

From Burial Grounds to Learning Deathscapes:

The Heritisation and Educational Potential of Historic Cemeteries

Abstract

The rich heritage landscape of a historic cemetery takes it beyond its primary function as a place of burial. It offers numerous opportunities to study history, culture, community identity and ecology. This thesis explores the educational potential of burial grounds in England to support outdoor learning across a wide range of educational contexts. By engaging students with tangible and intangible heritage, cemeteries can facilitate cross-curricular learning, skills development, emotional well-being and inspire creativity, while also contributing to heritage conservation and community engagement. This research examines how heritage content and interpretation in cemeteries can support education; what barriers prevent the realisation of their educational potential; and what strategies can address these challenges. This study draws on current scholarship relating to cemetery heritage, place-based learning and death education to develop theoretical groundwork for cemetery-based education. Using site visits, online materials and interviews with stakeholders, a number of case studies across England were examined, which represent varying levels and contexts of educational engagement. The findings reveal substantial benefits of cemetery-based education for different types of learners and subjects. They also demonstrate that this education offer is often constrained by financial limitations, staffing problems, logistical challenges, lack of educational interpretation and social sensitivities surrounding death. Drawing on best practice in this area, this study shows that these issues can be mitigated through adequate funding, effective interpretation techniques, sensitive facilitation and strong partnerships between heritage organisations, educators and local authorities. This research concludes that integrating cemeteries into educational practice can transform overlooked deathscapes into accessible learning environments that benefit students of all ages and support long-term heritage conservation and community engagement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Historic burial grounds are not just final resting places. They can act as unique outdoor learning environments that connect history, culture, community identity and nature. Cemeteries reflect changing social conditions and cultural traditions through generations, while also serving as important spaces for biodiversity. Integrating such sites into educational practice offers numerous opportunities for supporting curriculum teaching. Students engage directly with physical evidence of the past through landscape, as well as with intangible heritage of personal stories. Educators and heritage professionals should utilise the educational potential of these spaces to foster curiosity, empathy and critical thinking skills in all types of learners. The more people use cemeteries as places for learning, the more funding and appreciation these culturally rich burial places will receive. Engaging in thoughtful and caring educational practices will help preserve the burial grounds for future generations, while also empowering students to become active guardians of heritage for today and generations to come.

1.2 Research Aims

This study aims to show what historic cemeteries can offer as an educational resource and how these sites can be used to facilitate learning about history, culture, community heritage and the concept of mortality. By examining key barriers, such as financial constraints, lack of interpretation and social sensitivities surrounding death, this study looks into practical strategies for integrating cemeteries into educational frameworks, such as place-based education, experiential learning, interdisciplinary and community education. Through the analysis of academic research, case studies and interviews with stakeholders, this research aims to demonstrate the education potential of historic cemeteries for various subjects and types of learners. In doing so, the study argues for a holistic approach to more sustainable community engagement and conservation.

Despite growing interest in heritage as a learning resource, there is little practical guidance on integrating historic cemeteries into education. Closing this gap, this research provides practical approaches, adaptable frameworks and recommendations for curriculum and heritage

interpretation, as well as strategies for overcoming barriers to educational practice in such spaces. This dissertation is intended to bridge the gap between heritage content and educational practice and inform and inspire practitioners to incorporate cemeteries into formal and informal education.

1.3 Research Questions

This paper aims to address the following questions:

1. How can heritage content and interpretation at historic burial grounds be used to support all types of education?
2. What are the barriers preventing historic cemeteries from being fully utilized for educational purposes, such as finances, lack of heritage interpretation and logistical support, the social and psychological complexities surrounding death?
3. What are the strategies for overcoming these barriers?

Together, these questions guide an inquiry into how historic cemeteries can be transformed from overlooked deathscapes into meaningful educational resources.

Chapter 2 Methodology and Structure

2.1 Methodology

In order to set out a theoretical foundation for this project and establish gaps in current academic scholarship, the research process started with a detailed literature review including books, online materials and journal articles, which examined existing research on cemetery heritage, educational use of cultural sites and society's attitudes toward death. The historic overview of English cemeteries established a basis for identifying possible educational interests.

For the second stage of project, case study methodology was used to examine the current practice in cemetery-based education and to compare the results across various real-life examples. A number of historic cemeteries were studied using online resources, visits and interviews with stakeholders. The case studies were selected to provide a broad overview of different types of sites across England, which have experienced various levels of success with education programmes, mostly within the last ten years.

The obtained information was used to identify and thematically analyse the practice and heritage interpretation strategies to support educational outcomes, the effectiveness of different interpretation techniques, such as guided tours, printed materials, digital resources and interactive workshops in engaging diverse learner groups. Combining the aims and requirements of the National Curriculum in England with practical evidence offered a theoretical base and practical approach to how the rich heritage of the historic cemeteries can be used to enhance learning. Based on the best practice in this area, strategies and solutions are offered for resolving such issues.

An Ethical Review was prepared and approved by Bath Spa University. Accordingly, ethical considerations, particularly regarding sensitivity to death and memorial spaces, were observed throughout the research process.

Due to the constraints of time and resources, this research was limited to collecting data from online research and interviews with Friends' groups and cemetery officials, with limited input from other key stakeholders, such as local authorities, teachers, parents and pupils, which made it impossible to assess long-term educational impact comprehensively. Although I selected

examples from various parts of England, it was not possible to look at the UK as a whole, as well as drawing on experience from other countries. Limited space in this dissertation did not allow for a detailed examination of case studies, as examples of best practice in this area.

2.2. Research Participants

To cover a wide range of experiences, cemeteries from different parts of England and at various stages of education programme delivery were selected and approached for participation in this research project. The following were surveyed:

Arnos Vale (Bristol),
Beckett Street (Leeds - questionnaire),
Christ Church Graveyard (Todmorden, Yorkshire – questionnaire)
Dockroyd Graveyard (Bradford),
Farsley Rehoboth Burial Ground (Leeds - questionnaire),
Great Yarmouth (questionnaire),
High Royds Memorial Garden (Yorkshire - email),
Highgate (London),
Kensal Green Cemetery (London),
Malvern's Cemeteries,
Rectory Lane (Berkhamstead),
Sheffield General,
Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park (London),
Undercliffe (Bradford),
Welsh Harp Environmental Education Centre (London, on the site of former cemetery grounds),
Willesden Jewish Cemetery (London),
Wisbech General Cemetery (East Anglia),
Woodbury Park (Tunbridge Wells),
York.

In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of Canterbury Council Cemetery management, Caring for God's Acre (Friends of Shrewsbury Cemeteries, Longden Road Cemetery), and National Federation of Cemetery Friends. Subsequent references to the above

cemeteries and organisations will use the cemetery name, signifying that the information was provided by its representative, mostly the education lead. I also draw on my own experience of delivering workshops for school groups and families at Willesden and curriculum enrichment activities at the Welsh Harp Environmental Education Centre, as well as leading tours for families at Kensal Green Cemetery and other heritage attractions.

2.3 Structure

After defining the research aims, questions and methodology in Chapters 1 and 2, the dissertation establishes the theoretical foundation for using cemeteries for educational purposes in Chapters 3 and 4. It outlines a brief history of burial grounds and practices in England in 3.1 and considers their function as heritage landscapes in 3.2. Chapter 4 examines the concept of outdoor education, starting with a review of pedagogical frameworks for place-based learning, which provides the theoretical rationale for education activities in cemeteries in 4.1 and identifies common barriers to outdoor education in 4.2.

Chapter 5 proceeds to assess the educational potential of historic cemeteries, examining heritage-sector guidance, partnership models, types of educational activity, links to National Curriculum, provision for different learner groups and practitioner insights on best practice. This is followed in Chapter 6 by the examination of the barriers limiting broader uptake of cemetery-based learning and recommendations for addressing them in Chapter 07, alongside areas requiring further research in Chapter 8. A more detailed examination of educational content according to the National Curriculum and case studies are included in Appendix I. Extended proposal for future research is laid out in Appendix II.

Chapter 3: Cemeteries, Heritage and Education: Theoretical Premise

3.1 Historical Overview of English Burial Practices and Cemetery Design

British burial practices and cemetery design have changed dramatically over time, influenced by religious views, urban development and shifting social attitudes. Prior to the 18th century, most people in Britain were buried in parish churchyards, with the most prestigious burial spaces being inside church buildings, reflecting the central role of the Church in burial traditions. Apart from affluent families, only a small number of early graves were marked by lasting memorials. Thus, many early burials left few physical traces, which complicates archaeological study of death and commemoration in those times (Mytum, 2004, pp. 13–15).

During the late 17th and early 18th centuries, non-Anglican dissenters established their own burial sites on non-consecrated grounds, such as Bunhill Fields in London, opened in 1665. This challenged the Church's monopoly over burial space (Arnold, 2007, pp.68-93). Growing industrial cities, such as London, Manchester and Birmingham suffered public health crises through rapid population and poor sanitation, with decomposing bodies in overcrowded churchyards linked to diseases, such as cholera (Curl, 2000, pp.84, 154). Concerns about public health and the dignity of the dead paved the way for the establishment of joint stock cemetery companies and major reforms in the 19th century (Rugg, 2018). Practical Victorian cemetery design merged concern for sanitation with romantic aesthetics and moral ideals, which, along with the public parks movement, gave cemeteries a picturesque garden feel (Historic England, 2025a).

Notable examples are London's "Magnificent Seven" (opened 1830s–40s), Glasgow Necropolis (1833) and Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol (1839). Influenced by Père Lachaise in Paris, these cemeteries were deliberately designed as spacious, park-like landscapes, where nature and art combined to produce a peaceful environment for the living and the dead. Pioneering landscape designers, such as John Claudius Loudon, suggested practical layouts (i.e. grid plans), but also believed cemeteries should be "morally improving, educational, soothing and dignified" places (Loudon, 1843). New cemeteries featured winding paths, carefully planned groves of trees and opulent monuments, all "modelled after English garden

parks” (Mytum 2004, p. 89). The 1850s Burial Acts prohibited new burials in urban churchyards and encouraged cemeteries on city outskirts, aimed at improving public health through proper drainage and supervision (Arnold, 2007, pp.123-153). This reflected contemporary social values of moral improvement, sentiment and individuality. The purchase of burial plots indicated the social class and range of the owners, expressing middle-class aspirations, while naturalistic designs showed Protestant preferences for simplicity and moral purity (Tarlow, 2000).

Notably, these cemeteries were usually open to all religious denominations, signalling a shift toward a more inclusive and pragmatic approach to interment. Private cemetery companies marketed grave plots and monuments as commodities, appealing to the Victorian middle-class desire to commemorate family members in a visible and permanent way (Rugg, 1998). The burial industry matured with the growth of funeral undertaking and monumental masonry services to cater for a demand for elaborate burials, which Mytum (2004, pp. 35-81) describes as a ‘maturing industry.’ Such attitudes influenced cemetery design and usage, with the ‘celebration of death’ involving ornate rituals and artefacts (Curl 2001, p.135). Wealthy families treated cemeteries as theatres of mourning, staging funerals with grandiose hearses and plumed horses. Procession mourners, attired in the ritualistic black ‘widow’s weeds,’ followed a behaviour code. The plot’s dimensions and decoration indicated wealth and status, while elaborate markers signified faith, status and family pride, offering a cultural and historical narrative.

Changing theological views and concerns about hygiene and space drove innovation in the late 19th century, with cremation receiving legal recognition in 1884. The Cremation Act 1902 authorised crematoria and regulated the cremation practice (Jupp, 2006, pp 46-70). Although the first UK crematorium opened in Woking in 1885, there was religious opposition and adoption was slow. However, it gradually gained acceptance in the 20th century (Arnold 2007, pp. 123-153). By the 1960s cremation was preferred over burial (Rugg, 2018b), and now it accounts for over 80% of body disposal (Cremation Society, 2025).

In the 20th century many cemeteries included crematoria with their own memorial gardens. The World Wars led to the establishment of dedicated war cemeteries and standardised war graves. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), founded in 1917, developed a practice of commemorating fallen soldiers with uniform headstones and regimented designs, which were included into existing burial grounds. During the same time, municipal cemetery

design evolved towards simpler layouts, reflecting modern tastes for simplicity and lower maintenance (Historic England, 2025a). In recent decades, Britain has also seen the emergence of natural (woodland) burial grounds, prioritising ecological concern. Thus, funerary provision has cycled “from churchyard to cemetery, from cemetery to crematorium, and (now) the development of woodland burial” as broad trends over two centuries (Rugg, 2018a).

By the mid-20th century many Victorian cemeteries, having been filled and closed to new burials, entered a period of neglect and decay. Some historic cemeteries were turned into public green spaces, with headstones removed or engulfed by vegetation. Others continued operating in a limited capacity, but struggled as private cemetery companies went bankrupt or as local councils diverted resources elsewhere (Mytum, 2004, p. 95). Despite these changes, many rural parishes continued using small churchyards, signifying the continuity of tradition.

In recent years, the aging burial grounds have been seen in a new light, not just as dead and decaying remnants of a bygone era, but as important historic environments and repositories of heritage, cultural expression and community identity, which also preserve traditions and cultural identity. This renewed perspective paved the way for what is defined today as the heritisation of cemeteries, the concept explored in the following section.



Fig. 1. Kensal Green Cemetery (photo I.Porter, 2024)

3.2 Cemeteries as Cultural Heritage Landscapes

Today historic cemeteries in Britain are increasingly recognised as cultural heritage landscapes, rather than just places of interment. The concept of ‘heritisation’ reflects this changing perspective, describing the process whereby the once primarily functional sacred sites are newly interpreted and managed as heritage landscapes. Viewing cemeteries as repositories of social, artistic and cultural history warrants their preservation and provides opportunities to promote public engagement.

This interpretation enables historic burial grounds to receive protection for their ecological, architectural and historical value. Several of London’s 19th century cemeteries are on Historic England’s Register of Parks and Gardens, while others contain listed buildings and monuments. This acknowledges the craftsmanship of their memorials and the heritage value of their landscape design (Historic England, 2025a). This perspective is backed by Mytum (2004, p.2): “mortuary monuments provide one of the most widespread and visible sources of historical evidence available to us”, because the epitaphs, symbols, dates and names offer unparalleled access to past lives. The material culture and intangible assets of cemeteries represent ‘deathscapes’, the concept of a heritage space where human remains are marked or commemorated. It enables the exploration of themes of remembrance, preservation, cultural memories and the re-thinking of traditional narratives about the dead (Biers and Stringer-Clary 2024, p.505).

Material culture in the form of monuments and landscapes reflect how societies remember their deceased, giving the dead a presence among the living (Hallam and Hockey, 2001, p. 6). Further, “the past remains manifest in the present through material forms, sustaining relationships between the living and the dead” (*ibid*, p. 11). Individual memorials embody personal and family stories, but together, they showcase the histories, values and aesthetics of the times, affirming identity, expressing grief and confronting mortality. For example, the opulence of the Victorian cult of death can be contrasted with the austerity and uniformity of Commonwealth war graves. Multi-faith cemeteries, such as Brookwood, or specific faith, like Jewish burial grounds enable the exploration of different cultural traditions, making cemeteries a resource for RE studies, as well as history and broader culture curricula.

Preservation is essential for future exploration of this heritage. The material culture provides continuity between the living and the dead, therefore maintenance of funerary art and

monuments will sustain memory in the present (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 210). This view was backed by Arnold (2007, p.3): “the dead never really leave us: they lie beneath our feet, in layers of history that make up the city itself.” Thus, conservation is not limited to stones and landscape, but also preserving the connection to our collective past, which underpins the concept of heritisation. Therefore, heritisation can be viewed as an educational process in which cemeteries are valued for their historic properties.

In this context, cemeteries function not merely as sites of commemoration, but as potential spaces for learning, providing accessible resources for interpreting heritage through history, art and cultural traditions. This type of heritage interpretation has been increasingly recognised as valuable source for community history. Mortuary archaeology is no longer regarded as eccentric and has evolved into a serious discipline. Mytum (2004, p. 1-2) notes that their memorials reveal artistic trends, economic status, religion and social structures of their day. Systematic study reveals “many aspects of past culture beyond that directly associated with death” ranging from iconography and fashions to demographic patterns and literacy levels (*ibid*, p. VII). The use of particular features, such as monument design, symbols, inscriptions and cemetery layout signal the presence of a specific trend or context. This positions cemeteries as not only places for mourning, but as cultural landscapes, which help interpret the past (Cook (2014, p.4). These ‘deathscapes’ shape our collective remembrance and facilitate critical reflection on mortality, social values and heritage. This aligns with Rugg’s exploration of necro-geography as a resource for history and culture, offering insights into attitudes to cultural expression of mortality. Her works conceptualised cemeteries as ‘death-scapes’ or ‘necro-scapes’, i.e. frameworks for exploration of cultural, historical and spatial meaning (Rugg, 2022). Being static yet evolving spaces, they provide opportunities to engage with historical narratives over time, making a great education resource.

The incorporation of cemeteries into local and national narratives has informed heritage conservation policies. As a result, organisations such as local history societies, the Churches Conservation Trust and Caring for God’s Acre actively research burial grounds, documenting them through databases and survey projects that record gravestone inscriptions. Beyond their role in community engagement, burial grounds also have significant educational value. They encourage learners to connect personal and communal histories, fostering deeper understanding of cultural continuity and change. This makes cemeteries particularly valuable for teaching interdisciplinary subjects, such as history, sociology and cultural heritage.

Some historic burial grounds continue to offer interments. In such cases cemeteries combine historic elements with contemporary expressions of grief, which also communicate culture and meaning beyond burial. A diverse range of current memorial practices is explored by Neophytou, Kellaher and Francis (2005), who examine personal and communal meanings in urban cemeteries. They argue that cemeteries are important for cultural expression, including for families, where a visit “teaches younger people to value their connection with that community and with their ancestors.” (*ibid*, p.191)

Being a burial site grants these places “a multiplicity of meaning”, when plots become spaces for the living (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 84). Looking at the temporalities of cemeteries, House *et al.* (2023, p.3) argue that such spaces are not static. They are evolving cultural landscapes, which embody the tension between perpetuity and change, shaped by environmental, political, cultural and social dynamics. Individual stories are added to a collective memory, preserving the history of a community. Despite being ‘slow places’, they do change: ecological growth, evolving needs of the community, pressures from urban life and planning create heritage management issues, which need to be balanced against preservation and contemporary usage. These contradictory demands present significant challenges to the management of cemeteries. They include combining a respectful environment for mourners with facilities for access and enjoyable use by the public, such as seating, enhanced habitats for wildlife and a welcome for visitors, who wish to enjoy the beauty of the landscape or view and research history. Educational activities create a further challenge, but can form an important part of bringing together different aspects of historic cemeteries.

As early as 1843, John Claudius Loudon, a pivotal figure in the development of Victorian cemeteries, stated that churchyards and cemeteries ‘might become a school of instruction in architecture, sculpture, landscape-gardening, arboriculture, botany, and in those important parts of general gardening, neatness, order, and high keeping’ (Loudon, 1843, p.12). Thus, historic burial grounds can serve as a “resource for community history, biography and story-telling”, open to the public for learning and reflection (Pillatt, T. *et al.* 2021).

Cemeteries also serve as multifunctional urban open spaces. Although founded as garden cemeteries on the edge of towns, they are now surrounded by dense populations. Today, many have few or no burials and are seen as nature reserves or parks, offering tranquillity and wildlife habitats. Such recreational and ecological value has become part of their heritage profile and

offers opportunities for studying natural sciences within the framework of placed based education.



Fig.2 Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park (photo I.Porter, 2025)

In conclusion, the richness of the cultural heritage landscape of a historic burial ground harbours multi-dimensional educational potential. The following sections explore the practical application of this concept.

Chapter 4. The Case for Place-Based Education

4.1 Pedagogical Rationale for Place-based Education

The terms ‘place-based education’, ‘learning outside the classroom’, ‘place-based learning’ and ‘outdoor learning’ are used interchangeably in this thesis and are defined as structured educational activities that take place outside the formal classroom.

A review of recent pedagogical research conducted for this study concludes that place-based learning is recognised as an important component of formal and informal education. This approach not only enhances students' academic performance, but also fosters personal development, social skills and a deeper connection to their community.

