

History of Bunhill Fields

By Sheila McIntosh

“Bunhill Fields, that weird city with groves of tombstones.”¹



Many things about Bunhill Fields are mysterious. Even its name and its topography are uncertain. The clues that there are, are often found to be wrong or contradictory. There is no single existing ancient map or survey likely to give definitive answers. Many such documents could have been destroyed in the Great Fire or just lost in the mists and the turbulences of the times.

At the end of the thirteenth century the spread of land north of London Wall, east of St Giles without Cripplegate, and west of St. Botolph's without Bishopsgate, was known as The Moor or La More. On maps of the time it appears empty and desolate, liable to flooding. William Fitz Stephen² writing in the twelfth century gives a more vivid picture of the place: a great marsh that laps up against the northern wall, which, when frozen, provides an immense playground for the youth of the city, who use the animal bones lying around as improvised skates. John Stow, writing in 1603, describes the drainage of the land beyond Moorgate, which began in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century:

[B]y these degrees was this fen or moor at length made main and hard ground, which before, being overgrown with flags, sedges and rushes, served to no use. ³

¹ *Relics and Memorials of London City* by James Ogilvy 1910.

² <http://users.trytel.com/tristan/towns/florilegium/introduction/intro01.html>

³ https://www.gutenberg.org/files/42959/42959-h/42959-h.htm#FNanchor_284_284

The citizens obstructed the first attempts to enclose the land, but failed to stem the tide of development which was: “not so much for use of profit as for show and pleasure, betraying the vanity of men’s minds.” (Stow). There is an early mention of Bunhill but it does not identify the Fields. In Charles Kingsford’s notes on Stow he tells us that in the sixteenth century the building of garden houses and summer houses in rural suburbs was very popular. They were often places of assignation. In 1618, commenting on the morality and the showiness of these houses, Geffray Minshull wrote: “A nasty stinking lodging in a jayle is sweeter land than any garden-house about Bun-hill.”⁴

By the middle of the sixteenth century a much-reduced Moor remained in the east, surrounded in the west by Moorfield, Mallow Field, and Finsbury Field. Bunhill is not marked on the 1560s “Agas” map of London.⁵ I have found no map earlier than the seventeenth century that names Bunhill Fields and there is no evidence for the common belief that Bunhill was the site to which more than a thousand cartloads of bones were moved from St. Paul’s charnel house in 1549, nor that the name Bunhill derived from that event. It is said that the hill of bones was so vast that three windmills were built on it. On the “Agas” map there are certainly three windmills, but they are marked on Finsbury Field. In 1911 Walter Besant wrote:

[T]here were three great fields of the Manor of Finsbury, namely, ‘Bunhill, Mallow and High Field or Meadow ground where the three windmills stand.’ Thus, they are described in a survey of 1567.⁶

Besant does not give the author of the survey. It may have been one of the sources quoted by Stow or Strype.⁷

In 1739 William Maitland wrote that the artillery ground and the land to the north, as far as Old St was: “anciently denominated Bonhill or Bunhill.”⁸ By the time

⁴https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Essayes_and_Characters_of_a_Prison_and_P.html?id=iqVa6p6Q-H4C&redir_esc=y

⁵ <https://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/agas.htm?locIds=BUNH1>

⁶ [https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:11028284\\$548i_p.513](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:11028284$548i_p.513).

⁷ <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/strype/searchText.jsp>

⁸ https://archive.org/details/historysurveyofl02mait/page/1370/mode/2up/search/Bunhill_p.1370.

he was writing, part of the land was leased to William Tindall and: “denominated Tindal’s or the Dissenters’ great Burial ground.” There is evidence for this on maps⁹ and in documents.¹⁰ There is also evidence that Tindall opened it in 1665 as a private, non-conformist burial ground. It was attractive to non-conformists possibly because the Fields, although owned by the Ecclesiastical Commission, had never been attached to a Church. Also, when the Methodist chapel opened in City Road in 1778, Bunhill was conveniently close for burials outside the established church.

Later cartographers put Bunhill Field as a triangular area to the NW of Finsbury Field. Its name may have had nothing to do with bones or burials and is likely to have been older than the hill of bones from St. Paul’s. Perhaps like Bonehill in Staffordshire, the name derived from the Old English ‘Bolenhull’ or ‘Bulenhull’ meaning the hill where bulls roam. There had been laystalls in and around Finsbury Fields. These were originally places where cattle were kept before going to market. Or the name could have come from the later function of laystalls as dumping grounds for rubbish, old rags and bones, including animal bones supposedly from Smithfield.

There is also a lack of clarity about other aspects of Bunhill history. According to Maitland, in the year of the plague, 1665, the Mayor and citizens of London:

[C]onsecrated [this part] as a Common Cemetery . . . However, it not being made use of on that Occasion, the said Tindal took a Lease thereof and converted it into a Burial-ground for the Use of Dissenters.

