The management of historic cemeteries by friends groups: local narratives and the sense of place

Gaelle Jolly

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering

August 2013

COPYRIGHT

Attention is drawn to the fact that copyright of this thesis rests with the author. A copy of this thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognise that its copyright rests with the author and that they must not copy it or use material from it except as permitted by law or with the consent of the author.

This thesis may be made available for consultation within the University Library and may be photocopied or lent to other libraries for the purposes of consultation.
Table of contents

List of illustrations 4
Acknowledgements 5
Abstract 6

Introduction 7

Chapter 1: Context and methodology 9
1. Cemetery management 9
   Cemetery history: efficiency and grief 9
   Management problems: public and private space 11
   Cemetery friends groups 12
2. Theoretical framework 13
   Values-based historic conservation 13
   Critiques of heritage management 14
   Meaning construction and narrative 15
   Intangible values and sense of place 16
3. Methodology 17
   General approach 17
   Case studies 18
   Web-based survey 21

Chapter 2: The cemetery as green space 22
1. Nature and the city 22
   The three natures 22
   Wilderness 22
   City and countryside 23
   The garden 24
   Ruin, wasteland, secret garden 24
2. Green space 25
   Plants and wildlife 25
   Urban green space 27
3. Contrast and discovery 28
   Contrast 28
   Discovery 29
   Secret gardens 31
4. Control and balance 32
   Reclaiming the cemetery 32
   Control over nature 33
   Balance 34

Chapter 3: The cemetery as burial space 37
1. Liminality 37
   Death and liminality 37
   Liminality as a spatial concept 38
2. Individual links 40
   Personal and family links 40
   Interaction with graves 41
   Focus on individual stories 42
3. Death, humour and transgression 44
   Dark humour 44
List of illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1</td>
<td>Case study cemeteries, location map</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 2</td>
<td>Chapel, Holywell Cemetery (Henry Taunt, 1885)</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3</td>
<td>Chapel, St Sepulchre’s Cemetery (Henry Taunt, n.d.)</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4</td>
<td>Chapel, Osney Cemetery (Henry Taunt, 1911)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 5</td>
<td>Lychgate, Osney Cemetery</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 6</td>
<td>Lodge, Osney Cemetery (1960)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 7</td>
<td>Lodge, St Sepulchre’s Cemetery</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 8</td>
<td>Lodge, Holywell Cemetery</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 9</td>
<td>Entrance gate, Holywell Cemetery</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 10</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, looking east</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 11</td>
<td>Access to St Sepulchre’s Cemetery</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 12</td>
<td>View from the entrance, St Sepulchre’s Cemetery</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 13</td>
<td>Osney Cemetery, view from the lychgate</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 14</td>
<td>Osney Cemetery</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 15</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, Sarah Acland grave (1895)</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 16</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 17</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery (1950s)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 18</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery (2013)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 19</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, looking towards entrance (1974)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 20</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, looking towards entrance (2013)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 21</td>
<td>Osney Cemetery, aerial view (1918)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 22</td>
<td>Osney Cemetery (2013)</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 23</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, path</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 24</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, path</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 25</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, cleared grave</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 26</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, cemetery character</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 27</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, park character</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 28</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, meadow character</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 29</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, woodland character</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 30</td>
<td>Osney Cemetery, conifers by the entrance</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 31</td>
<td>Osney Cemetery, aerial view (1960)</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 32</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 33</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, grave of Sir John Stainer</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 34</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, grave in new path</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 35</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, grave in new path</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 36</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, north-east corner</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 37</td>
<td>Osney Cemetery, war graves</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 38</td>
<td>Osney Cemetery, Christ Church section</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 39</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, interpretation board</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 40</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, Walter Pater grave (n.d.)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 41</td>
<td>Holywell Cemetery, Walter Pater grave (2013)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 42</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, interpretation board</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 43</td>
<td>St Sepulchre’s Cemetery map</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Michael Forsyth and Professor Tony Walter, for their expert guidance, advice and enthusiasm for my research.

The project would not have been possible without the generosity of members of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery and the Friends of St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, who gave up their time to share their experience of looking after cemeteries. I would like to thank all my interviewees for taking part in the project and providing essential information.

Finally, thanks go to my husband, my family and friends, and my employers for their invaluable support over the course of this project.
Abstract

Friends groups have been instrumental in the rescue and management of historic cemeteries, but despite increased interest in cemeteries from conservation professionals and a policy context that encourages community involvement in their maintenance, there has been no research into the practical impact of volunteer-led management. This study addresses this issue through a comparative case study of three Oxford cemeteries, contextualised by a UK-wide survey of friends groups’ websites. It examines how volunteers construct meaning for the cemeteries through the selection and construction of narratives by exploring three themes: the cemetery as a green space, as a burial space and as a historic and community space. The first theme examines how volunteers relate to the presence of nature within urban cemeteries through a ‘secret garden’ narrative. The second theme shows how they address the liminal quality of cemeteries through individual links with graves, humour and poetry. The third theme focuses on the selection of local historical narratives by volunteer groups. Finally, a character assessment of the cemeteries reveals the impact of these narratives on cemetery structure and presentation, re-asserting the value of the conservation management plan process to ensure holistic conservation.
Introduction

‘Had the hopes of men like John Strang and John Claudius Loudon been fulfilled and sustained, Victorian cemeteries by now would be great planned landscapes, their monuments expressions of both piety and art, their planting fully matured. Instead, they have been damaged and depleted, frequently neglected or treated with indifference, sometimes destroyed.’

Brooks (1989, 77)

‘Wildlife and historic research, recording projects, and practical conservation work is often a good way of involving local communities in understanding and enjoying the landscape and its upkeep. Indeed, it’s the cemetery Friends’ groups that have led cemetery conservation.’

English Heritage (2007, 33)

Historic cemeteries have until recent years been neglected by local authorities and professional agencies. The aspirations of their creators and designers in the nineteenth century ended in many cases in gradual decay or wilful destruction. Friends groups have pioneered cemetery conservation, arguing for cemeteries’ importance and carving out new futures for many. Despite increasing professional interest and recognition of their value, cemeteries largely continue to depend on this voluntary involvement for maintenance and conservation. In a context of public spending cuts and increased reliance on volunteers, friends groups are seen as part of the answer to the intractable issue of maintaining public green spaces. While local councils and other organisations have responded by issuing guidelines for volunteers, there is a lack of research into the implications of volunteer-led management for the long-term conservation of historic green spaces, and particularly cemeteries.

Cemeteries, defined here as ‘place[s] for burials, other than a churchyard or graveyard attached to a regular place of worship’ (Rutherford 2008, 5), are complex sites – designed landscapes, memorials, host to architecture, sculpture and wildlife as well as to human remains. Their history has been approached primarily through art historical and social historical perspectives, although recently a wider outlook has been adopted by writers seeking to explore the emotional and cultural aspects of cemetery design. This renewed focus echoes current historic conservation philosophy, which seeks to incorporate and conserve all the values attached to a historic place and highlights the importance of intangible heritage alongside the conservation of historic fabric.

By adopting a conception of heritage as social construct, made up of the values held by individuals and groups, I propose to examine how meanings are attached to cemeteries in a process of narrative-making and realised in the expression and production of sense of place through management and interpretation practices. I will explore the narratives developed by local groups about cemeteries, and seek to determine: how these relate to a cemetery’s history, locality and condition; the extent to which they address the presence of death and nature within the cemetery; and how they contribute to sense of place. The focus is on identifying whether alternative voices are excluded and on determining the impact of privileged values on the character and presentation of the cemeteries. This is achieved through a case study approach comparing three cemeteries in Oxford, complemented by a web-based survey of cemetery friends groups in the United Kingdom.
The first chapter outlines the historical and policy context behind the development and current management of cemeteries and introduces the research methodology. The research material is then analysed in the following three chapters, looking at how volunteers relate to the cemetery as a green space, as a place of burial, and as a historic and community space. The final chapter presents a comparative character assessment of the case study cemeteries, analysing how local narratives impact on the sites and drawing conclusions for the practice of cemetery conservation.
Chapter 1: Context and methodology

The development of cemeteries in the nineteenth century was a response not only to the need for efficient and hygienic burial spaces but also to the demand for places appropriate to the expression of grief. The combination of these two imperatives is at the root of the form of the Victorian cemetery, expressed in particular through a combination of public and private space. Maintenance issues, and the emergence of cemetery friends groups, can be linked to these characteristics. However, changes in taste linked to cultural relationships to nature and death lead to ever-changing understandings and reinterpretation of cemetery spaces. By exploring the creation of these meanings through the concepts of narrative and sense of place in a study of the views of friends groups’ members, the impact of volunteer-led management on cemetery character can be assessed against the principles of values-based conservation.

1. Cemetery management

Cemetery history: efficiency and grief

Cemeteries began to be established in the early nineteenth century to address a lack of burial space in urban churchyards. As a result of public health concerns, burial grounds were set up outside centres of population to provide grave space that would be both hygienic and dignified. Accounts of cemetery history have tended to focus on art historical interest (Curl 1993, 2000, 2002; Colvin 1991), emphasising the role of architects and designers and the value of individual buildings and monuments. A more social historical approach has addressed the role of public health concerns and the expression of social status through funerary monuments (Cannon 1989, Mytum 1989). However, the character of cemeteries can be seen to stem from the combination of a dual purpose: to create efficient, hygienic places of burial and an attractive place for the bereaved to visit. Loudon, the most influential writer on cemeteries at the time of their creation, insisted that all aspects of a cemetery should be devised for maximum efficiency and ease of maintenance, combined with a choice of appropriate symbolism. This emphasis on utilitarian principles has been further explored by Johnson (2008), while Morley discusses how this is combined with ‘sensibility’ (1971: 47). Loudon thus suggested planting evergreen conifers as they were solemn and evocative in character, but also promoted ventilation and did not shed leaves (Loudon 1843, 20–21). In practice, while Loudon’s practical directions for cemetery design were influential, many cemetery designers opted for a more Picturesque style of landscape. This is evidenced at Southampton, where initial designs by Loudon were altered to a more Picturesque scheme after his death (Curl 1983, Simo 1988). As Brooks (1989, 39) argues, cemeteries designed in more formal layouts tended not to be as commercially successful.

Tarlow (2000) suggests that while concerns for public health and improvement are key factors in the drive behind the establishment of cemeteries, landscape design can only be explained by their role as ‘sentimental’, or ‘emotional’, landscapes, designed to meet the needs of the bereaved. Tarlow’s (1999, 133) study of memorials in Orkney thus explores how design and inscriptions are a manifestation of changes in emotional responses to death, while Buckham (2003) shows the importance of factors other than social status in influencing memorial inscriptions at York Cemetery. Brooks (1989) also argues that it is the balance between the need for an efficient disposal of the dead and the wish to provide an evocative landscape to attract customers that gives Victorian cemeteries their distinct character. As he points out, it is also this balance that has
failed to be preserved in later management, either through clearing of monuments for ease of maintenance or through embracing a ‘romantic’ overgrown aesthetic (Brooks 1989, 80).

The design of cemeteries, as that of other landscapes, is influenced by cultural change, and continues to be perceived differently as socio-cultural contexts change. As Whyte (2002, 7) argues, landscapes are ‘multi-layered, and constitute a form of memory in which is stored the history of successive periods of human activity’. Landscapes, whether designed or less formally shaped by human activity, reflect social, political and cultural changes, from the impact of battlefields (Warnke 1994) to politically motivated town planning (Matless 1998). This context includes changes in understandings of nature, which shape the design of gardens and other spaces. Turner (2005) thus sees garden design approaches as deriving from different conceptions of the relationship between God, man and nature, while Whyte (2002) demonstrates the evolution in landscape aesthetics through the eighteenth century from the Enlightenment’s ideas of rational control over nature, to Picturesque and Romantic views. Elliott (1990, 10) similarly traces the evolution of the Victorian garden in terms of levels of artistic control, and Fearnley-Whittingstall (2003) carries this analysis into twentieth-century garden design. Trends towards formal and informal styles of garden design have also reflected political contexts. Helmreich (2002) thus argues that the nineteenth-century ‘battle of the styles’ in garden design was a focus for the expression of national identity, with proponents of the wild garden, cottage garden and formal garden framing them as ‘the national style’.

The design of cemeteries, as ‘cultural landscapes’ (Francaviglia 1971), has similarly been influenced by these trends, from early Picturesque designs to the formality of lawn cemeteries and the emergence of natural, woodland cemeteries. The style of landscaping also reflects prevalent views on death and its relationship to nature, while the prominence of monuments is related to social and financial factors. Victorian cemeteries reflect a particular social system, as argued by Mytum (1989), Cannon (1989) and Herman (2010), as well as time-specific ideas about the kind of landscape suitable for grieving. Social and political changes affect both the perception of the cemeteries as originally conceived, and views on what constitutes an appropriate landscape for burial. Coffin (1994) thus demonstrates the origins of cemeteries in the classical tradition of burial in nature. While such ideas may persist, as does the Picturesque taste in landscape, this relationship with nature through burial and memorial has, according to Davies (2005 126), moved to a more ecological concern reflected in the development of woodland or natural burial sites, as well as the choice of natural settings for the scattering of ashes. Traditional forms of burial and commemoration continue to influence the disposal of ashes (Kellaher et al 2005), but conversely new modes of burial, such as the choice of trees as memorials in woodland cemeteries (Clayden & Dixon 2007) influence more traditional cemeteries. Other new values based on different views of nature also become attached to cemeteries, such as a concern with wildlife and/or a taste for romantic, overgrown cemetery landscapes. Management of historic cemeteries takes place in this context, which can lead to dramatic change in the character of cemeteries, as well as potential damage to gravestones and irreversible change in the designed landscape. This is an ongoing process: landscapes are invested with new meanings, while changing social contexts affect relationships with nature, the landscape, and specific places.
Loudon had foreseen the need to plan for cemeteries once they became full. He envisioned the mature landscapes, filled with sculptures, being used as public parks, where visitors could be educated about art, architecture and botany, and reflect on life and death (Curl 2000, 121). What he did not anticipate was the lack of both interest and resources that would lead to neglect and dereliction. The particular character of Victorian cemeteries became linked to ideas of decay, and no longer fitted notions of memorial landscape. This was compounded by an early decline in maintenance standards and a tendency to add burial space to paths and other available space, damaging the overall design (Brooks 1989). As Grainger (2005, 261) argues, for cremationists cemeteries were the equivalent of what overcrowded churchyards had been for cemetery campaigners. A more hygienic and solemnly appropriate way of disposing of the dead was called for – in cremation, and through different memorial landscapes such as war cemeteries and lawn cemeteries (Brooks 1989, 79; Rugg 2006). There was a wish for simpler, more uniform landscapes, on a more intimate scale, which, coupled with a more general anti-Victorian sentiment, had a significant impact on both interest in and practical management of cemeteries. While interest in cemeteries has since increased, there are still questions over the maintenance of this character.

Management problems: public and private space

Another key element of the cemetery landscape is the contribution of individual monuments. The quality of memorials was from the beginning expected to add to the Picturesque effect advertised by cemetery companies and showcased in local postcards – evidence of commercial competition or civic pride (Rutherford 2008, 15-19). For Loudon (1843, 12-13), memorials provided the chance to contribute to visitors’ artistic education. However, the presence of individual, privately built monuments on privately owned plots also had practical implications for revenue and upkeep. With burial plots sold in perpetuity, there was no ongoing revenue stream for a cemetery once full. Furthermore, this led to legal limitations to what could be done by cemetery managers. Any work to gravestones still requires grave owners to be notified, but financial responsibility falls back to the custodians of the cemetery if no one can be found (English Heritage 2011). As Hussein and Rugg (2003) explain, this legal situation, and the lack of strategic planning for burial from the nineteenth century to the present day, are behind both conservation issues faced by older cemeteries and lack of cemetery provision today.

Many early cemeteries were set up by private, joint-stock companies for profit, a system that quickly proved unsustainable (Curl 2000, 56, 112). Damage to cemetery landscapes started with the need and financial incentive for providing additional grave space. Dwindling revenue was compounded by inflation, and the regulation of burial fees by the state (Brooks 1989, 78). Private cemeteries also suffered from competition with public, subsidised cemeteries. Some local authorities took over private cemeteries, but lack of financial resources meant they too failed to maintain them adequately (Brooks 1989, 79). This situation is compounded by the legal requirement for local authorities to take over the management of Church of England graveyards when requested, adding to the financial burden of burial ground maintenance. This funding issue was – and remains – particularly problematic because the character of Victorian cemeteries makes them inherently difficult and expensive to maintain. Despite initial design and planning, cemeteries are essentially ad hoc landscapes, made up of irregular architectural features. A pattern of individualised, personal designed spaces, not unlike individual houses in a streetscape, accruing over time into a whole landscape, makes for difficult maintenance. This applies for instance to kerbs.
around graves, which were cleared from many cemeteries to help with maintenance regimes (Brooks 1989).

Individual graves are however also key to the emotional aspect of cemetery landscapes, one of the elements of the cemetery which should be considered for a holistic management approach (Woodthorpe 2011). Tarlow (2000, 232) emphasises the importance of cemeteries offering the opportunity for a personal relationship between the living and the dead, a ‘focus for grief’ on bodily remains and a secure place of burial. As Rugg (2000) argues, the physical set-up of cemeteries makes this personal focus possible, as ‘the identity of the deceased can be enshrined in the site’s internal order.’ Strange (2005, 172-3) points out that the cemetery is ‘a public space for the disposal of the dead’, but also provides a private space where the bereaved can be separated from the wider public arena, and ‘where personal languages of loss, identity and remembrance found easy expression’. In cemeteries still in use, where bereaved relatives visit and maintain graves, the personal attention to the grave space is a key part of mourning (Francis et al 2005). This personal attention is what makes cemeteries both meaningful and sustainable, just as investment by grave owners is the basis for their financial establishment. The return of cemeteries to public space (as envisaged by Loudon) loses both these elements and creates an unsustainable position.

Cemetery friends groups

Groups of people worried about the fate of their local cemetery were the first to value, campaign for and save historic cemeteries (Rutherford 2008, 59). Brooks (1989) traces this development back to an increased awareness and concern for historic conservation, although this does not explain why cemeteries have, more than other sites, been the focus of local campaigns and direct involvement by volunteer groups. The typical pattern is one of campaigning groups turning to ongoing maintenance and management. The Friends of Highgate Cemetery were one of the earliest groups, set up in 1975 to save Highgate and now managing the cemetery through a trust (Brooks 1989, 99). Other major examples include Abney Park in London, and more recently Arnos Vale in Bristol. I would argue that the involvement of local volunteers reproduces the one-on-one, personal attention to private spaces found in active cemeteries, something that local authorities are unable to achieve. The rise of friends groups is to be seen within this context, explaining why cemeteries in particular have attracted this kind of voluntary attention. More recently, friends groups have been established in increasing numbers, and with a variety of set-ups. A survey of websites of cemetery friends groups (Appendix 1) identified 72 groups across the United Kingdom. Of the 54 which provided a foundation date, 39 (72%) had been created between 2001 and 2012. While more recent groups may be more likely to set up a website – or to refer to themselves as ‘friends’, the keyword used for the search – this suggests an increase in the number of volunteer groups involved in looking after cemeteries over the past ten to fifteen years.

This rise in the number of cemetery friends groups is partly the result of policy and funding contexts. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) is the main source of funding for projects to conserve or restore parks and gardens, and their grants are more easily accessible to not-for-profit organisations (or to partnerships led by voluntary bodies) (Heritage Lottery Fund 2013). It is also easier for such groups or organisations to demonstrate local involvement and public benefit, which are key grant conditions. This is coupled with continued cuts in local authority funding, leading councils to actively encourage volunteer involvement. The 2010 coalition government’s Localism
agenda, based on the concept of the ‘Big Society’, conceives of public service being supported and delivered by volunteers (Localism Act 2011). In this context, agencies and charities concerned with the management of public spaces have sought to provide guidance. The parks charity GreenSpace (2013) has published guidance to local authorities on handing over management of green spaces to trusts. Similar guidance on transferring green spaces to communities had previously been issued by CABESpace, alongside publications targeted at both local authorities and community groups on how such groups can help improve public spaces (CABESpace 2007a, 2009, 2010; GreenSpace & CABE Space 2004). Many local authorities now also provide guidance documents for people wishing to set up a friends group to a park, cemetery or other public space (e.g., Oxford City Council n.d.-a). English Heritage, who have done significant work on cemeteries in recent years, provide clear guidance on running cemeteries through a conservation management plan approach (English Heritage 2007). They also started work in 2012-13 on assisting local groups by creating a toolkit for the assessment of cemeteries (English Heritage 2013, 17).

While conservation bodies and local authorities recognise the need to enable non-professionals to carry out work that conservation staff may be more familiar with, the existence of such guidance does not guarantee that groups will adopt conservation principles with a holistic approach to site management. The National Federation of Cemetery Friends, an umbrella body for such groups, draws on English Heritage’s and other guidelines on management plans in its own guidance (National Federation of Cemetery Friends 2009), in practice my survey of friends’ websites suggests that unless required by grant conditions, the focus of friends groups varies enormously. This includes natural history, architecture, local history and individual graves, with in some cases a very specific focus, on the war dead or on a particular person. The scale of their activities also varies, from small hands-on working parties to HLF-funded restoration projects. While friends groups provide invaluable maintenance and management of cemeteries, there is great variety in the kind of group created and in the work carried out, and the availability of guidance is not sufficient to ensure holistic conservation. However despite recognition of the increasing role of friends groups in looking after cemeteries and other historic green spaces, no research has been carried out on assessing the impact of such an approach.

2. Theoretical framework

Values-based historic conservation

The involvement of local communities in their historic environment is one of the keystones of current conservation and heritage management philosophy, as reflected in the approach advocated by English Heritage (2007) in Paradise Preserved – the key document for cemetery conservation management. The basis for English Heritage’s conservation advice is set out in Conservation Principles, whose six overarching principles highlight participation and the importance of understanding and managing significance based on a place’s ‘values’ (English Heritage 2008).

The values-based approach to historic conservation emphasises a holistic conceptualisation of heritage, in which the qualities to be conserved are not inherent in the fabric of an object, building or site, but created by people. This conceptualisation is a response to criticism of heritage conservation as an expert-led process privileging artistic merit and rarity, perceived as qualities intrinsic to the object (Bluestone 2000, 65). As Mason (2002, 8) argues, ‘heritage is multivalent’, and values are ‘contingent’ – produced within a particular context rather than inherent in the place or object. It is in an interaction between the object and its context that values
are produced. Those ‘values’ held by all stakeholders in a particular place, include historical and aesthetic qualities, but also economic potential, for example. Mason (2002, 11) proposes a typology split between economic and socio-cultural values, the latter being defined as ‘values attached to an object, building, or place because it holds meaning for people or social groups due to its age, beauty, artistry, or association with a significant person or event or (otherwise) contributes to processes of cultural affiliation’. These include historical value, cultural/symbolic value, social value (including ‘place attachment’), spiritual/religious value and aesthetic value.

Heritage is furthermore a ‘process’ (Avrami et al 2000, 3) ‘of heritage creation or production’ which starts when a place or item is designated as heritage. The continued use and interpretation of heritage over time and by different people actively creates and recreates values, and therefore heritage itself. Consequently, conservation is about ‘stewarding for future generations the material markers of the past, imbued with the cumulative stories and meanings of the past as well as of the present’ (Avrami et al 2000, 10). The practical tool for implementing this conservation philosophy is the conservation management plan. The plan process involves assessing the significance of a place based on its values through involving stakeholders, and planning for a management approach which conserves these values and preserves a place’s significance. Review of the plan is also an integral part of the approach, reflecting the importance of the continuous renewal of heritage as conceptualised (Mason 2002, 6).

Critiques of heritage management

Critics of heritage management support this conceptualisation of heritage, but argue that the field is dominated by the views of experts. If heritage is constituted of the values which people (experts, user groups, local residents, etc.) attach to places, then the assessment of the relative significance of these values is inherently political, and potentially conflictual. Defining a place in a particular way may exclude some of the meanings attached to that place, and consequently exclude people, and part of the site’s history. This phenomenon is termed ‘dissonance’ by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), who argue that any inheritance implies someone’s disinheritance. Smith takes the argument further, claiming that there is an authorised discourse about heritage which dominates and takes precedence over other approaches. This hegemonic discourse, she argues, ‘is reliant on the power/knowledge claims of technical and aesthetic experts, and institutionalized in state cultural agencies and amenity societies’ (Smith 2006, 11). While and Short (2011) verify this analysis in the context of urban planning in Manchester, arguing that the imperative for development requires ‘dominant heritage narratives’, marginalising alternative understandings. Waterton et al (2006) further argue that while conservation bodies such as ICOMOS claim to have addressed these biases, they are in fact still showing a bias towards expert views of heritage, as shown through the use of discourse analysis techniques on ICOMOS’s Burra Charter.

While Waterton et al’s analysis is valid, I would argue that the reference to older ICOMOS documents should itself be viewed as a sophisticated, multi-layered exercise in defining heritage and its conservation. In addition, while in practice experts may dominate, recent conservation guidance does emphasise the importance of being all-inclusive in assessing heritage places, and of considering all voices, while also recognising the difficulties inherent in such a process. Furthermore, while critics are concerned with the continued dominance of experts and advocate a community-based approach to heritage management (Smith et al 2003, Perkin 2010), I would suggest that this fails to address two key issues. Firstly, this concern only applies to
places where experts are dominant, and it does not address how communities themselves can include all values and points of view in the way they manage a heritage site. While it is entirely legitimate to question the ways in which the cultural heritage of local, indigenous populations is reframed for the consumption of tourists, there are many historic places that do not attract either tourism or ‘expert’ interest. Secondly, even if we accept that there is a dominant heritage discourse which marginalises community and minority views, there appears to be an assumption that these views are more valid, more authentic. This can result in an uncritical endorsement of community-led heritage management. Furthermore, communities are themselves varied, made up of different groups and individuals with conflicting understandings and values. While the involvement of local people as volunteers and partners in a management plan process is very valuable, it should not be assumed that such involvement is a route towards genuine community-led heritage.