Learning outside the classroom can provide genuine experiences that may not be available in traditional educational settings. Waite (2017, p.7) notes that "experiences outside the classroom may seem more 'authentic' and grounded in 'reality'". This perspective is shared by a number of pedagogical approaches. For example, the constructivist theory states that learners do not passively absorb knowledge, but actively build it as their understanding emerges within social contexts and interaction with the environment (Allen, 2022). This theory drew on studies by Jean Piaget, who proved in the 1950s and 1960s that learning is based on an active, experiential process, and Lev Vygotsky in the 1970s, who studied the social context of learning and found that development occurs “through the child’s interaction with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.90). Later, Kolb’s experiential learning theory positioned learning as a cyclical process, in which concrete experience is followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984, p.38). This theory can be applied to place-based and outdoor education, where directly engaging with real settings supports the experiences which enable learning to take place (Becker *et al.*, 2017, p.486; Mannion, Fenwick & Lynch, 2013, p.795).

The theoretical premise that collaborative and active inquiry-based learning will lead to better academic performance due to higher levels of engagement is strongly supported by contemporary practice and research, which reinforces the opinion that learning is not only an active process, but is also contextually situated (Schrader 2015; Krahenbuhl 2016). Hegediš

and Hus (2020) argue that learning outside the classroom in cemeteries can provide students with powerful cultural and historical insights. They state that “experiential learning can be defined as learning that seeks to connect a person’s sensory and emotional experience, thinking, analysing and acting into a whole” (Hegediš and Hus, 2020m, p. 2661). This ties in with a holistic approach of learning outside the classroom, which not only contributes to raised academic attainment, but also benefits overall mental well-being. Following a survey of recent academic research on the impact of outdoor education programmes on mental health and well-being, Wang *et al.* (2024 p.33) concluded that “outdoor education programmes significantly enhance social interactions, self-esteem and emotional regulation, while also promoting physical health, which in turn supports mental well-being. Engagement with natural environments has therapeutic effects, reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression.” Based on these findings, the authors argue that outdoor education programmes should be incorporated more systematically into school curricula to maximise their benefits for students’ mental health and well-being.

These pedagogical theories underpin the UK Parliament report *Transforming Education Outside the Classroom* (2010). It acknowledges that learning outside the classroom contributes positively to the academic and personal development of each individual. "Outdoor learning ... has a key role to play in reducing the levels of disruption, increasing engagement in learning and raising student motivation and academic achievement" (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010, p. Ev1). Such recognition has encouraged the state education system to recommend implementing place-based education as an essential element of a broad and balanced curriculum. For example, Ofsted asserts that if learning outside the classroom is planned and appropriately integrated across the curriculum, it raises attainment, improves behaviour and engages all learners (Skates, n.d.). Supporting this, the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, a registered charity, which advocates for varied learning environments, including school grounds, natural spaces, museums and local landmarks, states that these opportunities are essential to the development of cultural, spiritual, moral and social well-being, as well as personal development and academic attainment (Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, n.d.).

Informal settings, including community spaces, gardens and parks, present unique opportunities for experiential learning, which significantly enhances motivation and creativity. Freeman and Pike (2023, p. 186) demonstrate how learners can return to class more engaged

after sessions outdoors. Further, where children were encouraged to share experiences and stories about local places, they demonstrated a better understanding of their local environment and its relevance to them. This demonstrates that place-based learning can stimulate curiosity and inquiry, encouraging students to explore and connect with their surroundings. This approach is validated by Forest School, who assert that it “develops confidence and self-esteem through learner inspired, hands-on experiences in a natural setting.” Additionally, “learners constantly expand on their abilities by solving real-world issues, building self-belief and resilience” (Forest School Association, 2025).

Place-based education also acknowledges the social and cultural dimensions of learning. It encourages students to engage with their local communities and understand the historical and cultural significance of their surroundings (Waite, 2017. p.10). This approach, as well as enriching students’ learning experiences, fosters a sense of belonging and identity within their communities. This was reinforced by Freeman and Pike (2023, p. 187) who found that learners better understand their environment and its relevance to them if they share experiences and stories about local places.



Fig. 3. A school session at the Welsh Harp Environmental Education Centre (Thames21, 2019)

In conclusion, the educational opportunities offered by historic cemeteries can benefit all types of learners through insights into the past, provided by layers of cultural meaning and long history. The multi-functional character of outdoor spaces can facilitate learning across all disciplines, with perspectives and resources integrated meaningfully into almost every subject in the curriculum, as well as stimulating creativity, art and exploration of nature.

4.2 Barriers to Place Based Education

Despite the advantages of taking the classroom into the great outdoors, it remains a challenge for many schools. Waite (2020, pp.59-62) demonstrates that barriers to outdoor learning occur at a policy level, with regard to staff, logistics, practicalities, focus on exams, curricular demands and resourcing (Waite, 2020, pp.59-62). This is further complicated by the reduction in the amount of time children spend outdoors: Natural England reported in 2011 that visits to green spaces had halved within a generation (Malone and Waite, 2016, p. 1).

While all the above applies to school trips to cemeteries, there is an additional barrier here: a persistent public belief that death is taboo (Penfold-Mounce, 2024, p.418) and the notion that talking to children about death may be damaging (Marriott, 2024, p.381). The question therefore arises: how can this barrier be addressed to achieve meaningful educational engagement in heritage ‘deathscapes’? The answer might lie with death education.

Chapter 5: Educational Potential of Historic Cemeteries

5.1 Death Education

All major cultures and religions have developed some form of death education. Knowledge about death has traditionally been shared through religion, communal practices, professional training for end-of-life care and teaching coping strategies about attitudes and meaning around death (Morgan, 2020, p.3). More recently, these issues have been examined by the death-awareness movement and thanatology, the scientific study of death. These address society's taboos by developing education programmes on care for the dying, bereavement support and attitudes to death (Corr *et al.*, 2019, pp.4-5). Despite this, death education has often remained fragmented and limited to specific professions or age groups (Bryant *et al.*, 2009, p.317-318). Now that thanatology is more informed by evidence-based research and practice, it offers a framework for more coherent and accessible death education, addressing misconceptions and supporting better understanding of dying and loss. This is particularly important for children. Death education helps them understand and cope with loss in healthy ways, reduces isolation and harmful behaviours, improves communication and empathy and empowers them to support themselves and others when facing death. (Wester and Walker, 2017, p.20). However, children's understanding of death varies with developmental stage, requiring approaches that are age-appropriate and sensitive to individual experiences (Knight and Lee, 2009, p.217). Such programmes need to become an important part of children's learning, both in formal and informal settings.

The need for such provision is justified by the considerable scale of childhood bereavement. The Childhood Bereavement Network (2025) estimates that in UK from 2019 to 2021 around 26,900 parents died each year, leaving dependent children. When the exacerbating effect of COVID-19 is factored in, it is reasonable to recognise that significantly more children were also likely to experience the death of another relative, friend, or pet (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2025). However, addressing these sensitive subjects can be difficult for teachers, even if advice and resources are available. University of Bristol (2025) found a postcode lottery meant many children miss out, and a recent report by the University, Childhood Bereavement Network and Child Bereavement UK argued the case for grief education, stating that adequate

provision is needed to teach children “about grief and death to prepare them to manage bereavement and support others” (Dawson *et al.*, 2023).

Following a campaign to include a provision for grief education into the curriculum and the debates in Parliament on this subject (Hughes, 2025), the new *Department of Education Statutory Guidance on Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education* stipulates that primary and secondary school age pupils should be taught age-appropriate understanding of grief due to loss and bereavement (Department for Education, 2025).

There is an opportunity for cemeteries to play an important role in death education, because they can integrate emotional, cultural, historical and social aspects within the remit of place-based learning. At the same time, a sensitive approach to the issues of death can facilitate activities in other subjects, including religious education, computing, maths, art, design, literature, English, geography and science, as well as cross-curricular critical thinking and learning skills.

At the same time, engaging in subject-related activities can help teachers and students look at cemetery as a facilitating tool for starting a conversation about grief and loss. This was demonstrated during the *Dying to Talk* project, a partnership between the Universities of Bradford and Wolverhampton and Child Bereavement UK, which created resources, co-designed by young people aged 14-19 years, to encourage open conversations about death, dying and bereavement. The project began with workshops using archaeology as a prompt for young people to start discussing death. When given an archaeological object to handle, young people would open up about their own experiences with bereavement. The developed resources included a colouring book, a death themed card game with archaeological examples and a cemetery booklet with historical examples from Highgate and Undercliffe (Fig.4). Young people, called ‘Ambassadors’ for the project, took part in workshops, opening conversations about death through the media of literature, photography, food and drink, dance, music and technology. The resources, aimed at young people aged 10+ , their families and educators, are available on the website and can be used both in a formal and informal settings. The success of *Dying to Talk* led to its continuation as a new funded project to engage primary school children.

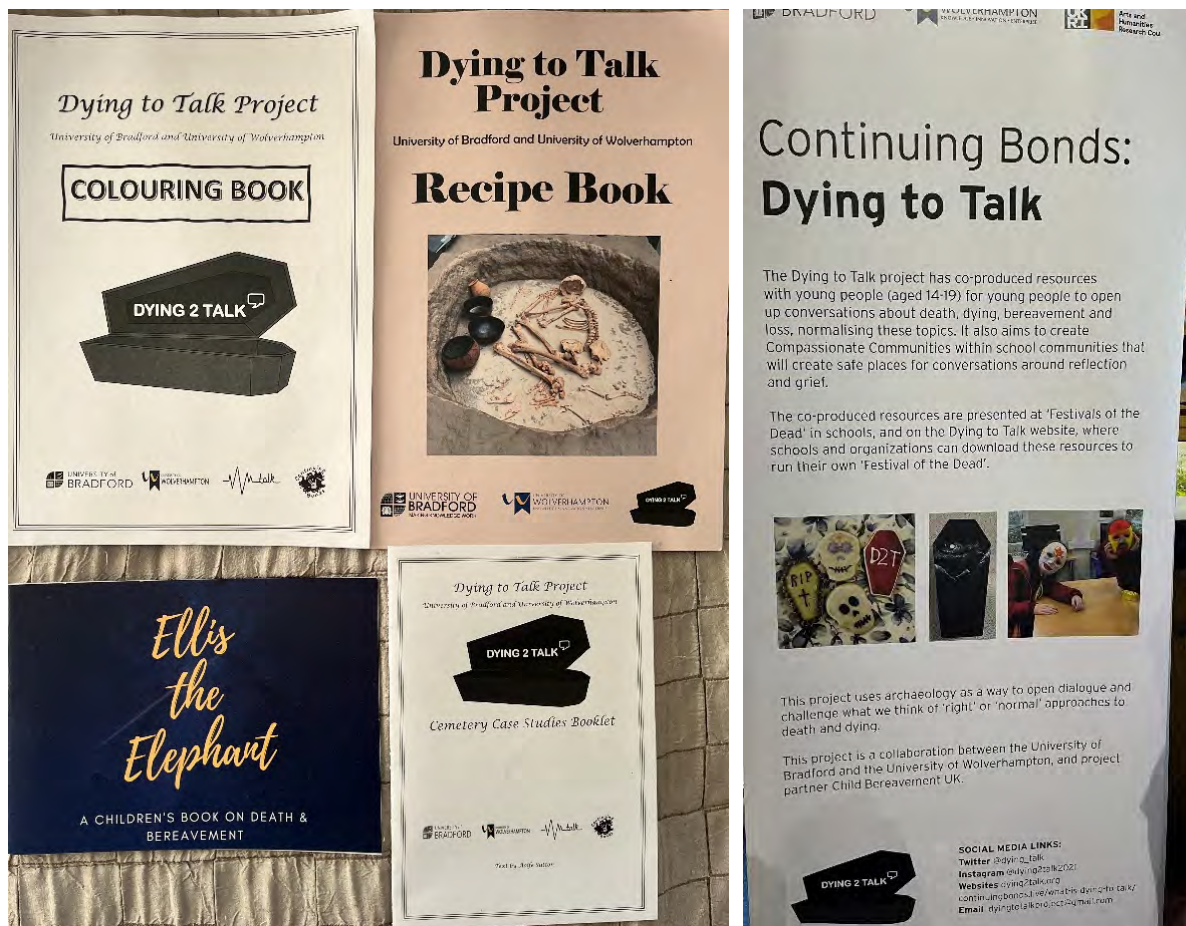


Fig. 4 Dying to Talk project materials (Photo I.Porter, 2025)

As Beckett Street educator states: “as a cemetery, we are centred around death. This part of the lifecycle is one that we treat with the utmost respect... All of our subject matter revolves around death education in some capacity, highlighting both the lives of those interred in our cemetery and how, where, and why they died, which can sit anywhere along the spectrum from heroic to harrowing” (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025). An example of this is a pamphlet on Paupers’ Graves, which covers epidemics, class divides, casualties of war and criminality. It offers a cross-curricular material with an emphasis on history and death. Therefore, any material from a cemetery, even if not explicitly mentioning death, can enable children to absorb the concept of death and, with appropriate guidance, enable them to eliminate any fears and misunderstanding around this subject.

Bev Forrest, writing for the Historical Association, acknowledged that teachers may believe that cemeteries are not appropriate for children’s visits. However, she argues that it is one place where they “can be introduced to discussions about death within a meaningful context”

(Forrest, 2015). To help teachers overcome misconceptions, she advocates careful preparation and a clear code of conduct. This advice was validated in practice at Willesden, where the teacher of a Roman Catholic RE group prepared pupils for learning about Jewish rituals of death and mourning. Some of the children were surprised to see a mortuary exhibition (Fig.5), but the preparation meant that no concerns were raised by pupils or teachers (Volunteer Co-ordinator, Willesden interview, 2025). Thus, a consistent approach and sensitive handling of death-related issues will transform these concerns from barriers into benefits when conducting educational sessions in cemeteries.



Fig. 5. Mortuary exhibition, Willesden Jewish Cemetery (photo I.Porter, 2025)

5.2 Sector Guidance

Both the heritage and education sectors recognise burial grounds as valuable educational resources, especially within the context of place-based education. Historic England's *The Heritage Schools Programme* provides guidance and resources to help schools engage with local history. The scheme trains teachers to use heritage on their doorstep, boosting teacher confidence and pupil engagement with local places. Since its launch in 2012, the programme has fostered a confidence in teachers for effectively harnessing local resources and has helped students understand and take pride in the local heritage and how it connects to the wider national history. Several *Heritage Schools* projects have used churchyards and cemeteries, including projects on Commonwealth war graves and war memorials for studying world war topics (Historic England, 2023). Historic England also cites Abney Park, one of London's original "Magnificent Seven" cemeteries, to illustrate the positive impact of cemeteries and other green spaces, such as parks and gardens, on health and well-being (Heritage Schools, n.d.). The programme is funded by the Department for Education, reflecting Government's commitment to place-based learning.

Historic England's *Investigating Our Local Churchyard* (Fig.7) provides a structured framework for the use of burial spaces in place-based learning. It encourages schools to regard them as places revealing insights into social change, architecture, art and community history. Hands-on investigation of bio-diversity, memorials and gravestones means that the learning is cross-curricular with a focus on RE, science, geography and history. Through observation, recording and interpretation pupils learn how symbols, inscriptions and burial practices reflect cultural change. Importantly, Historic England emphasises that when visiting burial grounds, schools need risk assessments, and respect and sensitivity are essential to promoting learning and conserving heritage. These guidelines reflect the commitment of the wider heritage sector to place-based learning, which strengthens pupils' sense of identity and responsibility towards their local environments (Historic England, 2025b).

The charity War Memorials Trust provides resources and curriculum-linked lesson plans for various youth organisations and history clubs (War Memorials Trust, 2025). The Royal British Legion (2025) offers the *Remembrance Learning Programme* (Fig.8), where youth groups, schools and families can access free resources and participate in free events. Such guidance facilitates the use of burial grounds for teaching about war conflicts, given that a high proportion of the 100,000 war memorials in the UK are located in churchyards or cemeteries

(UK Parliament, 2025). Pupils research names and historical contexts and develop critical thinking as part of the history curriculum. This also builds skills in creative writing and local history research, as well as exploring community values, memorial preservation and civic responsibility.

Caring for God's Acre, the conservation charity for burial grounds in the UK, points out that churchyards are in the heart of local communities, and, used as outdoor classrooms, become excellent venues for the study of natural, local and social history. Its website includes an education pack of five National Curriculum-related topics, with ideas and activities supported by templates, worksheets and photographs (Fig.6). Also in the pack is guidance and advice for teachers on risk assessment, partnerships and the sensitive issues to be considered before taking pupils to burial grounds (Caring for God's Acre, n.d.b).



Fig. 6. Example page from Caring for God's Acre's What's The Story leaflet (Caring for God's Acre, n.d.b)



Fig. 7. Investigating Our Local Churchyard (Historic England, 2025b)

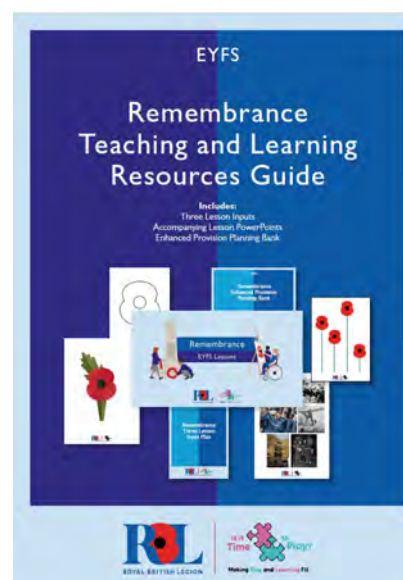


Fig. 8. A page from Remembrance Learning Programme (The Royal British Legion, 2025)

The Historical Association supports history teaching by providing resources, publications and professional development for teachers, students and heritage practitioners involved with education. In 2015 its Primary History journal published the article *Stories in the Stones: Using Cemeteries as a Local History Resource* by Bev Forrest. It offers practical guidance on using cemeteries as effective environments and encourages educators to set aside misconceptions

about children in cemeteries by setting out detailed strategies for planning informative, respectful and safe visits. Furthermore, it discusses curriculum links to literacy, art, geography, science and history and shows how burial records, memorials and gravestones can develop community engagement, heritage awareness and historical thinking. Collaboration with local historians and Cemetery Friends groups is encouraged to develop materials for heritage interpretation in specific cemeteries (Forrest, 2015).

Overall, the above guidance demonstrates that the education and heritage sectors recognise the importance and potential of cemeteries for teaching and learning. However, translating this into practice remains largely the responsibility of teachers and cemetery-based education leads. This is often challenging because of the barriers explored in Chapter 6.

5.3 Partnerships in Cemetery-Based Education

The success of educational visits to historic cemeteries depends on close working partnerships between professionals with expertise in different areas. Teachers, who understand curriculum requirements and pupils' needs, collaborate with volunteer historians who have site-specific heritage knowledge. Cemetery Friends and site managers deal with safety and logistics. Such collaboration combines professional teaching with expert content and the excitement of outdoor education. In this way the cemetery can function as an especially potent educational environment.

Participants in this study reported that their educational resources had been developed by people with teaching backgrounds and were effective when delivered by educators. Remembrance resources for Wisbech were developed by a former history teacher, who writes text books for Cambridge University Press and resources for the Historical Association and AQA exam board (Wisbech General Cemetery, n.d.). A primary school teacher with 30 years' experience devised the education programme for Willesden (Volunteer Co-ordinator, Willesden interview, 2025). The education programme co-ordinator at Undercliffe taught in secondary and special schools, as well as doing teacher training and university lecturing (Undercliffe interview, 2025). The public engagement manager at Arnos Vale, who developed and runs the cemetery's education programme, had been a class teacher and education officer for several museums (Janine Marriott, AVC Trust (n.d.), Arnos Vale interview, 2025). The

Canterbury City Council officer working on an education programme for the city cemetery appreciates the value of the contribution of history lecturers from local universities (Canterbury City Council interview, 2025). The input of experienced education professionals ensures that resources align with the national curriculum and are engaging for young people. It also gives the educational programmes authority and credibility.

