

**BRAINTREE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**BRAINTREE CEMETERY**

**TL 751 223**

Mid C19 public cemetery set up by Braintree Burial Board and opened in 1856. Lodge and double chapel designed by J Johnson of Bury St Edmunds, and landscaped by William Davidson, London.

**HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

Braintree Vestry applied in December 1854 to close the existing churchyard and burial grounds and open a municipal cemetery, in conformity with the Burial Act 1853 (16 & 17 Vic c 194) and elected a Burial Board to do this. The Board accepted a tender of land for the cemetery from Mrs Georgina Rolfe: Three Crowns Field, 5 acres 1 rod, at £150 per acre, was situated on London Road to the south of the town, near a bridge over the River Brain.

In March the inspector on behalf of the Home Office sought assurance that the land could be drained to 7ft (2.15m), and the Board had this from a land surveyor, J Savill, of Sible Hedingham (fee £2-2-0). A claim that the land could not be drained sufficiently prompted the inspector to obtain an opinion from Lee and Stephenson, Duke Street, Westminster (fee £5-7-9).

About 3(just over 1 hectare) acres of ground was to be set aside for burials initially, with entrance gates and a retaining wall to either side facing the road, a lodge and two chapels, one Anglican, the other Non-Conformist; 55 architects expressed interest, and 22 submitted plans. In May the Board decided that the chapels could be joined in a single building, and approved designs by J Johnson, of Whiting Street, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, and plans for the layout of the grounds and drainage by W Davidson, of 37 Bloomsbury Street, Bedford Square, from whom they also commissioned plans and estimates for planting. The Vestry had budgeted £3,000 in total, but costs exceeded estimates, the work was delayed, economies had to be made and a dispute with the builder (James Brown of Braintree) for payment was not settled for two years after the cemetery opened.

The cemetery was subdivided down the centre, with Anglican burials in the northern half and Non-Conformist in the southern half, faced by their respective chapels and enclosed by iron fences. On both sides grave spaces were laid out parallel to the chapels and numbered, even numbers on the Anglican side and odd on the unconsecrated, Non-Conformist side. The

former was consecrated on 11 August 1856; the latter was opened on 12 August. In October 1856, when Davidson wanted to start ornamental planting, 'the Board were of the opinion that as the expenses have exceeded the original estimates the question of planting must be postponed for the present.' In January 1857 the Board allowed planting with shrubs at a cost not exceeding £10.

Lower-lying ground on the south and west edges of the cemetery was reserved for future expansion, and part let out annually and part cultivated by the lodge-keeper. By 1880 this additional ground was taken up, again being divided into Anglican and Non-Conformist; the latter covered a slightly larger area but was less favourably situated, nearer the river. A small area to the south-east, with a separate gate on to the road, was a maintenance depot. Braintree Urban District Council superseded the Burial Board (or Board of Health) in 1894. In 1900 the cemetery expanded further to the west, the Anglican portion being nearer the entrance and the Non-Conformist further away. By the late 1930s a large area of land to the north of the original cemetery was made available, apparently not subdivided denominationally. In 1950 more land was provided further to the west, which was taken into use from 1958 onwards. Probably in the 1950s the lodge and front retaining wall and gates were rebuilt, blocking the secondary service gate.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

### **LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM AND SETTING**

The cemetery is situated to the south of Braintree on the northern slope of the valley of the River Brain, which flows eastwards past the town. London Road is directly to its east. Its boundary to the south and south-west is formed by the river or its narrow floodplain, and to the north and north-west is now occupied by housing.

### **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

The cemetery is entered from the east from London Road. The initial layout was centred on the two chapels. From the main entrance on the road a relatively broad avenue approaches the chapels up a slight slope, divides around them and continues in the same line down a rather steeper slope behind. Thus the chapels are very prominent, and this topography may explain why their position was at first a matter of contention, and why the Board quickly decided to unite the Anglican and Non-Conformist chapels in a single building, neither to be higher than the other, with a single bell tower. Perhaps for similar reasons the two halves of the original cemetery are exactly the same in size and layout, the main difference between them being that the Non-Conformist half is down-slope, and the Anglican up-slope. A secondary road runs around the chapels in a large oval, symmetrically about the central

avenue, with which it is joined by cross-paths. Perimeter paths run symmetrically to either side at the front of the cemetery.

#### PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

A double chapel stands in the centre of the main avenue leading from the entrance. Originally intended to be faced with Kentish rag, changed to red brick with Caen stone dressings; the roofs are slated; a brick porch facing the cemetery entrance is surmounted by an ashlar belfry with a short stone spire on top. The chapels are situated symmetrically to left and right, each with a three-light gothic window to both front and rear, with, in the outer side, two one-light windows and a large projecting porch. At the rear between the chapels is another, smaller porch, polygonal in plan. Several good small details, such as trefoil and quatrefoil lights in gables and the spire, carved heads (much eroded) at the stops of the arches around the doorways in the large porches, and stone-dressed buttresses at external corners and angles. The chapels were originally Anglican to the north (converted in 2002 to an office and public WCs), Non-Conformist to the south. A two-storey lodge on the south side of the entrance was rebuilt, probably in the mid C20; all brick with, outside the main gate of the cemetery, a two-storey window bay and semicircular-arched porch to the front door (a photograph shows the door to the original lodge was inside the gate); tiled roof. The gates and low retaining wall on the street frontage were probably rebuilt at the same time as the lodge, closing a secondary gate to the south. Behind the lodge is a small WC for the public, brick and concrete, late C20. (The original lodge and front wall were apparently brick with stone dressings, very like the chapels; some of the brick piers may survive at the north end of the front wall.)

#### GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS, LAYOUT AND PLANTING

To the east, in front of the chapels, there are relatively few burials. The ground, raised above the road and the intersecting paths, is instead dominated by grassy banks on which evergreen and some deciduous trees and shrubs are disposed with a striking, almost sculptural effect. The avenue is flanked by mature horse chestnuts, and further to either side the planting includes several mature specimen trees, such as varieties of cedar, cypress, pine and fir, weeping ash, monkey puzzle and blue Atlas cedar, interspersed with yews clipped into dense, characteristic shapes, usually urn-like, sometimes conical. The few monuments under and between the trees include fine tomb chests, head stones and a broken column on a pedestal, all in light stone mossy and lichen-spotted with age. Shrubs include Portuguese laurel, cherry laurel and phillyrea. Directly behind the chapels are several mature beeches, including one magnificent weeping beech. To the west of the chapels the central avenue is uncrowded by trees, which are set back a short distance, allowing monuments to regain prominence, at least on the up-slope side of the avenue; many are simple obelisks, and a remarkable topiary cross rises at one end of a flat tomb stone. Both up-slope and down-slope the cross-paths tend to peter out and become grassed over. The original surfaces may survive; elsewhere the present tarred surface probably overlies the former gravel.

The boundary of the original cemetery may be discerned to the south and west by the presence of old horse chestnuts along it, or just beyond it. The additional ground of 1880 was served by a single path running from east to west along the bottom of the slope, although few graves appear to have been inserted there. In 1884 this new lower boundary was planted with 30 limes (Burial Board minutes). Dead leaves have been allowed to accumulate along the bottom of the slope, to the east the perimeter path is used to stand equipment, building materials and wire bins for rubbish, while to the west the path has disappeared. An old oak and neglected limes grow on the present, rather unkempt southern boundary, above a sharp drop to the flood plain of the river. The west side of London Road is occupied by only a few houses, including Bridge Farm, and seen from the cemetery the valley here looks relatively open, quiet and rural.

The addition of 1900 faces the west end of the original cemetery across a distinct little valley running southwards to the river. To the west the ground rises again and the skyline is dominated by a conspicuous line of mixed mature beech, horse chestnut, silver birch, oak, lime and Scots pine. These trees mark the western boundary of the 1900 addition, with a path under them; other paths that, from map evidence, demarcated the denominational portions of this addition have disappeared. From the path a large expanse of ground can be seen further to the west, added after 1950. This forms a wide, rather bare, rounded slope down to an empty meadow. The area is served by a single path that curves almost on the level around the base of the slope, encircling numerous modern graves, and lined on the inside by mixed ornamental trees. The river forms the southern boundary of this area and the 1900 addition, and beyond the perimeter path to the south-west the river bank is lightly wooded. This has been designated as a wildlife area and possible space for future woodland scattering. The view to the extreme west is closed by the B1256, which is carried over the valley of the Brain on an embankment. The boundary directly to the north of the 1900 and later additions is formed by a close-boarded fence, with modern houses beyond. Occasional sycamores, once-pollarded horse chestnuts and a continuous beech hedge stand in front of the fence.

The 1930-40s addition is virtually a continuation in layout and planting of the original cemetery to its south, and is thus all the less noticeable from down the slope. It is therefore the least distinctive part of the cemetery, except for two features. At its west end a marked slope down to the south-west forms a kind of dingle, where creation memorials are concentrated. A swamp cypress stands at the top of the slope, with Scots pines and holly to one side. At the east end the rectilinear paths that intersect this part of the cemetery lead to a terrace above the road, with a line of limes, once pollarded and now neglected; steps lead down to the road, between brick walls, at the north-east corner of the cemetery. The terrace affords a good view over the road, to the west, the relatively open ground to the east, with

many simple monuments of the 1940s and scattered Lawson cypress, pine and ash, and to the south, the ornamental planting around the entrance of the original cemetery.

## REFERENCES

### Published sources

Kelly's 1882, 33

Kelly's 1908, 55

### Maps

OS 1875 1:2500 1<sup>st</sup> ed, Essex, sheet 25.14

OS 1897 1:2500 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Essex, sheet 25.14

OS 1922 1:2500 New Series, Essex, sheets 34.8, 35.5

### Archive items

Chelmsford Library (Local Studies Section): photograph of cemetery lodge and gate, MJI 900

ERO: Braintree Burial Board Minutes 1855-6, A7059 (part), D/P264/24 (part)

ERO: Plan of cemetery 1880, D/CC 31/1

ERO: Plan of cemetery 1900, D/CC 51/1

Researcher: Sarah Green