I therefore propose to use the framework of values-based conservation management to assess how community groups prioritise some values over others, whether they are representative of all community voices, and the impact of this bias on the historic character of cemeteries.

**Meaning construction and narrative**

Values attached to heritage are based on a particular context and vary between individuals and groups. While some can be of a practical, measurable nature, such as the economic value of a tourist attraction, most are based on interpretation, experience and association. Places are constructed through experience, what Ingold terms a ‘dwelling perspective’. It is by engaging with ‘an environment that is itself pregnant with the past’ that the landscape is constructed (Ingold 1993, 153). The character of a place comes from this interaction between environment and human activity over time. Hallam and Hockey (2001, 83) similarly argue that it is the ‘embodied experience’ of space that produces meanings. Places and objects of death, they suggest, act as memorials through this experience of using or inhabiting them. Landscapes and places are therefore ‘created by people’, as Bender (1993, 1-2) argues, through individual experience, and as a result they are perceived differently according to context and personal characteristics such as gender, age or class. They are ‘political, dynamic, and contested, something constantly open to renegotiation’ and they continue to be constructed by different people over time (Bender 1993, 276). This applies not just to large landscapes but also to designed spaces, which are constructed by the visitor as much as by the architect or designer, as Hunt argues, leading him to call for a new study of garden history through the study of garden reception, based on literary theory (2004; 2000, 218).

Duncan and Duncan (1988) have also adapted literary theory to the study of landscape as text, and Potteiger and Purinton (1998) show how narratives are integrated within the design of landscapes. Tuan (1991) also stresses the use of thinking of landscapes as texts, and the importance of language – through stories linked to places as well as through the process of naming – in creating the landscape. As Ingold (1993, 152) argues, ‘the landscape tells – or rather is – a story’. Writing more generally on heritage, Ashworth and Graham (2005, 3) argue that ‘narratives of belonging’ are created by individuals and by societies and associated to places. Narratives are chosen and developed, taking in heritage places in the construction of identity. Avrami et al (2000, 8) similarly highlight the role of ‘stories invested in objects, buildings, and landscapes, by individuals or groups’ in creating the values
attached to a place. Values are therefore created, through experience and narrative, by individual visitors to a site or landscape.

It is however important to note that while individuals attach different meanings to places, these are finite (Bender 2002) and involve wider agreement (Whyte 2002) amongst what Duncan and Duncan (1988) call ‘narrative communities’. These wider meanings include dominant discourses, but also values held by different groups, and they further influence what meanings individuals attach to a place. There are therefore identifiable trends in the interpretation of places. As Lowenthal (1991) and Lowenthal and Prince (1964, 1965) argue, this includes the prominence of particular landscape types within feelings of national identity – the ‘south country’ in the case of England (Howkins 1987). Schama (1996) also identifies general cultural interpretations of landscape expressed and understood through myths. Potteiger and Purinton (1998) further suggest that wider cultural narratives play a part in the interpretation and treatment of landscape. As Bender (2002, 107) argues, meanings attached to places are also linked to other places and meanings: ‘People relate to place and time through memory, but the memories may be of other places and other times’. In the case of cemeteries, this could include memories of both cemeteries with personal connections and images of better-known cemeteries, as well as other related places.

Crucially, not only are meanings behind the values which make up heritage, but these meanings, and the narratives through which they are expressed, go on to shape behaviour and further understanding of places. Narratives are reflected in the presentation of historic places, directly through interpretive material or design and indirectly through their management, as Azaryahu and Foote (2008) show of historical sites and Simon (1996) of planting and inscriptions in cemeteries. Guidance on the management and interpretation of heritage sites emphasises the importance of conveying multiple meanings and understandings (e.g. ICOMOS 2008b). However, the ever-renewing aspect of place narratives, informed and influenced by the place and by individuals’ own history and cultural associations, makes this difficult to achieve.

As critics of heritage management have pointed out, dominant narratives can silence alternative voices. In addition, for many ordinary historic places this process just does not take place at all. While the mechanisms that result in meanings being contested and expressed, through management and interpretation, have been studied in a range of contexts (e.g. Gathercole & Lowenthal 1994, Smith 2006), these focus on efforts to involve people outside museum and site managers. Little attention has been given to the meanings held and reproduced by non-expert managers. The meanings and narratives they privilege will also have an impact on places and their presentation, and in turn on their understanding by others. I therefore propose to use the concept of narrative to explore the values held by volunteers at cemeteries, by examining the stories they tell about the sites, from their own involvement to the cemetery’s history.

**Intangible values and sense of place**

The move in conservation philosophy towards a focus on values has been accompanied by a concern with protecting ‘intangible’ heritage – including traditions, stories and skills. Increasingly, both tangible and intangible heritage are seen as being made of socially constructed values. Swensen et al (2012) thus dispute the usual equation of tangible with expert views and intangible with local views, showing that there are in fact no clear boundaries between both aspects. As Graham and Howard put it (2008, 2), ‘heritage is less about tangible material artefacts or other intangible forms of the past than about the meanings placed upon them and the representations
which are created for them’. These meanings are embodied in place through what might be termed ‘sense of place’, based on contemporary understandings and re-imaginings of the past (Ashworth & Graham 2005, 7). ICOMOS’s consideration of intangible aspects of heritage has thus most recently focused on the concept of ‘spirit of place’, defined as ‘the physical and the spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion and mystery to place’ (ICOMOS 2008a). Such a definition of what is to be conserved is ever more subjective and hard to define. It is also precisely this elusive quality which makes people want to visit and look after a place. The concept seems particularly apt when considering designed landscapes, and specifically cemeteries – places whose design qualities are more elusive and changing, and where a strong spiritual element prevails. Gardens were thus defined in ICOMOS’s Florence Charter as ‘the expression of the direct affinity between civilisation and nature’ with ‘the cosmic significance of an idealised image of the world’ (ICOMOS 1982). However, the changing nature of the meanings themselves makes the focus of conservation ever less stable. The way in which ‘spirit of place’, or ‘sense of place’, is defined, constructed and renewed by people looking after a cemetery are therefore an essential focus of research.

Kyle and Chick (2007) argue that sense of place arises out of personal and shared memories rather than physical setting. It is personal memory and the stories told by others which give place its meaning and the sense of a particular character and value. The conception of sense of place as entirely reliant on people rather than physical characteristics has however been challenged. Stedman (2003, 674) thus compares models for evaluating how place meanings are created, and concludes that a meaning-mediated model is the only valid one, where ‘the meanings of a setting are based on its environmental attributes’. While sense of place is not the direct result of physical characteristics, the fabric of a place does influence the meanings it evokes. Huigen and Meijering (2005, 21-23) argue that while there are different conceptualisations of sense of place or place identity, some key elements can be agreed upon. These include that place is a social construct, based both on physical characteristics and on the past, but within a particular context through a continuous, contested process. This process of creating place, Potteiger and Purinton (1998, ix) argue, is carried out through learning the stories associated with that place, as ‘stories link the sense of time, event, experience, memory and other intangibles to the more tangible aspects of place’. These stories continue to be constructed and reframed through experience and memories, contributing to wider narratives about a place. Where individuals are directly involved in managing a place, their personal experience and engagement with that place will therefore be both directly inscribed and indirectly communicated through the place itself, and consequently contribute to future visitors’ sense of place.

3. Methodology

General approach

This research investigates the values volunteers attach to cemeteries, based on the concepts of sense of place and the role of narrative in creating and reproducing meaning, and their practical impact on historic character. The project takes the form of a comparative case study, supported by a web-based survey of friends groups in the United Kingdom. A case study approach enables these issues to be explored in depth within a local context, and to allow for comparison of similar sites. The web-based research complements this by providing general information on the cemetery friends movement, by verifying trends and contextualising local characteristics.
Case studies
Selection and comparative approach
Three case studies were selected for their common location and date and process of foundation, in order to explore how and why their appeal differs, and to assess the differential impact of volunteer involvement onto similar sites. All three are early Victorian parish burial grounds located in Oxford in close proximity to the city centre. While one is included on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens, these cemeteries do not have a national profile and have not attracted much attention from professional or amenity groups. This ensures that the values and impact of the volunteers can be better isolated from any ‘expert’ views. The relatively small size of the cemeteries also makes them manageable for volunteers, making the assessment of impact from their management approach more reliable. The three cemeteries also have different levels of volunteer involvement, making a comparison of the different appeal and impact of the cemeteries more viable.

Introduction to the case studies
Plans to set up a public cemetery in Oxford first emerged in the early nineteenth century, with a committee eventually set up in December 1843 (Jackson’s Oxford Journal, 1843). While initial discussions had resulted in a resolution to set up a public cemetery for Oxford, opposition from the city’s clergy effectively put an end to the plan, which was only finally realised in 1894 with the opening of three public cemeteries. The clergy was of the opinion that the responsibility for burial should remain within each parish and under the authority of the Church. They set up their own committee, the Parish Burial Ground Committee, to look into providing additional burial space for each of the parishes. This led to three parish burial grounds being set up, acting as remote churchyard extensions, each being subdivided between parishes. All three burial grounds were consecrated in 1848, with chapels designed by the same architect (all since demolished). Unlike most Victorian cemeteries, they were always situated close to urban populations, but development has continued in the intervening years. They are all now closed to burial, except in existing graves. I should note that while these burial grounds would not be considered ‘cemeteries’ under some definitions, they were created as part of the movement to set up cemeteries and were considered as such at the time as well as today. In addition, while they were controlled by the church and divided up between parishes, they are distinct from conventional churchyard extensions by not depending on a single place of worship. This status means that while the pattern of gravestones will not be influenced by the same social factors as with public or private cemeteries, their general topography and associated issues are comparable.

Holywell Cemetery
Holywell Cemetery, originally known as St Cross, is located to the east of the city, and provided burial space for the parishes of Holywell, St Peter in the East, St Mary the Virgin, All Saints and St Martin’s, with an area set aside for St John’s College. The cemetery is set at the back of the churchyard of St Cross Church, the latter converted in 2011 into an archive for Balliol College. The cemetery remains the responsibility of the Church of England, but is run by the Friends of Holywell Cemetery. A small committee manages maintenance, employing a part-time gardener and working with volunteers from the Oxford Conservation Volunteers on implementing a management plan drawn up by the local branch of the Wildlife Trust (BBOWT, previously BBONT). The Friends were set up in 1987, initially as a way of raising funds. Today the cemetery is managed for wildlife, and has an annual open day when the Friends lead tours for visitors.
St Sepulchre’s Cemetery
St Sepulchre’s Cemetery (Grade II on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens) is located to the north of Oxford, within the area known as Jericho, a nineteenth-century industrial suburb with working-class housing. It catered for the parishes of St Giles, St Mary Magdalen, St Michael’s and St Paul’s. The cemetery when first established was bounded on the west by the Oxford Canal, and to the north by a foundry. The latter was later extended and remained until the demolition in 2005 of the ironworks by owners Lucy’s for redevelopment as flats and offices. This project was the impetus for the development of a friends group at St Sepulchre’s. The Friends are an informal group, who meet on a twice-monthly basis to clear vegetation in the cemetery. The cemetery, as a closed Church of England graveyard, is the responsibility of Oxford City Council. The Cemeteries Service carries out regular maintenance, working closely with the Friends, who are registered with the Council for insurance purposes.

Osney Cemetery
Osney Cemetery, consecrated as St Mary’s, is located to the west of Oxford. It offered burial space for the parishes of St Aldate’s, St Thomas’s, St Ebbe’s and St Peter le Bailey – as noted in newspaper reports of the time the poorest parishes in Oxford (Jackson’s Oxford Journal, 1847). The site for the cemetery, much criticised by members of the city’s own cemetery committee for being too wet for burial, is bounded to the east by the railway line (unbuilt but already planned at the time). Its entrance, marked by a lychgate, is off a residential street, away from regular pedestrian traffic, although the cemetery is visible from passing trains. Osney Cemetery was partially cleared of gravestones in the 1970s to facilitate maintenance. It is managed by Oxford City Council and does not have a friends or other volunteer group involved in its maintenance. A local councillor led a tree planting project and appealed for volunteers but there is currently no ongoing community involvement.

Fig.1 Case study cemeteries, location map (marked in red). OS 1:25000 Scale Colour Raster © Crown Copyright/database right 2013. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service.
Data collection and analysis

Interviews
Interviews with members of the friends groups formed the core of my research. Contact was made initially with the group organisers, who provided further contacts, and in the case of St Sepulchre’s helped recruit interviewees through an email appeal. Interviews were carried out with three members of the committee of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery, and five members of the Friends of St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, in addition to two more informal conversations with the chairman of the latter. I also interviewed a local councillor and occasional volunteer with a special interest in both St Sepulchre’s and Osney about both cemeteries, and had an informal conversation with the City Council’s Cemeteries Manager, followed up by email correspondence. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted one-on-one or, in one case, jointly with two interviewees. The questions (Appendix 2) were designed to encourage interviewees to tell stories about both their involvement in the cemeteries and the cemeteries themselves. They were also asked about their views on what aspects of the cemeteries were most important and what their vision was for the spaces. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed in order to identify themes, particularly relating to the different aspects of the cemetery as a place of nature, death and history. The focus of the analysis was on identifying key narratives and descriptive accounts of the cemeteries. The interviews were also the source of factual information about the set-up of the groups and their activities.

Documents
To complement the interview data, documents produced by the friends were also examined. These included the annual newsletter of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery (1989-2012) and their management plan for the site, as well as the website of the Friends of St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, which launched in 2012. These documents were analysed in the same way as the interview transcripts, collecting descriptions of the cemeteries and teasing out the narratives favoured by the friends.

Historical research
I also carried out archival research and work on historic maps in order to understand the history and development of the cemeteries and to establish a basis against which to assess character change. This included checking accounts of the cemetery creation process in the local newspaper, Jackson’s Oxford Journal, and research in the parish archives for the relevant parishes. Unfortunately it was not possible to locate the complete minutes of the Parish Burial Ground Committee, or details of the commissioning of the cemetery designs. Maps held in the Church Commissioners’ archives and reproduced in consecration registers (Diocese of Oxford 1615-1987) only include location and division by parish, with no detail of planting schemes.

Character assessment
A character assessment of all three cemeteries was carried out in June 2013, building on previous regular site visits. Following principles of character assessment as developed for townscapes and neighbourhoods by English Heritage (2004, 2010, 2012) and for public spaces by CABE Space (2007b), this sought to identify the different character areas within each cemetery, including local context, and to assess the impact of any on-site or otherwise available interpretation on the visitor experience. The results of this assessment are discussed in the last chapter, and the impact of the themes of death, nature, and history and community identified through the interview and document analysis is discussed.
Web-based survey

The websites of cemetery friends groups were initially identified through the list provided on the website of the National Federation of Cemetery Friends (2011). In addition, a web search was carried out, resulting in a total of 72 websites or web pages (Appendix 1). The purpose of this additional research was to address some of the limitations of the case study approach. While the case studies focus on one city and one particular type of cemetery, the website survey enables any trends to be verified and local particularities to be evaluated. There would however be scope for a wider study of friends groups in different areas, particularly as the more personal aspects of volunteers’ involvement cannot be assessed through a website survey.

Information was gathered from the sites on the type and aims of each group and their year of creation, on the project they were managing where applicable and on regular activities, as well as on the main areas of interest (e.g. nature conservation or local history). Finally, key descriptive words and phrases were noted in order to identify trends in the ways cemeteries are described and valued. This focused on the same general themes identified for the case study research of nature, death, and history and community.

The emphasis on meanings, values and spirit of place in current historic conservation philosophy aims at being inclusive and holistic. It however also highlights the intangible nature of what makes a place significant, and the subjectivity of individuals’ perceptions. The inherently political nature of heritage makes balancing these values even more problematic. While the conservation management plan process aims to arrive at a compromise through the careful assessment and consideration of all aspects of the significance of a site, this process is unlikely to be carried out by volunteer groups. The personal values and continuous meaning-making activities of volunteers will influence both their perception and understanding of sense of place and their choices in management and conservation regimes. The following chapters examine how the volunteers at cemeteries in Oxford define a sense of place and how this influences site management and further understandings of their history and significance.
Chapter 2: The cemetery as green space

Urban historic cemeteries, as preserved pieces of countryside, tend to provide rich habitats for wildlife. This is reflected in a tendency for cemeteries to be managed for nature conservation, and has been recognised by professional bodies, with the production of guidance jointly by English Heritage and Natural England. The role of cemeteries as green spaces is also reflected in funding by the Heritage Lottery Fund under programmes for parks and gardens, and in some local authorities by management portfolios – in Oxford cemeteries come under Leisure and Parks. Nature could therefore be expected to be a key part of volunteers’ perception, enjoyment and management of cemeteries. However, the presence of nature in an urban context can be problematic, while also being at the root of rich meanings, metaphors and cultural narratives. This chapter explores the meanings attached to nature in the cemetery, and how narratives highlighted by the friends address the presence of nature in these urban sites.

1. Nature and the city

The three natures

Cemeteries were generally created outside centres of population, in order to remedy the threats to public health caused by overcrowded churchyards and to offer an Arcadian setting for burial. Urbanisation has however resulted in many cemeteries now being located in the heart of towns and cities. As a result, they tend to be very rich, preserved wildlife habitats, but are potentially also ambivalent, problematic spaces where countryside and city meet. I propose to explore how attitudes to nature shape the relationships of individuals with urban green spaces by using the framework proposed by Hunt (2000, 32-62) of the ‘three natures’. He describes three categories of nature to characterise degrees of control expressed in the relationship between nature and culture: the first nature of the natural world, or wilderness; the second nature of the cultural landscape, including urban development; and the third nature of the garden, where nature is combined with culture through artifice.

Wilderness

Wilderness, the first nature, tends to be defined in terms of opposition with civilisation. Harrison (1992) identifies the forest as the elemental natural space, which needs to be cleared for civilisation to be established. Despite this opposition it also remains ‘the shadow of civilisation’ – it is the home of outlaws, but also that of saints (Harrison 1992, 61). The forest’s dual nature can for instance be found in Shakespeare’s plays, where ‘as the city becomes sinister, forests become innocent, pastoral, diversionary, comic’ (Harrison 1992, 100). Schama (1996, 142) similarly argues that the English forest is ‘the opposite of court, town, and village – the sylvan remnant of arcady’, and a place where ‘English class magically dissolved into the moss’ (1996, 183). Forests in the English context can therefore be seen to represent wilderness, and trees are indeed identified as representing nature, as MacNaghten and Urry argue (2000). Schama argues that the English forest is a place where social roles can be reversed, as expressed in myths and literature. Maitland (2012) also suggests that the forest plays an important role in the English imagination, exploring links to fairy tales, national myths and cultural narratives. The forest, opposed to civilisation, is a place of refuge, of magic and of danger.

This ambivalence is reflected, according to Schama (1996, 517), in the concept of Arcadia itself. He suggests there are two kinds of Arcadia, both the products of an
‘urban imagination’ – one idyllic, the other wild – and both coexist in contemporary understandings of nature. Oelschlager (1991), tracing the history of the ‘idea of wilderness’, argues that modernism brought about a view of nature as the object of science and as material resource. However, he suggests that this practical, utilitarian attitude existed alongside earlier poetic and aesthetic views, renewed in the Romantic view of ‘wild nature’ as ‘an oasis free of the ills of civilization’ (Oelschlager 1991, 111). Jorgensen and Tylecote (2007, 448-9) also argue that wilderness is associated with two conflicting views – a positive, romantic view and a sense of potential threat, which they relate to the concept of the sublime. As Buijs (2009) found, there can be different images or conceptions of nature held within society, which vary between individuals and cultural groups. The notion of what constitutes an appropriate relationship with nature also varies, with de Groot et al. (2003) identifying themes of mastery, responsibility and participation. The theme of mastery itself varies in scope, as MacNaghten et al. (2003) identifies themes of mastery, responsibility and participation. The theme of mastery itself varies in scope, as MacNaghten and Urry (1998, 177) argue that a definition of nature as ‘other’ originated from industrialisation, which pushed nature to the margins of the city. As Williams (1973, 1) argues, this ‘contrast between country and city’ persists over time and despite the variety in types of human settlement. Bermingham (1986, 193) also suggests that the idea of the countryside persists despite its erosion, and has been performing ‘the ideological function of providing urban industrial culture with the myths to sustain it’, suggesting that this opposition is vital to cities, as a necessary corollary to urban life, which itself evokes ambivalent feelings (Porteous 1990, 176-7).

The perception that city and countryside are separate realms can be seen to result in ambivalent feelings about boundary spaces between the two, and about certain manifestations of nature within cities. Gallent and Andersson (2007) thus argue that the rural-urban fringe, where countryside and city meet, is subject to negative representations due to its ambiguous status. Qviström and Saltzman (2006) describe the inner urban fringe as a ‘landscape in limbo’ – spaces without a function that are awaiting a new use – related to Augé’s (1992) concept of ‘non-place’. As Özgüner and Kendle (2006) found in their study based on two contrasting sites in Sheffield, there is a general preference for more managed, orderly landscapes within cities, although natural landscape, in the sense of a contrast with the urban context, is favoured. This suggests a complex attitude to nature within the city, as Jorgensen and Tylecote (2007) develop in their discussion on the ambivalence of urban wilderness. They argue that such spaces are considered as wasteland in need of regeneration, but actually have their own value and potential, because of their ambivalent status. However this ambivalence, which stems from the perception that nature has overcome human agency, leads to doubts about whether nature is healing or hiding pollution.
‘cleansing’ or ‘contaminating’ the site. They also identify the lack of clear classification for urban wilderness, which appears to be ‘neither cultivated nor wild’ (Jorgensen & Tylecote 2007, 455-8).

Edensor takes a similar approach when discussing industrial ruins, arguing that ‘the succour provided by ruins to animals and plants (...) violates the rural-urban dichotomy’ (2005, 47). He argues that ruins represent a failure of human agency and a ‘return of the agency of the wild’. This idea of the agency of nature is addressed by Jones (2007), who analyses the role of the ‘non-human agency’ of trees in an urban cemetery landscape, highlighting a tension between cultural spaces and the forces of nature. Using Hunt’s terminology, the emergence of first nature within the urban setting of second nature constitutes a breach of boundaries, creating ambivalent feelings.

The garden

Hunt argues that gardens, the third nature, express ‘different modes or “performances” of cultural control over natural materials’ (2000, 51) – they are ‘expressions or representations of a culture’s position vis-à-vis nature’ (1992, 299). He takes the example of the Picturesque, arguing that it sought to ‘process the unmediated wild world’ to ‘make it palatable for consumption’ (Hunt 1992, 288). Whether through this ‘mode of vision’ (Watkin 1982, Hussey 1967, Ballantyne 1997) practised in tourism and art, or through its design legacy in the English landscape garden, the Picturesque represents a way of taming and appreciating nature. Hunt (2000, 23) argues that it is part of the perception of gardens that they are enclosed spaces, and sees a parallel between ‘the art : nature ratio’ and ‘the extreme of enclosure/openness’ as features which express the ‘dialogue’ between nature and culture: ‘Garden enclosures both define their spaces and appeal across boundaries – by way of representation, imitation, and allusion – to a world dispersed elsewhere’ (Hunt 2000, 29).

The enclosed garden thus represents the ultimate in control and idealised representation of nature – a paradise. As Aben and de Wit (1999) argue, the enclosed, walled garden, whose origins lie in the medieval ‘hortus conclusus’, ensures the exclusion of both city and wilderness. They also see the enclosed garden as being symbolic of the landscape – a microcosm. If gardens can be seen as idealised, controlled nature, then they are pitted against wilderness, as a cultural product. Aben and de Wit (1999, 12) suggest that the enclosed garden can play the same role today within the city – the ‘urban wilderness’ – as it did in medieval times towards the ‘natural wilderness’ – as ‘architectural spaces that exclude the city’. The walled garden, then, is both culture controlling nature and controlled nature in opposition to the human city. The status of the garden as ‘third nature’ makes it a sanctuary from two kinds of wilderness. The key to such a place fulfilling this dual, symbolic purpose is in the control of nature to exclude wilderness.

Ruin, wasteland, secret garden

The cemetery, as an enclosed garden and a ‘paradise’ within an urban context, is vulnerable to being overtaken by wilderness, and to becoming a ruin. Ruins, like urban green spaces, have an ambivalent character. Roth (1997, 2) highlights the particular impact of nature in ruins: ‘Ruins are a trace of the human intervention in nature and evidence of nature’s intervention in the human’. As he points out, the role of nature in this context is not necessarily perceived in negative terms for a Romantic sensitivity. However the attraction of ruins lies precisely in the dual meaning of ‘human decay and of reintegration into the natural world’ (Roth 1997, 2). There is
also, according to Merewether (1997, 25), a temporal aspect to this ambiguity, evoking a sense of ‘finitude as both disruption and continuity’. Woodward (2001, 73) further argues that it is a ‘dialogue’ between a ruin and the ‘forces of nature’ which make them appealing places, while as ‘ambiguous’ places they are rich in ‘metaphor’ (Roth 1997, 2). Edensor (2005, 3–4) argues that ruins are particularly appealing to children, as they evoke ‘tales of adventure in secret gardens, magical labyrinths and dense, enchanted forests’.

This idea that ruins are evocative, meaning-rich places where nature expresses both renewal and decay is echoed in the narrative of the ‘secret garden’ and that of the wasteland. Potteiger and Purinton (1998, 223) argue that the ‘wasteland’ is a cultural motif which shapes relationships to places by suggesting an appropriate narrative – of renewal and redemption through nature. A wasteland is, by definition, an abandoned place of no use, with negative connotations, but through nurturing of plants it can be rehabilitated and brought back into positive use. Through the use and control of nature these places can therefore express their potential while exorcising any threats from uncontrolled nature or wilderness.