However, limited staffing is a challenge. The absence of a professional education lead limits the scope of the education programme (Wisbech interview, 2025), and non-teachers do not appreciate the demands of the national curriculum (Malvern Cemeteries interview, 2025). This view is confirmed by Rectory Lane, who stresses the importance of curriculum links not only for enriching the pupil's learning, but also for justifying the cost of a school trip to the parents (Rectory Lane interview, 2025). Often retired teachers act as volunteers, but their expertise may become outdated over time (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025). Thus, the involvement of professional teaching staff is crucially important, but sustaining such expertise among volunteers is a challenge.

One way to ensure access to the expertise of educational professionals is to obtain funding, from such organisations as National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). Funded school sessions at Sheffield were run by the educator, who engaged pupils in a dialogue, which is an ideal for place-based settings such as cemeteries. She suggests that a good model would be to fund professional educationalists to provide sessions for free to schools, so that all have equal access to the historical and natural heritage of these sites (Sheffield interview, 2025). The *Heritage To Inspire* project at Longdon Road Cemetery, Shrewsbury, was funded by the NLHF, which enabled them to engage an expert in wildlife and nature (Caring for God's Acre interview, 2025).

Working in close partnership with schools can be a good way to resolve the issues of blending professional teaching expertise with the knowledge of Friends' groups. As part of a large project funded by the NLHF, Highgate is working with a primary and a secondary school to develop resources across age groups and curriculum subjects. These materials will explore the themes of climate change, biodiversity, wellbeing and inclusion for cemetery-based workshops. The pilot will refine the activities, which will then be rolled out to other schools (Highgate interview, 2025).

On the other hand, tensions between stakeholders undermine education initiatives. The Friends of Christ Church Graveyard have been in dispute with the local school over a building project, which encroached on the cemetery grounds. Despite the success of the first school visit, local schools are not supporting this education initiative due to this conflict, despite the enthusiasm and expertise of the volunteers (Christ Church questionnaire, 2025).

Most Cemetery Friends' groups operate as registered charities, with education specified as one of their primary objectives. Undercliffe confirms that this is the case for them, and they co-operate with colleges, universities and schools, as well as adult groups such as U3A and WI Oddfellows, to deliver outreach talks and on-site activities (Undercliffe interview, 2025). Cemetery conservation projects increasingly rely on major funders such as the NLHF, and public engagement and educational activities are required in order to securing financial support. Arnos Vale's £4.8m grant for restoration was linked to community-focused programmes including interpretation, events and school visits (Historic England, 2025d). Similarly, Sheffield's £3.7m grant for conservation and restoration was combined with public engagement, which offered training and education for all abilities and ages at different stages of the project (NLHF, 2018; UnLTD Business, 2018). Similar initiatives at Belfast City, Brompton and London Road, Coventry cemeteries show a consistent emphasis on public engagement with heritage through nature conservation, volunteering and education (NLHF, 2018).



Fig. 9. Consultation for plans for Brompton Cemetery (National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2016b)

As well as schools, local authorities and funding organisations, other heritage sites provide important connections to promote heritage in burial grounds. The Friends of York Cemetery identify York Minster and the Viking Centre as potential partners to promote the cemetery to schools (York interview, 2025). Bev Forrest recommends the local church and history society as useful organisations to engage with, along with the cemetery Friends' Group (Forrest, 2015).

The above examples demonstrate that educational programmes in cemeteries are most effective when supported by strong partnerships that combine professional teaching expertise, the heritage knowledge of volunteers and the practical support of cemetery management. Implementing this can be difficult without dedicated resources, but with the appropriate financial support, such partnerships will enable cemeteries to become truly effective educational environments, enhancing the experience of all types of learners.

5.4 Curriculum Studies in Cemeteries

Across all subjects, the National Curriculum in England advocates enquiry-led cross-curricular learning that links secure subject knowledge with real-world contexts and the development of critical, creative and reflective thinking skills. Cemeteries offer many opportunities for delivering such education process in local outdoor environment, enriching the learning experience throughout all Key Stages. This research uncovered examples of best practice, as well as possible ideas how to incorporate cemetery-based learning into school curriculum. Below is an overview of this topic, which is explored in detail in Appendix 1.

History curriculum promotes a balance between subject knowledge and historical enquiry skills, enabling pupils to understand both past events and how history is constructed (Department for Education, 2013a; 2013b). Historic cemeteries provide rich context for learning local and national history. Case studies from Arnos Vale, Undercliffe, Beckett Street, Rectory Lane, Tower Hamlets and others show how pupils investigate industrialisation, social change, Empire, migration and war through lives of real individuals and material evidence. Through the study of the monuments, inscriptions and burial records, pupils develop research skills, question historical representation and link classroom learning to lived heritage, promoting curiosity, empathy and meaningful engagement with the past.

The aim of Religious Education is to develop pupil's knowledge, understanding and respect for diverse beliefs (Department for Education, 2010). Historic cemeteries offer an effective real-world context for achieving this. Cemeteries are rich in Christian symbolism, shaped by centuries of diverse burial traditions. This rich history enables pupils to decode symbols and religious imagery, and to examine and compare different denominations and religions in a real-life setting. Multi-faith sites such as Brookwood, Arncliffe and Highgate reflect Britain's pluralistic society and enable children to discuss belief, identity and different cultural attitudes to death. Single faith burial grounds, such as Willesden Jewish Cemetery, facilitate in-depth exploration of a particular religion and culture. Pupils can study expressions of religious beliefs through symbol interpretation, hands-on activities and dialogue with faith practitioners and form a personal reflection on the subject. Such place-based activities build empathy, cultural sensitivity and constructive critical thinking. Visiting cemeteries helps pupils connect abstract philosophical concepts to practical expressions of religious and traditions. This reinforces curriculum goals of students exploring diverse faiths and developing their own beliefs and open-mindedness.

The National Curriculum positions the teaching of English as a gateway to success in other curriculum subjects, which offers a framework for developing literacy, communication skills and appreciation of literary heritage. The inclusion of the elements of Drama helps children become effective communicators and learn to appreciate the beauty and power of language and human emotions (Department for Education, 2014b). Historic cemeteries provide a range of opportunities for creative learning in these subjects. Real-world settings encourage engagement with Gothic literature, poetry and figurative language. Analysing gravestone inscriptions supports inference, vocabulary development and the history of English. A cemetery visit may include learning about authors' lives, as well as providing powerful stimuli for creative writing, performance and spoken language activities. Pupils can explore narrative, develop empathy and communicate effectively. Thus, the burial ground becomes an inclusive, interactive classroom for acquiring literacy skills, promoting imagination and connecting learning to authentic experience.

The National Curriculum for Art and Design calls for pupils to create works in varied techniques, analyse artworks using appropriate language, learn about major artists and understand the historical and cultural development of their art forms (Department for Education, 2013c). Cemeteries provide authentic examples of artistic, historical and cultural

heritage, which children can observe and analyse, including monuments, sculptures, architecture and symbolic motifs, and on which they can base their own creative work. Arnos Vale, Sheffield, Undercliffe and Abney Park offer examples of educational resource packs and school programmes, which use cemeteries creatively as places for imaginative and contextual art projects. Collaborative community projects in partnership with artists, schools and universities further demonstrate how cemeteries stimulate artistic engagement, imaginative historical thinking and practical craft learning for all ages.



Fig.10. Angel of the Cemetery sculpture at Eston Cemetery, North Yorkshire (Pye, 2024)

The National Curriculum for science promotes developing scientific knowledge, enquiry skills and understanding the relevance of science. Place-based learning is particularly helpful towards these aims. Cemeteries offer undisturbed habitats and rich biodiversity, which act as “living laboratories”, where pupils can investigate plants, animals, ecosystems and environmental change. Examples from Tower Hamlets, Arnos Vale, Willesden and Sheffield show how learners’ scientific understanding, motivation and wellbeing are enhanced through practical activities in cemeteries. Learning about scientists buried there enhances students’ appreciation of scientific legacy. From bug hunts to climate change, burial grounds provide excellent opportunities for practical application of studying skills, while promoting a sense of stewardship, sustainability and community and integrating science with citizenship, culture and history.



*Fig. 11. The grave of scientist Rosalind Franklin in Willesden Jewish Cemetery.
(Photo: I.Porter, 2025)*

The National Curriculum for Geography focuses on the interaction of human and physical geography (Department for Education, 2013d). Cemetery landscape, monuments and archive records provide an excellent resource for pupils studying geography topics, including population dynamics, migration patterns, ecology, rock formation and urban development. Such examples as Arnos Vale's mapping workshops and Sheffield's fieldwork resources show how pupils are able to develop skills in orientation, map-reading, enquiry and communication. Field studies in cemeteries can investigate environmental change, hydrology and geology. These areas tie in with many geography topics, as well as history, science, and citizenship, through active, place-based learning.

The National Curriculum for Mathematics encourages creative applications of this subject across academic subjects and everyday life (Department for Education, 2013f). A cemetery is an imaginative place to encourage this objective. Using gravestones as authentic data sets, pupils can practise number, measurement, geometry and statistics. This links learning to history, geography and community heritage. Examples from East Sheen, Ryde, Cambridge,

Houghton and Nuffield resources show pupils collecting and analysing dates, ages and spatial information, exploring symmetry, mapping, angles and problem-solving. These cross-curricular practical activities make abstract concepts meaningful and enjoyable, helping students understand the real-life applications of maths and appreciate it as a cross-disciplinary subject.

Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education equips children with knowledge, skills and values for healthy, safe and responsible lives. It is closely linked to the statutory Relationships and Health Education, and focuses on wellbeing, empathy, critical thinking and citizenship (Long and McGrath, 2024, PSHE Association, n.d.). Historic cemeteries are excellent places to carry out high-quality place-based learning that can enhance PSHE outcomes. Projects at Malvern, Undercliffe, Rectory Lane, Tower Hamlets, Beckett Street and Sheffield helped pupils explore personal stories, engaging with such PHSE themes as diversity, inequality, remembrance and civic responsibility. Through different activities, including discussion, historical research and stewardship, children can make connections between past and present and protect heritage for the future. This supports inclusive citizenship and PHSE outcomes across the curriculum.

5.5 Mental Health and Wellbeing

Place based education in a natural environment is beneficial to young people's mental health and wellbeing, as evidenced by all the participants interviewed for this research, as well as numerous sources online. Welsh Harp witnessed the calming effect that connecting with nature produced on children. Even pupils with ADHD or hyperactivity improved resilience and concentration during such sessions. This can help children develop into more confident adults, better able to maintain attention away from screens, regulate emotions and cope with stress (Welsh Harp interview, 2025).

Sheffield noted that schools without access to outdoor spaces appreciated the cemetery more. Their educator, a youth mental health specialist, champions simple experiences, such as listening to the river when in the cemetery (Sheffield interview, 2025). Tower Hamlets notes that pupils who struggle in a conventional classroom have better learning outcomes in woodland settings. The cemetery also offers forest bathing and meditation to promote mental

health and well-being (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025). A Forest School programme at Arnos Vale “develops emotional and physical wellbeing through interaction with peers and leaders and increases environmental understanding through games, activities and exploration” (Fig.12) (Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust, n.d.c). Undercliffe emphasises that pupils could be helped to build emotional intelligence and resilience and prepare for life’s challenges, when they explored death in supportive environments (Undercliff interview, 2025).

These examples prove that cemeteries can turn the abstract aims of PSHE into lived experiences. Active engagement and the cross curricular nature of outdoor education sessions help children develop confidence, self-esteem, empathy and communication skills. Learning in nature also helps pupils to notice and regulate emotions, reduce stress and develop coping strategies.

What is Forest School?
Forest School is an out of class approach to learning, teaching developmental skills in a woodland environment

- The beautiful 45 acre listed landscape of Arnos Vale is used to motivate, promote self-esteem and engage children of all ages, abilities and learning styles through fun hands-on activities and skills led opportunities.

Who can take part in Forest School?
Forest school can be for any school key stage, home-learners or pre-schoolers. Sessions can be tailored for learners with disabilities and specific learning needs.

Why choose Forest School?

- provides learning resources linked to trees, forests, woods and the outdoors



- develops emotional and physical wellbeing through interaction with peers and leaders
- increases environmental understanding through games, activities and exploration

What do children do at Forest School?
Forest School is made up of a wide range of experiences and adventures. These can include;

- Bush craft skills such as animal sign tracking
- whittling and knife work (depending on age)
- Fire lighting and cooking on fires.

Learners will enjoy a large range of activities that will connect them with the environment including arts and crafts, active games and science based activities

How much is it?
Sessions start from as little as £5 per student!

Contact learning@arnosvale.org.uk for more information

Discover the wonderful habitats through inspiring hands-on activities and games... No two sessions are the same!!



*Fig.12. Forest School from Arnos Vale Educational Brochure
(Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust, n.d.d)*

5.6 Special Interest Groups and Volunteering Opportunities

Special interest and volunteer groups can benefit from historic cemeteries. Commemorations and activities often involve scouts and other uniformed organisations. Scouts helped clear overgrown plots at Undercliffe and Rectory Lane. Young people can learn about wildlife and history, particularly when taking part in Remembrance ceremonies. Raunds Cemetery won the Wildlife Trust's Silver Award for a project involving a community partnership with Scouts and Brownies to improve its biodiversity (Raunds Town Council, 2025). Chobham Old Burial Ground invited youth groups for a clean-up session, uncovering a wooden cross from a casualty of WW1 (Woking News & Mail, 2022). In November 2025 Scouts and Army Cadets placed poppies at a war memorial in Hastings Cemetery (Fig.13) (SussexWorld, 2025).



Fig.13. Scouts join veterans to place poppies at Hastings Cemetery (SussexWorld, 2025).

Similar events take place at Tower Hamlets (Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, 2025) and Brookwood (Brookwood Last Post, 2024). An interesting commemorative project took place in 2015 in London, when Bermondsey Scouts researched the story of a Bermondsey scout killed in 1940 while volunteering as an air-raid patrol. The project culminated in a memorial service at Nunhead Cemetery, where Scouts, Beavers, Cubs and Explorers joined with family members to commemorate him (Southwark News, 2015).

Beyond taking part in commemorative events, volunteering in cemeteries helps learners develop new skills. In 2016 twelve young people trained as tour guides at Clifton Street Cemetery in Belfast as part of a NLHF-funded project, which included research on people buried there, visits to historic sites and “presenting stories in an interesting and factual manner” (National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2016a, Friends of Clifton Steet Cemetery, 2016). Friends of Shrewsbury Cemetery are teaming up with Shrewsbury School for pupils to volunteer at Longden Road Cemetery (Caring for God’s Acre interview, 2025, Shrewsbury School, n.d.)

Another volunteering activity is the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. In 2025 The Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery supported girls working towards their Bronze Award by helping to catalogue and index Friends’ publications. This initiative brought benefits to both sides: the Friends were grateful for the help that speeded up the digitization project, and the girls understood the importance of indexing and data, learned new Excel skills and picked up some interesting historic facts along the way (Kensal Green interview, 2025).

The above examples demonstrate how historic cemeteries are a real-world environment where young volunteers develop a range of useful transferrable skills, while contributing to good causes. It motivates reflection on social responsibility and community, encouraging holistic educational and personal growth.

5.7 Informal Learning and Family Activities

Informal activities and family learning are popular in a number of cemeteries across England. Arnos Vale runs a successful holiday programme, which includes nature walks, bug-hunts and pond dipping. Wand-making, clay sculpting and leaf printing are part of the arts and crafts activities, and there are also story-telling, theatre and music events. These are low-cost or free, as they are supported by small grants (Arnos Vale interview, 2025). Abney Park offers children's tours, music and interactive story-telling, as well as a Wildlife Watch Club (Greenspace for London CIC, 2025). The Forest School holiday sessions at Tower Hamlets are always fully booked, and nature-themed birthday parties are also popular, indicating community demand (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025). Such hands-on activities provide “the perfect, safe environment for your kids to get dirty, learn, play, laugh and connect with nature in the heart of East London” (Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, n.d.a).

Cemeteries encourage self-expression and creativity. A Woodbury Park trustee recalls growing up next to a cemetery and going to play there. Now she takes her granddaughter to Woodbury Park and invents stories about the names on headstones. This experience shows how burial grounds can spark curiosity rather than fear (Woodbury Park interview, 2025).

Families can explore the grounds in their own ways using interpretation boards and trails. Many Friends' groups and trusts have created family-friendly booklets or maps, which encourage children to interact with the landscape, memorials and wildlife. A good example is the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter Cemeteries Project, which has downloadable *Young Explorer* maps and a treasure trail that uses GPS to direct children to find tins with ‘treasures’ and learn about history and nature while doing so (Jewellery Quarter Cemeteries Project, 2025). Friends of Northwood Cemetery (2025) on the Isle of Wight offer resources that focus on history and nature, for children to spot memorials and animals. Mill Road Cemetery in Cambridge designed a *Trail of Imagination and Curiosity* (Fig.14) with unusual prompts, such as “Can you hear the sky?” It encourages children to use their senses in exploring a special place in the cemetery. The booklet was produced by a professional creative company in partnership with local primary schools (Mill Road Cemetery, 2025a).



Fig.14. Trail of Imagination and Curiosity (Mill Road Cemetery, 2025a)

Often funded by the NLHF, local councils and charities and designed by knowledgeable volunteers, such interpretation materials encourage young visitors to observe and ask questions, effectively turning burial grounds into outdoor museums or classrooms. Undercliffe argues that it is important for young people “to look around and try to interpret meaning within their surroundings”, rather than see the cemetery as a solemn or scary space (Undercliffe interview, 2025).

Walking tours are a popular form of heritage interpretation, particularly effective when theatrical elements are introduced and active audience participation is encouraged. At York, volunteers dress in period costume to perform monologues, giving visitors a lived performance rather than a static narrative (Fig.15).



Fig.15. Storytellers at Undercliffe Cemetery (Photo: I.Porter, 2025)

This ‘mobile pedagogy’ turns the walk into “knowing and understanding events and places ... by embedding knowledge at an accessible and sensory level for all” (Penfold-Mounce 2024, p. 417). Sharing knowledge through conversations with the guide and other visitors further enriches the learning experience. Thus, a participatory, imaginative and creative walking tour becomes a mobile pedagogic tool, embedding learning for children and adults alike (Penfold-Mounce 2024, p. 420-421).

A day out in a cemetery blends nature, history and adventure in accessible and interactive way. Arnos Vale’s storytelling tours and forest-school workshops “inspire young people to get outdoors and muddy” (Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust, 2025). Likewise, Willesden hosts nature walks and craft sessions (Fig.16), where families discover “the hidden gems of our local ecosystem”, from ancient trees and wildflowers to birds and insects, and create bug hotels and mosaics from natural materials (Willesden Jewish Cemetery, 2025b). Parents reported that they felt positive about such experiences for themselves and their children.



*Fig.16 Discover the Wonders of Nature workshop at Willesden
(Willessden Jewish Cemetery, 2024a)*

Moreover, family visits to cemeteries may create opportunities to address sensitive topics, such as death, bereavement and contested heritage in a compassionate manner. This will expand young people's cultural and moral education in a secure, but at the same time appropriate and relevant environment.

In summary, family activities in historic cemeteries offer many opportunities to learn and bond with each other and the place. Spending quality time with the family while engaging in play, active exploration and thoughtful discussion improves everyone's well-being and the feeling of belonging. Inviting families into cemeteries also brings significant benefits for the sites themselves and the local community. These historic landscapes are animated by the increased footfall. Funding bodies generally, and the NLHF in particular, prioritise heritage projects that benefit children, families and local communities. This revenue enables conservation projects, which create welcoming spaces for all.



Fig.17 Southwark Council, 2025

5.8 Cross-Curricular Learning and Skills Development

Every activity in a cemetery is cross-curricular, even if it is aimed at a specific subject, as outdoor study will cover a range of topics through holistic learning. Workshops can be designed to further embrace the interdisciplinary study. Selecting a specific topic, for example ‘angels’, could lead to creative writing, art work, photography or dance/drama (Forrest, 2015). Forest School approach at Tower Hamlets deliberately moves away from direct links to the curriculum, focussing instead on child-led play on a specific topic, for example, geography (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025).

