

Members of the Historical Society visited the Spital Cemetery in Chesterfield for a guided tour of the first public cemetery in the town. It was opened in August 1857 in response to a need for burial spaces for a rapidly increasing (and dying!) population. It also responded to the demands of non-conformists who did not wish to be buried in accordance with the rites of the Church of England. Initially there was no provision for Catholics but in 1859 land was consecrated for their burial.

The neo-gothic Chapel at the centre of the site is in fact two separate Chapels one for the Anglicans and the other for the non-Conformists. Chesterfield Council, who owns the Cemetery, has sold the Chapel and it is currently being restored and converted to a private residence. Not for the faint-hearted.....

The first burial in the new cemetery was of Mary Ann Bridgett aged 2 weeks on 23 August 1857. But the oldest grave is that of a priest of the late 12th or early 13th century whose remains were uncovered in the garden of a nearby house. He served the medieval Leper Hospital of St. Leonard which had stood very close to the site of the cemetery.

As in life, the dead were buried according to their social status. Many hundreds lie in unmarked graves while others have quite grand memorial headstones. The great and the good of Chesterfield are here in number and so too are the remains of infants and children to be joined later by their grieving parents. The deaths are also recorded of many who lost their lives through accidents at work and elsewhere.

Forty-two graves or memorials are cared for by the Commonwealth War Grave Commission- 35 from the First World War and 7 from the Second. They include a commemoration of 2 brother who died within 24 hours of each other in June 1917.

Perhaps the most poignant burials are those of 5 girls aged 12 and 13 who died in a fire in the dressing room of the old Palace Theatre on 27 December 1911. They were waiting to go on stage between acts, dressed in what, tragically, turned out to be highly inflammable costumes. Originally buried in unmarked graves, each now has a fine headstone paid for by the local community.

A steep hillside outside town seems like a strange choice for a cemetery. In mid-Victorian England, however, cemeteries were often laid out as attractive places in which to wander amongst trees and flower beds and along winding paths. The Friends of Spital Cemetery, who kindly hosted our visit, are now working hard to "promote Spital Cemetery as a haven for wild life and as a place of remembrance, heritage and learning for the community". They are doing a grand job!

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