

Conservation of Jewish Cemeteries

NOTE: This legacy Code of Practice for the Conservation of Jewish Cemeteries was originally written for the Survey of the Jewish Built Heritage and was subsequently posted on the Jewish Heritage UK website. It is now hosted on this website as a public service to the Jewish Community.

INTRODUCTION

According to *Halakhah* (Jewish law), Jewish burial grounds are sacred places in perpetuity. It is forbidden to disturb the dead or to remove them for re-interment elsewhere. It is a primary duty of the Jewish community to maintain its burial grounds:

- However old these burial grounds may be
- Whether or not they are still in use
- Even in towns where there is now no resident Jewish community

In the latter case, the burial ground may be the only physical evidence that a Jewish community had ever lived in the town.

Jewish burial grounds may be the responsibility of *Hevrot Kadisha* (burial societies), umbrella synagogue organisations (especially in London) or individual congregations. Since the mid-Victorian period, Jewish sections have been opened in many municipal cemeteries, often in an arrangement whereby individual burial plots are purchased by the Jewish community as required. Maintenance is carried out by the Local Authority. However, clarification is needed as to whether such consecrated ground is exempt from the application of the 100-year re-use-of-space rule under the Local Authorities Cemetery Order (1977). The Board of Deputies of British Jews (founded 1760) acts as Trustee for a number of closed cemeteries of defunct communities, mainly in the south and west of England.

A number of Jewish burial grounds are protected sites, as Scheduled Ancient Monuments, or contain Listed memorials or fall within the scope of the Parks & Gardens Register or local Conservation Areas. See the [Listings](#) page of this website.

For the latest on the legal position in both Jewish and European Law see:

- [Jewish Cemeteries and Mass Graves in Europe: Protection and Preservation: The Sacred Obligation of Burial: Life after Death in Jewish Belief](#) by Rabbi Elyakim Schlesinger, European Agudas Yisroel, Antwerp, 2007
- [Jewish Cemeteries and Mass Graves in Europe: Protection and Preservation: European and International Law](#) by Professor Louis-Léon Christians, European Agudas Yisroel, Antwerp, 2008
- [Document 12930, Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, 10 May 2012](#)
The Resolution on 'Jewish Cemeteries' was adopted unanimously.

SITES AT RISK

The steep demographic decline of Anglo-Jewry since the Second World War, from an estimated peak of 450,000 in the 1950s to 271,000 in 2021 (Census returns) has exacerbated the problem of "orphaned" burial grounds, *i.e.* those abandoned because of the disappearance of the community that established them.

The Survey of the Jewish Built Heritage documented some 150 Jewish burial grounds in Britain and Ireland dating from between 1657 and 1939. Jewish Heritage has designated a number of these as "Sites at Risk" from criminal vandalism or development pressures, but mostly through sheer neglect. Memorials and structures are exposed to the same threats from the environment - climate, erosion, unchecked vegetation and poor drainage - as all other burial grounds. Weathered and fallen tombstones, often made of inferior materials (such as sandstone) are commonplace even in some grounds of fairly recent date.

Mindless vandalism, particularly by juveniles, and deliberate desecration by anti-Semites, are on-going problems. The latter phenomenon has been on the rise again in recent years. Security problems at cemeteries are of concern to the Board of Deputies and other institutions of organised Anglo-Jewry.

The sacred nature of Jewish burial grounds has not prevented their destruction in practice, even in Britain, whose Jewish community escaped the fate suffered on Continental Europe during the Holocaust.

Follow the simple guidelines set out in this document to achieve good cemetery practice.

SITE MAINTENANCE

Regular maintenance

Treat your burial ground as you would your own house and back garden! Regular gardening and pruning of vegetation will save you money in the long run. Buildings on site such as the *Ohel* [prayer house, chapel], *Bet Taharah* [mortuary] and caretaker's house also need regular maintenance. This is especially true where a cemetery has fallen into disuse.

When undertaking repair work or improvements take care to conform to building regulations and planning law and, in the case of protected sites, to recognised conservation standards. In the case of historic burial grounds, you may require Listed Building or Conservation Area Consents. Please consult your Local Authority Conservation Officer and/or Historic England (essential for sites Listed at Grade II* or Grade I) if you need further advice.

Be environmentally friendly

Don't use chemical weed-killers as a substitute for regular gardening. These poison the earth and kill benign vegetation, wild flowers and butterflies that make the cemetery a much pleasanter place for visitors. On the other hand, "letting nature take its course" is a recipe for destruction. This is *not* a management policy, just a rationalisation for neglect.