The analysis of inscriptions and imagery on monuments builds analytical and research skills, and critical thinking can be developed through comparing visual evidence with burial records or census data. Moreover, cross-curricular learning in cemeteries, covering history, art, nature and citizenship forms the basis for caring and respectful attitude. Christ Church approach

learning by focusing on the “people just like you” aspect of the stories (Christ Church questionnaire, 2025), promoting empathy and making history a real lived experience. Pupils form personal connections with heritage sites, which reduces anti-social behaviour and vandalism (Malvern Cemeteries interview, 2025) and develop skills to preserve, protect and promote the heritage. This can lead to related further studies and career choices, or employment and volunteering in the sector, preserving local history and cemeteries (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025).

Learning is particularly effective if it is based on active participation. For example, Undercliffe collaborated with pupils to determine the content of interpretation boards and the education trail (Undercliffe interview, 2025). The informal nature of cemeteries encourages discussion of the broader philosophical and global issues. In Sheffield, pupils discussed climate action and debated, “can the world ever be completely free from pollution?” (Fig.18). Such in-depth conversations that draw on students’ knowledge help them develop debating skills and engage with the world in thoughtful way. (Sheffield interview, 2025).

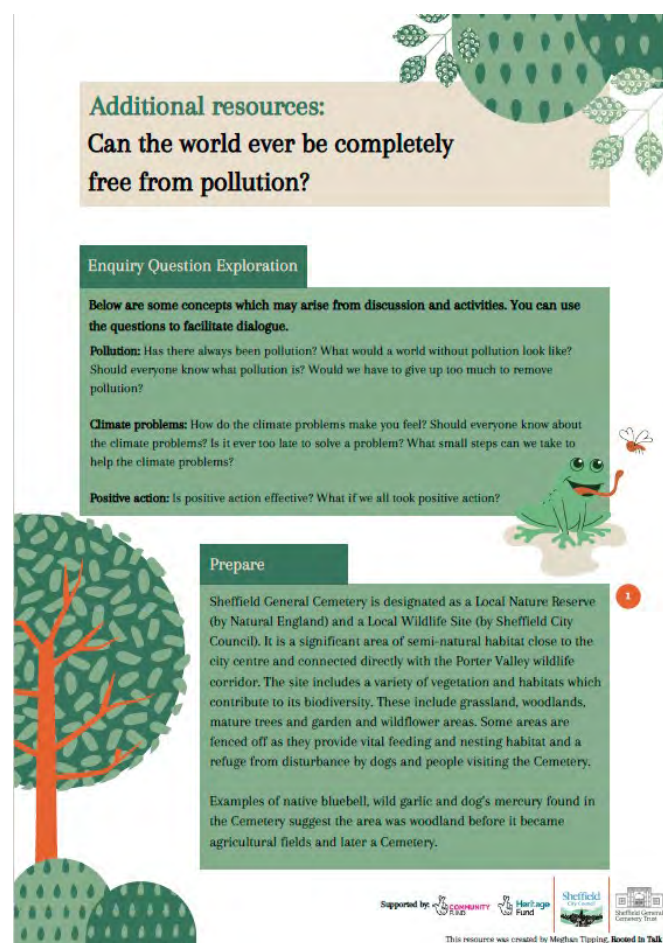


Fig.18. Geography Resources, Sheffield General Cemetery (General Cemetery, 2025)

Overall, these examples illustrate the potential of historic cemeteries to inspire creative interdisciplinary learning and critical inquiry. In blending different disciplines, study sessions in cemeteries broaden the opportunities for young people to improve academic attainment and foster connections to the place and community.

5.9 Higher Education

At higher education level, burial grounds can be used as both primary sources and research bases. For example, the University of Glasgow's five-week adult course *Walking the Cemeteries and Crematoria of Glasgow* teaches how to 'read' sculpture, funerary architecture and symbolic landscapes in the changing religious and social attitudes to death (University of Glasgow, n.d.). A third-year sociology module at the University of York, *Morbidity, Culture & Corpses*, takes a sociological approach to death and its relationship to spaces. One task is a *Death and Culture Walk* through York (Fig.19), which includes burial grounds, immersing students in thanatological heritage in real life (University of York, n.d.a,b). Students have been enthusiastic about this innovative project, and it has been adopted by other departments, such as archaeology and education and neighbouring York St. John University, proving that this tool can be replicated in other contexts (Penfold-Mounce, 2024).



Fig.19 York Death & Culture Walk map, (Penfold-Mounce and Coward-Gibbs, 2019)

As well as being used for academic study, cemeteries can become research grounds, where students gain practical skills in heritage management, archaeology and data analysis. For example, the *Discovering England's Burial Spaces* (DEBS) project created standardised digital tools and protocols for graveyard surveys. They were developed by University of York's digital creativity labs in collaboration with other departments and the University of Liverpool. The DEBS apps and database enable university teams and community volunteers to record gravestone materials, inscriptions and iconography, building skills in mapping and data entry. The results are to be submitted to open research archives (Pillatt *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, Bradford University students conducted a geophysical survey to locate unmarked graves, enabling a cemetery to identify plots for new burials. (Undercliffe interview, 2025; Undercliffe Cemetery Charity, 2025). York's digitised database provides material for MA and PhD analysis, enabling research ranging from 19th century funerary monuments, health issues, mortality, socio-economic inequality in York 1837-1927 and the prevalence of infectious diseases in urban populations (York interview, 2025; Ponce, n.d.). Tower Hamlets regularly works with university students and researchers on projects ranging from ecology and

conservation to history and sociology, as well as offering work placements (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025).

Cemeteries can be used for learning and implementing practical skills. In 2025 stonemasonry students from Bath College took part in the restoration of the historic Hope memorial at Arnos Vale. Working over several years, they gained practical experience in heritage stone repair, paving the way for future careers in conservation (Bath College, 2025). In the area of natural studies, Friends of St John the Baptist Churchyard, Cirencester partnered with the students from Royal Agricultural University, who assessed ‘no-mow’ wildflower areas for nectar, supplying information for Friends’ public education activities (Vujakovic, 2024). The Sheffield General Cemetery Trust and the University of Sheffield co-host exhibitions and share research, while Sheffield Students’ Union promotes volunteering opportunities at the cemetery at fresher events (Sheffield General Cemetery Trust, 2025).

This type of partnership demonstrates the benefits of education programmes for the learners and cemeteries alike. Students gain practical experience from real life applications of their academic studies, while cemeteries benefit from the enthusiasm and commitment of young people and the results of their research and fieldwork.

5.10 Adult Education and Life-long Learning

Cemeteries are also a source of lifelong learning. Friends’ groups record, research, write leaflets, guide walks, raise funds and conserve landscapes, making them important champions for their local cemeteries (Historic England, 2025f). Volunteers gain skills and knowledge as they undertake research, management, conservation and public activities. This enriches their lives as well as benefitting cemeteries.

In 2012, Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust developed a project to restore several local cemeteries, which provided 12,000 training and volunteering hours, including teaching new skills to a group of unemployed residents of the town, with several people going on to have professional employment in conservation (Great Yarmouth questionnaire, 2025; Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust, 2023).

Willesden offers professional-led training workshops for volunteers working on its Social History Archive and as tour guides, as well as social skills training for Front of House. Friends of Beckett Street Cemetery aim to “put flesh on the bones of history and breathe life into the past” via genealogy, interpretation and events (Beckett Street Cemetery, 2025). A volunteer reports that her involvement with the cemetery was fundamental to her educational and career pathways, as she developed the genealogical research skillset that shaped her academic career (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025). The University of the Third Age (U3A) offers learning for people no longer in full-time work. It is organised by interest groups and has extensive local history sections and an online cemeteries group. Talks and visits to cemeteries are particularly popular (U3A, 2025).

Citizen science projects are good examples of educational activities in cemeteries. In the *Beautiful Burial Grounds* project (Fig.20), carried out by Caring for God’s Acre, volunteers learned how to record heritage features and biodiversity, thereby learning heritage recording methods, digital skills and ecological survey techniques. They contributed their findings national online databases, such as the NBS Atlas and iRecord (Caring for God’s Acre, 2023a).

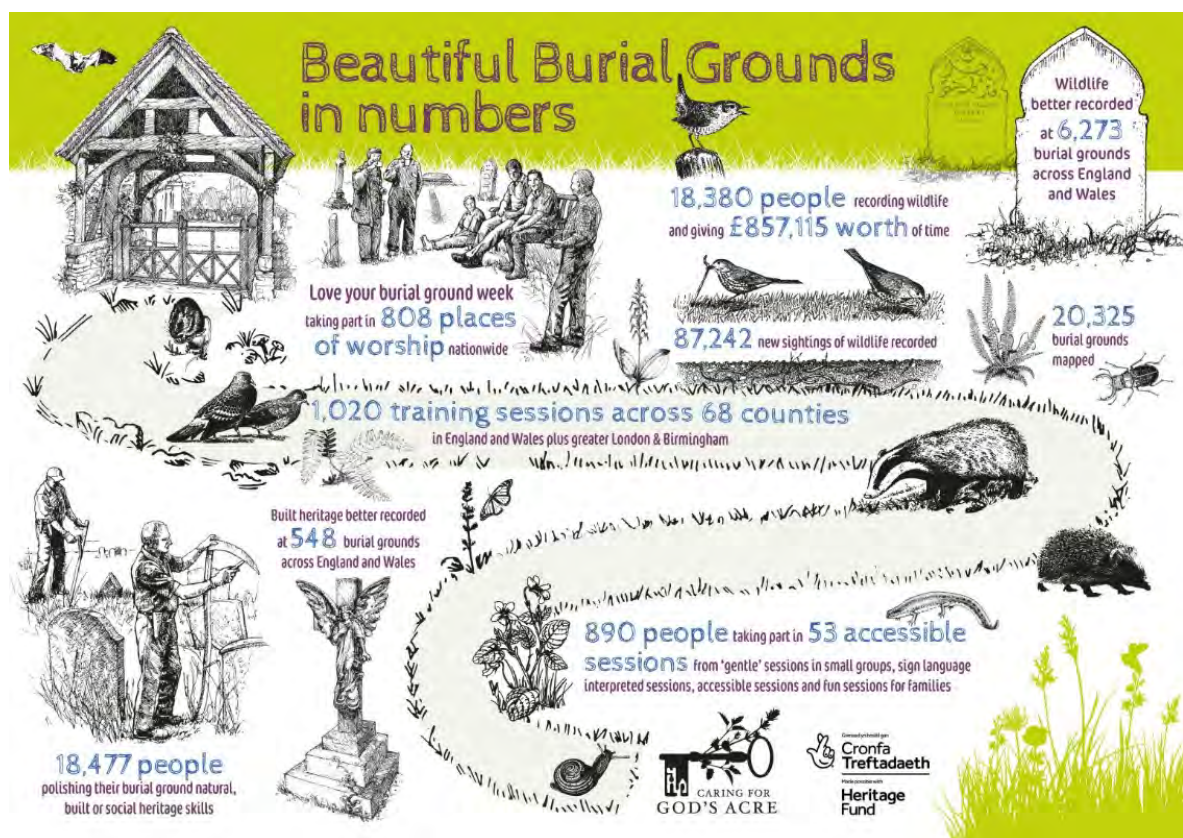


Fig.20. *Beautiful Burial Grounds* Project website image (Caring for God’s Acre, 2023a)

Bat Conversation (Trust Bat Conservation Trust 2025), RSPB (RSPB (n.d.), Butterfly Conservation (Butterfly Conservation, n.d.) regularly co-operate with cemeteries management and Friends groups, delivering talks, walks and monitoring programmes. Local history societies and photographic clubs also use cemeteries for research and learning projects and frequently share their work through exhibitions and digital archives.



Fig.21 Sunset Survey with Bat Conservation at Willesden Jewish Cemetery, promotional image (House of Life at Willesden Jewish Cemetery, 2023)

In conclusion, historic cemeteries have significant potential for life-long education and supporting personal growth. The blend of tangible and intangible heritage provides rich environment for practical and meaningful learning. Volunteers develop skills in research, conservation and public engagement, while contributing to heritage conservation of vulnerable sites. Such reciprocal arrangements benefit both the individuals and whole communities.

5.11 Success of Cemetery Education Programmes

This study has revealed that the majority of cemetery education programmes received positive reactions from participants and organisers alike.

Rectory Lane found that children were excited to be in the cemetery and some later returned with their families. While children showed no fear or discomfort, some adults were anxious about discussing death. Nevertheless, those teachers who brought classes to the cemetery were positive, which emphasises how their confidence affects success of such programmes (Rectory Lane interview, 2025). Willesden's experience backs this view. When pupils came to study funerary customs as part of RE curriculum, they found the Rabbi, who led Q&A session, so approachable, that even disengaged pupils began asking questions, so the visit was deemed a success (Volunteer Co-ordinator, Willesden interview, 2025). Local schools were impressed that such a useful resource lay on their doorstep, and pupils were amazed by people buried there (Volunteer co-ordinator, Willesden, 2025). There had been hesitation about bringing pupils into a Jewish cemetery, but "once people are in through the gates, they loved it" (Head of Heritage Willesden, 2025).

Similarly, at Kensal Green, the Duke of Edinburgh volunteering facilitator found that young people were originally wary of the cemetery, but once they had visited, they were more interested, having been influenced by the historical character of the grounds (Kensal Green interview, 2025). At Arnos Vale, too, children would arrive asking "is it going to be spooky?", but quickly discovered that it was not (Arnos Vale interview, 2025).

Woodbury Park noted that the mysterious and spiritual character of the cemetery created a special atmosphere, which fascinated children and adults, facilitating a special connection with the space (Woodbury Park interview, 2025). At Lawnswood Cemetery, a teacher brought Year 5 pupils to study local history. Emphasising the importance of preparing children for the visit, he pointed out that many pupils "didn't understand what a cemetery actually is. Some were rather shocked when they realised they would be walking only a few feet from people's bodies under the ground." But the results impressed him because learning about the real people had brought history to life, inducing pupils to ask their parents about family history. He reported that the cemetery had produced a 'wow' moment (Forrest, 2015).

At Malvern, responses were more mixed: some pupils discussed the First World War material with intense curiosity, particularly regarding technical aspects, but one student “felt very upset at being surrounded by such a bunch of lost life.” (Malvern Cemeteries interview, 2025). Such examples emphasise the need for sensitive facilitation of learning experiences in cemeteries, as they can raise complex and powerful emotions.

Yet, despite the positive reactions of the participants in cemetery learning activities, the enormous educational potential of historic burial grounds remains largely underutilised. All the surveyed cemeteries (with the exception of Highgate) reported that the uptake of education programmes is lower than they hoped. The following chapter will therefore examine the potential reasons for this.

Chapter 6. Barriers to Education in Cemeteries

6.1 Lack of Finance and the Need for Funding

The research for this project revealed that lack of financial resources is a major barrier to education programmes in historic cemeteries. Financial constraints affect every stage of the education process, from creating the resources to the delivery of content.

As explored in section 5.3, the input of professional educators is essential for creating quality learning resources. Their expertise ensures strong links to the curriculum and helps devise enriching and engaging materials. Delivering sessions, even if they are run by volunteers, still incurs administration and running costs. Cemeteries end up charging schools, which are already financially pressed. Even a small charge per pupil can be prohibitive, especially when transport costs are added. Arnos Vale found the uptake of education sessions was higher among primary schools, because secondary schools have even less money for trips (Arnos Vale interview, 2025).

The solution lies in funding, but often this is short term and does not support the continuation of programmes. In 2015 Willesden received a large NLHF grant to facilitate opening to the public. As part of the project, experienced educators developed a comprehensive set of learning materials. However, when the funded project finished and COVID struck, delivery had to be reduced and further funding would be required to re-vitalise the programme (Head of Heritage, Willesden interview, 2025). In another example, Sheffield secured funding for a ten-year school programme led by a professional educator, who delivered free sessions to schools. Further funding is needed, which can be arranged through partnerships, as she has found this to be the most effective model for facilitating free sessions, which encouraging uptake (Sheffield interview, 2025).

Financial challenges are also present in cemeteries which depend on local authority funding. Beckett Street is a municipal cemetery, relying on public finance and approval from Leeds City Council, which owns and manages it. A small membership charge of the Friends' group funds basic site maintenance and heritage interpretation, but no large expenditure. The Friends also must contend with "excessive bureaucracy" and lack of interest in cemeteries and local history

groups, which negatively affects care of the cemetery infrastructure and relegates seeking additional resources for education to even lower on the priority list (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025).

In contrast, external investment can dramatically transform cemeteries' education offer. A multi-million pound NLHF grant to Highgate for improving infrastructure includes a community engagement segment, which will include free tours to schools. Similarly, a NLHF grant of £249,000 for restoration of the Burton family mausoleum in the churchyard of St Mary Magdalen, Mortlake has only £80,000 for physical repairs, while the remainder is to “unlock the secrets” of the monument through interactive learning experiences (IanVisits, 2024). Such a significant proportion of fund allocation to educational activities demonstrates the importance that funding bodies attach to education as a mechanism for ensuring that their investment delivers meaningful public benefits.

Collectively, the above testimonies and experience demonstrate that education programmes in cemeteries are successful when they are appropriately funded. Insufficient or inconsistent funding remains a fundamental barrier to the integration of cemeteries into educational practice. Programmes need a secure and strategic investment to support the development of learning resources and the continued delivery of education projects.

6.2 Logistics

Delivering educational visits on a large scale requires engaging not only with schools within walking distance, but also with those who would need to travel. Undercliffe cites getting students to the cemetery as a major barrier, as schools within walking distance visit annually. Further, schoolchildren need facilities, such as classrooms and toilets. Undercliffe notes that schools would like to take part in world war commemorations, but they happen in November, when it is cold and wet. The Friends' lodge is too small to accommodate a full class, and they cannot afford significant adaptation (Undercliffe Cemetery interview, 2025). Rectory Lane has no toilets on site and the use of facilities at a nearby shopping centre is impractical for a school group, which limits participation (Rectory Lane interview, 2025).

In contrast, facilities at Willesden include various indoor spaces. The largest of these, the Prayer Hall, can accommodate two large classes at a time. The Heritage Centre has two smaller spaces, so the cemetery can run sessions for the entire year group, with activities rotating around the site. Disused chapels, converted into heritage spaces, can become hubs for public engagement, particularly useful for school groups, thus maximising the educational potential of cemeteries.



Fig.22 Inside the chapel at Wisbech General Cemetery (Photo: I.Porter)

6.3 Safety and Risk Management

Schools regard safety and risk management as major issues when considering activities in burial grounds, according to interviews with cemeteries. Open-access cemeteries are liable to anti-social or inappropriate behaviour, especially when the burial ground is large, overgrown and without security monitoring.

Wisbech volunteers reported “several times” walking into areas where adults were “smoking and drinking beer, at 10 o’clock in the morning,” emphasising that although “not necessarily threatening,” this was “not what you really want to walk into” with young children. They have

encountered rough camping which they link to social issues homelessness and immigration, facilitated by the garden-cemetery landscape of vegetation (Trustee, Wisbech interview, 2025).

A parallel concern is the institutional barriers formed by health and safety issues. At Beckett Street volunteers devised a cross-curricular programme including mathematics, which involved measuring a headstone. But the local authority rejected the plan, not because the headstone had not been tested for stability, but because all the headstones had not been tested. The council feared that an unsupervised child might try to climb an unstable memorial, but declined to fund a testing programme, and it is beyond the means of the Friends' group, so the whole project failed (Beckett Street questionnaire 2025).

Such concerns can be mitigated by a due diligence risk assessment, which shows that the setting is manageable and controls are in place. Teachers are advised to carry out a pre-visit site check and complete a risk assessment, in consultation with the cemetery management. For example, Arnos Vale produced a specific risk assessment for school visits, which identifies potential hazards, such as uneven ground, unstable headstones and dangerous litter, and lists controls, such as keeping children on paths and constant adult supervision (Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust risk assessment, n.d.b). Teachers can also be advised to carry out a pre-visit site check. Other issues to consider are adult-child ratios, mobile phones and First Aid kits, as described in Ryde's template for risk assessment (Ryde Social Heritage Group, 2011). It also offers warnings about weather and advises on extra caution around monuments. Further, Department for Education notes for Key Stage 3 science recommends adding an awareness of "sensitive and respectful behaviour" in cemeteries (DofES, 2004). The input of a dedicated health and safety team would ensure a high level of safety, increasing the confidence of educational professionals, as evidenced by Willesden, where risk assessments for school visits are prepared by the health and safety department of the United Synagogue.

