

**CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL
WIDFORD**

WRITTLE ROAD CEMETERY

TL 696 058

Late nineteenth century municipal cemetery, opened by Chelmsford Board of Health in 1886 with a combined gatehouse, chapel and lodge, designed by the Borough Surveyor, Charles Pertwee.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Sanitary Committee of Chelmsford Local Board of Health considered three possible sites for a new cemetery for the county town in 1884, and eventually agreed to purchase about six acres of land from a Mr. Cheveley in 1885, of which 'half was to be laid out with the necessary buildings, etc., at a cost of about £2,000, by the surveyor to the Chelmsford Board of Health, Charles Pertwee'. (*The Builder* 1885), loans being required from a local building society and from the Local Government Board. Construction of the buildings by a Mr. Gozzett began after February 1886, and the cemetery was consecrated by the Bishop of St. Albans on 3 August 1886. There was apparently at first no unconsecrated part of the cemetery and hence no provision for Non-Conformist or other burials. Certain areas were set aside for Catholic burials in 1963 and for Muslim and other burials in 2003.

The cemetery was extended to the east in 1903, to a design by Cuthbert Brown, the Borough Surveyor, and then successively to the south, and later also to the west, in 1929, 1939, 1947, 1967 and 2003. Land was bought up, possibly as early as 1939, extending to the west for about one hundred metres and to the south as far as the new by-pass around Chelmsford: the extra land initially being given over to allotments. The Crematorium, a much later addition to the Cemetery, was officially opened on Saturday 18 November 1961 by the then Mayor, Alderman Mrs J.P. Roberts. At the time there was only one chapel but a second chapel was built in 1984 to accommodate additional services. The original chapel, known as the South Chapel, was extensively refurbished in June 2007.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM & SETTING

The cemetery was established on the south-west edge of Chelmsford, immediately south of Writtle Road and west of the main railway line to London. The area of land in 1886 was just over six acres, of which the western half was initially laid out for use. By 2010 the maximum area in municipal ownership was incorporated into the cemetery. The cemetery is bounded to its north by Writtle Road; to its east by the railway line; to its south by the A122, originally the Chelmsford by-pass; and to its west by an industrial and trading estate, which includes the 'Britvic Tower' on the boundary. The cemetery was initially adjoined on its west by a rectangular plot of about two acres containing a house and a large garden; this still remains, functioning as a commercial nursery garden. To the west of this is a block of flats was erected, probably when a new road entrance to the crematorium was opened further to the west on Writtle Road. Railings at Writtle Road were designed by local firm of Corbett and Moreton.

The site is on fairly level ground. The part of the cemetery opened initially is on the highest part of the site, while the remainder slopes very gradually down to the south-west. Further to the west the River Wid flows northwards to join the River Can which flows to the east through the town.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The original entrance to the cemetery was on Writtle Road, through a gateway that formed part of the principal range of buildings, with a small service entrance to its east, since closed. The approach from the town affords a fairly broad view of the cemetery, where the Writtle Road rises over the railway bridge. When the crematorium was built access to it was through the cemetery, but a separate entrance was opened to the west of the nursery in a part of the site which had previously been allotments. By 2010 the only vehicle access to the cemetery was through the latter entrance.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

A combined lodge, gatehouse and chapel, designed in a vernacular neo-Gothic style by Charles Pertwee, borough surveyor in 1886, is ranged from west to east on the north edge of the cemetery, side-on to and set back from the Writtle Road. A central gabled cross-wing contains the entrance formed, on both ends of the cross-wing, by a high, pointed central arch with two smaller pedestrian side-arches. The entrance cross-wing is flanked by the two-storey lodge, to the west, and the chapel, open to the timber-framed roof, to the east. Both side-buildings are entered from the central entrance way. Externally the walls of the building are faced with roughly-cut squared limestone, laid randomly, with a red brick plinth and dressings. The high, steep-sided roof is tiled, with decorated terracotta ridge tiles and terracotta moulded eaves to the chapel. The entrance gables contain pargetted plaster panels in timber framing, with deep barge boards in front. The chapel is lit by relatively low, wide windows with shallow pointed arches, in the side-walls, and a small rose window in the east gable. The lodge has mullioned windows, and two red brick chimney stacks. A red brick wall with wrought-iron railings between brick piers runs in front of this building, with a wide splayed opening to the entrance. Plain railings run further to the east along the road, which rises to the railway bridge.

A second building was added in 1987. The size alignment and proportions of this building are similar to those of the original building; it has a higher roof ridge, and its walls are faced with similar limestone, although not roughly cut, in panels between red brick piers.