At the other extreme, the widespread practice in Anglo-Jewry of a "scorched earth policy" followed by gravelling over the site, has in the past been encouraged by religious authorities because it accords with the *Halakhic* requirement of not deriving benefit from a Jewish grave - even from the grass covering the ground over it. It is also cheaper than regular gardening.

The result, especially in inner city areas, has been that Jewish cemeteries often have a desolate air and can be depressing places to visit. Sometimes they seem slightly threatening: urban foxes have been known to dig under gravestones. Today's high environmental standards seek to discourage this practice and to find other more sensitive ways of conforming with Jewish burial law.

Regular Visits

Neglected cemeteries are an invitation to vandalism and criminality, including that which is racist and anti-Semitic in intent. Institute regular checks and encourage managed visits from interested parties, such as genealogical societies, school trips and Heritage Open Days. You will be surprised at the amount of interest in historic cemeteries there is out there. Cemeteries are an effective resource for education (especially minority history and anti-racist education) and environmental awareness. Visiting the cemetery is the best way of showing that we care!

Tighten Security

Most cemeteries do not have an on-site caretaker. Keep gates and boundary walls in good repair. Where new security measures are being taken, take care to conform to planning law and, in the case of protected sites, to recognised conservation standards. New boundaries may require Listed Building or Conservation Area Consents. Please consult your Local Authority Conservation Officer and/or Historic England (essential for sites Listed at Grade II* or Grade I) if you need further advice.

Use open metal railings (many attractive ornamental styles are available) in preference to solid stone or brick (expensive) or concrete (ugly) walls. Visibility of an open green space enhances the local environment and acts as a deterrent to vandalism and criminality.

Keep the gate locked. Know who has the key! Establish a simple access arrangement whereby *bona fide* visitors can call to collect the key or be escorted by the keyholder. Make sure that there is a second copy of the key kept in a secure place.

Landscape

Beautify the cemetery with easy to maintain shrubs and suitable trees (not too large as roots can cause structural problems to buildings and memorials). A few tubs of flowers can do wonders to relieve a bleak environment. Make sure that planting (especially trees) is at a suitable distance from any graves and does not overhang the boundary walls or fence onto a public street or right of way.

Paths should be kept clear and well maintained. Gravel is preferable to concrete and asphalt. Pay attention to drainage - nobody wants to end up in a watery grave!

Seek Outside Help

Enlist the Local Authority and other agencies such as the Probation Service or Groundwork UK for advice and help with maintenance, environmental and security issues. Much good will exists and funding may even be forthcoming (but don't rely on this). Sometimes concerned local residents are keen to help in a hands-on way through Neighbourhood Watch schemes and even gardening rotas. Form a Friends Group or Trust Fund to plan for the future of your cemetery.

GRAVE MAINTENANCE

Health & Safety Check that tombstones and other memorials are stable. Accidents caused by falling masonry have happened in old burial grounds. Victorian cemeteries often contain large, heavy memorials. Carefully lay flat any stones which are unsteady, in the same position. This is in conformity with current Home Office Health & Safety advice.

Never move a memorial from its original position. Bear in mind that it is the burial beneath which is sacred, not the grave marker over it. The primary function of the tombstone is to mark the place of burial. Removal and/or re-siting of tombstones also falsifies the historical record and may damage the historic landscape of the cemetery.

Choose flat stones For new graves, choose flat stones or chest tombs. This option is now increasingly being taken up in Ashkenazi as well as Sephardi burial grounds that have a tradition of flat stones.

Choose hardwearing materials Marble or granite is preferable to soft sandstones or slate *etc.* that easily erode and crumble. Cemeteries currently in use under the auspices of large synagogue organisations insist on standard materials, designs and inscriptions. This practice may be a bar to artistic expression, but does have the merit of imposing propriety.

Specialist Conservation Where repair of old tombstones is contemplated, seek specialist advice. This is vital in protected cemeteries. Bad restoration is more damaging than disrepair. Please consult your Local Authority Conservation Officer and/or Historic England (essential for sites Listed at Grade II* or Grade I) if you need further advice.

RECORD KEEPING & ARCHIVES

In many old cemeteries, basic information on the size, boundaries and number of burials has been lost. This is because of the disappearance of vital burial records such as title deeds, leases, burial registers and plot plans.

PROTECT YOUR RECORDS!

Old documents should be kept in a safe place, preferably a fire-proof and damp-proof safe. They should *not* be left lying around in the synagogue office nor - worse - in the *Ohel* in the cemetery. Paper records are very vulnerable to fire and water and simple wear and tear.

Duplicate original records by making a simple photocopy or scan them. Copies can then be made available for everyday use.