Later histories and surveys following Maitland, suggest that Bunhill Fields or Tindall’s was never used as a plague burial ground although the story of Bunhill as a plague pit is, in some sources, still told as part of authentic Bunhill history. Perhaps by the time the ground was properly opened, the plague was less aggressive and it was no longer needed. There is no documentary evidence to substantiate the claim that Bunhill was ever consecrated, although in its brief history of Bunhill The Blake

⁹ London Topographical Society *The A to Z of Georgian London*, London, 1982. (Map 5)

¹⁰ City of London, *Bunhill Fields Burial Ground: Proceedings in Reference to its Preservation with Inscriptions on the Tombs*, London:1867.

Society offers circumstantial evidence.¹¹

The ground was closed for burials in 1852 by which time, according to Charles Reed, chair of the Bunhill Fields Preservation Committee, 1865, there had been 120,000 bodies buried there. Presumably this was the number of recorded burials after its enclosure and establishment as a private non-conformist burial ground. In 1866, by means of a number of leases from the fifteenth century onwards, the land had been in the hands of and managed by the City for more than three hundred years. It was due to be returned into the hands of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1867. Since its closure as a burial ground in 1852 Bunhill had fallen into neglect and in 1866 an anonymous author wrote:

A desolate wilderness; most of the inscriptions on the gravestones are illegible, many of the tombs have fallen to pieces, the slabs lying broken on the ground; the grass is uncut, and the paths are overgrown with weeds; a host of cats who ran away at my approach, yelling at me as an intruder, appeared to be the only creatures who cared for the place.¹²

Bunhill was not the only neglected burial ground in London. Gradually the fate of these burial grounds was to be determined not only by questions of religion and attitudes towards death but by the need for better public health. Urban life expectancy was only half that of the rural population and there had been four major cholera epidemics in London between 1831 and 1866. Most social reformers believed in the miasmatic theory of disease, i.e. that disease is spread by bad air. The belief was that London's overcrowded graveyards and neglected tombs meant that noxious substances from decaying corpses were released into the air and were a source of disease. For some, cremation was the answer to London's overcrowded graveyards, but much more important for the fate of old inner-city graveyards was extra-mural interment, large garden cemeteries designed as public parks outside city centres. By the time Bunhill opened in 1869 ideas of burial grounds as sites of

¹¹ <http://www.blakesociety.org/blakes-grave/bunhill-fields-a-history/>

¹² Quoted Peter Thorsheim, "The Corpse in the Garden: Burial, Health, and the Environment in Nineteenth-Century London," *Environmental History* 16 (January 2011): 38-68.
doi:10.1093/envhis/emq146

relaxation and enjoyment were well established, inspired by designers and architects such as John Claudius Loudon.¹³ There was already the Rosary Cemetery in Norfolk, the oldest garden cemetery in England, established in 1819 as a non-conformist burial ground and garden cemetery. In London there were the Magnificent Seven Cemeteries, all laid out as garden cemeteries before 1869; the oldest, Kensal Green, had opened in 1833. Perhaps old disused cemeteries like Bunhill could also become gardens, amenities for the inner city. The miasmatic theory of disease was being challenged and, in any case, the burial grounds were there, like it or not, in amongst the places where people lived. Why not turn them into much needed places of public recreation for the inner city? Far from being disrespectful of the dead, they would be quiet places where people could contemplate their own connection with the processes of Nature and the cycle of decay and renewal.

The Bunhill Fields Preservation Committee was established by the Court of Common Council in order to argue that the Corporation of London should remain in charge of the burial ground:

[To keep] it in proper condition, planting trees and shrubs, keeping up the gravel walks and preserving the tombs, so that it may form within proper hours, and under proper regulation, a decent and ornamental 'open space' of the metropolis.¹⁴

An Act of Parliament of 1867 confirmed the City of London Corporation's continuing responsibility for the preservation and maintenance of Bunhill Fields. The Act clearly stated that the grounds should be for public enjoyment and: "No house or other building shall . . . be built or erected upon the burial ground or any part thereof."

The City saved Bunhill Fields from the Ecclesiastical Commission and the possibility of commercial development. It was safe, or as safe as it could be, from developers and profiteers.

¹³ Loudon, J.C. *On the Laying Out, Planting and Management of Cemeteries*, 1843.

¹⁴ City of London, *Bunhill Fields Burial Ground: Proceedings in Reference to its Preservation with Inscriptions on the Tombs*, London:1867.

After the City's stewardship was confirmed, Bunhill's memorial stones were repaired, paths were laid out and it was opened to the public in 1869 as a garden cemetery. The memorial stones that still exist give an idea of the forest of gravestones that must have been there when Bunhill Fields was first opened to the public.



What we see today is roughly the layout designed by the landscape architect, Peter Shepherd, in the 1960s, with ornamental beds along the northern perimeter and a closed area with memorial stones to the south.



Shepherd's ornamental beds



Closed area with memorial stones

More recent changes on the west side of the Fields are the creation of a dry shade garden, designed by Nigel Dunnett, and a closed area of natural woodland; both are managed by Friends of City Gardens.