The classic 1911 children’s story The Secret Garden follows this pattern. The abandoned walled garden is taken over by a mass of vegetation, but its potential for beauty is harnessed by a child, Mary, leading to emotional development and redemption (Hodgson Burnett 1995). This story, of an abandoned garden discovered and brought back to life, is reflected in The Lost Gardens of Heligan, a true story of the discovery and restoration of a Victorian garden, made popular in a book and television programme, and now a major visitor attraction (Smit 2000). These cultural narratives of wasteland and secret garden contribute to shaping our perception and understanding of abandoned and overgrown enclosed gardens, and, I argue, play a key part in how friends groups understand their involvement in looking after cemeteries.

2. Green space

Plants and wildlife

The most prominent theme in the interview data is that of the cemetery as a green space, appreciated for its beauty, peace, trees and flowers and the proximity of wildlife. Evidence from the websites of friends groups nationally shows a similar trend, with 25 using terms relating to peace and tranquillity, 17 using the words ‘beauty’ or ‘beautiful’ in the main descriptions of the cemeteries, and most dedicating part of the website to nature conservation.

Most interviewees emphasised the importance of the cemeteries as green spaces, and drew attention to specific natural features or wildlife. Members of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery described the cemetery as ‘a glorious place’ and ‘rich in wildlife’, showing an appreciation of the life of the natural world. At both Holywell and St Sepulchre’s there was a particular emphasis on spring bulbs, and on the beauty of the cemeteries in the spring:

‘It’s lovely in the spring. Lots of snowdrops to start off with, then you’ve got the primroses and daffodils. Then some bluebells and so on.’ (Holywell)

‘It’s lovely in the spring when the snowdrops appear. I mean there are thousands and thousands of snowdrops and other bulbs that, now that the undergrowth is clear, they all come up and it’s beautiful.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘But it’s just so beautiful when you get all the snowdrops and the bluebells and everything out.’ (St Sepulchre’s)
Flowers were a particularly welcome sight in the cemeteries, with the suggestion that more bulbs and more wildflowers should be planted to further improve them. This suggests a wish for a more informal, more ‘natural’ type of landscape. The same features are emphasised in the newsletter of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery, particularly the spring flowers, seen as the main feature of the ‘garden’ (1995).

Trees were another valued feature in both places, particularly older, mature trees:

‘those huge trees are wonderful, aren’t they?’ (St Sepulchre’s)
‘… I think the mature trees are just so dramatic. I think they’re gorgeous, just really nice.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

A cedar of Lebanon, which had to be taken down at Holywell in 2003, was mentioned as a particular feature (‘a wonderful old cedar of Lebanon’), and its passing is lamented at length in the Friends’ newsletter, where mentions of the magnolia at the cemetery’s entrance are also found. One volunteer at St Sepulchre’s also expressed the wish for further tree planting, specifically of fruit trees, which would provide blossom and fruit for local people. There was a particular delight expressed in picking fruit in the cemeteries, blackberries in particular, which for one other St Sepulchre’s volunteer were the first attraction of the cemetery. At Holywell the Friends mentioned other edible plants, some thought to be garden escapees – raspberries, asparagus and a plum tree – while the gardener tells in the newsletter of his determination to eat a medlar fruit picked in the cemetery (2001). This suggests an appreciation of signs of life in the cemetery, and of the fertility of nature. One respondent from St Sepulchre’s alluded to how the brambles might be fed by human remains – a strong expression of the idea of renewal through nature.

All these features, and trees in particular, are in stark contrast to the situation at Osney Cemetery, which one respondent described as ‘a bit dull’ and ‘ready for a lawnmower’, while two others commented on the lack of trees. The same emphasis is reflected on the websites of friends groups nationally, with references to ‘woodland’ areas and a ‘woodland atmosphere’, or to ‘a fascinating mix of gravestones and grass, tombstones, turf and trees’. There would therefore appear to be an identification of nature with trees and informally planted or wild flowers, and a particular appreciation of signs of life and renewal through blossom and fruit.

Spotting wildlife also came through strongly as part of the cemeteries’ appeal. Holywell Cemetery is actively managed for wildlife, but at St Sepulchre’s too volunteers reported seeing foxes, and seeking to manage vegetation to encourage wildlife, including birds and butterflies. Species mentioned by respondents from Holywell include goldcrests, pheasants, deer and foxes, while the Holywell newsletters include regular reports on butterfly surveys as well as other wildlife spotted in the cemetery. The reports of the gardener are particularly evocative, telling stories of encountering muntjac deer and nearly giving ‘a haircut’ to a hedgehog while cutting the grass (1993). Cemeteries are also repeatedly described as a ‘haven for wildlife’ on friends groups’ websites, and the vast majority include content on nature conservation. This interest in wildlife and delight in encountering wildlife in the cemetery further highlights this appreciation of living nature on the sites.

The gardener’s reports at Holywell also express the multisensory experience of being in the cemetery – not just the sights, but the sounds too:

‘Still mornings bring a more subtle collection of sounds … little creeping creatures … stirring dry leaves and loose soil … fills the air with a soft white noise’ (2002)
Volunteers from Holywell similarly emphasised that the cemetery is an escape from the noise of city traffic, where ‘the birds can make quite a racket’. This embodied experience of being in the cemeteries was also expressed in accounts by volunteers at St Sepulchre’s. Many told of their pleasure at working outdoors, and getting involved in physical work:

‘I love being out of doors and doing practical things’ (St Sepulchre’s)
‘These are selfish reasons to do with enjoying being with these particular people, enjoying the physical activity of, like extreme gardening …’ (St Sepulchre’s)

They also recounted, for instance, the feeling of the cold weather and the pleasure of warming up through working:

‘If it’s a cloudy, warm day or not too cold, we’ll work anywhere, but if it’s a cold, sunny day we’ll work in the sunshine.’ (St Sepulchre’s)
‘the frost was on the ground, and it was a glorious day, but it was absolutely freezing’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The embodied experience of being in nature and experiencing its sounds and smells is therefore a key element of volunteers’ enjoyment of the cemetery, alongside their appreciation for flowers, trees and wildlife.

**Urban green space**

This quality of the cemetery as a green space was also felt by interviewees to be one of the most important things to preserve, as well as a key reason for them to enjoy spending time there.

‘I live in the middle of the city and it’s very urban … there aren’t many trees … it’s like a trip into a countrified sort of area’ (St Sepulchre’s)

There was a marked emphasis at St Sepulchre’s on the function (or potential function) of the cemetery as a green space in an area described as lacking in green spaces, and as very urban:

‘I just think that any, any urban space, any green space in an urban environment is worth hanging on to’
‘Jericho is unfortunate because it has so little green space. And the gardens are tiny.’
‘And with that huge development in the University quarter up there in the Radcliffe area there’ll be even more people who’ll be wanting somewhere quiet.’

It is therefore the fact that the cemetery is an accessible green space within an urban area that is felt to be precious and worth maintaining. This is reflected on friends groups’ websites, where cemeteries are regularly described in similar terms, as ‘a unique piece of green space and history in the inner city’, ‘a green retreat, within a vibrant bustling city’, or ‘a breathing place in the city’.

One interesting aspect of this however is that St Sepulchre’s is in fact located very close to Port Meadow, a large area of common land with access to the river. This is something that respondents explicitly acknowledged, but this indicates that they thought that the cemetery could offer something different to local residents. The same is true of Holywell Cemetery, where interviewees seemed to value the natural character of the cemetery so close to the city centre. They saw it as a valuable place for people to walk, sit and reflect, and eat their lunch.

‘Well, I think just the peace and, it’s away from the rest of Oxford in a way’ ‘Although we’re right in the centre of Oxford’
‘… we need places like that within the city’
The Friends’ newsletter also includes descriptions of the cemetery as a ‘city centre site’, a ‘city cemetery’, or ‘a truly rural area in the centre of a large and expanding town’. However, although it is true that Holywell Cemetery is located very near the centre of Oxford, it is also very close to University Parks, which offer a large area of green space with public access. By contrast, Osney does in fact have less easy access to parks and green spaces, but apart from a one-off street party the cemetery does not appear to be much used, or at least not generally reclaimed as a green space.

However, it is not entirely clear whether the perception of the volunteers that these particular green spaces meet a demand, reflects actual use. In the case of St Sepulchre’s, there was little agreement amongst respondents over how much people did use the site. While it was considered to be important to provide green space, it was also perceived to be little known by local people:

‘So that’s a very, very valued open space for a lot of people from round about. Do you get a sense of that, that people use it a lot?
- Oh definitely, yes. Not many people. Not many people know about it, even people who live very close by don’t know it’s there.’

The need for green space therefore does not appear in itself to be an essential part of the appeal of the cemeteries. However, the volunteers clearly perceive the cemeteries’ value to lie in this characteristic as urban green spaces, and places of refuge from an urban environment. As one respondent said of St Sepulchre’s: ‘It’s the attraction of this little bit of the countryside inside, inside the city, which is very nice I think.’ Or, as captured by the tagline of the newsletter of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery: ‘A wildlife haven in a city centre’.

3. Contrast and discovery

Contrast

The interviewees’ descriptions of the cemeteries highlighted their location within urban contexts, but also more specifically the contrast between both the wider urban context and the immediate surroundings of the sites. Contrast between the cemeteries and their urban surroundings is also emphasised by friends groups’ websites, with 12 of those surveyed referring to the cemeteries’ urban location. One aspect of this contrast is the value of cemeteries as ‘quiet’ or peaceful places within a busy, crowded city environment:

‘And it’s a very nice place of course to go and sit. It’s one of the few quiet places, you know, off the beaten track, where you can go and sit and contemplate’ (Holywell)

Some respondents also identified the cemetery as a piece of ‘countryside’ within the city. The cemeteries were described as an ‘oasis’, and a ‘green island’.

‘I thought, what a wonderful oasis of country in the town. … And that was a bit special, because it was so far, so much into the city.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘[Walton Street is] sometimes very nice, sometimes very scruffy. There’s no greenery there at all. Now, if St Sepulchre’s could be, you know, a green island…’

In the Holywell newsletters the cemetery is described as a ‘green lung within the city walls’ or a ‘little paradise within the city walls’ – evoking the idea of the enclosed urban garden as refuge. Similar descriptive terms were used on the websites of friends groups – terms including ‘oasis’, ‘green retreat’ or ‘island’. The idea of peace and tranquillity is also very present in accounts of all cemeteries. They are seen as places apart, of quiet within the noise and busyness of the city, as well as places of nature within the urban environment.
This perception of Holywell and St Sepulchre’s cemeteries being ‘oases’ of green within the city is however interesting when considering the actual location of the sites. As well as being situated within easy walking distance of large open green spaces, the description of their locations as urban is also debatable. Holywell Cemetery lies very much at the edge of the city centre, in an area mostly made up of university and college buildings, and would not be an obvious place for city centre visitors to walk to. It also adjoins open spaces such as college grounds and sports fields, which while not publicly accessible do provide a green backdrop. While it does offer a green space which is accessible and truly public, the contrast between the cemetery and its surroundings is not as stark in reality as what the volunteers describe.

In the case of St Sepulchre’s, the cemetery is located within what was originally an industrial and residential suburb of Oxford, although it is very near the city centre. Jericho is a gentrified working-class neighbourhood, favoured for its closeness to the city centre, the historic character of its streets and the proximity of shops and restaurants. While the houses are small, with small gardens, they are also amongst the most expensive in the city. The descriptions of the local environment, when considered within that context, convey a degree of ambivalence about the urban and industrial character of the area. Some interviewees had known St Sepulchre’s before the ironworks were replaced by flats, but their views of the impact of the change varied. Some respondents highlighted the contrast between the cemetery and the factory as being particularly attractive:

‘It was absolutely remarkable because this brooding, dark building overlooked this wonderful riot of vegetation, and it really always reminded people of the dark satanic mills somehow, because it did look so Victorian and old and special.’

‘Well, the quiet, it probably was a sunny day. Lucy’s factory, and the contrast with Lucy’s factory banging away on the side, which is now flats.’

Others welcomed the change:

‘I think it’s a big improvement. Because the factory was really dark, satanic. … It was a very black, industrial feel.’

‘I think that’s quite good, because it was a factory before, and quite a crumbling factory. So actually I think it’s improved it in many ways.’

The respondents who were more positive about the change of use were also those who lived in the immediate neighbourhood of the cemetery. This suggests that they really experience the local area as very urban, and value the contrast between the street scene and the natural character of the cemetery – even more so in its current, quieter, residential incarnation.

Osney Cemetery, which is located in a quiet residential area alongside the railway line, may not therefore benefit from the same element of contrast – here there may not be as much of a perceived need to escape a busy urban setting, while the cemetery actually takes visitors nearer the industrial element of the railway. It is therefore not just the accessibility of the green space that matters but the perceived contrast between a busy urban or industrial environment and a green, quiet, ‘rural’ space.

Discovery

The contrast between the cemeteries and their immediate surroundings also contributes to the element of discovery when people first visit the sites. Both St Sepulchre’s and Holywell have discreet entrances and neither is visible from the street. By contrast, Osney Cemetery’s entrance, while off a quiet residential street, is marked by a lychgate and the cemetery itself is visible from both the road and the railway line.
Many respondents mentioned that they had not known the cemetery they volunteered at existed before being led there for a particular purpose.

‘I’d lived in Oxford most of my life, I didn’t know it existed I’m afraid, until [name] told me to go and see [name]’s grave there.’ (Holywell)

‘And like you … I’d been past that area lots and lots of times, and I had no idea there was a cemetery there.’ (Holywell)

‘No, I never really knew it was there, until I was looking through family history, and through some of the registers I found that there were some people buried in St Sepulchre’s. I thought: Oh yes? Where is this?’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The cemeteries were repeatedly described as ‘hidden’ or ‘secret’, ‘difficult to find’. At St Sepulchre’s interviewees highlighted the unwelcoming state of the entrance from the street:

‘And also the approach is not nice, you know with all these dustbins from the shop, and the very rotted road, and it’s often got a lot of litter from these bins ... So it’s not a good approach, and a lot of people don’t know it’s there.’

As a result, the ‘discovery’ of the cemetery was a very vivid experience. First-time visitors to St Sepulchre’s were described as ‘always surprised what a nice space it is’. One interviewee explained the appeal of St Sepulchre’s Cemetery as lying precisely in this sense of discovery:

‘Well, in St Sepulchre’s, like so many other people, because it’s a hidden place, off Walton Street, when you do find it you’re so delighted and enchanted by the place, that you feel it’s special to you, that you feel it’s a personal space. Obviously it’s not, it’s a community space. So I think we all feel that that hidden aspect is the attraction.’

This personal experience of ‘discovering’ the cemeteries was expressed in particular stories, with strong visual and sensory elements. One respondent remembered seeing Canon Bostock, who had looked after the cemetery single-handedly during visits to his daughter’s grave, busy gardening at Holywell Cemetery. She retained that image as her outstanding memory of the cemetery. At both cemeteries many respondents also referred to how overgrown they were at the time of their first visit, and this appeared to form a strong visual memory of that discovery:

‘I didn’t actually realise that there were mature trees because it was so overgrown.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The other overwhelming sentiment was one of enchantment, with interviewees describing their reaction as being ‘charmed’ or ‘enchanted’. The newsletters for Holywell Cemetery also describe the site as ‘wonderful’ and ‘enchanting’, and refer to ‘the sense of magic which is part of this area’ (1995). Similar descriptions can be found on the websites of friends groups, with references to cemeteries’ ‘atmosphere’, with a hint of ‘romance’ or ‘Gothic gloom’, and describing them as ‘wonderful’ or ‘marvellous’.

The theme of discovery was also reflected in the interviewees’ experience of uncovering individual graves within the cemetery at St Sepulchre’s:

‘We took the ivy off the top, it was like a cap! So we lifted the cap. So that was lovely.’

‘I love uncovering the gravestones and taking the ivy off, and seeing who’s buried there’

‘Just the thought that this was absolutely submerged in the complete jungle. You wouldn’t even have known that there was a grave there.’
A former volunteer at St Sepulchre’s Cemetery talked generally of her experience of doing research in cemeteries and graveyards, and talked of inscriptions revealed under lifted turf or by frost – both phenomena evoking a sense of discovery and wonder.

This sense of discovery, both of the cemetery itself and of gravestones and inscriptions, appears to be key to the sense of place in these spaces. In one of the newsletters of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery (2001), the gardener thus ponders on the effect that clearing the cemetery of vegetation would have:

‘Of course the effect might please the less adventurous of us, but think of the loss of both the mystery and shelter that makes the area so special’

It is a sense of adventure, mystery and discovery that is felt to make the space, and the experience of visiting it, ‘special’.

**Secret gardens**

This likeness to a hidden place which needs to be discovered, and where more discoveries await, is akin to the idea of the ‘secret garden’ as described in Hodgson Burnett’s classic novel and reproduced in other narratives. The secret element was felt by several respondents to be one of the attractions of the cemeteries.

‘it’s quite a well-kept secret’ ‘I think one of its charms is that it’s a sort of secret place …’ (Holywell)

‘a jewel they have hidden away in the midst of all these houses’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘Because people walk past these gates and haven’t a clue!’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘Yes, a lot of people never know.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

Similar descriptions can be found on friends’ websites: Streatham is ‘a forgotten, hidden place’, and Woodbury Park is an ‘arcadian cemetery’ which is ‘hidden away’.

One respondent, when discussing the difference between St Sepulchre’s, Holywell and Osney cemeteries, explicitly referred to the ‘secret garden’ quality of the former two:

‘Because there is again this sort of the secret garden, you know, childhood idea of going into this overgrown place and … that’s what it must… there must be some kind of childhood throwback, from reading Frances Hodgson Burnett and the idea of restoring an enclosed walled garden to what it used to be and making things grow again.’

Osney Cemetery not only lacks trees and thriving wildlife but also has an open aspect and obvious lychgate entrance. While it is located in a cul-de-sac in a residential area, it is immediately visible not only from the street but also from passing trains. By contrast cemeteries as hidden, enclosed green spaces, unknown to most but personally ‘discovered’, with vegetation hiding further features including plants and gravestones, parallels Mary’s discovery of the secret garden in Hodgson Burnett’s book:

‘Everything was strange and silent and she seemed to be hundreds of miles away from any one, but somehow she did not feel lonely at all. All that troubled her was her wish that she knew whether all the roses were dead, or if perhaps some of them had lived and might put out leaves and buds as the weather got warmer. She did not want it to be a quite dead garden. If it were a quite alive garden, how wonderful it would be, and what thousands of roses would grow on every side!’ (Hogson Burnett 1995, 77)

It is also very similar to Tim Smit’s description of finding the ‘Lost Gardens of Heligan’:
It was the silence, the unearthly silence that struck you first. ... This dank, dark place had its own strange beauty. ... Just when I was in danger of becoming seriously depressed by these notions of death and decay I spotted a leaf that didn’t look much like a bramble and followed its branch back to the stem. It was a vine, and an old vine at that. ... There in the midst of all this decay was another, far more powerful symbol – that of regeneration.’ (Smit 2000, 3-8)

The volunteers’ description of tackling vegetation, uncovering graves and enabling spring bulbs to thrive, contrasted with their first impressions of quiet, ‘glorious’ but overgrown ‘hidden’ places, echoes this narrative of restoring a ruin, wasteland or secret garden.

4. Control and balance

Reclaiming the cemetery

Part of the process of discovering and nurturing a secret garden is to take it over, reclaim it from wilderness and bring the vegetation under control. Achieving a degree of control over nature was in fact key to the volunteers’ enjoyment of working in the cemetery, while those not directly involved in hands-on work also emphasised the contrast in the appearance of the site before and after the friends’ intervention.

At St Sepulchre’s, volunteers’ preferred activity is to clear vegetation:
‘to a woman, they were all down to slash and burn… it was getting down and clearing up’

‘Oh I like clearing, I mean I love clearing, and the number of tombs we’ve uncovered, I mean the headstones, innumerable.’

‘So it’s a chance to hack away at ivy or brambles and, there’s nothing delicate about this operation really. It’s really clearing the undergrowth, you know’

This enjoyment was also expressed through emphasising the degree to which vegetation had taken over and how neglected the cemeteries were, describing them as ‘overgrown’ or ‘a jungle’:
‘it was very, very overgrown to start with’ (Holywell)

‘And of course, you know, one of the great achievements of the friends has been to tidy it up, you know. It was an absolute jungle, so they’ve dealt with the brambles and so on, to some extent.’ (Holywell)

The newsletters also refer to a ‘virtual wilderness’ (1989), ‘vandalised wilderness’ (1992) and ‘near jungle’ (2012). St Sepulchre’s volunteers used similar descriptions:
‘how neglected it was becoming, and there was the work going on at the Lucy’s development and trees were coming down and undergrowth was shooting up.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘the place was very densely thicketed, there were lots of young trees, young elder and brambles’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘Well it was very overgrown, and clearly very untended.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘It was absolutely covered in brambles and ivy and oh, it was such a, such a jungle, that you couldn’t even see what on earth you were doing! You know, it was like impenetrable you know.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

This overgrown state at St Sepulchre’s was itself contrasted with the appearance of the cemetery when still regularly maintained: ‘[the superintendent’s daughter] said her
father treated the… made the grass green velvet.’ There was a feeling that it should not have been neglected (‘it’s been allowed to get in a really terrible state’).

The volunteers were keen to highlight the difference they had made to the cemeteries:
‘I wish I’d taken photographs when I first went in to remind me what it was like then.’
‘I just wish we had the first, the earliest photos, because… It is a transformation.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The impact of the clearing work is now highlighted on the website of the Friends of St Sepulchre’s with before and after photographs at a work session in 2009.

This emphasis on the contrast between the original state of the cemetery and its neglected state, and then with the newly restored cemetery (now or as a future vision), is also found on friends groups’ websites, which describe cemeteries as in ‘disrepair and ruin’, in a ‘wild state’ of ‘chaotic overgrowth’ or ‘an overgrown and ivy-covered mess’, and with terms such as ‘unkempt’, ‘neglect’ and ‘vandalism’. This is contrasted with the restored cemeteries or visions for the future of ‘its former glory’, ‘a safe place for everyone’. At Osney the relatively sparse gravestones and smaller numbers of trees make it possible for minimal maintenance by the local authority to keep the vegetation at bay. This may be a reason why it has not attracted volunteers, as they would not find the same satisfaction in reclaiming the site. The practical involvement and satisfaction taken in the impact of controlling vegetation appear to be important elements in the approach taken by volunteers managing cemeteries.

**Control over nature**

Volunteers were however also very much aware that vegetation could easily soon grow again, and that maintenance needed to be ongoing to avoid nature taking over, with ivy being a particular problem.

‘But that’s a perennial task, because it grows up.’ (Holywell)

‘Yes, taming the brambles and the ivy and a lot of these seedlings, ash and things like that. And there’s so much growing out of the graves, and out of the surrounds of the stones. And it’s a long ongoing thing because everything grows up again the next day’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘it’s like the Forth Bridge. The ivy grows as soon as you’ve pulled it out …’ (St Sepulchre’s)

Controlling the ivy is also identified in the Holywell newsletters as ‘a never-ending task’, or ‘a constant battle’, as is the idea of keeping brambles and other vegetation ‘at bay’.

The impossibility of stopping the process of nature taking over again led to the graves which had been found, or discovered, being lost again:

‘I can’t find it now because it’s all gone overgrown again’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘Because the wildlife takes over if it’s left for too long. Because I know, I was up there on my own one time, up at the family graves. And I cleared them right out, and then when I went back this summer they were all overgrown again …’ (St Sepulchre’s)

This is mirrored by a story told by the gardener at Holywell in the 2007 newsletter, of finding lost sunglasses while clearing part of the cemetery:

‘You can rediscover old favourites and new wonders alike, old favourites becoming new wonders too.’
There was a worry among the volunteers at St Sepulchre’s that their work would be lost if no regular maintenance regime was established or more volunteers recruited, particularly in the long term when they would no longer be able to be personally involved.

‘No, it ought to be slotted into some system so it’s not just abandoned – well not abandoned, but just left in case – well it would be nice if we did something but, you know, but have something more formal.’

The problem however is not only with quantity of vegetation, but also quality. There was a sense that the friends differentiated between the right and wrong kinds of nature:

‘And I think it’s better than having some of the fairly useless trees that are in there at the moment. We’ve got very big trees which are really – we’ve too many very big trees I think. And then we’ve got all these wretched elders and so on, the sycamores that are sprouting out everywhere, which you can’t keep, it’s too small a space.’

This was also suggested by a respondent to be a problem for the yew trees at Osney Cemetery:

‘they’re not nice trees, they don’t have a trunk and branches. They’re just a great blob. … And it’s rather unpleasant, as you walk through the lychgate you go straight up against these three enormous blobs which aren’t even nicely placed. They’re completely in the wrong place.’

One of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery also reported taking an interest in Osney Cemetery but giving up when finding a dead rat on site, concluding that the cemetery ‘didn’t need any friends’. The purpose of looking after the cemeteries is therefore to nurture the welcome plants, including, at Holywell particularly, those which will encourage wildlife, while clearing unwelcome vegetation and wildlife.

One episode at Holywell Cemetery also highlighted the problem of clearing the ‘bad’ things and not the ‘good’ ones:

‘There was a rose that had sentimental value that was grown by his grave and the conservation volunteers during clearance, didn’t realise it was a rose and they felled it. Luckily it grew up again.’

The process of reclaiming the cemeteries from nature and distinguishing between the good and the bad is therefore not as straightforward as it might appear.