The above examples show that risk assessments and advance preparation can change the perception of cemeteries from dangerous and unpredictable places to safe environments, when potential risks are identified and controlled. This enables the educators to feel confident to use historic cemeteries as safe and valuable outdoor classrooms.

6.4 Lack of Staff and Capacity

The research reveals that historic cemeteries rely heavily on volunteers for the delivery of education programmes. Many members of the Friends' groups are of an older generation, whose capacity is limited. This is acknowledged by the educator at Undercliffe, who mentioned reduced mobility and capacity to deliver sessions (Undercliffe interview, 2025).

Beckett Street describes a similar demographic, noting that most volunteers are “of retirement age or above”, and lacked the perspective and skills to create material, which meets the curriculum (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025). Dockroyd Cemetery have the same concern, highlighting the need for “younger trustees” to sustain future work. Expert knowledge is needed to create learning materials and workshop content. The education lead at Dockroyd, a former primary teacher, confidently runs sessions for the local primary school. However, she is not familiar with the secondary curriculum, so cannot offer sessions, even though she thinks certain subjects could be covered (Dockroyd Graveyard interview, 2025). High Royds admits that the Friends' group would like to encourage visitors of all ages, but being a small group with limited funds, they are unable to offer educational materials, as they “do not know what we would include in such items” (High Royds, email response 2025).

Often initiated as a funded programme, educational activities have to scale down delivery or even stop once funding is finished, and paid educator posts are no longer possible. York employed part-time education officers to run a successful schools programme for a decade, but once funding ended, the Friends were “robbing Peter to pay Paul” and had to choose between site maintenance and education (York interview, 2025). Similarly, Rectory Lane's volunteer-led programme stopped because “we don't have anyone to lead them,” underscoring the lack of specialist teaching knowledge among volunteers (Rectory Lane interview, 2025). After a large scale programme by Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust, the Friends of Great Yarmouth Cemeteries report that they have “no members currently with the capacity to run an educational programme” (Great Yarmouth questionnaire, 2025).

For cemetery management struggling with funding staff posts, education is low on the list of priorities. Tower Hamlets, operating with “a staff team of two and a half,” cannot run an education service by themselves, but instead concentrates on Forest School offer and partners with another charity for school sessions. This collaboration works, but illustrates the need for dedicated experienced staff (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025).

Even where a large number of volunteers are available, guides and school sessions leaders often lack appropriate expertise. Highgate does not provide training for volunteer guides, who are willing to lead school tours, and this can negatively impact group management, age-appropriate interpretation and curriculum alignment (Highgate interview, 2025).

These examples illustrate that the delivery of high quality educational content needs professional support. This is difficult to provide consistently without appropriate long term funding, which would facilitate sustainable partnerships between heritage management teams and education professionals.

6.5 Psychological and Societal Sensitivities around Death

The perception of cemeteries as places unsuitable for children permeates every level of British society, thus affecting the attitude of educators, authorities and parents towards educational visits to cemeteries.

York reported that whereas adults exhibited unease around death, children displayed more curiosity than apprehension. Further, that grandparents had a different attitude from children towards cemeteries. Perhaps this can be explained by the cultural shift towards funeral services, which are a celebration of the life of the deceased, softening the generation's perception of death as something to fear (York interview, 2025). Children's interest was mentioned in several interviews. Sheffield reported that in discussions on death the young people talked about it with "such curiosity" (Sheffield interview, 2025). Arnos Vale reported that children ask questions about skeletons, cremation and decomposition (Arnos Vale interview, 2025). Willesden found children asked questions about everything around them "with sincere curiosity, without negativity" (Head of Heritage, Willesden interview, 2025).

At the same time, educators emphasise it is often parents and teachers, who want to 'sanitise' discussions around death and dying (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025) and therefore exhibit anxiety around such issues, fearing distressing their pupils or breaching cultural expectations.

Religious traditions and culture can impede cemetery visits. Willesden offers a wide range of family and school activities of particular relevance to Jewish traditions. However, there is a cultural perception in this community that visiting a cemetery is not appropriate for young

children, so parents are reluctant to approve visits for Jewish faith schools. Tower Hamlets also report cultural barriers: people from certain ethnic backgrounds believe that some graves contain people “burning in hellfire”, which have a negative effect on educational visits (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025). This especially complicates visits to cemeteries in ethnically diverse areas, such as Tower Hamlets in London or Beckett Street in Leeds. The latter reported a dramatic change in the cultural make-up of the local residents, with fewer local families with a personal connection to the history of the cemetery. This had resulted in a lack of interest in school visits (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025).

Many cemeteries continue to provide burial services, and interviewees felt this aspect should not be hidden. Canterbury supports the integration of heritage into bereavement education, particularly as current government policy advocates death education in schools (Canterbury City Council interview, 2025). Forrest adds respectful attitude during cemetery visits can be facilitated by careful preparation, such as notifying families in advance and being aware of recent bereavement (Forrest, 2015).

This research demonstrates that, although adults’ perceptions of children visiting burial grounds is affected by concerns about exposing them to death and bereavement, cemetery educators feel that these issues can be overcome with appropriate preparation and thoughtful discussion.

6.6 Institutional Hesitancy about Informal Education Settings

Taking children out of classrooms presents problems to schools. The combination of financial constraints, the pressure to deliver curriculum, misconceptions about death and health and safety concerns often result in school management taking negative decisions that stop students from experiencing valuable and inspiring outdoor learning in cemeteries.

The requirement to keep to the curriculum acts as a constraint on experiential education. Welsh Harp reveals that many teachers are surprised to discover how many things can be taught outside the classroom. Even when teachers recognise the benefits of outdoor learning, there is an implicit or explicit pressure on them to deliver the curriculum in a formal setting at school. Often, they must try to persuade their superiors that a curriculum topic could be better taught

outdoors (Welsh Harp interview, 2025). Rectory Lane reports that the secondary school curriculum in particular is very regimented leading into GCSEs, limiting the time they have to take children for learning outside the classroom (Rectory Lane interview, 2025). This is confirmed by Arnos Vale, who clarify that when a secondary school class is taken out for the day, they miss several subjects, taught by a number of teachers. A cross-curricular approach can help, for example, combining RE with geography. By contrast, primary schools have more flexibility in adjusting timetables, so they are more likely to take up cemetery visits (Arnos Vale interview, 2025).

Cemetery education leaders have limited resources and communication skills, and may struggle to engage schools. Wisbech and Willesden report that sending out cold calling emails to schools produced hardly any response, but volunteers do not have the time to make personal contact with every school in the area. Teachers are often over stretched, with little capacity to respond to external offers for curriculum enrichment. It is difficult for them to implement creative approaches due to the structural rigidity of the school system and administrative tasks they need to perform in addition to teaching. Experience demonstrates that teachers need a clear understanding of the educational value of a cemetery visit for them to commit. Longden Cemetery received no response from schools they approached, but when a teacher attended an Open Day and became interested, she organised school sessions for her school, covering history and nature (Caring for God's Acre, interview, 2025). Willesden runs '*Twilight Sessions*', when teachers can visit to discuss the content of the education sessions with the cemetery educators (Fig.23). Such examples demonstrate that well-targeted contact at personal level is more effective than broad, but perfunctory marketing campaigns.



Fig. 23. Willesden Jewish Cemetery promotional leaflet (Willesden Jewish Cemetery, 2025)

Even when schools participate, reticence can appear as disengagement in the actual learning process on site. The Volunteer Coordinator at Willesden recalled one instance where the teachers ‘were basically not in the room, on their phones, texting’ during their pupils’ workshop (Volunteer Co-ordinator, Willesden interview, 2025). This suggests that schools may view off-site education as outsourcing, with minimal input from the teachers. Expectations are thus misaligned, leading to an ineffective educational experience. The solution lies in the close working relationship between teachers and cemetery educators, with appropriate curriculum alignment and prior preparation, so that learning from visits can be fully optimised.

Throughout these examples, educators emphasise the value of communication skills in overcoming institutional reluctance. Breaking down the prejudices from adults is essential to forging successful partnership between educational institutions and cemetery learning teams.

Chapter 7. Key Findings and Recommendations

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This research revealed the significant education potential of historic cemeteries and the issues arising from running learning activities in deathscapes. As heritage landscapes, they offer opportunities for cross-curricular learning, personal development and meaningful engagement with history, culture and nature. Through analysing literature, sector guidance, case studies and practitioner insights, this research demonstrated that cemeteries can function as authentic outdoor classrooms that facilitate active learning, creativity, emotional growth and a strong connection to heritage.

However, the educational potential of historic cemeteries has not been utilised to its full extent due to a number of challenges, such as financial limitations, staffing challenges logistical constraints, lack of interpretation and societal sensitivities surrounding death. This research demonstrated that these barriers can be mitigated through professional educational input, sensitive facilitation, careful preparation and strong partnerships between heritage organisations, schools, funders and local authorities. When these factors come together, all participants report successful outcomes.

This study demonstrated how cemeteries can benefit learning at every level, from early years to adult education, at the same time contributing to heritage conservation and community engagement. Incorporating cemetery-based learning into education and heritage practice will help transform deathscapes into sustainable and accessible education resources, which will enrich teaching, reinforce community identity and ensure long-term conservation of historic burial grounds for future generations.

7.2 Recommendations

Interviews with educators reveal that many have a clear understanding of the challenges they face and ideas to overcome them. These have been collated into six key areas.

7.2.1 Funding: continuous investment is needed to maintain the professional level of education offer

Funding emerges as a major precursor to running successful education programmes. Undercliffe's educator states that appropriate funding would allow them to employ a dedicated lead for public engagement and education, create facilities for larger class-sized groups, which could include an exhibition space and develop more materials (Undercliffe interview, 2025). These sentiments are echoed at York, who notes that "if there was an obvious source of income, then probably the first priority would be education" (York interview, 2025). Willesden considers that additional funding is needed to create more "robust education packages" and employ a professional to deliver them, in order to make education workshops more modern and creative (Volunteer Co-ordinator, Willesden interview, 2025). With additional resources, the range of materials can be expanded to cover more subjects on nature and Jewish culture, and make the sessions easier to book (Head of Heritage, Willesden, 2025). Tower Hamlets states that with more funding they'd like to develop heritage interpretation resources, offer free downloadable education packs and implement more costly elements of conservation plans, such as reinstating original paths in the cemetery, which will improve access (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025). Arnos Vale highlights that securing funding for free school visits enables access for schools from the areas with higher levels of social deprivation, widening participation and promoting inclusivity (Arnos Vale interview, 2025).

At Highgate a large NLHF-funded project included the development of a schools' programme, which will devise activities for different year groups and across different curriculum areas. Starting as a pilot project with two local schools, the programme is to be shared across the sector. (Highgate interview, 2025).

Thus, securing long term funding emerges as a key priority for developing quality education programmes and their ongoing delivery. This will enable the engagement of education professionals for the resource development and the delivery of programmes, and also subsidise or waive fees for the schools, which already face financial pressures. Furthermore, funding can

address logistics concerns and contribute to the conservation of the cemetery landscape, ultimately improving the environment in which learning takes place.

7.2.2 Curriculum Support: Schools sessions need to be tailored to support the curriculum in order to appeal to teachers

Educators argue that it is essential for the teachers to understand the value of a learning session in a cemetery, and if they see the benefit of it for themselves and the pupils, they are more likely to organise a site visit. Welsh Harp reports that “schools really want to know what the curriculum links are” (Welsh Harp interview, 2025). Beckett Street sees the way forward in developing a specific targeted education programme for the relevant age groups, funded by the local council. Led by a designated experienced person and supported by local schools, communities and families, such programme would instigate the willingness to learn from such historic site (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025).

7.2.3 Creative Approach: original ideas and tailor-made sessions will result in an attractive offer for schools

Arnos Vale emphasise that a creative approach has worked well for them. Although their programmes are based on themed, curriculum-aimed workshops, the educator is able to create a tailor-made package for a specific group, taking the lead from the teacher (Arnos Vale interview, 2025). Such flexibility broadens opportunities for schools to engage and allows both educators and teachers to bring creativity into the learning experience.

Positive experiences lay the groundwork for long-term sustainable partnerships, resulting in repeat visits. This is evidenced by Woodbury, who run an annual ‘challenge’ for local schools culminating in an exhibition and prize-giving, drawing in a wider community (Fig.24). Institutional hesitancy can be overcome, when a school has teachers who are passionate about creative learning opportunities. Woodbury is fortunate to work with a school in Tunbridge Wells with an “amazing” headmaster (Woodbury Park interview, 2025).



Fig.24 Woodbury Park Cemetery Challenge: Exhibition and Prize Giving (Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery Tunbridge Wells, 2025a, 2025b)

In the same way as dynamic school leaders can overcome bureaucratic resistance, forward-thinking local authorities can help develop cemeteries' educational potential. In Canterbury the cemeteries manager recognises the important role of historic burial grounds in 'building bridges with the local communities', with education being one of the strains of public engagement. Cemetery use is declining nationally, so educational use is a crucial element in highlighting and preserving their history, and local authorities should lead the way (Canterbury City Council interview, 2025).

7.2.4 Partnerships: collaborations between all stakeholders combine the best expertise for delivering high quality and effective cemetery-based learning

Following on from the above examples, forging partnerships between teachers, cemetery management, Friends' groups, communities, local authorities and heritage organisations facilitates the creation and delivery of pedagogically sound and meaningful learning materials and helps broaden the education offer. Sharing the experience of successful programmes and appropriate interpretation will result in more confidence and wider awareness of what cemeteries can offer for learning, addressing institutional hesitancy in schools and local authorities.

7.2.5 Logistics: the provision of adequate facilities affects the up-take of school education programmes

Organisational challenges, such as transport, availability of indoor spaces and toilets, disabled access and adverse weather provisions can be addressed through advance planning, including a risk assessment and shared use of public facilities.

7.2.6 Psychological and Cultural Sensitivities Surrounding Death: advance preparation and sensitive discussion boosts teacher confidence in discussing death issues

Anxiety and misconceptions about death can be addressed through advance preparation, which can include age-appropriate guidance for children and pre-visit information for teachers. Adults would feel more confident about bringing children to burial grounds after they experienced a successful cemetery visit, which would allay qualms regarding the exposure of young people to deathscapes.

Collectively, these recommendations outline a practical framework for positioning historic cemeteries as safe and accessible learning landscapes, supporting both educational goals and the long-term custodianship of burial grounds.

Chapter 8. Further Research

This study revealed the enormous educational potential of historic cemeteries and the barriers to place-based education at these sites. In order to develop this further and find better solutions, additional research can be undertaken in the following areas:

- Gathering information from school teachers, parents and pupils. A selection of in-depth case studies from across the UK could produce graphs and charts to reveal trends.
- Extending research beyond school education to encompass informal / family learning and further and adult education;
- Research into the variations of cemetery-based education practice across the UK and how it is shaped by socio-economic, urban/rural and cultural contexts;
- Cemeteries are used differently around the world, and extending this research across countries outside the UK can bring out pedagogical value of deathscapes across different religions and cultures;
- An assessment of technologies such as QR-coded trials, apps and online databases could reveal the most efficient models. In addition, the latest advances, such as AI and VR could enhance learning experiences, including accessibility for disabled learners;
- Further exploring the relationships between different users of burial grounds, such as mourners, tourists, heritage and nature enthusiasts and learners will facilitate creating guidelines for safe and respectful education activities;
- Tracking a group of pupils over time to measure the educational, emotional and social impact of cemetery-based sessions, leading to a cost-benefit analysis and funding opportunities;
- Research could examine the psychological and professional reasons behind the reluctance of teachers to take children to cemeteries, and a CPD programme could be trialled and evaluated;
- The lack of expert staff could be off-set by creating an interpretation resource, identifying areas of the curriculum, which could be covered and enabling practitioners to create their own materials for a particular cemetery. A pilot project to implement this will help refine its usability and guide future feature development.

The research can include a combination of longitudinal studies, such as observing and evaluating school sessions, as well as surveys and qualitative case studies. The detailed examination of the above points is provided in Appendix II.

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Undercliffe Cemetery (2025) *Personal interview*. 25 June.

Welsh Harp Environmental Education Centre (2025) *Personal interview*. 23 July.

Head of Heritage, Willesden Jewish Cemetery (2025) *Personal interview*. 1 July.

Volunteer Co-ordinator, Willesden Jewish Cemetery (2025) *Personal interview*. 23 June.

Wisbech General Cemetery (2025) *Personal interview*. 4 August.

Woodbury Park Cemetery (2025) *Personal interview*. 28 July.

York Cemetery (2025) *Personal interview*. 27 June.

Appendix I

Curriculum Links in Historic Cemeteries

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1. History

England's history curriculum aims to give young people a solid understanding of British and world history. It calls for a balance between disciplinary knowledge (how historians construct and study narratives of the past) and substantive knowledge (facts and accounts of the past). Therefore, pupils must not only learn key facts about the world and UK, but also critical thinking about how history is constructed, and why it matters. (Department for Education, 2013a; 2013b).

Heritage sites in general, and historic cemeteries in particular, are excellent places for teaching history. Experiential learning at such sites enables enquiry-based approaches, which, in turn, stimulate curiosity and develop critical thinking skills.

The **Key Stage 1** curriculum requires teaching about “where the people and events they study fit within a chronological framework and identify similarities and differences between ways of life in different periods” (Department for Education, 2013a). This can happen through learning about the lives of people buried in the cemetery, interpreting epitaph wording, guided storytelling and creating timelines. Pupils can map dates on a timeline, sketch symbols and objects from gravestones and discuss how the materials and words tell us the stories of people buried in the cemetery. Learners discover how we find out about the past by asking and answering questions. Guided walks show the differing ways in which history is represented, i.e. through landscape, inscriptions and monuments, which encourages historical inquiry.

For example, at Arnos Vale pupils study gravestones and sequence dates into a timeline, to build the understanding of time, change and continuity (Arnos Vale interview, 2025). At Undercliffe the team works closely with the history leader at a nearby primary to align vocabulary, set objectives and implement modules on local history so pupils can visit several times a year and construct a course of study based on the cemetery (Undercliffe interview, 2025).

In **Key Stage 2** the emphasis is on early history, but it also includes “a significant turning point in British history, for example, the first railways or the Battle of Britain” (Department for Education, 2013a). Cemeteries provide local examples covering these themes, such as the family grave of Isambard Kington Brunel in Kensal Green (Fig.1), as well as other railway engineers, all within the sound of Brunel's Great Western Railway (Friends of KGC, 2025).



Fig.1 The memorial to the Brunel family at Kensal Green Cemetery (Photo I.Porter, 2025)

On-site lessons using a variety of sources enable pupils to relate national events to local examples, helping them understand how individual lives influenced wider changes. The analysis of archival material, inscriptions and monuments enable pupils to explore social transformation, industrial development and innovation within an actual historic landscape. This practical approach shows pupils how evidence from various sources constructs a historical narrative.

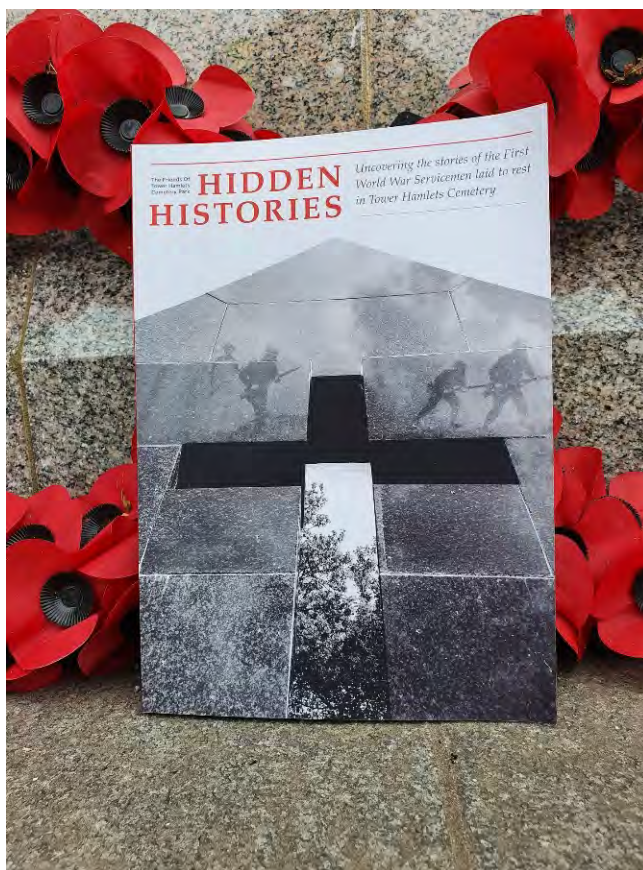
At Beckett Street there are plentiful opportunities to learn cultural and social history through the stories of people of diverse backgrounds. This reflects the everyday life and class system in Leeds in the past. Memorials and records there reveal global connections through the migration, missionary work and military service. Engagement with original sources, such as burial registers can spark an interest in uncovering lost stories about women and the working classes (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025).