The crematorium is a fairly large single-storey building ranged from north to south, but its shallow pitched roofs and external wall-facing of light yellow brick, with occasional panels of white limestone sculpted in relief, have the effect of minimising its apparent size. A central tower and service block is flanked to north and south by chapels, lit by clerestory windows. Further to the south an unwallled structure, a timber-framed roof supported on timber columns arranged around a central opening, appearing somewhat Oriental in style, shelters floral tributes.

LAYOUT AND PLANNING

The first part of the cemetery to be opened contains broad paths arranged around a large central circle so as to form a Celtic cross in plan. In the centre of this cross is a fine, mature Wellingtonia, and the four arms of the cross are flanked by clipped pairs of Irish and golden yews. A hedge-bank with holly and hawthorn marks off the nursery garden to the north-west. The second half of the cemetery opened to the east in 1903 is on a similar plan with a blue-green fir in the centre of its cross, the four arms of the cross each being flanked by two clipped pairs of Irish and golden yews. The railway line, running in a shallow cutting, is protected by plain wrought-iron railings, and masked by a bank with beech, Scots pine, Portugal laurel and other laurels, and poplar. A line of planes and Scots pines runs along the southern edge of the original cemetery. Headstones and memorials are fairly well distributed across the grass, with a few First World War graves to the east and a cluster of very recent relatively flamboyant 'Showman' memorials near the east end of the chapel, very visible from the road.

A relatively shallow extension was made along the southern boundary of the cemetery in 1929, with broad paths running around its edges. A plain railing runs along the railway cutting there, with occasional flowering cherry and hawthorn. A further smaller rectangular area was added to the west in 1939, running up to a western boundary in line with the western edge of the nursery garden to its north. The area further to the west, marked by a line of cypresses on its eastern and southern edges, was earmarked in 1939 for future expansion, but in the event the next addition to the cemetery, in 1947, was to the south of the 1929 extension. The paths in the 1939 and subsequent extensions are of poured concrete, while the previous paths have tarmac surfaces, presumably covering original surfaces of gravel. A memorial at the western end of the 1939 area commemorates 99 workers in a local factory (Hoffman Manufacturing Co Ltd) killed by bombing in the Second World War. Several Second World War graves (and one memorial of 1915) form a distinct group on the southern edge of the 1939 area, with lawn-like grass and continuous flower beds between the headstones, laid out by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

The 1947 extension is bounded to its south by a line of flowering cherries, and occasional sycamore and beech, interspersed with low bushes of clipped yew. This planting continues further to the west, in front of a brick wall around the north-east corner of the adjacent Britvic factory. The western end of the 1947 extension contains the crematorium, with a memorial wall of light yellow brick to its east, numerous memorial rose beds, and a grove of silver birch surrounded by daffodils and other flowers in season. An ornamental lily pond adjoins the structure for floral tributes; a swamp cypress is in the open centre of this structure. The area to the west and north-west of the crematorium has been turned over to an approach road for vehicles and car park. The vehicles enter and leave by a single gate on Writtle Road, but follow a one-way loop, past secondary car-parking bays, to the crematorium and a large open car park; the road back runs along the western edge of the site, from which it is screened by a beech hedge.

The remainder of the site, to the south of the 1947 extension, has been progressively opened in three stages up to 2003, marked by a line of cypresses and then by beech hedges. These later areas contain rows of headstones back to back, without kerb sets, for easier mowing of the grass. The adjoining main road is elevated on a concrete-faced ramp as it approaches a bridge over the railway and has

high walls to deflect traffic noise. In the southern part of the cemetery, anodised steel fencing with razor wire protects the top of the railway cutting on the east and a concrete-panel wall forms the western boundary. Beech hedges are being grown to mask the road and railway fencing and the concrete wall. Today the cemetery provides new lawn graves, cremated remains plots, Showmen's Graves, and a Muslim burial section.

REFERENCES

Books and Articles

The Builder vol 48 6 June 1885 p815

Maps and Images

1921 25 inch ordnance survey map sheet 54.14

1939 25 inch ordnance survey map sheet 54.14

Archival Items

1884-88 Local Board of Health, Sanitary Committee minutes ERO A6053

1893 Plan of extension ERO D/C/C44/3

1904 Plan of addition ERO D/C/C55/2

1929 Addition ERO D/C/C80/4

1929, 39 Diocese of Chelmsford miscellaneous deeds ERO D/C/P3/15

1939 Addition ERO D/C/C90/3

1947 Addition ERO D/D/C98/5

Researcher: Sarah Green

Site Visit: Sarah Green, various