**Balance**

Beyond the necessary distinction between valued plants – for wildlife, aesthetic or sentimental reasons – and undesirable vegetation, the volunteers were also aware of the need to define how much vegetation to take away.

Holywell is managed for wildlife, but the Friends’ management strategy also acknowledges the need to give a welcoming impression as visitors walk in, in order for the place not to look ‘neglected’:

‘When people come in we didn’t want to give the impression of it being very overgrown’

This is also expressed in the newsletters from the start, as for instance in the 1994 issue:

‘… to strike a balance between keeping the churchyard tidy enough to be attractive and accessible for humans but yet still retain enough cover to protect the wildlife which thrives here’
The management plan’s strict rotation system of clearing, in which each area was to be cleared once every five years, has been modified to avoid that look of neglect. While there was a concern that inscriptions on some graves could no longer be read because of ivy and lichen (the degree of concern varied between respondents), it was also felt that there needed to be a ‘balance’ for the sake both of wildlife and of the particular ‘natural’ ‘charm’ of the cemetery. This is expressed in the 1994 issue of the newsletter by the deprecatory description of ‘the sterile, expensively manicured lawns which have been fashionable in the past’. While the cemetery should be welcoming to people visiting graves, a cemetery without expansive vegetation and wildlife is considered ‘sterile’.

The same concern came through at St Sepulchre’s, where it was felt the cemetery should not be too ‘manicured’ – a word used by several respondents. Volunteers tried to find their way through a description of the ‘right’ level of clearance, as exemplified here (on St Sepulchre’s):

‘Well I think… get rid of so many of the brambles. Leave patches, so that there’s, you know – and other heaps and bowls and anything like that, which can be food for birds. Some of the understorey, yes, leave that as area for wildlife habitats. … It wouldn’t be right to clear it too much. But to get it under control, the brambles and the… to get some main paths streamed on a regular basis. … And, yes, just not manicure it too much and get it too, too tidy, but… make it… keep it wildlife-friendly but not over-overgrown.’

There was however a sense that the ‘right’ level was not universally agreed. The Friends of Holywell Cemetery sometimes had to explain to visitors why the cemetery looked ‘wild and woody’, although usually found that people were satisfied when told about environmental management. At St Sepulchre’s the volunteers had the reverse problem, with some people objecting to the clearance work as they were worried about the effect on wildlife or had enjoyed the cemetery’s ‘wild’ appearance. One occasional volunteer also explained that she had preferred the cemetery before the clearance work started, while being aware of the long-term problems for gravestones:

‘I liked it when it was very wild really. With a path through it. But it was – the graves were getting quite badly affected by the ivy and trees growing through them and so on, so that’s probably not a good idea.’

The volunteers also had different opinions on the ideal level of clearance, with one volunteer being keen to turn the cemetery into more of a ‘park’, while others were explicitly concerned about it not being like a park. The volunteers used comparisons with other types of green spaces in order to define the character of the cemeteries and how far clearing should go. The cemeteries therefore should not ‘look too much like a park’ or ‘too municipal’ or like a ‘municipal cemetery’ or a ‘college lawn’, neither ‘manicured’ nor ‘wild’, because ‘it’s in the middle of a city’. It should be a ‘managed, natural cemetery’. It is not as ‘formal’ as a park, so is more like the ‘countryside’, but not in the same way as ‘nature reserves’. The difficulty in finding and managing that balance was summarised by one of the St Sepulchre’s volunteers:

‘So I suppose the nicest idea would be if it could be tidied up the extent that it becomes a pleasant place for somebody to go in and just sit down and have a little think. But not a deserted wilderness where people will go and make a mess of it, you know. But how you do that I really don’t know.’

The friends thus seek to determine and preserve the level of vegetation that contributes to the cemetery’s ‘charm’ – in other words, they are keen to preserve a sense of place. They are aware of the role of vegetation in creating the sense of enchantment many
describe, created through contrast with the surroundings and heightened by the experience of discovering a secret, hidden place. The semi-ruined character of the cemeteries – where nature has begun to take over, bringing with it ideas of renewal and the passage of time – is essential to this sense of place. The treasurer of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery thus describes seeing the cemetery after the cedar tree has been felled (2003): ‘the scene was enchanting ... the great beauty that comes when nature takes on order’. This tension between allowing nature to take over and preserving access to graves and the wildlife and flowering plants they value is addressed by the Friends of Holywell through a semi-formal management regime, while at St Sepulchre’s it is still being debated and negotiated as work on the site continues.

Nature is key to the appeal of the cemeteries, but more specifically it is the sense of contrast between an urban environment and a hidden piece of ‘countryside’ which is meaningful to the volunteers. The memory of discovery, and the embodied experience of nature and tackling vegetation are at the root of volunteers’ sense of place. This enjoyment is always threatened by nature taking over, or the wrong kind of nature encroaching, and finding a balance is difficult due to a degree of ambivalence. However this tension is itself an important element of the ‘secret garden’ narrative through which the cemetery is understood and experienced. This powerful cultural narrative can be seen to be key to the sense of place for the volunteers and to both the initial appeal of the cemetery and their ongoing experience of interacting within the site.
Chapter 3: The cemetery as burial space

The previous chapter showed how urban cemeteries are valued for the provision of green space. However, the volunteers made a clear distinction between the type of landscape found in a park and that suitable for a cemetery. A lack of continuity in population and changing religious attitudes may contribute to a shift in the initial status of cemeteries as places of grief, commemoration and sanctity, but death remains an inescapable presence even in older, disused burial grounds. The presence of death and the absence of continued ritual activity, as well as a location at the boundary between countryside and city, frame the cemetery as a liminal place, in which death and life, and private and public space, coincide. This chapter examines the ways in which volunteers address the presence of death in the cemetery and how its liminal quality is expressed through descriptions of sense of place and the behaviour of the groups in the cemetery.

1. Liminality

Death and liminality

A key concept I propose to use in considering how volunteers relate to burial space and deal with the material presence of death is that of liminality. This was introduced by Van Gennep (1960) in his classic work on rites of passage. The transitional stage in the passage from one status to another through ritual, the liminal stage represents the state of being neither one thing nor another. As Metcalf and Huntington (1991, 32) argue, the concept of liminality was further developed by Turner as the state in which ‘communitas’, society in its unstructured state, is expressed, thereby threatening social order. Liminal persons, Turner (1969, 95) argues, elude networks of classifications. Danforth’s study of death rituals in rural Greece (1982) draws on these theories and identifies the role of the liminal stage for both the dead and the bereaved. Douglas’s work on the concept of ‘dirt’ is also relevant to ideas of liminality. Dirt – discarded objects – disturbs order by not fitting into any category, and needs to go through a process of de-differentiation to lose its previous identity completely so it no longer represents a danger (Douglas 2002, 197-8). The human corpse could be considered in this category, as well as a ‘liminal person’ as described by Turner. Kristeva (1982, 4) similarly identifies the corpse as ‘abject’, as being ‘death infecting life’. Abjection, she argues, is caused by ‘what disturbs identity, system, order’.

Burial, through the rituals of death, ensures the passage of the corpse from the category of the living person to that of the dead. Or, following Douglas, the disposal of the corpse through burial ensures that it loses its dangerous quality. The corpse however, unlike ‘dirt’, cannot be said to entirely lose its previous identity. As Hockey (1990, 34-5) argues, the rituals of death ‘fram[e] the boundary between life and death’, thereby securing social continuity. Specifically, identity is retained through inscriptions on the grave, as Hallam and Hockey (2001, 157) argue: ‘materialized words become potent as markers that preserve identity after death’. The naming of the grave contributes to the dead retaining their identity, while activities at the grave, and the depositing of flowers and objects on the grave, help establish continued social relationships between the dead and their living relatives (Meyer & Woodthorpe 2008). The grave itself is designed to ensure continuity within the family, within the context of the cemetery, which secures social continuity, as Ariès (1981, 542) argues. Francis et al (2005, 84) suggest parallels between the grave and the home, whether through emphasising links or separation, including through plants and gardening: ‘Funeral and mortuary rituals help create a connection between home and cemetery that can be
either amplified or neutralized by religious ideology and personal action’. These rituals, they argue, also ‘establish the tomb as the final dwelling place of the once-living body’ (2005, 104). This status of the grave as an individual home for the dead, where they can be visited as part of a relationship which persists in the home and through other objects, clearly identifies the grave as a private, personal space. Strange (2005, 163) shows how this creates a ‘tension’, as the grave, a site of private identity and memory, is located in a public space. There are indications that this personal identification with the grave may be changing and the relationship with the dead may be moving away from the cemetery as a response to increasing mobility (Howarth 2007, 231). Sorensen’s (2009) study of new burial spaces in Denmark – urn-burial and lawn cemeteries – thus highlights how this represents a shift from a material, localised and private memorialisation of the dead embodied in the grave to a more ‘immaterial memory’, turning the place of burial into a ‘more collective space’. However, in the traditional cemetery the grave retains its private, individualised character.

In disused cemeteries, where graves are no longer visited and might even be hidden, the stones broken, inscriptions lost or illegible, the status of the grave as the personal home of the dead person can become problematic. For people with no personal relationship with a grave and no memory of visiting a particular cemetery, the grave is a liminal space in two senses: as the threshold between life and death, but also as a private – but possibly unclaimed – space within the public space of the cemetery. The burial rite is not sufficient in ‘neutralising’ the corpse, and the lack of continued ritual, mourning activity, at the grave creates ambivalence. As Hallam and Hockey (1998, 51) argue, ‘monuments have a claim to permanence, counteracting the impermanence of flesh’. They quote Stewart: ‘Our terror of the unmarked grave is a terror of the insignificance of a world without writing. The metaphor of the unmarked grave is one which joins the mute and the ambivalent; without the mark there is no boundary ...’ (Stewart 1998, cited by Hallam & Hockey 1998, 31). Harrison (2003, 12) similarly argues that burying the dead is the basic act of claiming a place as cultural, what he calls civilisation’s ‘humic foundations’, and he identifies the importance of inscription: ‘There are no gravestones on the sea. History and memory ground themselves on inscription, but this element is uninscribable’. Worpole (2003, 113) compares cemeteries to libraries, highlighting the role of engraving as reflecting both presence and absence. He also argues that cemeteries, as representations of the passage of time, are like ruins, and that an abandoned cemetery is therefore ‘doubly affecting and disturbing’ as ‘a ruin of a ruin’ (Worpole 2003, 128).

I would argue that what happens to a ‘derelict’, overgrown cemetery is a loss of definition and boundaries. Damaged, sometimes inaccessible, or fallen gravestones are like abandoned houses: personal spaces whose inhabitants have disappeared, dead (literally in cemeteries) or lost and unknown (through the loss of their social relationships through grave visiting). Simultaneously, vegetation blurs the boundaries between the public and private spaces of the cemetery, while also expressing, as already discussed, nature taking over culture. This is similar to what Vidler (1992) describes as the ‘architectural uncanny’, exemplified by the abandoned house, as in Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ – the ‘unhomely home’. The abandoned grave is one kind of abandoned home, and the abandoned cemetery an abandoned city within the city – doubly uncanny.

**Liminality as a spatial concept**

In addition to the status of the grave as a liminal space, the cemetery as a whole can also be analysed in terms of liminality. The concept has been extended from the
discussion of ritual to a spatial analysis of the boundaries between different kinds of place and of spaces characterised by a state of ‘communitas’, where norms of behaviour are suspended. Stevens (2007) thus argues that thresholds between public and private spaces create liminal moments which have an impact on sense of identity and behaviour.

At a larger scale, places at the boundary between two kinds of place – such as city and countryside as previously discussed – can also be seen as liminal. Most cemeteries were originally literally at the edge of cities, set up away from centres of population; in the modern city they can be seen to retain that quality. As Walter (1990, 171) suggests, it is appropriate for cemeteries to be ‘in limbo between culture and nature’, ‘because death, like birth and sex, is the boundary between culture and nature’. Boundary places (such as the seaside) are also rich in cultural meanings and can have different norms of behaviour (Shields 1991). Shields (1991, 118) thus argues that Niagara, a traditional honeymoon destination, chimes with the status of newly married couples as ‘betwixt and between’ two social states. Shields (1991, 61) sees places as being made up of interpretations of their meanings over time, creating what he terms ‘place-myths’, which feed and reinforce interpretation and behaviour.

Cemeteries can be seen as ‘betwixt and between’ spaces in a number of ways: as places of death in the city, as public spaces made up of private graves, as places with different norms of behaviour (they are unlike parks). They also carry meanings created through literature and film, places of tragedy or horror, or of romantic impulse. Worpole (2003, 22) thus argues that ‘the cemetery exerts a continuing influence upon the urban imagination especially for children, for whom this walled world (a world literally turned upside down) is often a source of unease and superstition, as it is in so many neo-Gothic novels and films …’. Cemeteries as a result are often used for ‘marginal’, anti-social activities: by homeless people, drug takers, or by teenagers (Deering 2010).

Another relevant concept is Foucault’s ‘heterotopia’, which he defines as ‘counter-sites’, where all other sites ‘are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted (Foucault 1986, 24). He gives the example of cemeteries as such sites. Hetherington (1997, 46) further explains the concept as ‘sites which rupture the order of things through their different mode of ordering to that which surrounds them’. They are ‘the sites of limit experiences, notably those associated with the freedoms of madness, sexual desire and death in which humans experience the limits of their existence and are confronted by its sublime terror … sites of all things displaced, marginal, novel or rejected, or ambivalent.’ As heterotopic, marginal spaces and as sacred places, cemeteries can be the venue for marginal and transgressive behaviour while posing challenges to the stranger taking on the management of very private space within the public realm. It could in fact be argued that the potentially transgressive involvement of volunteers (often acting without legal authority) in looking after cemeteries is linked to their liminal quality. There is also however the potential for a sentiment of enchantment and possibility, as Edensor (2005) argues of industrial ruins. Liminal places are perceived as places of freedom away from social norms of behaviour, and are rich in meanings and possibilities.
2. Individual links

Personal and family links

The issue of blurred boundaries between public space and private graves was reflected in the way in which volunteers created and emphasised personal links with particular graves.

Two of the volunteers had initially visited the cemeteries – and eventually become involved with the Friends – because of family or friends being buried there.

‘And I thought yes, I’d like to get involved with that because I’ve got family buried down there.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘When he died, his widow suggested I went down and looked at his grave, which I did, and there was a funny old man gardening there, throwing out leaves, and it turned out to be Canon Bostock’ (Holywell)

This volunteer was inspired to set up the friends group at Holywell Cemetery as a result of this encounter. The Friends’ treasurer, who was not interviewed as part of the project, also has a relative buried in the cemetery, and sometimes reflects on this in newsletter reports.

This personal involvement by some of the Friends is reflected in the way Holywell Cemetery is explicitly managed to provide an appropriate setting for mourning relatives as well as a wildlife-rich habitat. Newsletters mentions that ‘the cemetery is above all a place where the people buried there are honoured’ (1989), and that management is about achieving an ‘attractive balance’ between ‘protecting the environment’ and ‘dignity and care appropriate to the memory’ (1991). The area nearest the entrance is deliberately managed to avoid a sense of neglect for people visiting the graves of relatives:

‘this was about the only area where people, current relatives, were coming in in any numbers. … So we decided to keep this clear mown all through the year.’

Continued personal links are evident in the contents of the newsletter of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery, where the deaths of committee members are marked and accounts made of new interments of ashes in the cemetery. Biographies written by relatives and other personal accounts of the cemetery are also regularly published. The Friends have also used personal links to raise funds for the cemetery, in particular by contacting Oxford colleges whose past members were buried in the cemetery. This suggests that interest in and responsibility for maintenance continue to be linked to personal relationships or historical links with individuals.

A more indirect personal link was made by a volunteer at St Sepulchre’s, who drew a parallel between the graves there and family graves elsewhere:

‘And the other thing is that I feel it’s not always possible to look after the graves of the people you love who have died. … I think of, you know, how I wish I could go and visit my mother’s grave more often for example, but how… and that sort of thing and my father’s as well. … it’s not how it used to be, where everybody was in one small village community and, you know, there was always somebody there to look after it.’

Looking after the cemetery could therefore act both as a way of thinking about loved ones who have died, and participating in a general responsibility for looking after graves, with the hope it might be reciprocated by other volunteers elsewhere. This suggests a personal relationship, if not directly with the people buried in the cemetery, then vicariously through them with loved ones buried elsewhere. The cemetery then acts as a generalised form of memorial, representing other places of burial elsewhere.
The cemetery for these volunteers is a place to either visit loved ones – the continued burial ritual – or to connect with loved ones buried elsewhere, with the cemetery representing other burial places. These relationships can be seen as a way of establishing a level of ownership of the cemetery, likely to make it easier to relate to its private character.

Interaction with graves

Whatever their personal links to the cemetery, volunteers at St Sepulchre’s are all involved directly with clearing graves of vegetation, working on the private spaces of the cemetery and effectively carrying out the work originally done by relatives. The cemetery has been very overgrown, to the point that graves were in some places not at all visible before the volunteers’ intervention. As already discussed, the satisfaction with clearing appears to be an essential aspect of volunteers’ enjoyment of working in the cemetery:

‘I love uncovering the gravestones and taking the ivy off, and seeing who’s buried there.’

This sense of discovery included the uncovering of the inscription, finding out a name and more about the person buried there. Volunteers also expressed particular satisfaction where a relative later sought out a grave they had cleared, enabling that connection between the dead person and their descendant. Visits by relatives also establish another personal connection between the volunteers and the people buried in the cemetery.

‘So that’s good, giving people the opportunity to find where their ancestors were buried.’

In the case of a volunteer with family connections to the area, discovering names on graves is also a way of establishing links with her own family history, with friends or with local families remembered from childhood:

‘a couple of times ago I uncovered one for the Blencowe family, and they were the bakers along Kingston Road’

The same volunteer also said that she thought about the people’s lives when uncovering their graves, thereby establishing a more personal relationship with the deceased:

‘I certainly wonder what they might have done given the opportunity, and what did they do without the opportunity to do other things.’ ‘Who’s this I’m working on, you know, what did they do? What’s their name? Is it a name I recognise from way, way back? Or, you know, previous generations?’

The process of uncovering a grave could also be a moment for the group to come together in reflection:

‘Obviously one doesn’t say a prayer or anything. But you think about the situation. Today, we rediscovered a stone of a baby born 27 May 1888? 1889? Died the same day. And you just think… the horror of that, this much-loved baby has got a full adult space and stone. And not tucked in with parents or anything but there. So it does, oh yes, that does come across, and… then if somebody’s released, if a stone is released, we say, oh that’s right, they’re free, they can go off. So there is a special aspect to it, yes I think yes, definitely.’

Working in the cemetery, while volunteers may take part for the enjoyment and satisfaction of clearing vegetation, is in practice very much expressed in a personal interaction between volunteer and grave, with the person buried, their story, their
relatives. It is also an opportunity to reflect on life and death, and to take part in the ritual of death, ‘releasing’ the dead from neglect.

At Holywell Cemetery, although the Friends are not, except for graves of people they knew, generally involved in maintenance, there was a real sense of a connection with the individuals buried there. This was expressed in references to the ‘residents’ of the cemeteries, and more particularly the way in which they referred to the gravestones by using the person’s name, expressing familiarity.

‘Because as you see a lot of the residents are now very difficult to read’

Or, talking of repairs or erection of new gravestones:

‘Druce has been done you see. Steiner. Charles Williams.’

This personal contact with the graves reflects the way in which they are initially looked after by relatives, and re-establishes a more meaningful, ritual behaviour in the ‘private’ parts of the cemetery. Identifying the graves with the people they commemorate re-affirms their identity and turns the generic death space of the cemetery back into the resting place of known individuals.

Focus on individual stories

Volunteers also focus on particular graves, people and stories when talking – and writing – about the cemeteries they are involved in. This is reflected in the contents of the websites of friends groups, many of which have lists of people buried in the cemeteries with biographical details. The people selected for these descriptions, apart from local or national historical figures and war graves, are typically people with an ‘interesting’ story, or an unusual grave or inscription: the quirky, the tragic and the extreme. This includes people such as boxers or circus performers, accident or murder victims, children or very old people, the first or last burial, the tallest grave, etc. One of the volunteers from the Friends of Holywell Cemetery had been researching and writing biographies of people buried in the cemetery. Aside from an interest in local history, his choices included the tomb of Henry Bird, ‘a Magdalen College choirboy who died at an early age’, and whose elaborate tomb is particularly distinctive and inspired a poem by a university bedel whose life he had researched. Another was ‘a mountaineer who was killed in an avalanche in the Caucasus, 1888’. Both examples have a story attached to them, of ‘touching’ or tragic, accidental death:

‘the story of this little boy, Henry Bird, because it’s such an attractive tomb. … and how the whole school trouped down to the cemetery … And so the whole story is rather touching really’

The same volunteer also suggested that visitors needed a guide to tell ‘some of the stories’ in order to truly enjoy the cemetery, showing a focus on the importance of personal stories to relate to the place and its history. Other Holywell friends talked of a baby buried just outside the grounds of the cemetery, a story also expanded on in their newsletter by a relative, and of a child and nursemaid who had drowned.

‘There’s that sad little story with the child that was stillborn and couldn’t be buried in the cemetery.’

‘This is a nursemaid and child who drowned at Medley Weir. She went in after him, and they both died.’

Again these are stories not only of untimely death but also with particularly touching elements – the child that could not be buried in consecrated ground and the sacrifice of the nursemaid trying to rescue her charge.
Even more famous people had particular stories and anecdotes attached to them, which it might be argued made them feel better known, and easier to relate to. They told of the botanist George Claridge Druce:

‘And that’s a little story that somebody told us when we were showing them around was that he was in Italy travelling by train through the countryside. And he suddenly spotted a flower that he was interested in, so he pulled the communication cord!’

This focus on anecdotes and personal relationships is also reflected in the biographies published in the friends’ newsletters, with information or articles sent in by relatives, and pieces written from the perspective of one person’s memories. In the 1992 issue for instance, an article entitled ‘Joan Bates remembers’ goes from grave to grave, with personal anecdotes about the deceased, from friends to tradesmen, linking a visit to the cemetery to one person’s life and recollections, but also highlighting ‘interesting’ stories.

Several respondents referred to the presence of ‘interesting people’ as one of the most important things to preserve in the cemeteries. Conversely, Osney Cemetery was considered to be suffering from a lack of interest, and a lack of stories:

‘I think Osney Cemetery doesn’t have so many interesting graves, that’s my view. … whereas with St Sepulchre’s Cemetery there are some nice stories attached to some of them.’

The graves themselves can also be a point of focus, although architectural interest was very much a minority concern among the volunteers. As already mentioned, in some cases a large grave for a child was perceived of particular interest or poignancy, but other graves were noticed for being unusual:

‘I noticed this glint of brass on an old tomb – grave slab – and I went across and it was like a mayor’s necklace, brass and coloured beads, and…it was a professor of Tamil and South Indian languages who had died exactly 100 years before.’

This is a grave which volunteers mentioned often, due to the continued visits to it. This suggests that fame or historical renown are perhaps less important than the evidence of someone’s continued impact through behaviour in the cemetery, and effectively their continued social presence. In another case the striking appearance of the gravestone reflected what was seen as an interesting story, the death of a mechanic in the car of a racing driver in the 1930s:

‘the young man who was killed in this motor accident, which is a brilliant white tombstone which shows up from a distance, with a little carving of the motor car in the 1920s I think.’

‘… there’s the one of the racing driver down there. If we found a few more people like that that would be interesting’ ‘Yes, relate… relate to the people again’

Noticeable graves are, I would argue, another way for volunteers to personalise their relationship with the cemetery. They are the reverse of those hidden, broken, illegible gravestones whose abandonment and poorly defined public-private boundaries may lead visitors to feel uneasy. With their individuality expressed in the stone, and the clarity of the story attached to them, they are easier to relate to and do not break boundaries between public and private in the same way as anonymous, illegible gravestones.
3. Death, humour and transgression

A recognition of the presence of death also appeared through the use of humour by the volunteers interviewed. This was expressed through anecdotes about bodies and bones; a humorous take on what happens in the cemetery, including their own involvement; and humour as a bonding mechanism within the group.

Dark humour

Dark humour focused on undifferentiated corpses – bodies and bones. A volunteer at St Sepulchre’s thus reflected on the value of corpses to feed brambles:

‘And there was the most fantastic patch of brambles, and I couldn’t help but think, you know, thank the person from whom these brambles grew, where the grave was coming.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The same volunteer recounted a story, from an article in the New York Times in 1887, which reported on overcrowding at the cemetery:

‘… they’re complaining about the bones rising up to the top of St Sepulchre’s. So from 1847 to 1888 it was full up, and bubbling over with bones [laughs]’

Similarly, volunteers from Holywell Cemetery talked about the move of bodies from a city centre churchyard to the cemetery:

‘- And they brought all the burials from Carfax, somewhere in Holywell, we don’t know where.
- You know there was once a church, and they had traffic problems in the nineteenth century [laughs]
- Well it was the bodies rising up I think actually! [laughs]’

In both of these stories from the history of the cemeteries, there is a certain enjoyment of the gruesome nature of the episodes, in response to the grotesque image of bones rising up from the ground. The same dark humour is evident in two anecdotes told by the same Holywell volunteers about foxes in the cemetery:

‘- A fox got into the vaults of the church too, they had to close the church.
- Yes [laughs] Detected by the smell when it died. [laughs]
- And the other thing was that a fox started to dig one of the graves.
- Oh yes.
- And there were bones, by the side of the grave [laughs]. Which they tried to identify. It turned out they were from a roast joint, not an inhabitant [laughs].’