Cemeteries have a large potential to teach research and interpretation skills. At Rectory Lane pupils practiced ‘detective skills’ to analyse headstone inscriptions and dates to infer social status and occupations. They looked at why some memorials were larger than others, which linked to economic history, including the Cooper family who owned a factory manufacturing

sheep dip, and their prosperity was reflected in a grand memorial. Pupils followed up by consulting census data, tracing how the business evolved, so could link the cemetery material evidence to documentary sources. They also investigated gender representation in the past, revealing stories of women, such as a local nurse, who would otherwise have remained anonymous (Rectory Lane Interview, 2025).

Undercliffe educators link sessions to Bradford's industrial past, with discussions around layout, such as consecrated or un-consecrated ground, enabling pupils to reflect on changes in gender roles, social hierarchy and class divisions. For example, how few women's names appear on gravestones (Undercliffe interview, 2025).

The Remembrance assembly at Wisbech included children placing crosses on war graves and reflecting on wartime sacrifice by local soldiers (Wisbech interview, 2025).



At Tower Hamlets, a *Hidden Histories* project produced biographies of 200 World War One servicemen and women from the First World War (Fig.2). Themed interpretation panels and new paths were created to support school visits, emphasising local connections to the wider world (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025).

Fig.2 Hidden Histories Booklet (The Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, n.d.e))

At **Key Stage 3** pupils should develop a deeper understanding of local, British and world history by pursuing historically valid enquiries, including some that pupils have framed themselves and create relevant and structured accounts, supported by evidence (Department for Education, 2013b: 8). Cemeteries facilitate this by offering both practical learning experiences and opportunities for independent research which are based on tangible evidence, especially for the 19th century and later. Cemetery layouts, epitaphs and monuments reflect the cultural, social and political dynamics of Britain through recent centuries. For instance, when pupils explore the concept of Britain as the first industrial nation, they can visit the graves of factory workers, industrialists and engineers to research innovations, but also understand the human cost of industrialisation and discuss the urbanisation, public health, social reform and class divisions it brought.

Sheffield offers a rich source of social heritage for learning about working class and people of colour buried in un-marked graves (Sheffield interview, 2025). This reveals human stories behind narratives of empire, class and industrialisation. Forrest (2015) notes that when pupils explore inscriptions of occupation, they uncover the stories of migration, for example, from Germany because of the woollen industry; and also journeys to the New World. Learners can be inspired to find out why and how such journeys were made and investigate cause and consequence, continuity and change, and links local to world-wide history.

Topics such as the transatlantic slave trade and its abolition, or the growth of the British Empire, are revealed by inscriptions and memorials, which demonstrate Britain's imperial reach and moral contradictions, commemorating both abolitionists and merchants who profited from slavery. For example, resources prepared by Hackney Museum for Abney Park Cemetery on the abolition of slavery (Fig.3), created in consultation with local teachers, contain information about people buried in the cemetery, with images of their headstones and biographies. The leaflet includes issues for discussion and suggestions for activities before and during a visit, with a map showing relevant locations. (Hackney Council, n.d.)

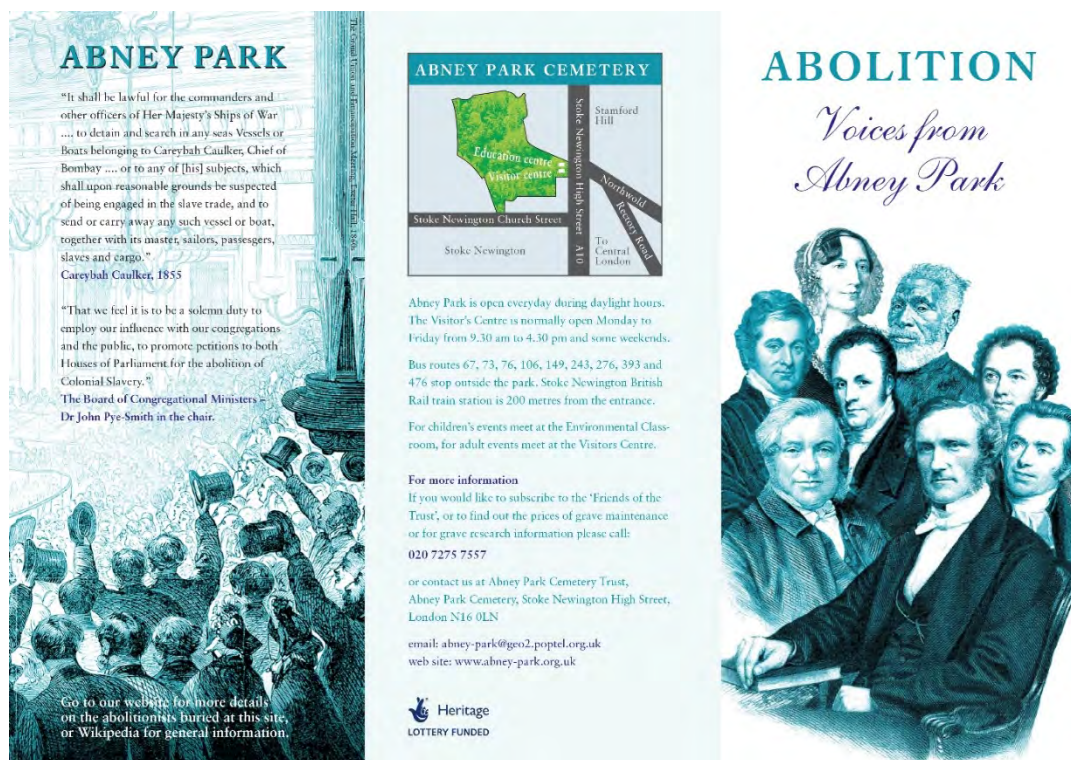


Fig.3 Abney Park Abolitionists Trail (Abney Park Cemetery Trust, 2007)



Fig.4 The grave of Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst in Brompton Cemetery (Photo I.Porter, 2024)

Similarly, war graves from the First and Second World Wars enable pupils to connect local dead to the global conflicts through regimental symbols, epitaphs and Commonwealth War Graves. Politicians and campaigners for women's suffrage may rest in the same grounds, allowing interdisciplinary examination of reform and politics.

While war graves mark local commemoration of international conflict, regimental symbols and epitaphs connect local sacrifice with global wars. Examples include the annual remembrance ceremonies which include local children at Undercliffe (Interview, 2025) and the war grave resource pack at Wisbech (Interview, 2025). The representation of women on memorials can invoke discussions on whose stories are remembered and whose omitted, which hones critical thinking about heritage, memory and versions of history (Undercliffe interview, 2025).

At **GCSE and A Level**, students are to gain a deeper understanding of historical contexts by analysing sources, evaluating evidence and interpreting its significance in order to construct well-argued historical accounts (Department for Education, 2013b). Historic cemeteries offer rich evidence that can be used to develop learning the skills that align with these objectives. Students can learn analytical and interpretive skills by studying such primary sources as gravestones' inscriptions or burial records to trace social and cultural change over time and explore major historical themes, i.e. industrialisation, empire and war, connecting national narratives to local community histories.

Undercliffe's educational visits and Tower Hamlets' interpretation panels show how such programmes teach young people that what "history means for the here and now" (Undercliffe interview, 2025). Such experiences raise social awareness, foster emotional and intellectual engagement and link classroom learning to lived heritage.

Cemeteries are particularly important for local history studies, which feature prominently in the history curriculum (Department for Education, 2013a,b). Forrest (2015) argues that local study "challenges teachers to find easily accessible, inexpensive and relevant resources on their doorstep. A rich resource which has traditionally been overlooked is the local churchyard or cemetery." Local burial grounds bring history literally close to home, offering pupils physical evidence of how people lived, worked and interacted with each other in their own communities.

At Ireland Wood Primary School in Leeds, for example, pupils visited nearby Lawnswood Cemetery to study Victorian life. History Coordinator Tom Connelly made them "experts about particular graves" (Fig.5). During the sessions they made notes, drawings and photographs on site and back at school analysed census returns and created a photo-story to share with families online. These sessions helped pupils realise that "history is about real people," inspiring curiosity about their own family histories and strengthening intergenerational connections. This aligns with the curriculum's guidance that pupils should "construct informed responses

that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information” (Forrest, 2013).



Fig.5 Pupils from Ireland Wood collecting information on life expectancy at Lawnswood Cemetery Leeds (Forrest, 2015)

Local schools visit At Dockroyd Graveyard twice a year to study individuals “who may have lived in the village and had a trade in the village,” such as shopkeepers, tailors or railway workers, integrating social history with geography and community heritage (Dockroyd Graveyard interview, 2025).

York notes that the cemetery carries the history of the town from 1800 onwards, through the Victorian period and right up to now. This makes the cemetery a valuable educational resource. Using it for local studies allows pupils to relate to their own history, to research how people lived and what changed over time (York interview, 2025).

Interpreting historical evidence in cemeteries teaches pupils to value continuity and change and to connect local stories to national and global narratives. This supports the National

Curriculum's goals to offer children opportunities for enquiry-led, contextual learning rooted in place and people.

2. Religious Education

Religious Education (RE) in the National Curriculum aims to promote knowledge, understanding and respect for diverse faiths and beliefs, and cultural traditions that have shaped Great Britain and the world (Ofsted, 2021). The subject encourages pupils to “explore meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God ... and what it means to be human”, and to express their own religious or non-religious beliefs (Department for Education, 2010). Historic cemeteries offer a wide range of opportunities to translate these aims into a meaningful practical experience. A thousand years of Christianity has filled the cemeteries with the wealth of religious symbolism. Crosses, angels, Victorian mourning symbols and Bible quotations on monuments illustrate Christian beliefs and attitudes to death. Interpreting religious symbols in relation to various types of beliefs and commemoration of the dead gives pupils real life evidence of religious and cultural practices in historical context (Mytum, 2020).



*Fig.6 A Japanese memorial in Brookwood Cemetery
(Photo I.Porter,2021)*

In the current multi-faith society, burial grounds, particularly in large cities, offer unique opportunities to teach how different religions express their belief through symbolism (Forrest, 2015). Brookwood was established in 1854 as a multi-faith national cemetery for London's dead (Brookwood Cemetery, n.d.a). Along with Anglican and various other Christian sections, there are dedicated areas for Muslims, Zoroastrians and graves for other faiths, including Jewish and Hindu, making Brookwood a microcosm of Britain's religious diversity (Brookwood Cemetery, n. d.b).



Fig.7 Raja Rammohun Roy memorial at Arnos Vale (Photo I.Porter, 2023)

At Arnos Vale RE groups can look at symbolism, how people communicate their faith on gravestones and the division between Anglican and Nonconformist sections. The monument to influential Indian religious and political reformer Raja Rammohun Roy offers an opportunity to explore Hinduism (Fig.4) (Arnos Vale Cemetery interview, 2025).

Wisbech, although predominantly Anglican, has Jewish, Kuwait, Baptists and Methodists burials, which help pupils to “see a whole of religion” represented in one site (Wisbech interview, 2025). Sheffield notes that in such multicultural cities as theirs, where over half of pupils in some schools are Muslim, visits to cemeteries have not raised objections and can instead open respectful discussions about differing attitudes to death and burial (Sheffield interview, 2025). At Highgate, an educator recalls leading a class of Muslim pupils and discussing “what a Muslim cemetery looks like... very different,” which “opens up interesting conversations” about how burial customs vary across faiths (Highgate interview, 2025). Burial grounds for a specific faith, such as Willesden, provide opportunities to study a particular religion in depth. This cemetery offers school resources for each Key Stage and runs interactive workshops, such as Q&A sessions with a Rabbi and hands-on object handling, creating an engaging and practical learning experience.



Fig.8 Interpretation board at Willesden Jewish Cemetery (Photo I.Porter, 2024)

As RE is offered throughout all the Key Stages, a visit to the cemetery will enhance learning for all ages, when activities are tailored to each age group and curriculum objectives. Key Stage 1 pupils (ages 5–7) might be taken on a guided walk to notice symbols on gravestones. Discussing flowers on graves can introduce the idea that different people have their own ways of saying goodbye. Many historic cemeteries are peaceful green spaces, where younger children can also do simple nature activities, with opportunities to discuss the matters of life and death in a supportive environment.

In later Key Stages a cemetery visit can incorporate RE into history, literature, art and other subjects, taking advantage of cross-curricular opportunities of placed-based education. During a school guided walk at Willesden pupils learn about Jewish customs and people buried there. The educator encourages a dialogue about beliefs and practices in real life context, such as the Jewish tradition of placing stones on graves rather than flowers, as in Christian denominations (Willessden Jewish Cemetery, 2025). Such activities address RE targets of learning about religions, such as facts, symbols, stories and learning from religions, for example, personal reflection on meaning.

In Key Stage 3 (11–14) and Key Stage 4 (14–16, GCSE level), cemetery visits enable a discussion of more complex issues. Students can investigate how different religious traditions understand mortality by comparing epitaphs and architecture of monuments in various sections of the cemetery, for example, Catholic or non-conformist. This can prompt researching ethical questions, such as the equality in death or social issues in relation to war graves or memorials of tragic events. This links RE to citizenship and history, taking advantage of cross-curricular learning. Using such field work in RE will contribute to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, fostering respect and tolerance for other faiths, ultimately preparing students for life in a diverse, modern Britain (Department for Education, 2014e).

Visits to historic cemeteries might inspire A-Level students to undertake independent projects. Examples may include how Victorian funerary art reflects Christian theology, or how the presence of non-Christian graves in a cemetery signifies religious tolerance. Inscriptions and iconography on monuments and burial records provide rich primary material for critical study of religious beliefs and cultural traditions, which will help students understand abstract concepts of philosophy and ethics, and see the impact of such ideas on people's lives.

In conclusion, burial grounds offer a material context to religious and philosophical concepts, expressed through cultural heritage. By aligning activities at these sites with RE curriculum aims of learning about religions and fostering respect for different beliefs teachers can meet RE attainment targets in creative and memorable ways.



Fig.9 A Jewish grave in the Anglican section of Kensal Green Cemetery (Photo I.Porter, 2023)

3. English Language / Literature and Drama

In comparison to History and RE, the teaching of English may not be at the forefront of priorities, as far as cemeteries are concerned. However, the possibilities here open a new scope for interactive and creative approach to the teaching of English and Drama.

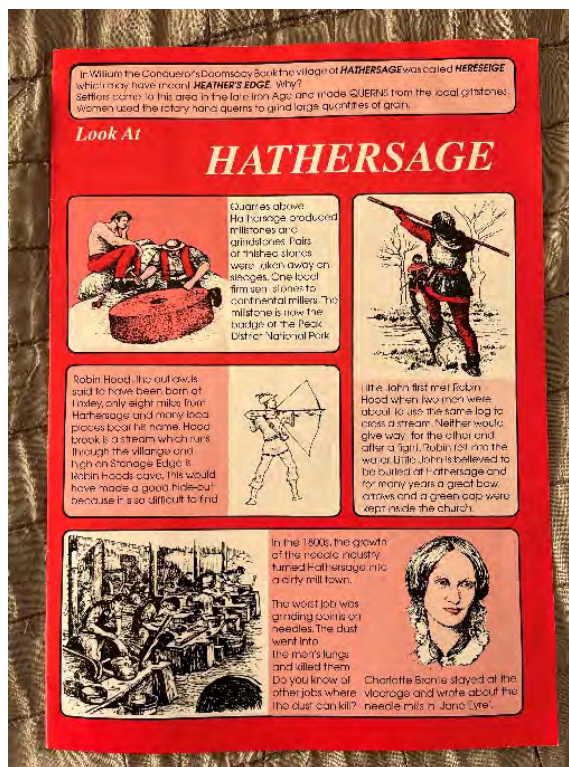
English as a subject combines the disciplines of English language and literature, that goes far beyond learning to read and write. It is the gateway to success in other curriculum areas. According to the research carried out by the Department of Education, “through studying literature, pupils’ eyes are opened to the human experience; they explore meaning and ambiguity as well as the beauty and power of language. English also has a strong creative and expressive dimension.” (Department for Education, 2023). The National Curriculum in English provides a framework for developing literacy, communication skills and literary appreciation through “reading with understanding ... and widely for pleasure and information, building a broad vocabulary and solid grasp of grammar”. It also stipulates learning about English “rich and varied literary heritage”. Children should “communicate their ideas and emotions to others” and “use discussion in order to learn” (Department for Education, 2014b).

Historic cemeteries can be an innovative resource for English, offering rich content and teaching opportunities. Burial grounds connect with the themes of remembrance and mortality in literature, from elegiac poems and Gothic novels to war literature. These themes can be made more tangible by engaging with a historic environment: by physically being in such a space, learners can more vividly imagine the setting and respond to the texts. Highgate reports a visit from Year 7 pupils studying Gothic literature. The experience of walking through a 19th century cemetery deepened their understanding of setting and atmosphere in Gothic fiction (Highgate interview, 2025). Reading a poem like Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* or Victorian ghost stories on-site could help students feel the mood and understand the context behind such works. Looking at Victorian funerary architecture in connection with such poems as Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* opens a conversation about Romanic literature, philosophical questions ("*Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty*"), history and contested heritage (i.e. antiquity artefacts in British museums). The words '*In Memoriam*', often found on Victorian gravestones, can be the basis for discussion of Tennyson's poem of the same name, which explores the themes of death and memorialisation within the context of Christianity vs materialist science.



Fig.10 Monuments in Kensal Green Cemetery, showing words 'In Memoriam' and Greek urns (Photo I.Porter, 2023)

Cemeteries become repositories of cultural heritage through the stories of the people laid to rest there. Exploring a historic burial ground thus ties into the curriculum's aim of appreciating heritage and context in literature (Department for Education, 2014b). For example, the graveyard of St Michael & All Angels Church in Hathersage in the Peak District reputedly contains the grave of Little John, the trusted comrade of Robin Hood (Fig.12). The church produced a leaflet (Fig.11), interpreting the story for children, connecting the famous legend to their local heritage (Bessacarr Publications Ltd, 2014).



*Fig.12, the grave of Little John in St.Michael & All Angels graveyard
(Photo I.Porter, 2025)*

*Fig.11 Look at Hathersage Children's Trail, St.Michael & All Angels Church
(Bessacarr Publications Ltd, 2014)*

The graves of famous authors offer opportunities to learn about the writer's lives and their role in society, facilitating the curriculum aim of deepening pupils' understanding of the societal and historical backdrop of literature. The Friends of Canterbury Cemetery, when considering an education programme, could include writer Joseph Conrad, buried here (Canterbury City Council interview, 2025).



Fig.13 The grave of Wilkie Collins in Kensal Green Cemetery (Photo I.Porter, 2022)

Kensal Green Cemetery is the final resting place of William Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins and many other writers. Charles Dickens (along with numerous other writers from Geoffrey Chaucer to Philip Larkin) is buried in Westminster Abbey (Westminster Abbey, n.d.), which, as well as being a landmark of national importance, is also a place of burial and commemoration, and, therefore, can be included in this study.

The National Curriculum calls for interactivity and active participation of pupils of all ages, from re-telling and acting out of stories and poems in early stages to producing independent course work using research and academic writing skills (Department for Education, 2014b). Historic cemeteries can become creative classrooms, where English teaching can be placed a broader cultural and historical context. Students might investigate memorial inscriptions and link them to historical events, or analyse imagery and symbolism, and use this research as a basis for writing investigative pieces, prose or poetry. Historic England notes that investigating local burial grounds helps young people connect local stories with national events (Historic England, 2021). By connecting literature to lived heritage, both tangible forms such as landscapes and monuments, and intangible forms such as the stories of people buried there, pupils are encouraged to develop empathy, creativity and respect for diversity, supporting the curriculum's aim of cultivating confident and thoughtful writers and speakers.