Dry shade garden.



Dry shade garden

Some plants in dry shade garden



Brunnera 'Jack Frost'
Persicaria affine



Polygonatum canaliculatum (Solomon's seal)



Euphorbia robbiae



Lamium maculatum



Epimedium 'Frohnleiton'





Woodland wildlife reserve



Woodland wildlife reserve



Woodland wildlife reserve

Some plants in woodland area



Primula veris (cowslip)



Narcissus pseudonarcissus
(wild daffodil)



Tulip sylvestris (wild tulips) and
Scilla siberica (Siberian squill)



Silene dioica (red campion)



Ornithogallum umbellatum (star of Bethlehem)



Geranium robertianum (Herb Robert)

Work on the memorials continues; stones are repaired and lost graves excavated. A more accurate location for the grave of William Blake has been discovered by the historians of The Blake Society. The new site is a few yards to the east of the monument to both Catherine and William Blake. The memorial stone, set in the grass in 2019 to mark the spot, leaves out the reference to Catherine Blake.

Cats are seldom seen in Bunhill now. There are different “pests”: squirrels and feral pigeons, well fed by young children and those deprived of the comfort of pets in City flats. They are not fed from the birdseed bought by the City for rarer, smaller, less pushy forms of wild life. Caged bird tables and squirrel busters see to that.



Squirrel buster with goldfinch



Bird table with great tit



Squirrel buster with starling

On Sundays the admirers of the lower forms of wildlife bring their own food, some standing with outstretched arms, sleeves scattered with birdseed while the pigeons flutter about them and eventually land so that arms and sometimes heads are barely visible. City workers fill the benches in the summer eating lunch under the plane trees, surrounded by plump, bright-eyed squirrels sitting on their haunches waiting for food to drop.



But that was then and this is now.



Social distancing April 2020

Blakeian mystics, meditate near Blake’s memorial stone, leaving unsolicited gifts.



New Memorial stone (2019)



Old memorial to Catherine and William Blake

Non-conformists contemplate the courage of their Christian forbears; curiosity seekers come to photograph the tomb of Dame Mary Page, “the *oddest* grave” in London according to guide books. She was the wife of a wealthy businessman and politician, Sir Gregory Page, 1st baronet. Very little is known about her except for what is in her husband’s biographical details in histories of parliament or the baronetcy and what we read on her tombstone.



HERE LIES DAME MARY PAGE
 RELICT OF SIR GREGORY PAGE BART.
 SHE DEPARTED THIS LIFE MARCH 4 1720
 IN THE 56th YEAR OF HER AGE.



IN 67 MONTHS SHE WAS TAPD 66 TIMES
HAD TAKEN AWAY 240 GALLONS OF WATER
WITHOUT EVER REPINING AT HER CASE
OR EVER FEARING THE OPERATION

It is the epitaph she asked for in her will; the epitaph of an eccentric self-obsessed oddity? Or, there is a different take. Mary Page was a Christian non-conformist. She had four children who, unusually for those days, are not mentioned on her tomb. Perhaps what she wanted us to know about was what she believed was grace in suffering and also her greatest achievement, Christian forbearance. Many of the words on the memorials at Bunhill are illegible, some of the occupants of what were elaborate graves, are now anonymous. Dame Mary Page's epitaph is clear and legible, the words heartfelt. Her illness, Meigs syndrome, has even been diagnosed from the detail on the tomb and written up in medical journals¹⁵. Mathematicians from China to Peru visit the garden on their way to and from the nearby Royal Statistical Society and gaze in awe at the Bayes Cotton tomb where lies Thomas Bayes, eighteenth century philosopher and clergyman.



VAULT OF THE FAMILIES OF BAYES AND COTTON
THOMAS BAYES COTTON
SON OF BAYES COTTON AND SARAH
HIS WIFE AND GREAT-GRANDSON OF THE SAID
JOSHUA AND ANN BAYES (10)
21 MARCH 1787

His importance was unrecognized in scientific circles until the 1950s and now his

¹⁵ Griffin, Dr. J. P. "Dame Mary Page – the first recorded case of Meigs' syndrome?" *Journal of the Royal College Physicians* Vol. 30 No. 5 October 1996.

theory of probability, Bayesian Theory, is central to work on Covid-19. Psycho-geographers wonder at the configuration of spiritual wisdoms; Iain Sinclair calls Bunhill: “The triangle of concentration. . . . Everything I believe in, everything London can do to you, starts here.”¹⁶

You don't have to be a non-conformist Christian, a psycho-geographer, or believe that the spirits of the long dead Blake, Bunyan, Defoe or Thomas Bayes still linger; you don't even have to be seduced by the place's gothic charms to recognize that they are part of the patina of Bunhill Fields and woven into the meanings we attach to it.

¹⁶ Sinclair, Iain, *Lights Out for the Territory*, London: Granta, 1997