Dark humour did not often appear in the newsletters of the Friends of Holywell, perhaps because many members, who make up the readership, have relatives buried in the cemetery. There was however one cartoon depicting the figure of death in the 2005 issue, alongside a report by the Oxford Conservation Volunteers which directly reflected on mortality:

‘Stripping ivy off a gravestone puts you in touch with mortality – the way we grow, we flourish and go back whence we came’

This suggests the use of humour to balance out the serious consideration of death for volunteers working directly near the graves. There was similarly little humour found through the analysis of the websites of cemetery friends groups, although the Sheffield General Cemetery Trust also uses puns and titles which directly address death for its tours and publications – their newsletter is thus called ‘Undertakings’.
Literature on the relationship between death and humour highlights the role of humour and jokes in helping medical and emergency staff deal with sudden death, and in particular to ‘cope with the, often incapacitating, liminal space between life and death’ (Scott 2007, 362). More generally, Elgee (2003) argues that laughter comes as a defence against death anxiety, while Marmo (2010) writes of her own experience of humour being used by family members at a funeral, as a way of responding to the experience of abjection. The use of humorous stories may therefore be a way for volunteers of dealing with the presence of death in the cemetery. The lack of corroborative evidence from the web-based survey would suggest either that the Oxford volunteers are unusual in their use of humour or that humour is used in interactions with other volunteers but eschewed in more formal narratives about the cemeteries. The link between humour and transgression would however suggest the latter.

Humour and transgression in the cemetery

Some of the stories told by the volunteers did not directly address the matter of death, but related to activities in the cemetery. One of the friends described being interviewed by local radio at Holywell Cemetery:

‘I made one mistake once. Somebody from BBC Radio Oxford was coming round to make a programme. We were chatting informally beforehand and we passed Kenneth Tynan’s grave so I said one of his claims to fame was that he used the f word on radio for the first time. And during the interview she said: and what was Kenneth Tynan famous for? [laughs]’

This anecdote relates not to death itself, but rather to talking of the dead, and talking in the cemetery. While the embarrassment is due to having to tell the story over the radio, there is a sense that telling the story in the first place may have been inappropriate – a small transgressive act in the context of the cemetery. This is reinforced by another anecdote, told by another Holywell volunteer, who describes failing to recognise Mary Wilson, poet and wife of former Prime Minister Harold Wilson:

‘I met her one time there carrying a kettle and a lot of other things and she spoke to me and I said, and she was dressed so completely un-Oxford like and I said, I’m terribly sorry, I can’t remember your name. She said: Mary Wilson.’

This story is interesting because it highlights how encounters in the cemetery can strip people of their normal social identities. The humour comes from the volunteer failing to recognise someone this well known, making a social faux-pas. I would suggest that it is not irrelevant that this takes place in a cemetery: it highlights a tendency for people to challenge or ignore social norms in the liminal space of the cemetery. This enjoyment of transgression in the space of the cemetery is also present in the way a volunteer at St Sepulchre’s describes carrying out ‘highly illegal’ tree planting, and adding plants ‘surreptitiously’, as well as her delight in witnessing children riding bicycles around the cemetery:

‘… they were having a whale of a time cycling round. Well, some people might have felt that was very disrespectful, but [laughs] it was good fun, it was good fun.’

The cemetery, as already mentioned, can be a place where children or teenagers can spend time away from adult supervision, a place of freedom. However, the behaviour of children in the cemetery can be seen as inappropriate by others, not least because having fun in a cemetery could be construed as ‘disrespectful’. At Holywell Cemetery respondents also laughed about their and other volunteers’ potentially destructive
behaviour, including accidentally setting fire to a tree, a rose being mistakenly cut down and potentially rare lichens being removed from graves to uncover inscriptions. This sense of transgression and freedom appears to be part of what the volunteers enjoy about working in the cemetery.

**Humour and bonding**

The volunteers were somewhat reluctant to admit to having fun in the cemetery, but several mentioned enjoying jokes while working:

‘[name] is a master punner, and a jokesmith, and quite often, he goes away sawing by himself but sometimes he will be working amongst us and he comes out with these jokes and we roar with derision [laughs].’

‘[name] is such a character with the most wonderful sense of humour [laughs]’

Humour is also mentioned in the Holywell newsletters by the gardener when he describes working with volunteers (2010), while an Oxford Conservation Volunteers report refers to a ‘fun day’ (2009). This enjoyment is part of what seems to bond the group of volunteers at St Sepulchre’s, but it also reflects a more general attitude to their own involvement, a feeling that perhaps there is something a little odd about enjoying working in a cemetery.

‘I always enjoyed walking around churchyards I must say [laughs]’

‘You know if you say to somebody, I’m off to snip ivy in a cemetery, they’ll think you’re mad!’

The use of humour in this case expressed self-awareness about enjoying something which other people may think strange or morbid. While in the cemetery however, there is a different sense of freedom, and of being with like-minded people – bonding through humour, jokes, and openly ‘having fun’ in the cemetery.

**4. Death and sense of place**

**A place of commemoration**

For some of the volunteers the presence of loved ones buried in the cemetery will inevitably contribute to their attachment to the place. This is reinforced by the telling and re-telling of how they first came to visit the cemetery, or how they cleared family graves. There is however a more general sense that the presence of the dead contributes to the character and atmosphere of the cemetery – to sense of place. Several volunteers mentioned the people buried in the cemetery as the most important thing to be preserved:

‘I think it’s the people thing which is so important’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘I mean, first of all I think it’s important because people are buried there and somebody has marked their graves and it’s good to be respectful towards people who have died and been buried there, and not let it just go.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

This suggests a sense of the cemetery as a place for commemoration, which is reflected in general terms in descriptions of what people do or might like to do when visiting:

‘Yes, I think some people like to go there to have a quiet sit down’

‘I think it’s a peaceful place for a lot of people’ (Holywell)

The same kind of descriptive terms were found in the contents of friends groups’ websites. Around a third of the websites describe the cemeteries using terms which

The inaugural newsletter of the Friends of Holywell Cemetery similarly describes the cemetery as follows:

‘The cemetery is above all a place where the people buried there are honoured’ and it is about ‘the life commemorated by their headstones and the life now of those who read what is written there.’

The cemetery is thus also seen as a place to reflect about mortality, as one of the St Sepulchre’s volunteers expresses:

‘But it’s got this, yes you’re right, it’s got this added, this added dimension. Yes. And of course you come away, well that’s another day that I’m not there [laughs]. Another day I’ve survived, yes.’

So while most of the volunteers did not spontaneously identify this role for the cemetery, there did appear to be something different about working in a cemetery, as a place of commemoration and as memento mori.

**Gravestones in the landscape**

The role of death in the cemeteries’ sense of place is also more directly sensed through its physical manifestation – the gravestones. While volunteers were far more likely to talk about plants and nature than about the architectural qualities of memorials, they did consider the graves to be an important part of the place:

‘I’d like to see some of the tombs restored if possible’ (Holywell)

‘We specialise in Celtic crosses’ (Holywell)

‘But of course the stones, the memorials themselves are extremely interesting. And we would like to get a group together to record the stones …’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The volunteers were also worried about the potential impact of gravestones being pulled down as a result of health and safety concern:

‘And it’s interesting that I felt that in St Sepulchre’s there’s still a lot of upright headstones which have not been felled by health and safety.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘One of the things we’re scared about is if they come and do what they’ve done at the Wolvercote one, health and safety and all that, and they start to, when the gravestones start to tip slightly they just flatten the lot. … it looks like a bomb’s hit them at Wolvercote’ (Holywell)

The description of Wolvercote Cemetery highlights the importance of the gravestones to the general landscape of the cemetery and a sense of the violence made to the cemetery by laying them down. One of the Holywell volunteers, who has a particular interest in architecture, also identified the monuments as a key element of the appeal of the cemetery, as here compared with Osney Cemetery:

‘it’s got more atmosphere. And it’s got more trees, for example. And it’s got more variety of monuments’
The gravestones are thereby identified as part of what makes the cemetery ‘better’, alongside trees, contributing to its ‘atmosphere’, and even when not directly identified as features they are a key element of the cemetery landscape.

This appreciation of the role of the graves was not however entirely universal. One of the volunteers at St Sepulchre’s was keen to see the gravestones moved to the periphery of the cemetery, in order to make more space for its use as a park:

‘Well of course, the whole question of whether the headstones should be maintained as they are. A lot of them are very broken, you know, and whether they couldn’t be moved round the walls, around the outer edges, as you often see in some cemeteries, and therefore making it more of a proper park.’

This particular volunteer was also explicit in not seeing the role of the cemetery as burial space as a positive attribute:

‘Well… Not the cemetery particularly, no.’

There was a particular dislike of broken stones, and it could also be seen as a way of increasing the public space of the cemetery, by making the private elements more marginal, less visible, especially where they are damaged and cannot be identified.

Other volunteers were strongly opposed to this approach:

‘And the other thing that annoys me is when the City Council or whoever it is tidies up the stones and puts them up in straight rows.’

‘Some people have suggested that perhaps all the stones should be lifted and put to the sides and that it becomes a park, but I don’t think that’s right. I think it’s got to be kept as a cemetery.’

The latter quote suggests an identification of the presence of death through the physical presence of gravestones with the character of the cemetery. However it is the gravestones, not the dead, which are the positive feature. Osney Cemetery is perceived to be suffering from the lack of gravestones there – although there seemed to be an assumption that this equated lack of burials, which is not in fact the case. But perhaps a cemetery with no gravestones is even more problematic a space – where death may or may not be present, even more anonymous than with a faded out inscription. Death therefore seems to be seen to contribute to sense of place provided that it is manifested through looked-after gravestones.

**Spirit of place and poetry**

In addition to the physical manifestation of gravestones and the general status of the cemetery as a place of reflection and commemoration, there was a more elusive quality to the cemeteries that volunteers touched on. Some felt that there was something more meaningful about working in a cemetery, as compared to working in another green space or garden:

‘I do feel that looking after a cemetery as opposed to picking up litter or digging weeds out of the Botanic Garden or something, you know, it has a specific interest like that.’

A volunteer at St Sepulchre’s also believed that the cemetery played a part in making the group a safe and comforting place for some participants, including someone who had been recently bereaved.

As previously mentioned, there was however a sense that this particular aspect of cemeteries, while welcome by some, might be perceived as negative by others. While talking about the possibility of re-opening Osney Cemetery for burial, one said:
'But maybe local people wouldn’t like that. Perhaps it’s rather a gruesome thought, I don’t know. They probably prefer it be left well alone.’

Similarly, a volunteer at St Sepulchre’s pondered about the educational value of the cemetery for school visits:

‘But maybe that’s something that people... wouldn’t want to be involved with the death side of it, I don’t know…’

Death could therefore be a positive, meaningful element of working in a cemetery, and a positive attribute for the group of volunteers, but there was some unease about how people more generally might feel about the presence of death.

One key way in which the evocative aspect of cemeteries was emphasised by volunteers was through the use of poetry:

‘Do you know the poem, Gray’s Elegy in a Country Churchyard? I think that’s just lovely, yes’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘Well, yes, when you think that one of the most popular poems in the English language is about a country churchyard.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

Apart from these references by two volunteers at St Sepulchre’s, the volunteers from Holywell all also mentioned a poem by Mary Wilson about the cemetery, described as ‘evocative’. The poem, ‘St Cross’, starts with the lines:

‘In old St Cross, the blackbirds sing  
All day among the cedar trees;  
Wild briony and bindweed cling  
Around the headstone, and a breeze  
Is blowing through the waving grass,  
And round the feet of ghosts, who pass’

A poem inspired by the tomb of the young Henry Bird was also quoted at length by one of these volunteers, who also described Holywell as being ‘very Betjemanic’.

Accounts of the cemetery by the gardener in the newsletters of the Friends of Holywell themselves become increasingly poetic over the years:

‘The stones, under which we shall all lie, are standing well’ (2000)

‘The stones, which were drowning in the summer high tide, are now bobbing along in the gently swelling seas like dark buoys’ (2004)

The reference to poetry and use of poetic expression suggests an attempt at capturing the ‘spirit of place’ of the cemetery, and in particular the feelings evoked by its function as a burial space. Poetry enables the volunteers to express the significance of the presence of death in the space, beyond the aesthetic effect of gravestones.

While the presence of death was not a particularly prominent motif in descriptions of the cemeteries, further analysis does reveal it to play an important part in how the volunteers relate to the sites. The liminal quality of cemeteries, and particularly of graves, is, I have argued, addressed through establishing personal links with the deceased, and through the use of humour. Liminality is also expressed in mildly transgressive behaviour, while death is important in creating a sense of place for the volunteers, through the cemetery’s role as memento mori and the aesthetic contribution of gravestones in the landscape. A more indefinable aspect of this sense of place is also expressed through poetry, showing how the role of the cemetery as a place of burial is addressed in indirect ways.
Chapter 4: The cemetery as historic and community space

The issue of dealing with old graves in a changing community highlights the role of the cemetery as historic and community space. Cemeteries provide access to local history through the biographies of notable people who contributed to the local area, and through more general trends in social history as reflected in patterns of mortality. They can also be reclaimed and reinvented as community resources through work with schools or events held in refurbished chapels. Major conservation projects such as those funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund tend to highlight this function of historic cemeteries, reflecting grant requirements for community benefit. While volunteer-led conservation ensures an element of community involvement, it does not however guarantee an authentic or representative interpretation of history. This chapter addresses this issue by looking into how representative or inclusive friends groups are, and how they draw from and interpret the history of the cemeteries in their descriptions and narratives about the sites and their local contexts.

1. Place, heritage and identity

Heritage and identity claims

Heritage, as defined by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, 6), is the use of the past for the needs of the present. Specifically, a selective use of the past is made for the benefit of a group of ‘legatees’ at the expense of other individuals and groups. Group identity can therefore be constituted through heritage by exclusion as well as inclusion. Ashworth and Graham (2005, 3) argue that ‘in defining the discourses of inclusion and exclusion that constitute identity, people call upon an affinity with places or, at least, with representations of places, which, in turn, are used to legitimate their claim to those places’. The selection of specific places and monuments, or the naming of a place, all make statements about what a society or nation values, defining identity and belonging. Critics of heritage argue that the naming of a place as ‘heritage’ is value-laden, and as those with power are able to designate what is ‘heritage’, the history of others is delegitimised by the heritage process. McDowell (2008, 42) thus argues that cultural heritage sites play a part in communicating a ‘narrative of the past’ required to ‘justify’ the present by particular social groups, a process which happens to the detriment of ‘historical accuracy’. This echoes Lowenthal’s (1996, 132) argument that group identity is constituted through the creation of ‘falsified legacies’. In addition, this creation of heritage is a continuous process, as Schwartz (1982), for instance, shows in a study of memorials at the US Capitol.

This critique of heritage as representing the interests of a social elite has particularly been applied to post-colonial contexts, in which non-white heritage is either neglected or interpreted through Western criteria (Gathercole & Lowenthal 1994). A particularly sensitive aspect of this colonial legacy is the issue of keeping and displaying human remains and sacred objects in museums. As Simpson (1996) argues, this is not only a question of how the dead are treated, but also about conceptions of ownership and the status of objects. Jenkins (2012) suggests that as a result of this critique British museums have suffered a loss of cultural authority and professionals themselves are no longer confident about the role of human remains and other artefacts in research. The issue of cultural ownership is at the heart not just of post-colonial museum curation, but also of heritage as a whole, including the care and presentation of objects – or human remains – from a community’s own culture.
Economic imperatives are also at the root of how places are framed as heritage – through tourism or local development. Critics of heritage with an international focus have highlighted the impact of tourism on the presentation of local cultures and historic sites to the detriment of local populations, but this analysis is also applicable to Western contexts. Broomhall and Spinks (2010) show how places in the Netherlands are presented to fit dominant historical narratives, and Fees (1996, 135) demonstrates that Chipping Camden, as a typical Cotswolds village, is dominated by a ‘myth’ which gives ‘outsiders’ authority at the centre of local culture and history, in which ‘natives’ are marginalised. As Horne (1984, 17) argues, tourists seek objects – or buildings – because of their fame, in a process akin to a pilgrimage, and it is this ‘myth’ that is perpetuated in tourist destinations. Hubbard and Lilley (2000) argue that there is a more complex process at play in their study of Stratford-upon-Avon, where they suggest the touristic image of the town is the result of an interaction between local people and outsiders.

The commodification and reduction of the past are not however limited to tourist destinations. The planning process can also privilege certain buildings or places over others, through designation and planning decisions. This process, Hayden (1995, 53) argues, tends to favour the re-use of historic buildings for economically profitable ends, resulting in gentrification. Stephenson (2010, 18) suggests that planning is focused on ‘physicality of place rather than its embedded qualities’. In other words, despite heritage policy emphasising more general ideas of character and values-based conservation, it is still the fabric of buildings that is protected and preserved. Through this process, the kind of place to which some local people are attached due to personal history and memory can be neglected in favour of a more general sense of what is valued – architecturally and economically. Uzzell (1996) also emphasises the role of interpretation in creating a sense of place in his study of the impact of a local museum on people’s impression of the town of Guildford. Exhibitions or interpretation at specific sites are influenced by, and in turn influence, the understanding and experience of the wider area. The selection of particular narratives or buildings in telling the history of a place has the power to influence the sense of place of both tourists and local people.

**Place and identity**

Place – as opposed to space – is socially constructed through the meanings attached to it by people. As Cresswell (2004, 10), drawing on Tuan, puts it, ‘When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way) it becomes a place’. These values in turn form the basis for a sense of identity, as Bender (1993, 3) argues when writing of landscape, as ‘part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group or nation-state’. Cresswell (2004, 10) however makes a distinction between landscape and place, arguing that landscape tends to be viewed from outside, while ‘places are very much things to be inside of’. This highlights the importance of embodied experience in creating place – and place memory. Places, Hayden (1995, 46) suggests, ‘trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past’, stressing the role of both visual and bodily memory in embedding meaning in a place. This personal memory, when shared with others, can make places the focus of group identity and shape social memory through ceremony and ritual, as Connerton (1989) argues. Memories are also, according to Cresswell (2004, 85), ‘placed’ through the erection and preservation of monuments and buildings, and through inscription. These memories – and narratives – can then form the basis for group identity. Tuan (1977, 178) thus argues that ‘identity
of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs and functional rhythms of personal and group life’.

The notion of place memory and identity being grounded in bodily experience however relies on the existence of long-established social groups whose personal and group history is linked to a permanent place they and their ancestors have shaped. As Tuan (1977, 198) suggests, being ‘rooted’ in place differs from an active creation of ‘sense of place’. This creation of identity through shared memory is examined by Kyle and Chick (2007, 221) in their study of the venue for an agricultural fair in Pennsylvania. In this case it is not the place itself that matters so much as the shared experience of being in that place and the sharing of narratives between generations. Where there is no continuity of occupation or use, place memory therefore needs to be constructed anew by each group. As Dicks (2000, 52) suggests, communities are increasingly ‘idealised’ as identity is shaped around lifestyles, and it is through narratives of the past that these ‘imagined communities’ create a common bond. Easthope (2009) considers the relationship between place and identity in a more mobile world. Giddens and Bauman, she suggests, have argued that there has been a shift in modern society from ‘relatively stable identities rooted in place to hybrid identities characterised by mobility and flux’ (Easthope 2009, 65). Massey also conceptualises place as ‘open and hybrid’, as Cresswell (2004, 53) suggests, based on ‘routes’ not ‘roots’, and Urry (1996, 47) argues that people now consume the memories of other societies and cultures as well as their own.

This change from a direct experience of place history to a disconnected understanding of the past is identified by Nora in his discussion of history and memory. His argument is that modernity marks a shift from memory – when the past was experienced through continuity – to history, which is a ‘reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete’ (Nora 1989, 7). Lowenthal (1996, 114) similarly argues that it is not possible to experience the past authentically, as our understanding of the past is coloured by our own experience. According to Lowenthal (1985: 385), the creation of heritage is a way of making the past accessible and meaningful in the present. The past is therefore always reconstructed as it cannot be accessed directly, as Huyssen (1995, 15-6) also argues – a problem with history as much as with heritage, as there can be no neutral position (Samuel 1994, Landzelius 2003). Nora however argues that some places (and objects) retain this more direct link to the past – what he terms ‘lieux de mémoire’: ‘There are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire’, Cemeteries are among the places Nora identifies as being ‘lieux de mémoire’, alongside, amongst others, museums, monuments and archives. There is a sense in which cemeteries provide a direct link with the past, through the presence of the dead in the ground, as well as through inscription, and a sense of the passage of time in the changing landscape. Harrison (2003, 28) thus identifies the grave as the basis for place and civilisation: ‘the surest way to take possession of a place and secure it as one’s own is to bury one’s dead in it’. He further argues that caring for the dead is essential to create identity: ‘they help us to know ourselves … We give them a future so that they may give us a past’ (Harrison 2003, 158). However, while for a long-standing community there will be direct links with the place where family and ancestors are buried – and where they may expect to be buried themselves – it is not clear whether cemeteries can create such a direct link to the past for newcomers. McDowell (2008, 41) thus argues that in a time of ‘postmemory’, ‘memories are passed down through generations to be represented by people who have no personal attachment to the memory’. Newcomers to a place become caretakers for memories they may not know
or may understand differently. As Nora (1989, 15) also argues, ‘the passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history’. A cemetery therefore, despite a direct link to a particular local past, will be subject to a selective exercise of linking to the past through narratives and new value-making. In addition, even where people seek to authentically represent the past, their lack of direct link to place memory means that the nature of what they pass on will inevitably be altered.

**Community and authenticity**

The selective use of the past, through the development of ‘historical narratives’ (Groote & Haartsen 2008), is the basis for the creation of such place identity. As Huigen and Meijering (2005, 22) put it, ‘the history of a place can be seen as a lucky dip. Everyone reaches into it for “facts” to support their own particular goals’. Zukin (2011) argues that while some elements of the history of a place may be used in the creation of a new place identity, and even though these are presented as authentic local history, the ‘sense of place’ that results is entirely new. This is exemplified by Davison et al’s (2012) study of Dalston, where activists opposed to development regretted the loss of places associated with local activities. However, other local people denounced these activists as middle-class newcomers who had no personal experience of these activities. This highlights how successive waves of newcomers in an area create different place identities for the same buildings and sites.

In some cases this sense of identity coincides with that created by developers. Atkinson (2007) thus shows how a ‘kitsch’ ‘maritime aesthetic’ used by developers in dockland developments is adopted by residents as a historic sense of place. Their notion of this past is detached from actual history and is a more sanitised, superficial idea of a maritime place, but becomes significant to local people. Wells (2010) similarly argues that ‘historicised design’ plays a part in creating sense of place, making it a popular type of architecture. While conservation theory denounces pastiche, the look of history can be sufficient to instil a sense of place – and identity – in some people. Wells (2010, 475) suggests that ‘spontaneous fantasy’, or what Urry (1996, 51) terms ‘distracted perception’, evoked by buildings and based on a generic sense of the past, is important to newcomers who lack personal or family memories linked to a place: ‘To satisfy this need for rootedness and attachment to the history of Anderson, their experience is filled with imaginary scenes from the past, sometimes partly based on what they have read and have been told or simply created from random meanings over which they appear to have little control’ (Wells 2010, 476).

Nostalgia for a generic past drives interest in historic places, as both Hodge (2011) and Farrar (2011) suggest, while suggesting solutions for a more authentic experience of the past. Lowenthal (1985, 295) however argues that if people do not know that something is a replica rather than an original, their experience will not be affected, and ‘the copy reflects “the past” no less than the original’.

While it can be debated whether a nostalgic take on a place’s history is more or less authentic, there is a difference between a reconstruction of the past through lived experience and memory and the influence of nostalgic narratives on newcomers. The phenomenon of gentrification tends to be based on the adoption and adaptation of buildings and places to create a new sense of place. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, 79, 91) include gentrification, with the adoption of working-class, industrial neighbourhoods by the middle class for housing or leisure use, as an example of ‘disinheritance’ through the heritage process. The interpretation of a place’s history by gentrifiers will inevitably differ from that of original communities. In particular, there is
a tendency for a romanticised notion of working-class history and culture to be adopted by middle-class newcomers, who in the process displace the original residents. Mills (1993, 158) argues that gentrifiers use the ‘symbols of working-class culture’ to create a new sense of place. The process of refurbishing older houses, of ‘retro-fitting’ and ‘retro-chic’, is also described by Samuel. He argues that there is nothing “historic” in any archaeological sense about conservation areas, which are instead characterised by being inhabited by newcomers with a taste for the aesthetic of older buildings, a process which ‘invests property with a pedigree and newcomers, if only by proxy, with roots (…)’ (Samuel 1994, 128). Zukin (2011, 165) similarly argues that marketing strategies highlighting a particular interpretation of place identity can coincide with the interests of newcomers, who come to be ‘culturually dominant’.

When considering the involvement of the ‘local community’ in heritage and interpretation it is therefore important to consider which community is doing the work of selecting historical narratives. Newcomers have a different understanding, and any sense that their involvement in heritage designation and management makes it more ‘authentic’ is questionable.

2. The group and the community

Ad hoc and personal nature of the groups

A key issue with community groups being involved in managing historic sites is therefore the extent to which they represent the community and constituency for a particular place. The two friends groups under consideration have a very different origin and make-up, which can be expected to affect their approach to the cemeteries.

The Friends of Holywell Cemetery were founded by one person following her first visit to the cemetery to find the grave of an acquaintance. With the help of a friend, she went on to raise funds to employ a gardener, calling on colleges and individuals with links to people buried in the cemetery. The local branch of the Wildlife Trust was consulted to draw up a management plan for the cemetery, and their representative is still involved in the Friends. The committee also has representation from the Church, which remains nominally responsible for the cemetery. Other past members of the Friends’ committee include people with personal links to the cemetery, while more recent members were recruited via personal acquaintances:

‘and then I got to know [name], who really started this Friends of Holywell Cemetery’

The committee of the Friends of Holywell retain an overview of the cemetery’s management, manage funds and employ a gardener, while practical work is carried out by the Oxford Conservation Volunteers on the basis of environmental conservation.