Forrest (2015) highlights how burial grounds can be used as text and inspiration for creative writing, poetry and persuasive writing. For example, students can read and interpret epitaphs and inscriptions on gravestones. Studying the language on memorials becomes an exercise in inference, as well as reading: students decipher dates, archaic phrasing or poetic tributes,

developing skills of observation and interpretation. This can lead to discussions about how language changes, different writing styles and tone, as well as targeted audience.

Arnos Vale runs a programme for younger children called *Stomping Stories*, using books like *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, *The Gruffalo* or *Hansel and Gretel* to explore nature habitats and the cemetery landscape. The older learners from a project called *South Bristol Youths* chose eight different people buried in the cemetery and created performances based on their research into the lives of these individuals, combining history skills with language and drama (Arnos Vale interview, 2025).

At Woodbury Park, a funding legacy sponsors projects involving primary school children. The Friends organise a challenge: participatory programme for local schools for pupils to discover, create, design a piece of work on a subject relating to the cemetery. Previous topics included the poor in the Victorian society, William Morris and Jack London, who wrote about poverty in London. The project culminates in an exhibition. By framing it as a “challenge” rather than a competition, the initiative ensures inclusivity, encouraging the participation at all levels, including pupils with special needs (Woodbury Park interview, 2025).

One of the aims of the English curriculum is for pupils to become ‘effective communicators’, being able to express their ideas clearly and with respect to others (Department for Education, 2014b). A cemetery can become a space to develop such skills, while bringing together a multi-disciplinary approach involving heritage, history, themes of mortality, or conversation on current affairs based on the lives of people buried there. Meghan Tipping, experienced educator and author of the book *Bringing Talk to Life*, ran a series of workshops at Sheffield General Cemetery. Her approach was centred on bringing young people into outdoor classrooms and encouraging them to talk and explore through conversation. This proved to be “the most successful model to actually engage with the space and to be able to develop that kind of knowledge and passion and feeling about heritage”. (Sheffield interview, 2025). Such skills reinforce literacy targets of the National Curriculum, while cultivating imagination and empathy.

Although Drama is not a separate core curriculum subject, its teaching is an important element in the spoken language provision of English and is envisaged as a vehicle for developing pupils’ expressive, interactive and reflective skills (Department for Education 2014b). Role-play improvising scenes in various settings, formal presentations and debate and other drama

techniques are teachers' building blocks for the effective teaching of English as a core curriculum subject (Drama Resource, n.d.).

Historic cemeteries provide a creative learning environment with numerous opportunities for drama interpretation at all Key Stages. Pupils can research and create roles based on the lives of people buried in a cemetery, or watch an interactive presentation by educators or volunteer actors. This becomes an engaging and meaningful learning experience, which incorporates drama into subjects. Drama can be used to engage children from a young age onwards in various areas of curriculum. At Longden Road Cemetery in Shrewsbury, the *Heritage To Inspire* project featured 'insect interviews'. "These were read by a couple of volunteers, one taking the role of 'interviewer' and the other being the animal in question. Silly voices were allowed!" (Caring for God's Acre interview, 2025).

At York, Years 9 and 10 were taken on a tour of the cemetery. The students went back to school and together with the drama teacher picked the stories they were interested in and created their own drama to showcase them, then performed in front of the school and parents. The teacher reported that "they have absolutely lapped it up and they had learned so much" (York interview, 2025). This, and the experience of children creating their own drama performances at Arnos Vale described above demonstrates how cemeteries can become a vehicle for creative expression and imaginative learning, which goes beyond the textbook. The architecture and nature landscape of a burial ground have a powerful emotional impact, which stimulates improvisation and creative expression. Monuments, epitaphs and nature inspire young people to respond physically and emotionally, thus promoting engagement, collaboration and reflection.



Fig. 14 Costumed interpretation at Kensal Green Cemetery (Photo I.Porter, 2024)

In conclusion, cemeteries offer many opportunities for enriching English curriculum and encourage active learning and participation, in line with the education sector guidance on making education engaging and relevant. Placing learning in a real-world context, rather than teaching literature as a classroom subject, allows the teacher to connect English to place and personal experience, which makes learning more effective and lasting.

4. Art

The National Curriculum for Art and Design ensures that pupils produce creative work in various techniques, can analyse art works using appropriate language, are familiar with the works of great artists and understand the historical and cultural development of art forms in the appropriate cultural context (Department for Education, 2013c).

As “outdoor museums of sepulchral art, textbooks of art history” (Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art, 2021) cemeteries offer diverse visual landscapes,

where learners can find tangible examples of art and design from different time periods. Students can engage with monuments, art installations and cemetery buildings to practice observation and artistic skills in a variety of media, including art, design, sculpture, photography and architecture.



Fig. 15 A piano, donated to Chapel Street Cemetery in Eccleshill is now a piece of contemporary art (Photo: I.Porter, 2025)



Fig.16 Example from Art and Architecture resource, (Caring for God's Acre, n.d.b)

Caring for God's Acre educational pack offers a section on *Marvellous Monuments* (Fig.16). Exploring Art and Architecture, learners are encouraged to survey gravestone styles, study churchyard carvings and create artwork inspired by tomb designs through a variety of cross-curricular activities (Caring for God's Acre, n.d.b).



Fig.17 Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust, 2023

At Arnos Vale, schools come for self-led activities in drawing, painting and photography, exploring the unique possibilities of the landscape (Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust, 2025).

Sheffield offers activities in a variety of techniques, including mono printing, sketching from observation or creating clay impressions of leaves. The educator notes that a new experience may spark a hobby or maybe a career in the future in the creative sector (Sheffield interview, 2025).



Abney Park Cemetery trail for Key Stage 1 engages young children in creative activities on site, providing inspiration for practicing drawing skills (Fig.18) (Hackney Council (n.d.b).

Fig.18 A page from Explore Abney Park leaflet by Hackney Museum (Hackney Council, n.d.b).

At Undercliffe students from the local secondary school carried out a photography project as part of their curriculum enrichment. The Friends were very impressed by the quality of the students' work, which was displayed in an exhibition (Undercliffe interview, 2025).

Cemeteries can play a valuable role in supporting the curriculum's aim to understand art in its historical and cultural context. Pupils can explore the lives of artists buried in a cemetery and evaluate their work in relation to its time period. For example, Mark Gertler, buried in Willesden, is renowned for his art that protested against the First World War (Fig.19).



Fig. 19 Mark Gertler grave at Willesden Jewish Cemetery (Photo I.Porter, 2025)

The presence of Commonwealth war graves in the same cemetery offers a cross curricular learning opportunities, connecting art and history through a tangible setting. A Kensal Green volunteer recalls that when she was growing up, her school would take pupils to the local American revolutionary war cemetery where they did rubbings of the stones, using paper and coal (Kensal Green Cemetery interview, 2025).

At Dockroyd Graveyard pupils have an art lesson in the grounds drawing trees and wildlife (Dockroyd Graveyard interview, 2025). The *Heritage To Inspire* project at Longden Road Cemetery included making clay images, plant pots, bird boxes, wildflower seed bombs, mammal footprint traps, clay bugs using natural materials and cyanotype printing with flowers (Caring for God's Acre, interview, 2025).



Clay bugs



Cyanotype prints



*“Curious Carvings” clay
images*

Fig.20 Art activities at Longden Road Cemetery, (Caring for God’s Acre, 2025)

The cross-disciplinary opportunities of a cemetery visit link art with history and citizenship, for example, exploring the lives of artists buried there, with RE and literature by studying symbols and inscriptions on monuments, or science, when looking at weather and properties of stone. Such connections make learning more relevant and memorable. Indeed, researchers have highlighted that cemeteries encourage reflection and historical memory, which are key pedagogical values in art education (Huerta, 2016).

Several recent projects across the UK have used cemeteries to bring together professional artists, schools and the local community in collaborative art projects. In 2024 Derby City Council commissioned artist Richard Janes to create a COVID-19 memorial sculpture at Nottingham Road Cemetery. The project brought together the Voices in Action youth council, primary students and the Friends of the cemetery to discuss pandemic experiences and then hand-build clay models symbolizing “the good things that came out of it” (Derby City Council, 2024). Bronze casts of the models were incorporated into the final sculpture, installed in the cemetery grounds. As well as a contemplation of the recent Covid experience, the sculpture reflects the Victorian funerary heritage of the cemetery and its thriving wild life (Friends of Nottingham Road Cemetery, n.d.). This participatory design project not only taught students about the memorial design process (concept to casting), but also gave them a personal stake in the cemetery’s artistic heritage.



*Fig.21 The sculpture in Nottingham Road Cemetery, Derby
(Photo: Friends of Nottingham Road Cemetery (n.d.))*

A similar project took place in West Lothian in 2023. Commissioned by the local community association and the council, and funded by Stirling Developments, *The River* sculpture was created by artist Svetlana Kondakova Muir through collaboration with a bereavement group, schools and wildlife advisors. The sculpture features water-themed mosaics designed by local primary pupils and the Boy's Brigade, incorporating motifs of native wildlife such as oak, hazel, bluebells, butterflies, an otter, a trout and a kingfisher. It symbolises the natural cycle of life and evokes peace and reflection (West Lothian Council, 2025).



Fig. 22 The River Sculpture Project Photos: West Lothian Council (2025)

Going into higher and further education, cemeteries offer a space for practical learning and applications of skills. In 2025 Highgate hosted a collaborative workshop with the Architectural Association School and the Building Crafts College for architecture and stonemasonry students. Exploring memorials with a conservator and stone mason, students learnt about stone decay, monument design and restoration techniques, including a demonstration of inlaid lead lettering. They also studied the original drawings in the cemetery archive. The visit was followed up by a stone carving session at college, linking architectural heritage with hands-on craft activities (The Building Crafts College, 2023).

5. Science / nature

The science framework in the National Curriculum is focused on progressing the scientific knowledge of pupils across different subjects. Learners are to understand scientific processes and methods of inquiry, how science is used today and its future implications. Pupils should not only grasp concepts and facts, but also learn to work and think like scientists, asking questions and testing assumptions about the world around them. From learning about plants and animals in natural habitats and basic environmental awareness in Key Stage 1 to complex interactions within ecosystems and climate change towards the end of school education, pupils are encouraged to be active learners by undertaking practical investigations and to interpret data and form evidence-based conclusions (Department for Education, 2015).

Pedagogical research and practice show that that outdoor learning in nature improves children's motivation, behaviour, academic achievement and social skills like teamwork, at the same time benefitting their mental and physical health (Natural England, 2023). Welsh Harp notes that, "especially in a city, children's life is full of concrete or exists on a screen", and coming out of the classroom and studying nature in its proper environment is hugely beneficial to children, as well as to their teachers and parents (Welsh Harp interview, 2025). Being surrounded with nature can spark curiosity and focus in ways that a traditional classroom does not, leading to memorable hands-on learning experiences suitable to all types of learning styles.

Burial grounds often have pockets of wild life that have been undisturbed for many years, and less footfall than public parks. For example, Glasgow Necropolis is the second-largest greenspace in the centre of Glasgow. Glasgow City Council has designated it as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (Glasgow Necropolis, n.d.). A variety of microhabitats are

created by its old tombstones, grassy meadows, shrubs and mature trees. Pupils can study practical application of science concepts in these biodiverse ‘outdoor laboratories’.

Nature workshops are among the best explored and utilised activity in cemeteries. Educational charity Setpoint London East, based at Tower Hamlets cemetery, brings approximately 7,500 school children a year for curriculum-linked workshops on minibeast safaris, pond dipping, seed dispersal, soils, examining the gravestones for stone weathering, engaging in full with the possibilities of Tower Hamlets as a biodiverse 33-acre woodland nature reserve (Soanes Centre, n.d.). The Friends of Tower Hamlets cemetery offer Forest School, with trained leaders conducting sessions in a safe natural environment, which include making a fire and cooking over it, exploring nature and using tools (Fig.23). In the borough of Tower Hamlets in London “most schools have lost green space in favour of more buildings to accommodate more pupils, so they find it much harder to deliver the nature elements of the curriculum” (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025).



Fig. 23 The setting for Forest School at Tower Hamlets (Photo: I.Porter, 2025)

Forrest (2015) lists habitats, mini-beasts, erosion and weathering, rocks and food chains as key topics covered in cemetery-based sessions, directly mirroring primary science objectives on living things and their environments.

At Dockroyd, classes typically visit in two groups of thirty and draw trees as an art activity or explore the wildlife. Volunteers work to preserve nature within the graveyard, making it a perfect place for such activities (Fig.24) (Dockroyd Graveyard interview, 2025).



Fig. 24 Dockroyd Graveyard, 2025 (Photo I.Porter)

At Arnos Vale ‘bug hunts’ are used to develop investigative skills. Pupils look for invertebrates, classify them by features (for example, the number of legs) and conclude why spiders, worms and woodlice are not insects. This reinforces knowledge of arthropod anatomy and concepts of classification through practical investigation (Arnos Vale interview, 2025). At Willesden younger groups come for seed planting activities. Volunteers explain the difference between soil and compost. Children plant one biodegradable pot in the cemetery and take a second one home, which stretches their experience of plant growth beyond the visit (Fig.25) (Volunteer Co-ordinator, Willesden interview, 2025).



*Fig. 25 School planting sessions at Willesden Jewish Cemetery
(Photo: Willesden Jewish Cemetery (2024b))*

A similar activity is popular in Eashing Cemetery Community Garden and Orchard in Godalming (Eashing Cemetery Community Garden and Orchard, 18 June 2025). Canterbury emphasises the educational potential of its collection of over 300 types of trees and associated wildlife tours (Canterbury City Council, interview, 2025). Conducting field investigations, observation and data recording help develop scientific inquiry skills, while connecting classroom knowledge with physical environment. A cemetery is ideal for studying plants and life cycles, with many trees, flowering plants, mosses and ferns growing there undisturbed over long periods of time, especially when the Friends' groups preserve and enhance natural environment and habitats by introducing 'no mow' areas. Volunteers at St John Baptist, Cirencester invested a lot of time and effort in enhancing the biodiversity of the site, with education in mind. They invite local schools for nature and biodiversity study, including Years 5 and 6 undertaking species identification. (Vujakovic, 2024). Royal Parks offer a range of educational activities across all their sites, which include Brompton Cemetery (Plan My School Trip, n.d.).

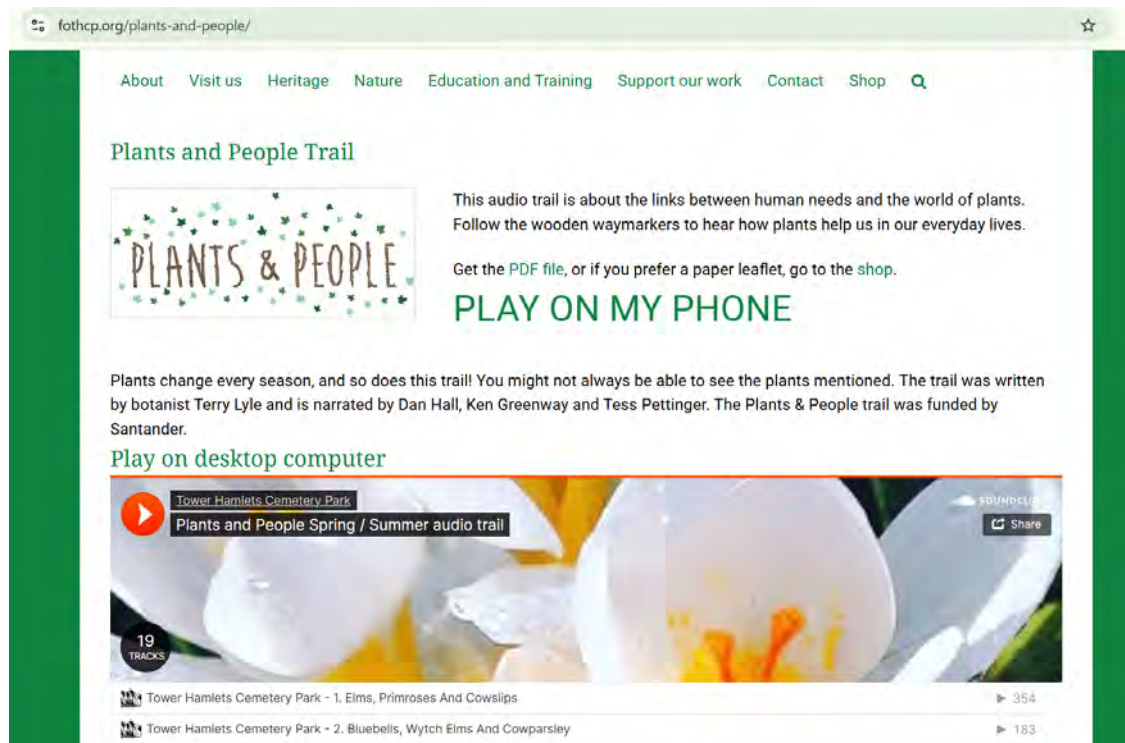
Sheffield ran climate action workshops, examining noise, air and light pollution by contrasting the relative tranquillity of the cemetery with adjoining busy roads and urban lighting, helping pupils relate abstract environmental science to their own city (Sheffield interview, 2025).

Many burial grounds developed self-guided interpretation materials that can be used both within structured school session and as individual activities by families. Abney Park offers family ecology resources on trees, fungi and invertebrates (Hackney Council, n.d.). In addition to a general Nature Trail, York offers detailed leaflets on snowdrops and butterflies in the cemetery (York Cemetery Trust, n.d.).



Fig.26 Brompton cemetery animal spotter leaflets and other materials (Photo I.Porter, 2024)

Utilising technology for interactive online resources for nature interpretation, such as the *Plants and People* digital resource developed by Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park (Fig.27) (Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, n.d.) enhances the learning experience for young people, as well as adults.



*Fig. 27 Screenshot of the Tower Hamlets Plants and People interactive online resource
(Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, n.d.)*

Nature exploration in a cemetery also helps pupils to appreciate it as a community green space that needs looking after. This aligns with the Curriculum’s objective of promoting the values of responsibility and sustainability alongside acquiring knowledge. It also reflects broader educational strategies by the Department of Education to ensure access to nature for young people and to involve them in improving biodiversity in their local grounds (Natural England, 2023). For example, working with Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust, Jewellery Quarter Cemeteries Project in Birmingham developed a series of school workshop guidance and self-guided activities to “explore nature in the cemetery and learn about habitats, ecosystems and food chains”, with an emphasis on learning how “to take better care of the plants, animals and other creatures living in these beautiful places, whilst respecting the history of the cemetery” (Jewellery Quarter Cemeteries Project, n. d.) Such initiatives enhance pupils’ knowledge of nature and their role in caring for it as part of their community, which contributes to the Citizenship Curriculum.



*Fig. 28 Poppies at Willesden Jewish Cemetery
(Willessden Jewish Cemetery, 2025d)*

Cemeteries are often planted with symbolic or ornamental species, for example, poppies for remembrance, evergreens signifying eternal life, or commemorative planting on a grave of a particular person. Discussing these choices can develop cultural literacy and show how human values intersect with nature, enriching the learners' appreciation for both science and heritage.

Growing plants in a cemetery may be compared with the artistic depiction on monuments, including the symbolic meaning of plants through history (Mytum, 2020), bringing together biology, art and history.

Combining the theme of history and commemoration with nature studies, learning about people who contributed to the world of science and environmental action buried in a cemetery adds a different dimension and special interest to learning. Willesden, for example, is the final resting place of scientist Rosalind Franklin, who contributed to DNA and viruses research and zoologist Walter Rothschild, who founded Natural History Museum at Tring, as well as many other remarkable scientists (Willessden Jewish Cemetery, n.d.). Scientist Michael Faraday is buried at Highgate (Fig.29) (Wikipedia, n.d.). Exploring the stories of men and women of science extends students' horizons and adds depth to understanding of how scientific knowledge developed over time.