Deposit the originals in the City Archives. In London, the London Metropolitan Archives already hold large archives of the United Synagogue and the Federation of Synagogues. Local record offices are keen to take material of minority communities in their area. They have the staff to catalogue material and the resources to provide correct storage conditions. Arrangements for long term loan and limited access can always be negotiated in individual cases.

Make a Database of your cemetery records. Projects by synagogue organisations are underway in London and Manchester, and enthusiastic genealogists and local historians have taken the initiative elsewhere. Much of this material is now publicly available online through JewishGen. Such projects can be time-consuming and labour intensive work. Entries must be carefully checked for transcription errors. (You will need to be literate in English and Hebrew in order to undertake this work). Remember that databases, whilst a powerful research tool, are *not* a substitute for the original records - which should never be destroyed in the process (this has happened!).

Keep current records up-to-date according to a logical system of book-keeping. Database your records, but also keep ledgers. Burial registers should be kept in duplicate, at different locations (which are known by more than one official). The safe in the synagogue office is a good place for one set of registers. Records on computer should be backed-up on suitable computer archiving media (with additional copies stored elsewhere), which should be updated along with changes in computer technology. Records should be organised chronologically, with an alphabetical index of names, so that entries can be cross-referenced by both name of deceased and date of death/burial.

Keep a Plot Plan of the actual location of burials. Remember, not all graves have a tombstone. In old cemeteries there are usually far more burials than actual stones, some of which may have disappeared. If necessary, engage an architect or surveyor to draw up an accurate site plan. Again, keep duplicate copies of the plot plan. Keep them all up to date with names, dates and plot numbers.

Conduct a field survey of historic cemeteries where records no longer exist. Draw a plot plan, photograph and carefully transcribe tombstones. Local historians and genealogists are already engaged in such work. Use a standardised recording method and *pro forma*. An excellent example in print is: Bernard Susser (ed.) *Alderney Road Jewish Cemetery London E1 1697-1853* (London, United Synagogue 1997). Online, there are now numerous impressive projects, some of which are utilising sophisticated mapping techniques, satellite technology and even drones. There is no substitute, however, for careful painstaking work on the ground.

FUNDING & STRATEGIC PLANNING

Our ancestors paid fees to the burial society, as we still do today, to ensure that they had a decent burial. They also expected that their last resting place, and those of their families, would remain undisturbed and respectfully maintained in the future. The Jewish community is therefore both *Halakhically* and morally bound to maintain its cemeteries and those of its ancestors.

Unfortunately, in reality, burial grounds are not a profitable enterprise. Income generated by the sale of plots comes to a natural end, whilst the cost of maintenance increases. The declining population of Anglo-Jewry in most areas means that small and ageing congregations around the country are increasingly needing outside assistance with the upkeep of historic synagogues and disused cemeteries.

Here is some basic advice in order to maintain good practice:

Keep Separate Funds Synagogue membership funds *must* be kept separate from burial society funds. This has not always been the case until now. Increasingly, public grant aiding bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund are insisting on ring-fencing of restricted funds as a precondition of assistance.

Make Provision for Closed Cemeteries When a synagogue closes down, or an entire Jewish community in a small town ceases to exist, take steps to ensure that proceeds from the sale of communal property is invested in a Trust Fund for the upkeep of the associated cemetery or cemeteries. Even in cases where the municipality has maintained the Jewish cemetery in the past, the present economic climate makes it unwise to rely on this continuing in the future.

Encourage City-wide and Regional co-operation Synagogues and burial societies, particularly in declining regional communities, must pool resources to look after *all* of their cemeteries, including the most historic. In practice, present-day congregations are sometimes reluctant to take on responsibility for the burial grounds of defunct congregations. However, this responsibility *cannot* be side-stepped.

Set up a Cemetery Friends Group Such groups are successfully carrying out restoration and on-going work at old Jewish cemeteries in Bath, Glasgow, Sunderland and Liverpool. Remember that descendants of people who lived in your town and local people are all potential members, volunteers and donors.

Apply for Public Funding In Canterbury, the historic importance of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Whitstable Road (1760) was recognized back in 1997 through a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £42,000 to Canterbury City Council to undertake conservation, primarily through the clearing of excessive vegetation, repair of the 18th century walls, the provision of signage and occasional opening to the public. More recently Liverpool's Deane Road Cemetery, that boasts a fine Grade II Listed Greek Revival screen wall, has attracted nearly half a million pounds of Heritage Lottery Fund money. Remember, such grants also need to attract Match Funding from within the Jewish community.

The creation of a central Jewish community conservation trust fund is urgently needed to tackle the problem of closed historic cemeteries on a national scale.

See 'Managing the Past: a plan for the future' *Jewish Tribune* 7 June 2012, pages [30](#) and [31](#).