The Friends are however a membership organisation, with members from around the country, some of them people with relatives buried in the cemetery.

‘About 60, 70, something like that. So they get sent a newsletter and they have to pay a subscription, now £10 a year. And a lot of people give donations as well.’

These members do not get directly involved in managing or maintaining the site, and many do not live locally. The Friends of Holywell Cemetery are therefore a small core group with a mix of personal links and specific interests in the cemetery – wildlife or local history – recruited through personal acquaintance.
The Friends of St Sepulchre’s Cemetery are a much more recent group, set up by one of the current members when plans for development of the ironworks buildings emerged:

‘[Name] had set up the Friends of St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, because he was concerned about how neglected it was becoming, and there was the work going on at the Lucy’s development and trees were coming down and undergrowth was shooting up.’

Another volunteer then took on responsibility for setting up working parties to maintain the cemetery:

‘And from that we organised one Sunday afternoon, and we had a lot of people turn up … Perhaps ten, eight or ten people turned up. And then we organised some more and we got lots of people turning up.’

This original group of volunteers has come down to a core of twelve to sixteen people, who attend work sessions on an ad hoc basis. Volunteer recruitment takes place through advertising in the parish magazine and through press appeals, but in practice it is through personal friendship or acquaintance that most volunteers become involved.

‘Well, [name] who lives, as you know, just across the back, she told me what she was doing, and I went and looked at it and thought it was a good idea to try and restore this place for the community, really’

‘Well, through my neighbour. … And then she mentioned to me that there was this group that was doing work in the cemetery. And so I went along and helped her out once or twice.’

‘… it was through her husband doing a course at Rewley House…’

This informality is reflected in the set-up of the group, which does not have a constitution or other formal arrangement.

‘No, it’s very informal. It would be nice if it could be slightly formalised, but you never want to be too bureaucratic about things.’

‘And nobody wants to be sitting around deciding on things, and that’s found success’

The recruitment of volunteers through existing acquaintances also resulted in a fairly homogeneous group, despite the earlier involvement of families with children:

‘So the result is that apart from [name] and one other male, we’re all retired white old ladies. Yes, we don’t fit the demographic for volunteering at all, you know, we should be young and black and other things, but we’re not…’

This tendency for recruitment through word of mouth has been identified in studies of volunteering generally (Wilson 2000) and within museums, libraries and archives in particular (Hewlett 2002, Paine et al 2006). The result of this kind of recruitment is a lack of diversity amongst volunteers, who in the museum, library and archive sector tend to be mostly women, mostly aged 45-74, and 97% white (Hewlett 2002, 47-49). As Orr points out, ‘the profile of the heritage volunteer and the heritage visitor is markedly alike’ (2006, 197), and this is reflected in the profile described by the St Sepulchre’s volunteer.

**The group within the community**

The groups are therefore not representative of the local community. In the case of Holywell Cemetery, there are no local residents in the immediate neighbourhood of the cemetery apart from students, who are a transitory population, although the cemetery does have potential meaning for people beyond the immediate area as
burials included other Oxford parishes. The management of the cemetery is therefore not grounded in any kind of local grassroots involvement, although it has a wider basis through donations and practical involvement of other local organisations.

St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, by contrast, is located within a densely populated residential area. The cemetery itself is overlooked by nineteenth-century houses on one side, and new-built flats and offices on other sides. There was however little involvement from residents in the flats, and even some degree of hostility to the work of the Friends:

‘Yes, but people just don’t join in things, so many of them anyway, and they don’t want commitment, so many people don’t want… they just want to do their own thing, which is a shame.’

‘Five families? From the flats. Perhaps. Not many. To begin with they were very keen to make it known that they didn’t like what we were doing. As they sat on their balconies and watched us work.’

There was a particular issue with one resident from the flats who had confronted the group and complained to the City Council. The problem had been resolved through the involvement of the Cemeteries Manager, but the episode had been a disturbing one for the group.

Aside from immediate ‘neighbours’ of the cemetery, there was also very little involvement from other community groups. A recent planning battle over planned development on the canal side led to the set-up of a trust, the Jericho Living Heritage Trust, as well as local involvement in opposing the plans. One founding member of the Friends was previously involved with this group, and had plans for the cemetery to be encompassed within a wider community scheme for the boatyard site. This relationship had however since broken down, and the Friends no longer had links with this project or other community activism:

‘I’m not, I’m not that much involved in the local community actually. I’m not, I suppose… older, older retired women, I suppose that. But I don’t, I don’t really do much for Jericho or in Jericho. So the cemetery is sort of separate.’

These distinctions reflect the history of the area, and the waves of gentrification that have affected it. While one volunteer was Oxford-born, others had established in Oxford in adult life or in older age. The original population – most of which was displaced in the 1970s – was not represented, while the most recent wave of newcomers did not appear to take the same kind of interest in the place.

A similar problem may be present at Osney Cemetery, where local people have not tended to be involved in looking after the site. A local councillor, who had tried to get residents involved either in cleaning up the cemetery for OxClean (an annual city-wide event) or in setting up regular working parties, explained the lack of interest:

‘I have tried to start one up, but people are very busy. Most of the people who live there now have demanding, sort of professional jobs in London, so they’re very busy. And then the people who’ve lived there for a long time are often retired or very busy doing something else. Or having two jobs to try and make ends meet or something. People… I think people in North Oxford are more likely to have time to give up to something like that, but in that part of Oxford people don’t seem to be so time-rich.’

This mix of low-income, long-standing population and newly established London commuters was seen to result in a lack of community involvement. It would suggest that in Oxford earlier waves of newcomers – perhaps those working in Oxford rather than commuting – are most likely to become involved in local issues.
While there are local factors behind the make-up of the groups in Oxford, a lack of involvement by the wider local community appears to be replicated in friends groups around the country. Three websites include mention of active involvement of the wider local community, but this relates to specific projects: two HLF-funded projects which involve an element of community involvement, and one where the aim is to turn the cemetery into a community resource, including orchards and beehives. This suggests that groups tend to involve the wider community as part of specific projects rather than as a matter of routine. Groups do invite people to join them and many also work with schools, and the stated aims of about a third of the sites include mention of ‘promoting’ or ‘raising awareness’ of the cemetery, of making it ‘accessible’, or of working ‘for the public benefit’. However, in some cases this is moderated by the idea of promoting ‘respectful enjoyment’, which suggests a wish to control the type of use made of the cemetery, and to educate communities about the space, rather than to invite views on how it should be run.

**Community use**

Perhaps as a result of a lack of integration within a wider local community, respondents had very different – and sometimes contradictory – views on how much the cemeteries were used by local people.

‘What do you think Holywell Cemetery means to people in Oxford? 
- Well, not much’  
‘I think it’s used a lot actually, more than one realises.’ (Holywell)  
‘Whenever I go down there there’s always someone coming in and walking around.’ (Holywell)  
‘Not many people know about it, even people who live very close by don’t know it’s there.’ (St Sepulchre’s)  
‘Well, one of the things that’s interesting when we are working, how many people do come in. And if we’re there toward lunchtime a lot of people come in and have their lunch.’ (St Sepulchre’s)  
‘Some children get pushed around in pushchairs. But I don’t see a lot of people going there, no. Because, you know, you do still find druggies who have been sleeping the night there and that sort of thing, and it’s offputting.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The perception of how much people used the cemeteries seemed to depend on each volunteer’s view of whether the cemetery was a good community space, or whether people knew enough about what was of interest there.

Amongst the people they knew to visit the cemeteries were relatives or descendants of people buried in the cemeteries:

‘One or two people do visit graves there regularly and put flowers on them.’ (Osney)  
At St Sepulchre’s several volunteers talked about people visiting the cemetery to look for graves, and told of the role of the Friends in clearing and locating those graves. At Holywell Cemetery, there was a mix of people visiting to find graves and ongoing visits by relatives to look after loved ones’ graves.

‘And then, some distant relatives who come and look up ancestors.’  
‘The people who come and look after the graves, there’s the ones by the magnolia tree, isn’t there?’

Local residents were also described as visiting the cemeteries, because of the peace and quiet in the cemetery, or for walks with their children or their dogs:
‘So, people come in at lunchtime, from offices from round about or whatever and they have their lunch on the seat there. (Holywell)

‘It was nice to see, and people come there with their children. People come in with their dogs. That’s not so… not so nice, but, yes…’ (St Sepulchre’s)

Holywell Cemetery was also thought to attract tourists seeking the graves of the famous:

‘But I think the use of it mainly, is in the summer, tourists. They come and have a look at Kenneth Grahame’s grave, things like that’

Visitors, both local and from further afield, also went to the cemetery as part of Oxford Open Doors, the city’s event for Heritage Open Days.

‘As I say I think this open days thing has opened people’s eyes… a lot.’ (Holywell)

‘And last year we did Oxford Open Doors, and we had what, 480 people in.’ (Holywell)

‘It’s been nice when there’s been – for the open days. We’ve had about 50 or 60 people.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

A less popular group of people were rough sleepers, at least where drugs or drink were involved.

‘Of course it also attracts some of the homeless, you know, well it’s good that they can find somewhere to… as long as it doesn’t become some kind of drug centre or anything. Which it hasn’t so far’ (Holywell)

‘But we’ve had quite a few problems in that cemetery over the years, with rough sleepers and people using drugs, people drinking …’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘And then there are drug users, in both of those cemeteries, and people do find needles. And that’s dangerous and upsetting …’ (St Sepulchre’s, Osney)

‘And we had the couple who camped. He’s an alcoholic I would imagine, and he just sleeps outdoors. …’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘Though it would be nice to keep out the undesirables. But I think they’re monitored now by the PCSOs. Because there was a couple there with a dog, sleeping, but I think they’ve been removed.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘I mean I don’t like, you know the sight of the druggies, and you know we had to clear a lot of syringes …’ (St Sepulchre’s)

There was a real ambivalence in evidence. Most of the volunteers did not object to the presence of rough sleepers, whether at St Sepulchre’s or Holywell, but did worry about drugs and needles – something which was also perceived to be a major obstacle to Osney Cemetery being used by families and children. There was however also a sense that cemeteries had a role to play in sheltering people in need:

‘But apparently Superintendent Ward in the 60s, he always left the gate unlocked. Because if there was somebody who was homeless they could always come in and have somewhere to sleep, not a bed for the night but they could have somewhere to sleep.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The cemetery as community space

The volunteers also varied in their vision of how the cemetery should be used by the local community. Nationally, the kind of use advocated (gleaned through descriptions of the cemeteries) by friends groups focuses on ‘exercise’, ‘relaxation’, ‘quiet reflection’, ‘quiet’ or ‘passive’ ‘recreation’, and ‘contemplation’. There is also often
mention of nature: ‘relax among the wildlife’, ‘get in touch with the seasons’, ‘feel at one with nature’. Other features mentioned include views and the potential for photography. Exceptions include the description of a cemetery having ‘tourism potential’ and one being described as ‘a vibrant part of the community’, but the overwhelming impression is that visitors should be quiet and respectful of the people buried in the cemetery.

This is reflected in the Oxford case studies, with the main idea being that the cemeteries should be places for people to be able to sit and be quiet:

‘There are seats in there, they can go and have their picnic lunches.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

There was also a wish to see children in the cemeteries:

‘And, so the children had a lovely time coming to plant [the trees], but I hoped it would encourage the children to come back and water the trees and use the cemeteries more.’ (Osney)

‘But there were kids in one night … It was nice to see, and people come there with their children.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘Well I think it’s important to preserve it as a green open space. For the community. And I’d really like to see it turned into a people’s park, with possibly some playground things, but natural playground things, for children.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

One St Sepulchre’s volunteer also envisaged schoolchildren visiting the cemetery. She was aware of one teacher who already did so, and thought that existing trips to the local area could be extended to take in the cemetery:

‘… his wife teaches classics at the High School, and she takes groups into the cemetery’

‘So why not take them on to St Sepulchre’s? And explain how it was that the cemetery was created or why it was created and what’s happened subsequently.’

A more widespread use of the cemeteries as community spaces was also envisaged by some respondents.

‘And about three summers ago, two or three, people in Barrett Street had a wonderful summer party in the cemetery … And they had dancing and sports and fantastic things. Because there is quite a lot of open grass there, so it’s quite good for an occasion like that.’ (Osney)

‘I don’t see why you shouldn’t have fruit trees that people can pick stuff off the ground and so on’ (St Sepulchre’s)

Another respondent envisaged the role of the cemetery as a space where local communities could come together by working together. A Muslim herself, part of her motivation for getting involved was to contribute to the wider community:

‘And I think that it would be possible that in a community project like looking after a graveyard or a cemetery or something, you know, that different people from different backgrounds could come together and get on fine.’

While there was no overall vision for the cemeteries, in the sense of an agreed project plan for future use and management, some of the volunteers had very clear visions of what role the cemeteries could potentially play within the local community. These ideas were not however based on a sense of a demand within the community or on experience of current use, but rather on individual interests and wishes.
3. Local history

A minority interest?

The majority of friends’ websites surveyed (48 or 67%) included an explicit focus on local history, either through the content of the website or through other publications or activities. The nature and extent of that focus however vary. They include the history of the cemetery itself, often with quite a lot of detail including local history and background information on the creation of cemeteries generally. Where a notable architect or designer was involved in the cemetery or its landscape this is also emphasised. Some websites include information on social history based on grave design symbolism, background on child mortality or people’s occupations, for instance. Some have a very specific focus on one individual or family buried in the cemetery. Finally, websites tend to include biographies of people buried in the cemetery, from national and local figures to war graves or, as previously discussed, people with what was considered to be an interesting story. This indicates that while local history is of interest to friends groups, it is not necessarily the main focus, or approached in any systematic manner. The variety of what is included suggests that it is likely to depend on the specific interests of individual group members.

This tendency is also evident in the Oxford case studies. Local history was not mentioned by many of the respondents, with several explicitly explaining that they did not know about the history of the cemetery, who looked after it or why it had been apparently abandoned.

‘I don’t know anything much about it from the historical point of view, except that it was there, and there was the chapel in the middle which was taken down in – when was that, in the 1970s?’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘I don’t know much about the history of it, so don’t ask me. No, I should find out of course, but I don’t actually know anything about the history of it.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

One respondent from the Friends of Holywell Cemetery, who is particularly interested in local history, also suggested that this was not generally the main focus for the group:

‘perhaps the historical side has been a little bit neglected’

There was also a concern about the recording of inscriptions, as at both cemeteries this had not been prioritised:

‘But certainly some of the inscriptions need to be recorded I think because, while they’re still visible, readable’ (Holywell)

‘I’d like a nice up-to-date interpretive board and records of the graves, I think that would be valuable.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

‘And we would like to get a group together to record the stones, but it just hasn’t happened because we’re still busy gardening.’ (St Sepulchre’s)

Local history therefore appears to be something that the volunteers feel should be tackled, but it is not their primary concern. This is likely to also reflect the particular local context, where local history is perceived to be accessible through other buildings and sites, in particular the university and colleges. Oxford is also a place of transit, where relatively few inhabitants are originally from the city. Data from the 2001 census shows that 25% of the local population had moved within the last year – the highest population turnover rate of any English local authority. It is also a very international population, with 28% of residents born outside the UK according to the 2011 census (Oxford City Council 2013). This would be likely to lead to people
having a more academic than personal interest in local history, and to be more influenced by external or tourist narratives about the city. There were some exceptions amongst respondents, with some having personal links and one having lived in Oxford all her life. However most volunteers have a more general interest in the city’s history which is not based on family links or personal memories.

**Famous graves and biographies**

Where local history is addressed, it is mainly through the biographies of people buried in the cemetery. On friends’ websites the number of biographies and their presentation vary greatly. In some cases only a few biographies are included (suggesting a work in progress), while others have many arranged in categories. One site has a series of downloadable factsheets including lists of people by theme or category such as common surnames, links to the railways, etc, which provide a wider local history focus. A few websites offer a less selective list by including biographies written by people’s descendants, with one group appealing for such contributions, and one site includes biographies of the first 20 people buried in the cemetery, more likely to include a cross-section of local people.

The newly set up website of the Friends of St Sepulchre’s Cemetery (2012-2013), managed by a local history enthusiast with widespread interest in Oxford and its history, is unusual in including biographies for people as they are researched, apparently without discriminating according to any particular criteria. This is very effective in providing snapshots from people’s lives in the past. The newsletters of the Friends of Holywell have a more selective focus on biographies, with some famous people coming up repeatedly over the years, and others being profiled by family members or friends. Regular profiles and mentions include Charles Williams (member of the Inklings), Sir Henry Acland (Regius Professor of Medicine and benefactor to the city), Kenneth Grahame (author of *Wind in the Willows*), Walter Pater (writer and academic), and Sir John Stainer (composer and academic). This reflects an emphasis on people with links to the university, and those with a national profile. This links to a perception of Oxford as a university city, and a privileging of academic and intellectual achievements, a dominant narrative about the city.

One of the respondents for Holywell Cemetery writes regular profiles of people buried in the cemetery for the newsletter. The selection of subjects is based on a wish to represent life in Victorian Oxford:

‘Well I just thought they were interesting people, you know. It just caught my attention as being significant figures in their various ways, and giving a sort of cross-section of Victorian Oxford.’

In practice university links also prevail, such as Henry Acland and John Burgon, Henry Bird whose family had college links, or the wife of the President of Magdalen College. Another focus was on further links with national figures or places, for instance the sculptor of Henry Bird’s tomb, who was also responsible for Eleanor Cross at Charing Cross and work at the Palace of Westminster. Links with Ruskin, Pugin and Harold Wilson were also mentioned.

Other respondents from Holywell also highlighted specific graves, such as the botanist George Claridge Druce or Kenneth Grahame. They also mentioned the Sisters of Clewer, a religious order who had stayed in the building of Holywell Manor and had an area of the cemetery reserved for them. This reflected a more general interest in the history of the site of the cemetery, to which I return below.
At St Sepulchre’s too specific notable people were mentioned. The main names were Thomas and Martha Combe. Thomas Combe was a printer for Oxford University Press who funded the building of a nearby church and played an important part, with his wife, as patron for the Pre-Raphaelites. Benjamin Jowett, a university figure, was also seen as a notable burial. This focus on famous or ‘interesting’ burials, found throughout cemeteries, was reflected by respondents:

‘And yes, make people more aware of who is buried there. Like Martha and Thomas Combe and Benjamin Jowett and there must be a whole lot of others from that part of Oxford who would… people would be interested in, knowing about. Because up at Wolvercote there’s a sign, signs pointing to Tolkien’ (St Sepulchre’s)

The same respondent felt that St Sepulchre’s was lacking in such graves compared to Holywell:

‘No there’s so many people you can find in St Cross, names that you know through the university connections and history generally, yes. But with St Sepulchre’s it’s rather more difficult to find. … You need something like that to head people in the right direction to find the few notable people there are there.’

The lack of such figures at Osney Cemetery was also perceived to be detrimental to its interest:

‘I think Osney Cemetery doesn’t have so many interesting graves, that’s my view.’

The focus on biographies can therefore affect not only the general perception of local history, but also whether local people value the cemetery as a historic site in the first place. Volunteers tend to relate to local history as told through biographies – a narrative form – particularly where these fit within more generally accepted historical narratives about the locality, thereby reinforcing dominant perceptions.

**Snapshot of local history**

The focus on individual biographies did however also open up the possibility of putting together a general portrait of Oxford at a particular point in time. The Holywell volunteer who has been researching biographies described this through two metaphors, as ‘a sort of open book’ and as a museum:

‘it is a sort of little museum of Victorian Oxford, and not just Gown, but Town as well’

This suggests that the cemetery can be used as a way of telling a more complete history of Oxford at that particular time in history:

‘these are all people, you know, who represent Victorian Oxford’

The volunteer was hoping to put together a booklet telling some of these stories to reveal the larger picture of Oxford at that time, and enable people to access that history through visiting the cemetery. This idea of variety was also reflected in the first issue of the friends’ newsletter (1989): ‘where the men of letters may lie next to the tailor on the High and where the station-master lies amongst those who travelled on trains which steamed into Oxford station.’ Although the focus is mainly on ‘many eminent academics, writers and local business and professional people’.

This idea of the cemetery revealing the past was also evident in responses by one of the St Sepulchre’s volunteers:

‘Certainly when Lucy’s was there you got the feeling you were living in a working space and it was a nice mix of work and – the sounds of work – and what life had been like years ago. And down, is it Juxon Street, the gardens of those houses, they’ve been there a hundred years. So it was all, sort of a time capsule in a way.’
This is a more direct leap into the past, seeing the cemetery as part of a wider historic townscape – and soundscape – a more direct way to explore the history of the place. Another volunteer also highlighted the importance of the factory buildings in making that link with the past:

‘Yes, and with Lucy’s round it too it was just all part of history.’

There was also an element of wanting to make links with wider local history:

‘Find a bit more history, yes, of people who worked at the Press… … all sorts of local things like that if you can look through the parish registers and find them and then find their occupations.’

This shows a concern with making links with local industry and drawing a picture of the history of the neighbourhood. In both cases there is also a sense of the physical place as providing a way into history through its character and the people buried within its grounds.

**Place history**

This focus on place also extends to a wider area. Respondents from Holywell were aware of the history of the site of the cemetery, its uses over the centuries and the changes at Holywell Manor and within the parish as a whole, including, for instance, the remnants of Civil War groundworks at the back of the cemetery. This history was recounted in several issues of the newsletter of the Friends, from the use of the site as a bowling green to the history of how the cemetery became neglected, and later developments by colleges alongside the cemetery. Other issues of the newsletter address the history of Holywell Manor, of its gardens, and of the ‘Holy Well’, while a series of articles explores the history of the parish of Holywell as a whole. This therefore extends from an interest in graves and the cemetery site itself to a wider local area. Interestingly there is little mention of the other parishes from which people were buried in the cemetery. While national links are drawn from the more illustrious burials in the cemetery, the more ‘ordinary’ local history remains limited to the immediate, site-specific, area.

At St Sepulchre’s too there has been a tendency to try to integrate the cemetery within a wider, place-specific local history. One respondent describes the links as follows:

‘So the whole thing ties in with local history, with national transport development, with… the economy. Everything, absolutely everything!’

This reflects the location of the cemetery within an industrial area, alongside the canal and railway line. The main focus however has tended to be on the Pre-Raphaelite link, with plans by one of the friends to create a local heritage trail. This is envisaged to include sites such as St Barnabas Church, with its links to the Combes, the chapel of Keble College and the paintings at the Ashmolean Museum. The plan also includes an idea for a building to be erected within the cemetery, on the site of the chapel, to act as an exhibition and meeting place and as a shrine to the Pre-Raphaelites. While there are undoubted links between the local area and the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and while it would be an interesting way to get visitors to link Pre-Raphaelite sites and art within the city, this focus is very selective. This is similar to some other cemeteries where one particular grave is taken as the focus. In this case it also reflects a particular take on the local area and its history, and in Oxford as a whole. It also seeks to integrate the cemetery within a wider heritage narrative, and exploiting the kind of tourism attracted to Oxford, as well as chiming with newcomers’ conceptions of the city and the area.
The cemetery friends groups, like other volunteer groups, are not representative of their local communities but drawn from fairly homogeneous social and age profiles. Recruitment through existing connections leads to cohesive groups and potentially longer-term involvement, but it risks excluding alternative community voices. The volunteers’ take on local history privileges individual biographies which echo wider narratives of Oxford as a university city. While there is also a tendency to incorporate the history of a wider local area, this is a potentially skewed process, and fails to incorporate the full history of the cemeteries and the communities they once served. This shows how a focus on individual graves, or any other individual element from a cemetery, can affect the general telling of local history. The differences in historical focus amongst volunteers are also significant. From localised, family-based history to an interest in art history, the possibilities for future interpretation of the cemeteries ultimately depend on individuals’ own interests and relationship with the place.
Chapter 5: Impact of volunteer-led management on cemetery character

The preceding chapters have identified key themes and issues with the ways in which volunteers relate to the cemeteries as green spaces, burial spaces, and historic and community spaces. A complex set of attitudes to nature in an urban context and to the presence of death materialised in gravestones give rise to culturally rich narratives and a dynamic, embodied, personalised sense of place. Combined with an unrepresentative, informal group make-up, these result in idiosyncratic interpretations of history and conflicting perceptions of, and visions for, community use. This chapter examines how these issues, developed and expressed through local narratives, are manifested physically in the cemeteries, through a comparative character assessment of the sites and an analysis of the impact on historic character, before drawing conclusions for policy and practice in volunteer-led cemetery management.

1. Management approaches

The three cemetery case studies are subject to different management arrangements. Osney Cemetery is maintained solely by Oxford City Council; St Sepulchre’s Cemetery is managed jointly by the Council and the Friends; and Holywell Cemetery is managed by the Friends with both professional and volunteer involvement.

Osney Cemetery
At Osney Cemetery, the City Council’s Cemetery Service provides regular, minimal maintenance through mowing. The cemetery is relatively sparsely planted and many gravestones are now missing, making this approach to management viable. Recent waves of financial cuts have however led to a reduction in the frequency of maintenance. The Cemeteries Service needs to prioritise work at active cemeteries with the staff available, and therefore reduce management of closed cemeteries. A tree-planting project, part of a Millennium initiative, had been set up by a city councillor with the hope to involve local people in future care of the trees, but there is no volunteer involvement at present.

St Sepulchre’s Cemetery
The involvement of the Friends of St Sepulchre’s enables the Council to act in a partnership to maintain this cemetery, which also falls within its remit. Both the Cemeteries Manager and the volunteers indicated that there was a good working relationship in place. The Friends have followed the main priorities of the Council in clearing sightlines to improve safety, and contact the Cemeteries Service when cut vegetation needs to be removed. The Cemeteries Manager also makes regular visits to the site when the volunteers are working. The aim in the medium term is to establish a new management plan for the site in accordance with reduced resources. This is envisaged to create a more ‘natural’ feel to the cemetery. While initial conversations have taken place with the Diocese over these plans, at the time of writing nothing was yet in place.