Fig. 29 The memorial to Michael Faraday in Highgate (Photo I.Porter, 2021)

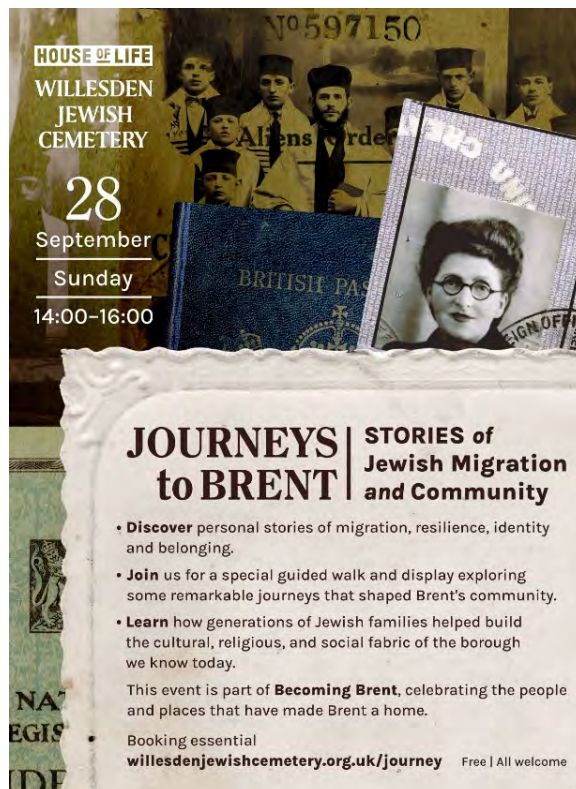
The above examples show that cemeteries act as living laboratories provide multi-faceted learning environment, which can enrich the National Curriculum's content in science, as well as developing practical scientific skills and learning to care for the environment.

6. Geography

The National Curriculum for geography calls for pupils to be equipped with “knowledge about places, people, resources and natural and human environments” and “deepening their understanding of the interaction between physical and human processes” within landscapes and environments (Department for Education, 2013d). A geography activity within an outdoor learning space, like a cemetery, contributes to the National Curriculum target of inspiring “in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people that will remain with them for the rest of their lives” (Department for Education, 2013d). The physical aspect of the learning environment deepens pupil's contextual knowledge of the locality and the effect of human interaction on the physical aspects of their surroundings. In practice this means that young

people explore human geography, such as population, settlements and cultural practices alongside physical geography, such as landforms and ecology in a real-world setting.

A cemetery can be seen as a map of our past, holding local historical and demographic data. Forrest (2015) highlights the use of cemeteries for drawing and interpreting maps and studying patterns of migration.



For example, Willesden's *Journeys to Brent* project revealed the stories of Jewish migration from countries around the world to make this part of London their home. This material makes a solid foundation for the study of world population movement in the context of history and local studies (Willesden Jewish Cemetery, 2025).

Fig. 30 *Journeys to Brent* leaflet

(Willesden Jewish Cemetery, 2025)

At Arnos Vale, Key Stage 2 workshop *Map It (Geography)* explores the landscape and headstones applying geographical skills. Pupils use compasses to learn orientation and direction, and perform mapping tasks that develop their judgement about which features are appropriate to record, for example, a gravestone is a permanent point worth mapping, but a car is not. This leads to discussions about map-reading and broader geographical ideas. (Arnos Vale interview, 2025; Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust, n.d.c).

Sheffield provides free downloadable geography resources. Using the landscape, monuments and epitaphs, burial records, archives and the historical development of the cemetery, the

leaflets explore the topics of flooding, urban development, climate change and pollution. They encourage active learning by asking the users to “Prepare, Explore and Discover” and then “Share, Create and Reflect”. This structure aligns closely with the aims of the National Curriculum of gaining skills from fieldwork experience and from multiple sources of geographical information (General Cemetery 2025). The resource also supports the wider aims of teaching pupils to become effective communicators: a skill that is best developed through active, place-based learning (Sheffield interview, 2025). This structure aligns closely with the aims of the National Curriculum for geography, which advocates investigative tasks which require learners to collect, analyse and communicate data derived directly from fieldwork (Department for Education, 2013d). By using a cemetery’s physical environment and archival materials pupils can deepen their understanding of geographical processes such as hydrology, environmental change and urban development. The activities also prompt the interpretation of multiple sources of geographical information, from historical maps and burial plans to contemporary spatial data and observational sketches. The Department for Education and Skills developed a guide for geography fieldwork for Key Stage 3 Science for studying rock cycles and the scientific enquiry of geological changes, with a section for specific field work in cemeteries (DofES, 2024).

Science and nature workshops and resources, as discussed in Section 5, can be a useful basis for the topics connected with environmental geography. Analysing the history of cemetery development facilitates the study of urban geography. This demonstrates the educational value of cemeteries beyond one specific area, covering various aspects of the Geography Curriculum, as well as connecting it to other disciplines, such as history and citizenship.

7. Mathematics

The National Curriculum defines mathematics as a “creative and highly interconnected discipline” and a “foundation for understanding the world”. The key mathematical knowledge and skills, such as problem solving and reasoning are to be applied to science, technology and engineering, financial literacy and other subjects, as well as everyday life (Department for Education, 2015f).

Cemeteries provide authentic real-world data and hands-on context for the teaching of mathematics across all Key Stages. A burial ground can be used as an archive, with headstones as “form a statistical database of the community”, reflecting history and life events (Price,

2011). Such setting naturally integrates maths with history and geography, which aligns with National Curriculum advice to apply mathematics in meaningful contexts across various subjects.

At East Sheen Cemetery pupils collected data, such as dates of birth and death, gender, occupation, cause of death, if stated, relationship to others buried nearby and other interesting information and used it back in the classroom for working on a range of core maths skills. Data was analysed in conjunction with relevant events in history, such as the World Wars and Great Smog of London, supporting cross curricular learning in history, social studies and geography. Applying mathematical methods to analyse authentic community data is a good example of contextualised, inquiry-based learning, which makes number, statistics and measurement more meaningful and engaging for pupils (Price, 2011).

The Ryde Social Heritage Group (Isle of Wight) developed comprehensive primary school resources called “*Dead Good Maths*” for hands-on activities in Ryde Cemetery (Fig.31). Downloadable activity sheets include a *Memorial Survey* (collect and analyse data from gravestones), *Grid References* (locate graves on a map), *Measuring Angles* (on memorials and landscape features), *Path Measurement Exercise* (estimate and measure distances between graves), *Dates and Ages* (use birth and death dates to calculate ages or timelines) and *Symmetry and Tessellation* (explore the patterns on memorial art). These exercises cover various maths skills, including arithmetic, geometry and data analysis. The *Measuring Angles* leaflet states, “This exercise is generally regarded as ‘wicked’ by the children who have already carried it out” (Ryde Social Heritage Group, n.d.), which validates how an unconventional outdoor learning setting can introduce excitement into a traditional subject. Further, this aligns with the National Curriculum target of instilling in the pupils “an appreciation of the beauty and power of mathematics, and a sense of enjoyment and curiosity about the subject” (Department of Education, 2013f).

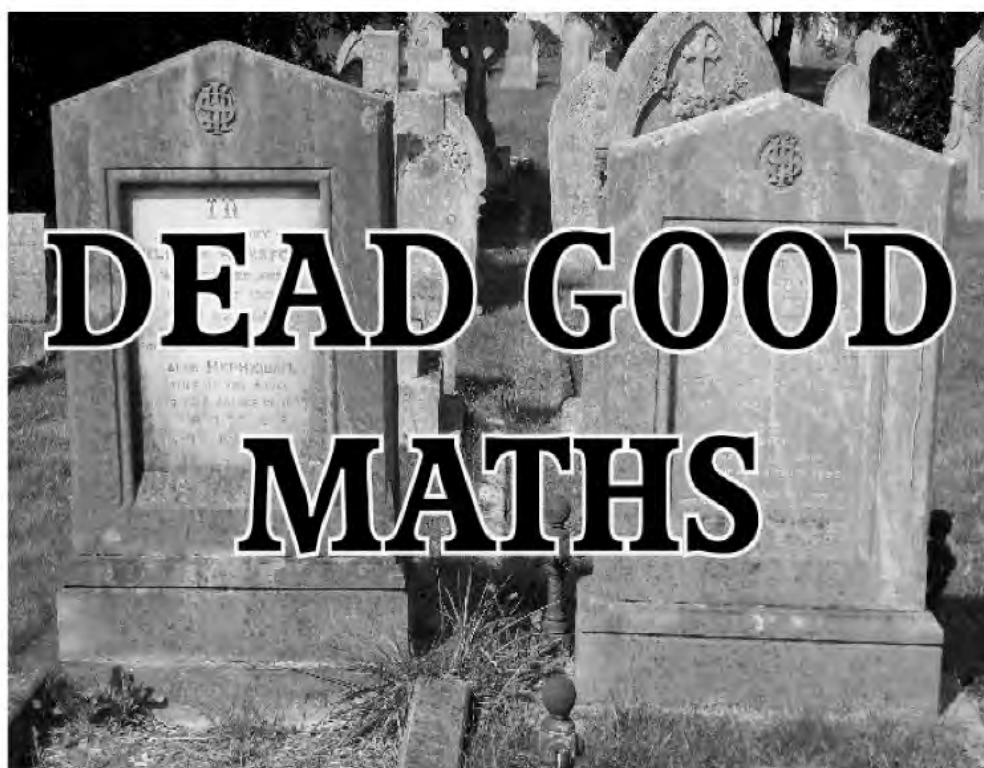


Fig. 31 Dead Good Maths leaflet (Ryde Social Heritage Group, 2015)

Mill Road Cemetery in Cambridge created a resource to teach pupils to handle data in practical ways through measuring, symmetry, counting and following directions. It is based on landscape features, such as tombstones and natural objects, including sticks, leaves, trees and even minibeasts. Such activities integrate geography, science and art, making the cemetery a cross-curricular educational setting. (Mill Road Cemetery, n.d.)

Houghton Heritage Society in Co Durham produced a maths trail for Houghton Hillside Cemetery. It is devised around cemetery features and covers calculation and numbers (based on dates and ages), speed and measures, symmetry and geometry, area estimation and statistics through traffic surveys, and contextual problem-solving. Each trail covers several curriculum objectives, allowing teachers to spot gaps in understanding across topics. The trail also includes advice on risk assessment, travel information and contact details of the local authority, making it a complete and user-friendly package (Houghton-le-Spring, n.d.).

As part of *Applying Mathematical Processes* series, Nuffield Foundation developed a resource on *Cemetery Mathematics*. Key stage 3/4 pupils visit a local graveyard or cemetery and then set their own questions, based on the collected data and to test their own hypotheses in a real-life setting. The key learning objectives are identifying the mathematical aspects of their question, analysing and classifying data, interpreting and evaluation and communicating findings through discussing the results. The trail includes advice on health and safety and practical arrangements (Nuffield Foundation, 2010). As a general resource, it is of particular interest to the cemetery educators who do not have the expertise to develop their own school materials, but would like to offer education programmes, as well as teachers looking for enriching their maths curriculum through hands-on fieldwork.

The above examples illustrate the potential of burial grounds as imaginative mathematics classrooms. Their strength lies in how activities in such settings exploit children's natural curiosity and provide opportunities to engage with the subject through effective learning techniques. Numbers and dates on headstones prompt calculations and questions; geometric thinking is inspired by the variety of shapes in the landscape; and the experiences are made memorable by the natural outdoor setting. Abstracts concepts in algebra, statistics, measurement, geometry and other areas are made concrete through hands-on experiences, as specified in the National Curriculum for maths.

9. PSHE and Citizenship

Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education aims to equip pupils with knowledge and skills for healthy, safe and prepared lives, as well as helping them to achieve their academic potential, fostering personal wellbeing and removing barriers to learning (Long and McGrath, 2024; PSHE Association, n.d.). This subject is to help children address critical issues and make informed choices about relationships, friendships, health and future careers (PSHE Association, n.d.). The core themes cover physical and mental health awareness, emotional resilience, healthy lifestyles, positive relationships and responsible citizenship, among others. An important part of PSHE education is the development of self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking and social responsibility (Long and McGrath, 2024).

Historic burial grounds offer rich interdisciplinary learning opportunities that support PSHE outcomes. Forrest (2015) highlights the opportunities for pupils to engage with conservation

and shared values, develop communication skills, work collaboratively in groups and practise problem solving.

Cemetery-based projects benefit the aims of citizenship education by encouraging pupils to see themselves as members of local, national and global communities. Malvern Cemeteries believe that learning about the personal stories of people buried in cemeteries challenges pupils to see graves not as faceless objects, but as representations of individual lives, thereby fostering empathy, respect and a sense of responsibility. (Malvern Cemeteries interview, 2025).

At Undercliffe, the educators believe that learning about Bradford's historical development puts modern life in historical context. Bradford had an illustrious past as one of the richest cities in Europe in the 19th century, but today young people and even adults may not be aware of this. Learning from the lives of people in the cemetery enables them to understand what history means for 'here and now', allowing pupils to "to inculcate a pride in the city" (Undercliffe interview, 2025). Such emphasis on local identity and critical engagement with the past inform learners' understanding of how history shaped modern day living, aligning with curriculum aims to develop informed and reflective citizens. Combining history research skills with reflecting on the lives of people in the past encourages the development of empathy, community belonging and understanding cultural identity.

At Rectory Lane the middle-class nature of people buried in the cemetery reflects the historic character of the area, but not the present day ethnic diversity. (Rectory Lane interview, 2025). This can be the basis for discussing questions of social class, representation and historical inequality, as part of study of race relations in historic context.

Tower Hamlets approaches diversity and inclusion by framing the cemetery as part of "the changing face of East London," using tours such as *Around the World in Two Hours* to highlight graves and plants with connections to South Asia, East Asia and the African continent and to emphasise that people "from all over the world" are buried there. The cemetery becomes more inclusive by fostering connections with the black and brown communities in the area, as it offers the chance to enjoy and learn in the Cemetery Park to every pupil in the borough, irrespective of their national or religious background, promoting the message that "we have more in common than we differ", (Tower Hamlets interview, 2025). This is a core value in citizenship education. Beckett Street explains that learning in a cemetery promotes "a deep respect for historical lives and an empathy for the experiences of previous generations", based on inscriptions, religious, secular and floral iconography and cemetery records. "They could

learn to ask questions, be curious and participate in discussions and stories in a meaningful way. They could also develop the skills necessary to protect, preserve and promote this history for future generations” (Beckett Street questionnaire, 2025).

School sessions at Sheffield focused on introducing children to discussions about major life concepts, such as death, remembrance and social responsibility through philosophical questions like “Should we accept our place in society?” or “How can we make our mark?” These discussions were based on what pupils could observe around them and in the stories revealed in the cemetery. The informal atmosphere created space and freedom for pupils to talk, test ideas and develop their own understanding, while being sensitively guided by a qualified educator. The educator emphasises that “bringing young people into historic spaces and letting them talk and explore through talk” is “the most successful model to actually engage with the space and to be able to develop that kind of knowledge and passion and feeling about heritage” (Sheffield General interview, 2025). This supports the PSHE aim of teaching young people to see themselves as active, caring and responsible participants in their communities (Long and McGrath, 2024).

The above examples demonstrate how learning in a cemetery can bring together the study of history, discussions on the issues of diversity and philosophical issues and enables young people to take up the roles of active, responsible citizens in a real-life setting, supporting PHSE education targets across the curriculum.

Appendix II

Further research

This research has revealed the enormous educational potential of historic cemeteries in the UK and the barriers to participation in place-based education at these sites. In order to develop this further and find better solutions, more research can be undertaken in the following areas:

Broader Research Base

This study collected information through online research and interviews with Friends' groups and cemetery officials, but only one interview with a local authority representative. Although some of the cemetery educators were former teachers, the scope of this project did not allow for gathering more information from school teachers, parents and pupils themselves. Collecting their experiences and points of view will offer the opportunity to create a fuller picture and find better solutions.

National Variation in Cemetery-Based Education Provision

Due to the time and resources limitations of this research, it has not been possible to create an accurate picture of how the provision of cemetery-based education varies across the UK and how it is shaped by socio-economic, urban/rural and cultural contexts. Examining a larger number of case studies from different parts of the UK will give a better picture of the education offer in cemeteries across the whole country. Graphs and charts could be produced on the basis of this information to reveal trends. Further research into this will be useful to inform policy and guide funding distribution.

Different Types of learners

This study mainly concentrated on school education, only briefly covering other types of learning, such as informal/family learning and further and adult education. The focus was mainly on organised school workshops and materials aimed at school groups, with other areas,

such as mobile pedagogy, heritage interpretation, etc. covered only briefly. Extending the study further into these areas will offer benefits for a wider range of community involvement.

Cemeteries as Global Cultural Landmarks

The practical experience has been gathered from the sites around the UK. However, during literature research, it became apparent the cemeteries are used for education around the world. Taking into account similarities and differences in various countries would yield interesting experiences and innovations, comparing, for example, pedagogical value across different religions and cultures, issues facing education programmes in different countries and best practices in this area.

Best Practice Studies

Limited space in this dissertation did not allow for a detailed examination of case studies. Examining the success of each individual cemetery, which run a large scale education programme will bring out aspects useful for others.

The Role of Digital Technologies

The assessment of how current digital interpretation techniques, such as QR-coded trails, apps and online databases are used in current educational projects will reveal the most efficient models to be recommended to practitioners. There is a need to investigate how the latest technological advances, including AI and VR technologies can be used to enhance the learning experience during an education visit to a cemetery, as well as used in outreach, including improving accessibility for disabled learners and how modern digital tools can benefit heritage preservation.

Guidelines for Heritage and Education Sectors

This study revealed tensions between different uses of burial grounds, such as mourning practices, tourism, heritage conservation, ecological management and education access. Future research can investigate, for example, the balance between increased footfall from education

programmes and heritage and nature conservation or respectful practices when encountering the recently bereaved in a cemetery. Such research will guide practitioners in creating learning activities that balance educational value with safeguarding considerations in an appropriate and respectful way.

Further research into health and safety aspects would inform practitioners on the best practice in creating risk assessments for education visits.

Evaluate the Impact of Cemetery-based Education

While the current study presents strong qualitative evidence of positive engagement from pupils and educators, it has not been possible to evaluate the long-term effect of student's visits to cemeteries, i.e. if the experience changed their attitudes to heritage, nature and death, improved health and wellbeing and equipped them with new skills, as well as influencing later choices, such as future course of study or volunteering. A future study could create a series of education events in collaboration with a selected cemetery and school with a view to track a group of pupils over a certain period to measure the educational, emotional and social impact of cemetery-based sessions. It will be interesting to compare outcomes from cemetery-based sessions to other types of educational environments, such as classrooms or other green spaces. A comparative cost-benefit analysis of such a project could demonstrate value to funders and local authorities, facilitating access to funding, which is a major barrier to cemetery-based education, as revealed by this study.

Create a CPD Programme

To address the reluctance of teachers and education authorities to take children to cemeteries, future research could examine psychological and professional reasons behind this, methods to overcome such reluctance, i.e. how best to prepare for the visit to improve student outcomes and emotional reactions and create a training/advisory programme to help teachers access the full benefits of deathscapes. A trial run of such a CPD programme will enable researchers to evaluate its effectiveness.

Creating a Practical Resource

This study revealed that there is a big interest in cemetery-based education, both among cemetery volunteers and authorities and educational establishments. One of the barriers to develop this is the lack of professional educational expertise among cemetery staff and volunteers, which requires financial resources, not available to cemetery managements. It will be helpful to create an interpretation resource, which will allow educators and teachers to draw information on different aspects of the curriculum and create their own resources for a particular cemetery. It will be devised in collaboration with technology students and education students. A database can be created to filter information by

- Subject
- Key stage / year group
- Type of learning / research questions / lesson aim
- Skills: mindfulness, teamwork, wellbeing, independent enquiry

It will be linked to a user interface, such as a website and/or an app, featuring:

- Explanations of the common types of symbols
- General history of cemetery movement for historical background
- Use of technology, i.e create an outline of a tombstone or a building for colouring in / art / design project
- Link to information resource to find biographies of individuals
- Integration with IRecord for info about creatures, PictureThis for plant identification, burial records databases (deceasedonline), database for monument identification, Ancestry website for biography information
- GPS guide to find locations

A pilot project to trial this resource will help refine its usability and guide future feature development.

In conclusion, the avenues for further research detailed above highlight the need for continued investigation to develop effective, ethical and innovative education practice.