The volunteers meet twice a month for ‘gardening sessions’. They work section by section to remove the worst of the vegetation and to clear gravestones. They also look after the more formal beds in the seating area, and some additional planting has taken place. Bird and bat boxes have been installed, and habitats created for hedgehogs and other animals. While they do not have a formal management plan in place, the volunteers benefited in the past from a visit by the local Wildlife Trust to advise of what species were present in the cemetery and to provide guidelines on
environmental management. These are taken into account in maintaining the site, although in practice the work is not scheduled or prescriptive.

Holywell Cemetery
Holywell Cemetery is managed by the Friends of Holywell Cemetery, with a framework based on a management plan commissioned from the Wildlife Trust in 1987 and last updated in 1990 (Keene 1990). The plan includes assessment of physical attributes of the site (climate, geology, geomorphology, hydrology and soils); biological information (vegetation and fauna); cultural information (archaeology, land use history and past management); and ‘ecological relationships’. The value of the cemetery for nature conservation and education is then the main focus of the assessment, with the key objectives defined as to ‘retain essential nature of the graveyard whilst encouraging as wide a range of habitats and wildlife as possible’, ‘plant only to conceal unsightly shed and buildings … and to provide replacement trees’; ‘keep areas A, B and C mown to give appearance of tidiness for most of the year but allow spring and summer herbaceous plants to bloom and seed. Peripheral regions of A and B to be left as shrub areas’; ‘… establish a rotation of clearing the scrub from D, E, F, G, and H, clearing one section each year although leaving small patches of scrub …’, and ‘existing conifers to be conserved as long as practicable and some broadleaved trees to be encouraged but controlled where damage to the monuments is threatened’.

The plan thus focuses on ecological management, but seeks to also provide a sympathetic environment for people visiting graves. The division of the cemetery into eight sections is based on that idea. The three areas (A, B and C) due to be kept mown are towards the entrance of the cemetery, and where the more recent graves are located. In practice this plan has been altered over the years. While these areas are still managed so that they are kept clear while allowing spring and summer flowering, the rest of the cemetery is now managed in a more ad hoc way, clearing sections more often than originally envisaged to avoid the cemetery being too taken over by scrub. The plan also mentions a secondary concern for the conservation of gravestones, but this is not specific, referring to ‘clear[ing] round a few graves of historical or aesthetic interest’, and ‘re-erect[ing] fallen monuments where this can be done safely and straighten tilting ones where they appear to be dangerous.’ Provision is also made for removing vegetation that threatens monuments.

2. Comparative character assessment

General character and change over time
The three cemeteries share similarities in their original design. The plots are of comparable sizes, at approximately 0.6 ha (Holywell), 1 ha (St Sepulchre’s) and 1.5 ha (Osney). They also have a similar, roughly rectangular shape, with the entrance on the narrower side (Appendix 3). All three had a small chapel situated near the entrance (fig.2-4) – all designed by Henry Jones Underwood in Norman and Gothic styles (Colvin 2008, 1066). The overall structure of the cemeteries, reflecting the need to divide them into plots for use by individual parishes, is also consistent, with a regular pattern of paths. The cemeteries all had at least some sections originally planted with avenues of conifers, reinforcing this basic structure (Appendix 3).
Fig. 2 Chapel, Holywell Cemetery (Henry Taunt, 1885)
© Oxfordshire County Council – Oxfordshire History Centre

Fig. 3 Chapel, St Sepulchre’s Cemetery (Henry Taunt, n.d.)
Reproduced by permission of English Heritage
Despite these common features, the cemeteries exhibit clear differences. While the chapels were commissioned at the same time as the cemeteries, other buildings for the cemeteries were provided individually, and in some cases at a later date. Osney thus has a lychgate, which is still standing (fig. 5), and had a lodge in its north-west corner, now lost (fig. 6).
At St Sepulchre’s Cemetery a lodge was built shortly after the cemetery was set up – it too still in place – providing an entrance into the cemetery (fig.7).

Holywell Cemetery’s lodge (fig.8), originally attached to a schoolroom, was built in 1850, as an addition to an existing lychgate (Hylson-Smith 1996).
One key consequence of these differing buildings is to create a distinctive character to the entrances into the three cemeteries. This is reinforced by the different context into which the cemeteries were created. In the case of Osney this was a residential area alongside the planned location of a railway line. St Sepulchre’s was in a growing residential and industrial neighbourhood. Holywell however was located behind a church, against a mostly rural backdrop. These differences can still be felt, and may even have been exacerbated over time.

Holywell retains a rural character: while its immediate approach is what is now a busy road, the atmosphere inside the cemetery is one of peace and silence. As soon as one steps into the cemetery the traffic noise decreases and birdsong can be heard. As there is no building or structure at the entrance, but simply a wooden gate, there is a real sense of contrast walking in (fig.9-10).
St Sepulchre’s is more hidden away, situated off a busy street with shops, cafés and restaurants but not a major road for car traffic. The entrance would be easy to miss, and access to the cemetery is through a path with the appearance of a private courtyard (fig.11). Once through however visitors are greeted by the intact cemetery lodge (fig.7), creating a real sense of entrance into a separate space. The presence of offices and flats overlooking the cemetery however gives less of a sense of seclusion than at Holywell, despite the conifer avenue creating a feeling of invitation to discovery around the site (fig.12).
Finally, Osney is located just off a residential street, or via access over a railway bridge. The cemetery is more visible from the street than the other two, and its lychgate clearly marks the entrance. Once inside, the view is blocked by mature conifers near the entrance (fig.13). The site otherwise has a fairly open feel, but groups of trees create hidden spaces (fig.14). Combined with the larger size of the cemetery this can create a feeling of insecurity. The cemetery is overlooked by the streets on two sides and the railway line on another, the far end being bordered by larger trees. The railway is very present with the sound and sight of regular trains going past.
These characteristics come both from the original location and design of the cemeteries and from the way they have changed over time. Despite new building, Holywell has retained a calm, semi-rural feel, also accentuated by a management regime that privileges wildlife. The character of the cemetery itself however has changed from a formal design to a much softer feel through this approach (fig.15-16).
St Sepulchre’s has changed dramatically in recent years with the closure and then demolition of the ironworks that used to border it and their replacement with offices and flats (fig.17-20). This has altered the appearance of the cemetery, as the new buildings, while of similar scale and on the same footprint, use modern bricks and have larger openings and balconies, as well as its sounds – from the sounds of industry to a very quiet atmosphere. People are however more present than they would have been inside the factory buildings. The social make-up of the area has accordingly changed, including not only the immediate surroundings but also the wider neighbourhood, which has changed from working-class to middle-class in its make-up. The cemetery itself has evolved from a uniform, fairly formal design to a succession of character areas, with a marked difference between the higher and lower levels of the cemetery, where tall grasses and trees prevail.
Fig.18 St Sepulchre’s Cemetery (2013)

Fig.19 St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, looking towards the entrance (1974) © Oxfordshire County Council – Oxfordshire History Centre
Osney is least changed in terms of its surroundings, the railway line providing a constant presence, although residential development has expanded. Once considered an unsuitable site for burial, and lamented as offering the worst conditions to the poorest of the city’s parishes, the area today is mixed. As a central location near the railway station with Victorian housing similar to that found in Jericho, the neighbourhood is attractive to commuters. It is also however likely to retain older residents, and is surrounded by council housing, particularly to the south. The main impact on the character of the cemetery itself has however been the removal of gravestones in the 1970s, as well as the loss of the path structure (fig.21-22).
In order to further examine the differences in the character of the three cemeteries and to explore the relationship between their physical appearance and the narratives developed by volunteers from the friends groups, a more detailed character assessment focuses on the key themes identified in the preceding discussion.

**Relationship to nature: discovery, contrast, control**

The complex relationship with nature explored in the second chapter is reflected in the character of the cemeteries – from the ‘secret garden’ narrative of discovery and contrast to the issue of control and defining the right level of intervention.

**Holywell Cemetery**

Holywell Cemetery is managed to encourage plants as habitat for various species, while still providing a welcoming environment for relatives visiting graves, and to emphasise a feeling of adventure and discovery. The entrance into the cemetery fits the ‘secret garden’ narrative: a gate, with little sense of what awaits beyond until you step through it, particularly as the cemetery is hidden behind a churchyard. The contrast between the street and the cemetery is one of sounds as well as appearance: the feeling of a natural place as opposed to the traffic outside. The theme of discovery continues throughout the site. Paths are often slightly overgrown, inviting the adventure-minded, and winding paths lead the visitor to graves cleared for their interest, often visible only as they are approached. Other paths have a woodland feel, with the same sense of discovery along shaded paths or against the walls (fig.23-25).

The need for balance is expressed in the different character areas, the cleared areas by the entrance giving way to overgrown sections. The balance here is not within the cemetery as a whole but in a choice between accessible and less-accessible sections on the one hand, and between notable and less important graves on the other. The dominant character of the cemetery is of a ‘natural’ place, and while a degree of balance is sought between wildlife and visitors, this acknowledges the role of the cemetery as a place of burial in the context of a nature reserve, rather than seeking to express a cemetery character.
St Sepulchre’s Cemetery
At St Sepulchre’s the volunteers were seeking, in the interviews, to define the ‘right’ level of clearing for the cemetery. As the Friends took over the cemetery at a time when it was neglected and very overgrown, the question of how far to go, without a management plan in place, was particularly salient. In practice, clearance takes place on an ad hoc basis, tackling areas in turn and clearing graves as they are discovered. The result is one of clear demarcation between different character areas, which can be seen to exhibit particular characteristics – as ‘cemetery’, ‘park’, ‘meadow’ or

Fig.23-24 Holywell Cemetery, paths

Fig.25 Holywell Cemetery, cleared grave
‘woodland’ landscape (fig.26-29). The areas near the entrance of the cemetery have a clear cemetery character: the graves are the most prominent aspect, alongside the avenue of mature conifers, and the Gothic lodge. Further down the centre and along the eastern edge there is more of a ‘park’ feel: planters, more sparsely arranged graves and more domestic trees are present. The area at the western end of the cemetery is clearly separate from the rest of the site, an impression exacerbated by a drop in level. This area is a mix of meadow (tall grasses, wild flowers) and woodland (large trees, bluebells in the spring).

Fig.26 St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, cemetery character

Fig.27 St Sepulchre’s Cemetery, park character
In the absence of a considered management plan, this clear separation between character areas appears to be a direct consequence of complex attitudes to nature and the need to both welcome and control it. The other unintended consequence of this approach is that the element that particularly ‘charmed’ the volunteers when they first
visited the cemetery is at risk of being lost. While a sense of discovery and contrast still prevails when first walking through the entrance to the cemetery, the south-western and north-eastern corners of the cemetery are now very open and exposed to surrounding buildings and windows. The ‘secret garden’ character identified as key to the sense of place would therefore appear to risk being lost. On the other hand, the more managed, clear-mown aspect of parts of the cemetery is closer to its original character – of formal, well-tended graves and a clear network of paths.

Osney Cemetery

Osney Cemetery fails to adhere to the ‘secret garden’ narrative favoured by volunteers at other sites, due to its clearly marked entrance and fairly low walls, and to an apparently more mundane (less ‘natural’) character inside. This is likely to be behind at least part of the lack of community interest in the site. The presence of overgrown yew trees struggling for space at the entrance has also been identified as a negative element (fig.30). Nature here is not perceived as appealing, but rather as potentially threatening. The cemetery is laid out on level ground, so that despite it being fairly open, clumps of trees create hidden corners, making it difficult to assess who else may be in the cemetery. The cemetery is kept uniformly mown, and graves are kept clear of encroaching vegetation, while allowing the trees to remain in place. This is effective at maintaining the gravestones, but the cemetery has lost its original structure, which would have been provided by more formal planting and clear paths. Historic photographs show the gradual erosion of this formality, with the paths already less distinct by the 1960s (fig.31). The undifferentiated landscape is a manifestation of this minimal management approach, which keeps control of nature but does not actively manage the features of the designed space. It serves as a useful ‘control’ site, showing how regular, institutional management, while avoiding the biases and changes in character described above, can result in a gradual erosion of the site’s structure.

Fig.30 Osney Cemetery, conifers near the entrance
Focus on individual graves

Another key theme identified through interviews and data analysis is the privileging of specific graves. This is characterised by clearing individual graves, relating to death through individual people and the promotion of the biographies of notable or interesting people. This has clear consequences for the on-site management and character of the cemeteries.

Holywell Cemetery

At Holywell, the original pattern of paths is generally still identifiable, but additional paths have been created within individual sections. These provide a route towards graves considered notable, whether for architectural interest or more usually due to who is buried there. This creates a markedly different character for the cemetery. While the general structure of the design, including surviving formally planted trees, can still be observed (fig.32), walks through individual sections provide a very different feel.
Most graves, except in the areas at the entrance and near the bench, are surrounded by tall grasses and are difficult to access. In these areas, which make up most of the cemetery, only graves at the edges of paths are clearly visible.

This emphasis on individual graves skews the general structure and gives them new prominence. John Stainer’s grave, for instance, has been made accessible by a new path, and now appears at a corner formed by two paths (fig.33). Some graves where gravestones are missing can conversely be seen in the middle of grassed paths (fig.34). A new path giving access to the tomb of Henry Bird also leads abruptly to a grave within the path (fig.35). This situation reflects the aims of the management plan, to keep some graves clear while managing the site for the benefit of wildlife. It is not however a neutral process, and the creation of new paths has a distinct impact on the overall character of the cemetery, eroding the formal aspect of the original structure and giving new prominence to selected graves. By contrast, many other graves have inscriptions that are no longer legible, and others still are not accessible to visitors, at least in summer. These graves will, in the longer term, become less accessible both physically and for interpretation, while the site’s overall structure risks being lost.

Fig.33 Holywell Cemetery, grave of Sir John Stainer
St Sepulchre’s Cemetery
At St Sepulchre’s the impact of a focus on individual graves is less visible, but in the longer term could become more marked. Here this emphasis is expressed in two ways – the hands-on approach to clearing vegetation, and long-term plans or ideas for the cemetery.

The volunteers at St Sepulchre’s tackle the cemetery area by area, clearing tougher vegetation and then working on individual graves. This attention given to each grave
ensures that cleared tombstones are accessible and legible where possible. The focus on these individual areas does however also lead to edges of the cemetery – including gravestones – being left overgrown (fig.36). The contrast here is therefore between cleared areas and areas still to be tackled by the volunteers. The difference between character areas is therefore not only one of landscape type, but also between accessible, legible gravestones and those still left either to the edges or to overgrown, flowering areas.

One specific grave has been identified as of particular interest, at least by one member of the Friends, who sees it as the basis for potential interpretation and promotion of the cemetery to visitors – the grave of Thomas and Martha Combe, patrons to the Pre-Raphaelites. The grave is not currently easy to locate, even with a map, as while unusual in appearance it does not particularly stand out from a distance. Its position near the entrance and near the location of the chapel, where any visitor centre would be sited, would create a focus on this section of the cemetery. Aside from privileging an arguably arbitrary reading of the cemetery’s significance, it would reinforce the prominence of the upper part of the cemetery over the lower sections, making it the key destination for any visitors. A new building acting as visitor centre would also inevitably have a major impact on the cemetery, while further interpretation on this basis would continue to reinforce this particular narrative and influence the cemetery’s sense of place.

Osney Cemetery
Osney Cemetery is not noted for the presence of ‘interesting’ graves or notable burials. Aside from the presence of war graves (fig.37), which is documented by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on their website (CWGC, n.d.), no grave is highlighted or noted by websites or in the City Council’s listing (Oxford City Council n.d.-b). This may be due to the relatively small number of visible graves remaining on site, but also to a more general lack of interest in the cemetery. This is reflected in the management and appearance of the cemetery, where all graves appear to be treated equally, resulting in a more homogeneous character than the other two sites and a
more inclusive take on the burials it contains. This is not, it should be pointed out, due to a lack of potentially ‘interesting’ graves. The section immediately to the right of the entrance was reserved for parishes associated to Christ Church Cathedral, and as a result included burials of figures from Christ Church – people who could be highlighted as other college and university figures are in the other two cemeteries (fig.38). This could also apply to the war graves and a number of more unusual monuments. This lack of interest may be seen to result in a featureless landscape, but it is also a more objective treatment of graves, leading to better conservation of the appearance of the cemetery – though not, it could be argued, of its meaning as a memorial space where personal relationships between the living and the dead can be continued.

Fig.37 Osney Cemetery, war graves

Fig.38 Osney Cemetery, Christ Church section
Community interpretation of local history

In addition to the structural impact of focusing on individual graves, the interpretation of local history by the friends also has a more general impact on the presentation of the cemeteries.

Holywell Cemetery

Interpretation at Holywell Cemetery consists of a board located near the entrance by the bench (fig. 39). This provides a short history of the cemetery, alongside a map and list of graves, and reflects the interpretation of local history identified in the interviews and newsletters. The focus is on the early history of the site, from its listing as meadow in Domesday Book to its recreational role in the eighteenth century. The foundation date of the cemetery is given, and note is made of the architect of the lodge. No mention is made however of how and why the cemetery was founded, or of the existence of a chapel (this is not marked on the map either). The second half of the text mentions that ‘burials include many eminent academics, writers and local business and professional people’, before turning to the management for wildlife by the Friends. This highlights a focus on individual burials of ‘notable’ people, with no mention of who else the cemetery catered for or of local social history. The cemetery is therefore presented as a place of long history, noted for its beauty and wildlife and for hosting the remains of people of note from both Town and Gown.

![Holywell Cemetery, interpretation board](image)

The information on wildlife and the map invite people to stroll, discover graves and appreciate the natural beauty of the cemetery. This encourages perception of a specific sense of place, something that is realised through site management, allowing nature to prevail while clearing paths for the discovery of ‘important’ graves (fig. 40-41). While this is a perfectly acceptable view of what makes Holywell ‘special’, and reflects what people value of the cemetery, it is also a biased view, based not on a full assessment of its historical and social significance but on individuals’ values. As a result, the Holywell that was perceived and appreciated by the Friends is reproduced and re-emphasised through its management, creating and reinforcing a particular
sense of place – to an extent at the expense of historic integrity. A further concern is with the selection of graves, based primarily on a prominent cultural narrative of Oxford as university city, promoting a particular reading of the history of the cemetery and city. The reinforcement of this selection through active management risks marginalising other readings of the site and its ‘residents’ still further.

Fig.40 Holywell Cemetery, Walter Pater’s grave (Henry Taunt, n.d.)
© Oxfordshire County Council – Oxfordshire History Centre

Fig.41 Holywell Cemetery, Walter Pater’s grave (2013)
St Sepulchre’s Cemetery

The main pieces of interpretation available to visitors to St Sepulchre’s are an information board produced by the City Council (fig. 42) and a map created by the Friends which is made available on their website and given out at open days (fig. 43). The board provides an – in places inaccurate – summary of the cemetery’s history, from the site’s origin as part of Walton Manor to the creation of the three cemeteries. The cemetery and its chapel were in fact consecrated in 1848, not 1850 and 1865 as the board suggests. The reasons given for its creation are also partly incorrect, as it preceded the 1849 cholera epidemic and was not related to a fashion for permanent graves as suggested, being a church burial ground rather than a privately established cemetery. The board goes on to identify notable ‘residents’, including two masters of Balliol College and Thomas Combe, as well as the mechanic who died in 1934 in a racing car accident, including the story of his widow’s ashes being interred in 2000.

These graves are also among those depicted on the Friends’ map, which suggests a route around the cemetery highlighting both graves and natural features. Here the volunteers appear to have sought interesting graves as the typical way to guide visitors through a cemetery – including ‘notable’ burials, graves of architectural interest and ‘interesting’ stories. It could however be questioned how notable past heads of colleges or academics really are, and how interesting potential visitors might find them. This tendency to look for famous graves could be seen to be behind the emphasis given to the grave of Thomas and Martha Combe discussed above. While it is apparent that the presence of famous burials in a cemetery can be key to attracting visitors and making the site valuable to local communities, such a specific focus is both skewed and unrepresentative of the full history of the cemetery. The map does
however also suggest a route through the cemetery which is akin to the volunteers’ experience, highlighting the graves they have so far discovered and a personal take on the character areas of the cemetery. This idiosyncratic presentation is engaging, and provides an interesting way for visitors to explore the cemetery.

Osney Cemetery
This focus on famous graves and significant stories is also one of the factors identified as missing at Osney Cemetery. In fact the cemetery does hold the graves of academic figures, as well as war graves, as discussed above. As it stands however these are not highlighted by any on-site or online literature. The potential for the history of the cemetery to be interpreted is missed because of this lack. This is an important point: while the focus on single graves can be misleading and potentially damaging, it can also facilitate a degree of research into the history of the cemetery. The consequence at Osney is that all graves are treated identically, but also that wider historical elements are ignored, explaining for instance the proposal to remove some of the original planting. In addition, the apparent absence of graves – in fact an absence of gravestones – contributes to making the history of the cemetery invisible, and therefore inaccessible.

3. The future of the case study sites

Vision for the future
This tendency for the volunteers to focus on particular aspects of the cemetery results in a lack of agreement over what is most important to conserve. While some individual volunteers have a clear vision of what they would like to see, this does not apply to all and in some cases can directly conflict with others’ views. One volunteer
at St Sepulchre’s thus envisages a conversion of the cemetery into a park, moving gravestones, installing play equipment and adding an entrance gate. This is in direct contradiction to other volunteers’ views that monuments should remain in place and the cemetery should not look like a park. It is also markedly different from the idea of interpreting the cemetery as part of a Pre-Raphaelite themed walk. At Holywell there were also different views (though far less markedly so) between volunteers regarding the importance of conserving gravestones and inscriptions against management for wildlife. While at Holywell potential conflict is moderated by the existence of an agreed management plan, at St Sepulchre’s the ad hoc approach to maintenance reflects this lack of agreement and coordination. This is a state of affairs most volunteers welcome, as they enjoy the informal character of their involvement, but it could lead to both an uncertain future and potential conflict.

**Practical issues**

There are also practical issues with volunteer-led management in the long term. Holywell benefits from a formal committee structure, agreed management plan and some degree of financial security, but the committee is currently very small, and has been even smaller in the past. The reliance on this small number of volunteers is therefore potentially insecure. The Friends’ approach, following a modified management plan without formally reviewing the existing document is also potentially damaging as and when the group changes. The issue of damaged inscriptions is a case in point, as an evolving problem which could have been identified and addressed through a review process.

At St Sepulchre’s there are plans, on the part of the City Council, to establish a new management plan taking account of the Cemeteries Service’s capacity for ensuring maintenance. Many of the volunteers were however ambivalent about the idea of a more formal set-up, or the introduction of a management plan. Studies of volunteering have identified the issue of relationships between volunteers and staff, highlighting the need for staff to listen to volunteers’ views (Orr 2006, Paine et al 2006). However in cases where the work is volunteer-led, such as with metal-detector users, the issue can be one of lack of trust and collaboration with professionals (Thomas 2012). While some volunteers at St Sepulchre’s thought it would be necessary for the future of the cemetery to have a formal organisation, agreed plan and funding in place, many welcomed the informal involvement, lack of meetings and bureaucracy and not ‘being told what to do’ by the Council.

This is both the strength and weakness of management by friends groups. Their flexibility and individual involvement is a good match for the maintenance needs of a cemetery, but it cannot assure a long-term future for the site. Where no volunteers are involved however, as at Osney, the threat comes from the possibility of further cuts to local services. The Cemeteries Service has already reduced the frequency of its maintenance at both cemeteries, and without involvement from other groups this could ultimately lead to damage and further loss of historic fabric and integrity.

**Long-term impact**

The principles behind conservation management planning are a comprehensive and inclusive assessment of the place, building or object to determine its values and how they should be conserved, and a process of review as an integral part of management. Management by volunteers on an ad hoc basis, despite guidance and encouragement from professional agencies, will generally not follow these principles, except where they are required as part of project funding. In the case of Holywell Cemetery, while a
plan is in place, this is focused on environmental rather than historic conservation, and has been informally adapted but without a comprehensive review process. At St Sepulchre’s and Osney environmental matters are taken into account, but maintenance, whether by the local authority or volunteers, is resource-based rather than conservation-led. This is not to say that the sites are not managed in a values-based way, but rather that those values are implicit and based on individuals’ interests. More specifically, it is through a combination of professional advice and an interpretation of sense of place that management direction is defined. This has a number of long-term consequences for the cemeteries.

Firstly, the identification of what is of value is that of a few individuals rather than a community-wide interpretation, leading to a potentially biased take on the cemetery and place’s history. This can lead to some aspects of the cemeteries being neglected or ultimately lost. For instance, the emphasis on nature and discovery at Holywell is already leading to the loss of legibility of many graves, as well as encouraging a limited reading of local history.

Secondly, without the benefit of historical research, a reading of sense of place is based on a moment in time that may not reflect the historic character of the site. All three cemeteries were originally structured spaces, with clear networks of paths, planted avenues and neatly arranged graves. While the evolution from this original character is part of the place’s history, there is a danger that this becomes exacerbated by management practice – exaggerating a particular reading of the cemetery and eroding the possibility of alternative readings. An emphasis at St Sepulchre’s on the Pre-Raphaelite connection would certainly have that effect, but so would privileging spring flowering in one section of the cemetery while keeping other sections clear. The different character areas are likely to become increasingly defined over time.

Finally, the prevalence of an ad hoc style of management has more practical consequences. Without the continuity of an official management plan to guide future maintenance, the cemeteries are reliant on personal memory and continued involvement by volunteers. As volunteers leave and join, original goals risk being diluted, skewed or lost. Conversely, a lack of renewal or recruitment of volunteers – at St Sepulchre’s for instance – could leave the cemeteries to be neglected again.

The return of cemeteries to the local or church authorities would not however guarantee a more holistic or structured approach to management. While management of Osney Cemetery avoids bias in historical interpretation and the reliance of continued volunteer involvement, it has not been successful in retaining original character or interest in the cemetery as a historical and memorial space. The involvement of volunteers brings irreplaceable advantages to the future of historic cemeteries.

Firstly, cemeteries require individual care to replace grave maintenance by relatives, and this personal attention provides a continuity of meaning as well as practical care of graves. Personal attention ensures that graves are cleared and maintained, through a level of work not possible for local authority staff to provide, and that the stories associated with them are uncovered and shared, continuing in their role as memorials.

Secondly, volunteers are also crucial in interpreting meaning and involving the rest of the community and visitors. However idiosyncratic, their take on the cemetery’s history and character can be very engaging – as the map produced by the Friends of St Sepulchre’s Cemetery exemplifies. Their interpretation of a sense of place – as secret garden and a place of discovery – also offers a valuable visitor experience, sharing in
what the volunteers find special about the cemeteries. These cemeteries need personal involvement to remain relevant to local people and to receive sufficient levels of maintenance.

4. Implications for policy and practice

Cemeteries as green spaces

Cultural changes in people’s relationship to nature appear to be leading to an appreciation of more informal landscapes, particularly wildflowers, and a concern for nature and wildlife conservation. This landscape preference coincides with emerging trends in cemetery landscapes through the creation of natural and woodland burial sites. There is also evidence that volunteers particularly identify nature with trees. As a result, trees are key features both to attract volunteer interest and to retain attachment to the place. However, this should be balanced with the need to conserve original planting schemes, particularly the main structure of the cemeteries, and any new planting should take historic design into consideration.

Appreciation for nature is particularly felt and expressed by volunteers through embodied experience of being and working in the landscape. More specifically, it is the contrast between the cemetery and its surroundings which makes the experience special and reinforces place attachment. As a result, cemeteries which do not have these characteristics are less likely to attract volunteer attention, and cemetery owners should ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to manage these sites. The feeling of discovery and the sense of looking after a hidden place are key both to place attachment and to continued enjoyment within the cemetery. This sense of place therefore needs to be conserved to ensure continued interest, and could be further encouraged, for instance through the use of trails. However, there is a danger that over-emphasising this element could lead to the damage of historic features or distort the original historic landscape character.

While the presence of nature facilitates this sense of discovery, it can also be perceived as a threat. The appeal and therefore sustainability of cemeteries depends on an adequate balance being kept. This balance could also be seen as part of the solution in balancing the requirements of nature and historic conservation.

The active involvement of volunteers in the landscape gives them a sense of having reclaimed the cemeteries, and of making a real difference by tackling vegetation. As a result, volunteers tend to become interested in cemeteries if they are under threat through development or neglect. It may therefore be difficult to involve volunteers to look after a cemetery which appears to be safe, but lack of interest should not be taken to mean that the cemetery has no local significance. The ‘secret garden’ narrative of discovering and nurturing a hidden place is also important to the initial appeal of the cemeteries as well as to an ongoing sense of place. There can therefore be no assumption that local people can be convinced to become involved in looking after a cemetery if that sense of ownership does not exist. As more local authorities seek to recruit volunteers and set up friends groups, research into the ongoing success of such schemes would be valuable.

Cemeteries as burial spaces

One of the key findings from the Oxford case studies is the way in which volunteers relate to the role of the cemetery as burial space through personal connections with graves, which I have suggested is a result of the liminal quality of graves, and particularly of damaged or hidden gravestones. Volunteers sometimes have existing
relationships with the graves, or they can establish a more general sense of looking after the dead, indirectly relating to the graves of their own relatives or friends. In both cases, this sense of a personal link enables them to navigate the space of the cemetery and to find meaning in the grave spaces. The involvement of volunteers with existing links can therefore be a positive element for friends groups. The focus on individual graves is also manifested in an interest in people and stories, or sometimes gravestones, considered remarkable, touching or interesting. While this enables volunteers to give individual attention to the maintenance of gravestones, to make new connections and enable descendants to find graves, providing meaning to the space, it can also affect the landscape. The need to relate to compelling stories, or to distinctive gravestones, can lead the volunteers to alter the landscape to allow access to these graves, creating new paths, or to choose which sections of a cemetery to keep clear on the basis of the location of such graves. This tendency therefore needs to be balanced by a more formal management plan to provide a framework for volunteer work on these individual graves.

Another aspect of the presence of death is the sense of transgression and freedom it offers within the space of the cemetery. This appears to be an important element of what makes the work enjoyable for the volunteers. It contributes, partly through the use of humour, to cohesion of the group, and offers the cemetery as a free space, free of concerns about social differences or formalities. This freedom seems to make involvement with the friends more enjoyable, but it can also lead to unregulated planting or other unapproved site management. It also means that such informal groups do not necessarily provide the long-term, secure maintenance local councils might hope for. While a degree of informality may make it more likely for volunteers to provide long-term involvement, it should be balanced by clear guidelines on any major management decisions. The role of humour and informality also suggests that while the volunteers feel they may be unusual in enjoying cemeteries, there is likely to be a larger constituency who would enjoy contributing, provided that these aspects of the work are highlighted and that history is presented in an engaging way.

The cemetery does however also remain a place of commemoration, and the presence of the dead contributes to the sense of place volunteers seek to express through both humour and poetry. This suggests that there may be some scope for humour and poetry to be used by cemetery managers as part of creative interpretation of the sites, thereby encouraging further interest and involvement. However, it is also important to keep in mind that not all volunteers will necessarily relate to the cemetery’s role as a place of death in the same way or in positive terms. Depending on the size and dynamics of the group, this could have serious repercussions on the management of the site, and this also highlights the need for agreed management goals and policies.

**Cemeteries as historic and community spaces**

The case study friends groups were formed informally, mostly through personal acquaintance. This is not always the case amongst friends groups, but it appears to contribute to strong bonds within the groups, which can become their own community. This can be invaluable in cases where there is no obvious local constituency, as at Holywell, and it would be difficult to replicate artificially by local authorities recruiting volunteers. The downside of this tendency is that the volunteers do not represent the local community as a whole. Not only are the narratives they privilege only a selection of what makes the cemetery potentially significant, they cannot be considered to constitute a ‘community’ view. This may particularly be an issue in a place like Oxford, where such a large proportion of the population is made
up of newcomers, but is likely to be found elsewhere too. In the context of
gentrification, there is a tendency for people to identify with existing narratives about
the place, and to seek stories which fit that narrative. In the case of Oxford, the
dominant view of the university city and its contribution to intellectual life are
therefore privileged. This fits the volunteers’ experience and conception of the place in
which they live, but is only one aspect of what the cemeteries could potentially
express and represent.

The lack of community representation has an impact both on the potential use of the
cemeteries by the community and on how history is represented. If volunteers are
made up of small groups without a grassroots base, their understanding of how the rest
of the local community uses and understands the cemetery, whatever their intentions,
will be based on their own perceptions and interests. This means that the values
attached to the cemeteries by other people may be lost or damaged, and the potential
significance of the cemetery for local people jeopardised. In addition, the selection of
specific biographies, something which nearly all cemeteries do, is not a neutral way to
approach the cemetery’s history. Without the balance which a more formal,
professional assessment of the site could bring, this may highlight unrepresentative
aspects – including those inspired by other cemeteries – and ultimately damage the
fabric as well as the presentation of the cemetery.

Some of the approaches taken by the volunteers were however very valuable and rich
ways of envisaging the sites. These included ideas of the cemetery as time capsule,
museum or book, presenting the city at a particular point in time, something that the
website of the Friends of St Sepulchre’s also does very well. The investigation of the
history of the place also makes a positive contribution, in this case bringing a deep
grasp of a sense of history. Both these approaches should be considered in cemetery
interpretation, as strategies that people can relate to well. The friends’ idiosyncratic
map of St Sepulchre’s was also a very good way to enable people to explore the
cemetery. This personal touch can also be very valuable and encourage visitors to
make their own discovery, an aspect of cemeteries that is key to their enduring appeal.
Conclusion

The creation of cemeteries in the nineteenth century was motivated by a dual imperative to provide an efficient solution to burial in a form suitable for the expression of grief. This resulted in ad hoc landscapes characterised by the interplay of public and private space, leading to complex and costly long-term maintenance requirements. The involvement of volunteers can be key to ensuring the survival of cemeteries, and the conservation of their social and cultural significance, by re-introducing individual attention and maintenance of graves. Over-reliance on volunteers however risks having an impact on historical significance. This project has shown how emphasis on a ‘secret garden’ narrative of discovery, coupled with a focus on individual graves, can skew the original design structure and prominence of gravestones. Appreciation for wildlife and the wish to control nature can also affect the cemeteries through the gradual creation of separate character areas. In addition, the selection of historical narratives that chime with dominant discourses about the locality can present an incomplete picture of the sites and further affect both presentation and character.

These findings re-emphasise the importance of setting up balanced conservation plans to meet long-term management objectives, and have implications for cemetery management at a time when local authorities seek to involve more volunteers in their maintenance. The way volunteers’ narratives address the multiple roles of cemeteries as green space, burial space and historic and community space however also have implications for other comparable spaces, and more generally for approaches to the conservation of intangible heritage and 'spirit of place'.

The case study material showed that the volunteers valued the cemeteries primarily as green spaces, but that the key to their appeal was a sense of contrast and discovery, combined with the experience of regaining control over nature. This suggests that the appeal of cemeteries is very specific to local context. It also uncovers a degree of ambivalence about vegetation in the cemetery, a perennial threat to its recovered beauty. This tension between the forces of culture and nature is however an integral part of the embodied experience – and associated narrative – of taking over and looking after a cemetery.

Cemeteries are a very particular type of urban green space, due to their primary role as memorial spaces. This is not always recognised in local authorities’ policies, and the model pioneered by cemetery friends has been adopted to encourage volunteer maintenance of parks as well as burial grounds. A ‘secret garden’ character, and the associated narrative of reclamation which encourages and sustains volunteer involvement, are however unlikely to be present in many urban green spaces, particularly larger parks. While there has been a rise in recent years in the numbers of both grassroots and council-initiated volunteer groups managing green spaces, the applicability of the friends model to other spaces is disputable, and long-term success is likely to depend on the particular character and local context of each site.

A ‘secret garden’ character could however be found in other urban spaces, particularly wastelands, natural sites at the edge of cities, or even abandoned and ruined buildings. The literature on ruins and research into attitudes to urban nature have highlighted the appeal and potential of such less regimented spaces, achieved through a balance between wilderness and order. Compared to cemeteries, these other liminal urban spaces are less likely to be accessible – at least legally – or considered suitable
for volunteer management, but closer examination of how visitors relate to, experience and interpret these sites, by bringing to light the narratives they favour, could further inform their treatment and approaches to their maintenance.

Cemeteries were conceptualised in this study as liminal spaces because of the presence of death within their bounds as well as their – actual or metaphorical – location ‘betwixt and between’ nature and culture. Graves represent a further liminal space within the cemetery, as private and representative of the deceased. The volunteers were shown to address this liminal character by establishing relationships with the graves and by re-individualising gravestones through clearance and identification. The use of humour when talking about and working in the cemetery, and an enjoyment of transgressive behaviour, were also analysed as manifestations of liminality. In addition, the presence of death was shown to contribute to sense of place, expressed through poetry and experienced through group bonding and the cemetery landscape.

In conservation terms, cemeteries are primarily approached as historic and architectural spaces and as wildlife habitats, rather than as memorial spaces. The case studies however demonstrated a direct, individual relationship with graves, and the re-establishment of ritual-like behaviour, from grave clearing by volunteers to grave ‘tourism’ by visitors. It is through the renewal of meaningful personal links with individual graves that the cemetery can regain its historical value as a communal memorial space. This could have implications for both contemporary cemetery design and management and for the creation of public memorials.

The common perception of modern cemeteries and memorial gardens as impersonal spaces may be partly due to population mobility and the resulting loss of continuity in burial ritual and grave visiting. Cemetery volunteers’ apparent need for active, personal relationships with the grave space suggests that contemporary cemeteries would benefit from more individualised grave spaces that both acknowledge and help overcome feelings of ambivalence through better personal connection. Similarly, public memorials are likely to be more effective where a degree of personal interaction can take place, and where visitors can actively discover the individuals commemorated – as is for instance the case with the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC. Accessibility and scope for an individual sense of ownership of the space appear to be important elements in facilitating meaningful remembrance.

Heritage, it has been argued, is created to reinforce group identity through the selection of place-based historical narratives, and newcomers can be seen to select elements from the past to construct a new sense of place, thereby excluding alternative community narratives. The case study friends groups were shown not to be representative of their local communities, and to have differing views on both current and potential use, in accordance with their own tastes and interests. They address local history primarily through biographies, although the cemeteries are also seen by some as a point of access to the past and part of a wider place history. Selected historical narratives in the case study groups however tend to confirm the wider cultural narratives about Oxford and fail to encompass wider local and social history.

In changing local contexts, the appropriation and reinvention of heritage by newcomers can lead to the erosion of historical meaning and the silencing of alternative interpretations. This phenomenon has been recognised in the heritage literature in post-colonial contexts and through the issue of the display of other
cultures within Western museums – not least the debate over the treatment of human remains. The impact of gentrification can however be examined within a similar framework. While generally considered in social terms – the displacement of populations from their original neighbourhoods – gentrification, and the regeneration schemes often seen as a solution to funding repairs and ensuring sustainable new uses for historic buildings, also have an effect on the interpretation of local heritage. Change of use of buildings, and changing social profiles, inevitably affect historical continuity, as well as leading to new understandings and interpretations of their meaning. As links to a place and its history become ever more tenuous, narratives in turn become more distorted, impacting on the significance of buildings and neighbourhoods.

One key argument of this thesis is that non-expert management of historic places should be viewed critically, and considered as potentially biased as management by heritage professionals. The ideal of community heritage needs to be critically examined, and in particular the impact of local views on the conservation of more ‘ordinary’ historic places. The principles of conservation are applied primarily to protected, designated buildings and sites, while those without national or international significance are left to generally less critically engaged local management. The Oxford cemetery case studies showed how the maintenance of these more ordinary places can depend not just on the interest and commitment of a few individuals, but also on incidental local factors, including their immediate context and topography. The value of these spaces is however not exclusively to be found in the current local community’s views, while the factors affecting such interest, such as neighbouring land use, can be short-lived. There can therefore be no assumption that places of local rather than national significance can be identified through local consultation and community feeling alone. A more long-term view of a site’s place within the urban fabric and the community is necessary to assess significance.

In addition, the narratives attached to a city or locality have a direct impact on which places are valued, potentially leading to the erosion of diversity and meaning, as dominant interpretations are reinforced – such as the view of Oxford as an academic, intellectual centre. Places whose intangible values accord with a dominant narrative therefore risk being privileged over others. Furthermore, local interpretation of what represents ‘spirit of place’ is not necessarily either ‘authentic’ or the most significant aspect of a place. This is the case, for instance, with cemeteries whose ‘romantic’, Gothic atmosphere, or more generally wild appearance, is particularly valued, when it represents the result of neglect and the erosion of architectural and landscape features. Generalised, evocative images and narratives about Victorian cemeteries in turn influence and reinforce understandings of the meaning of individual cemeteries. The creation of new narratives and the influence of wider cultural themes therefore have a direct impact on the understanding of places’ significance. While these narratives may result in a stronger sense of place for individual sites and the wider locality, this is to the detriment of diversity and of a holistic understanding of place.

This highlights the impact of wider socio-cultural change on the conservation of historic places, and of intangible values in particular. Continuity in social, or spiritual, significance can, just as continuity of use, be in conflict with material conservation. As shown in this study, conserving the meaning of the cemetery as a memorial space, through enacting and enabling relationships with individual graves, and through reflecting contemporary understandings of an appropriate memorial landscape, can also lead to an erosion of historic character. In this case therefore the role of the
cemetery as an emotional landscape is in direct conflict with its role as a historic site. These approaches to cemetery management, and both past and present neglect of some Victorian cemeteries, reflect ongoing changes in socio-cultural attitudes to death and nature, and in conceptions of the memorial landscape. The accretion of meanings and uses, the patina of time and architectural additions and adaptations all contribute to the history of a place, but over-reliance on intangible aspects of heritage as criteria for management can skew its significance and damage historic fabric. The focus on ‘spirit of place’ therefore needs to take account of the interaction between historic fabric and intangible values and the ongoing changes it creates. While the character of a site affects its sense of place, the narratives woven from the experience of being in that place will in turn have an impact on its historic fabric. In addition, sense of place depends on individual experience, which in changing social contexts will be based not on personal memory and knowledge but on a snapshot in time informed by experience of – real or fictional – other places. The concept of ‘spirit of place’ in historic conservation represents an acknowledgement of the difficulty inherent in achieving a holistic assessment of the significance of historic sites. This focus on the more elusive qualities of place however needs to be considered within the context of external factors and influences involved in determining intangible values and the sense of place.
References


Diocese of Oxford (1615-1987). Faculty and Consecration Papers. Oxfordshire History Centre, DIOC/2/D.


GreenSpace & CABE Space, 2004. Making a Difference: How to set up and maintain a community group for parks and green space. Reading: Green Space.


Appendix 1: List of cemetery friends’ websites

Friends of Anfield Cemetery (Liverpool): http://www.anfieldcemetery.co.uk/
Friends of Arnos Vale Cemetery (Bristol): http://www.arnosvalefriends.org.uk/
Friends of Barnsley Cemetery: http://www.friendsofbarnsleycemeteries.webs.com/
Friends of Beckett Street Cemetery (Leeds): http://www.becketstreetcemetery.org.uk/
Friends of Bedford Cemetery: http://www.bedfordcemeteryfriends.org.uk/
Friends of Belgrave Cemetery (Leicester): http://www.friendsofbelgravecemeteries.org.uk/
Friends of Brackley Road Cemetery (Buckingham): http://www.tonywebster.co.uk/cemfriends.htm
Friends of Brandwood End Cemetery (Birmingham): http://fbec.org.uk/
Friends of Broadwater and Worthing Cemetery: http://www.fbwc.co.uk/
Friends of Brockley and Ladywell Cemeteries (London): http://www.foblc.org.uk/
Friends of Brompton Cemetery (London): http://www.brompton-cemetery.org/
Friends of Burngreave Chapel & Cemetery (Sheffield): http://www.friendsofburngreavecemeteries.btck.co.uk/
Friends of Cathays Cemetery (Cardiff): http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wlsfcc/Cathays.htm
Friends of the Cemeteries (Agecroft, Peel Green, Weaste and Swinton cemeteries, Salford): http://www.salford.gov.uk/friendsofthecemeteries.htm
Friends of Darwen Cemetery: http://www.darwencemetery.org.uk/
Friends of Dean Road & Manor Road Cemetery (Scarborough): http://www.scarboroughcemeteries.co.uk/
Friends of Deane Road Cemetery (Liverpool): http://www.deaneroadcemetery.com/
Friends of Duncombe Cemetery (Ferryhill): http://www.ferryhill.gov.uk/services/duncombe_cemetery.htm
Friends of Flaybrick (Birkenhead): http://www.gavinrymill.com/flaybrick/gen.html
Friends of the General Cemetery (Gainsborough): http://www.friendsofthegeneralcemetery.com/
Friends of Glasgow Necropolis: http://www.glasgownecropolis.org/
Friends of Hebron Burial Ground (Bristol): http://www.friendsofhebronburialground.net/


Friends of Highland Road Cemetery (Portsmouth): http://www.friendsofhighlandroadcemetery.org.uk/

Friends of Histon Road Cemetery (Cambridge): http://www.histonroadcemetery.org

Friends of Houghton Hillside Cemetery (Houghton Le Spring): http://www.theoldcem.co.uk/

Friends of Hyde Park Cemetery (Doncaster): http://fohpc.theinterchange.org.uk/

Friends of Jesmond Old Cemetery (Newcastle): http://www.jesmondoldcemetery.co.uk/

Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery (London): http://www.kensalgreen.co.uk/

Friends of Key Hill and Warstone Lane Cemeteries (Birmingham): http://www.fkwc.org/

Friends of Lawnswood Cemetery (Leeds): http://friendsoflawnswoodcemetery.co.uk/

Friends of Layton Cemetery (Blackpool): http://www.layton-friends.org/

Friends of Leverington Road Cemetery (Wisbech): http://www.wisbechtown.co.uk/cemetery.htm

Friends of Linthorpe Cemetery (Middlesborough): http://www.folc.org.uk/

Friends of Lister Lane Cemetery (Halifax): http://www.listerlanecemetery.co.uk/

Friends of the London Road Cemetery (Coventry): http://www.lr cemetery.co.uk/

Friends of Margate Cemetery: http://www.margatecemetery.co.uk/

Friends of Margravine Cemetery (London): http://www.margravinecemetery.org.uk/

Friends of Masbrough Chapel & Walker Mausoleum (Rotherham): http://www.walkermausoleum.co.uk/

Friends of Mill Road Cemetery (Cambridge): http://www.millroadcemetery.org.uk/MillRoadCemetery/Home.aspx


Friends of Poulton Cemeteries (Morecambe): http://www.lancaster.gov.uk/cemeteries/morecambe-cemetery/


Friends of Newtown Road Cemetery (Newbury): http://www.fnrcnewbury.org.uk/

Friends of Northwood Cemetery (Isle of Wight): http://www.friendsofnorthwoodcemetery.org.uk/

Friends of Nunhead Cemetery (London): http://www.fonc.org.uk/

Friends of East Cowes Cemetery (Isle of Wight): http://www.friendsofeastcowes.org.uk/Cemetery%20%20Project
Friends of Pateley Bridge Cemetery and St Mary’s Churchyard (Nidderdale): http://www.nidderdale.co.uk/friendsofPBC/index.htm

Friends of Philips Park Cemetery (Manchester): http://www.foppc.com/

Friends of Radnor Street Cemetery (Swindon): http://www.radnorstreetcemetery.org.uk/

Friends of Rake Lane Cemetery (Wallasey): http://www.wallaseycemetery.co.uk/

Friends of Redcar Cemetery: http://www.forcem.co.uk/

Sheffield General Cemetery Trust: http://www.gencem.org/

Friends of Southampton Old Cemetery: http://www.fosoc.org/

Friends of Spion Kop Cemetery (Hartlepool): http://www.communicate.co.uk/ne/spionkopcemetery/

Friends of St James (Liverpool): http://www.stjamescemetery.co.uk/

Friends of Stanton Road Cemetery (Ilkeston): http://friendsofstantonroadcemetery.org.uk/

Friends of Stockport Cemeteries: http://www.friendsofstockportcemeteries.co.uk/

Friends of Streatham Cemetery (Tooting): http://www.friendsofstreathamcemetery.co.uk/

Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery (London): http://www.towerhamletscemetery.org/

Friends of Walkley Cemetery (Sheffield): http://walkleycemetery.wordpress.com/

Friends of Wardsend Cemetery (Sheffield): http://www.friendsofwardsendcemetery.btck.co.uk/

Friends of the Welford Road Cemetery (Leicester): http://www.fowrcl.org.uk/

Friends of West Norwood Cemetery (London): http://www.fownc.org/

Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery (Tunbridge Wells): http://www.fwpc.org.uk/

Friends of Woodgrange Park Cemetery (London): http://www.fowpc.co.uk/

Appendix 2: Interview scripts

Script 1 – Friends’ chairs

Could you tell me how and why the Friends were set up?
When was this?
Who was involved?
Were there any difficulties? Any negotiations or disagreements with other people involved?

How are things set up now? Are there any formal agreements in place?
Do the Friends work to a project or management plan? Is this reviewed regularly? How are decisions made?

How many members are there?
Are they all actively involved?
What kind of people tend to be involved?
Do you have any information about age range, where people live, etc? Or why people decide to join?

What is the Friends’ purpose or vision for the cemetery?
What do you think are the next steps, or the challenges facing the Friends in future?
Can you remember when you first visited the cemetery? What did you think of it?
Do you have a favourite story about the cemetery?
What do you think is most important about the cemetery, or most special to you?

How would you describe the role of the cemetery in Oxford today? How people use it? What it means to people? What it represents about the city?

What is your personal vision for the future of the cemetery? What would you like it to look like? How would you see it being used?

Thank you. I think we’ve covered a lot of things; you’ve been really helpful. Is there anything else you’d like to mention about the cemetery, or what it means to you?

Script 2 – Friends’ members

Have you lived in Oxford a long time?
What brought you here?

Could you tell me how you became involved with the Friends?
How long ago was this? Were there other people you knew in the group?

So, what kind of things do you do for the Friends?
Any other activities you get involved in? Is this something you enjoy?

Can you remember when you first visited the cemetery? What did you think of it?
Do you have a favourite story about the cemetery?

What do you think is most important about the cemetery, or most special to you?

How would you describe the role of the cemetery in Oxford today? How people use it? What it means to people? What it represents about the city?

What is your vision for the future of the cemetery? What would you like it to look like? How would you see it being used?

Thank you. I think we’ve covered a lot of things; you’ve been really helpful. Is there anything else you’d like to mention about the cemetery, or what it means to you?
Appendix 3: Maps

Holywell Cemetery

Ordnance Survey Town Plan of Oxford, 1:500, 1878
© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2013). All rights reserved. (1878)

OS MasterMap® 1:1,250
Osney Cemetery

Ordnance Survey Town Plan of Oxford, 1:500, 1878
© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2013). All rights reserved. (1878)
St Sepulchre’s Cemetery

Ordnance Survey Town Plan of Oxford, 1:500, 1878
© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2013). All rights reserved. (1878)

OS MasterMap® 1:1,250