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## The creation of St Giles churchyard as it is today

A few years ago Donald contributed an article to the *Camberwell Quarterly* which sketched the history of St Giles churchyard from early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (*CQ* No.192, Spring 2017). Recently, Elaine brought to light documents in the London Metropolitan Archives which provide the basis for a much fuller account of the transformation of the space from a derelict and overgrown burial ground into a pleasant public park.<sup>1</sup>

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number and shallowness of the burials in London's churchyards were becoming a matter of public concern. This led to the passing of the 1852 Burial Act.<sup>2</sup> An Order in Council made under the Act on 13 August 1855 forbade all burials in St Giles churchyard after 1 March 1856.<sup>3</sup> The churchyard was then, it seems, left untended. Today we only need to go to the more obscure areas of Nunhead cemetery to see the sort of effect Nature can have. An untended area



Part of the churchyard in 1932. Copyright Southwark Local History Library and Archive

quickly becomes an obstacle course of young trees, brambles, ivy, wild clematis and more.

The churchyard of St Giles would not have been alone in being left to revert to wilderness. Prompted presumably in part by the existence of these potential public spaces, the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA) was established in 1882. Its principal object was "the protection, preservation, safeguarding and acquiring for permanent preservation for public use, of gardens, disused burial grounds, churchyards, open spaces, areas of land likely to be used for building purposes, ..." <sup>4</sup> St Giles churchyard was obviously a likely candidate. The Vestry approached the MPGA in 1896. There followed various discussions over the years, none of which resulted in anything being done.<sup>5</sup>

The Open Spaces Act 1906 then gave local authorities the power to acquire disused burial grounds (and other spaces) to be made into parks. In 1900 the Vestry had been replaced by the Metropolitan Borough of Camberwell, but the Act did not prompt any immediate action. Finally, and probably, it would seem,

<sup>1</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, DS/F/1938/008. This reference refers to a folder of documents, which are not separately referenced in any way.

<sup>2</sup> 15 & 16 Vict, c.85, "An Act to amend the Laws concerning the Burial of the Dead in the Metropolis".

<sup>3</sup> DS/F/1938/008, Petition, p.1. The Vestry minutes for 20 October 1853 and 15 April 1854 in the Southwark Local History Library refer to an Order in Council of 20 October 1853 and a date for the ending of burials of 1 May 1854.

<sup>4</sup> MPGA website.

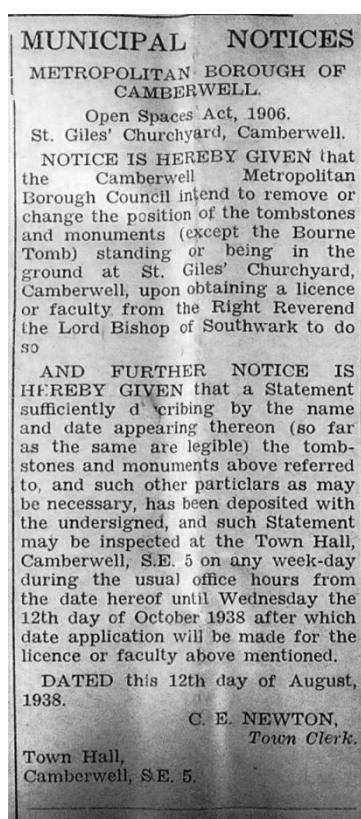
<sup>5</sup> *CQ*, No.192 (Spring 2017), p.14.

because of the impetus provided by the vicar, H.P. Lindsay, the process began in 1937, under the Open Spaces Act, that would lead to the conversion of the burial ground into a public park.

By the late 1930s, according to the *South London Press*, its condition had “produced many outbursts from nearby residents, who complained bitterly of the broken headstones, open tombs and the general air of decay.”<sup>6</sup> The photograph on the left from 1932 shows the sort of state the burial ground was in. The photograph was taken looking westwards along Churchyard Passage (pretty well invisible) towards Camberwell Grove – the silhouette of the Camberwell Grove buildings identifies it. What exactly we are seeing amongst the ruined graves is not clear. But there seem to be the low sides and left-hand end of a tomb of some sort that has been opened. The slab leaning against the right-hand end could be consistent with that opening in fact being to a stairway going down – from early in the 18th century, family plots were sold to parishioners and non-parishioners alike, the larger plots being for vaults entered by staircases.

The conversion process was triggered in June 1937 by “a claim recently received by [the Works Committee of the Borough] from the Parochial Church Council of St Giles’ Church for the repair of the railings of the burial ground”. The railings were those, then and now, on either side of the graveyard section of Churchyard Passage. We don’t know the basis on which the claim was made, but it led to a meeting on site between the vicar, H.P. Lindsay, accompanied by one of the churchwardens, and the Works Committee’s chairman, the Town Clerk, the Borough Engineer and the Surveyor. This seems a pretty heavyweight team just for the repair of some railings; so it must be assumed that the question of conversion of the burial ground was already in serious contemplation, very possibly having been proposed by Lindsay. In any event the project was discussed at the site meeting, and approved at a full council meeting.<sup>7</sup>

The conversion entailed three main steps: agreement between the church, represented by Lindsay, and the Borough, on what work was to be undertaken; conveyance of the land from the church to the



Borough; and then a “Petition” from the Borough to the Diocese of Southwark for a “Faculty”, the diocesan permission to make the change and, in particular, to move the gravestones. The documents in the London Metropolitan Archives are evidently what remained in the possession of the diocese, largely from what passed between it, in the person of the Registrar, and the Borough, in the person of the Town Clerk.

The Town Clerk began the process in October 1937 by seeking confirmation of what, in fact, was entailed. The Registrar was able to guide him, and also to offer great assistance in the form of a similar petition relating to a similar case in Barking of a few years previously. There is no correspondence in the first half of 1938 when, presumably, the plans were being formed and agreed. The outcome then was that the legible gravestones would all be moved and placed “on the northern boundary” of the churchyard and against its east wall. The illegible stones would be used for paving footpaths. The ground would be levelled and turfed as necessary, with a fairly simple layout of paths. The proposed cost was £2,220. There was a particular condition, of which we don’t know the origin, that the Bourne tomb, near the church and fenced then as now, was not to be disturbed.

Two requirements of the Open Spaces Act were that all legible gravestone inscriptions should be recorded; and that those records, along with the work that was proposed, should be advertised for public inspection and comment.

There are 481 entries in the list of gravestone inscriptions, some complete, some fragmentary (and one may wonder how many more were illegible). Most of the inscriptions record multiple burials.

<sup>6</sup> *South London Press* 9 June 1939.

<sup>7</sup> Southwark Local History Library, Metropolitan Borough of Camberwell, *Minutes*, Vol.37 (1936-37), pp.264.

No.171 is one of the more extreme examples, and may serve as an illustration of what prompted the 1852 Burial Act:

Elizabeth Harris, died November 27th 1812 aged 58 years.

Also Sarah Goring, sister to Elizabeth Harris and late wife of George Forbes Goring of this Parish, Mason, died September 29th 1815 aged 56 years.

Also Martha Goring, second wife of the above George Forbes Goring died May 30th 1822 in her 53rd year.

Also Mr. George Forbes Goring, husband of the above, died July 22nd 1827. Aged 65 years. George Goring, grandson of the above, died October 22nd 1847. Aged 36 years.

Also Eleanor Goring, sister of the above George Forbes Goring, died February 3rd 1848, aged 67 years.

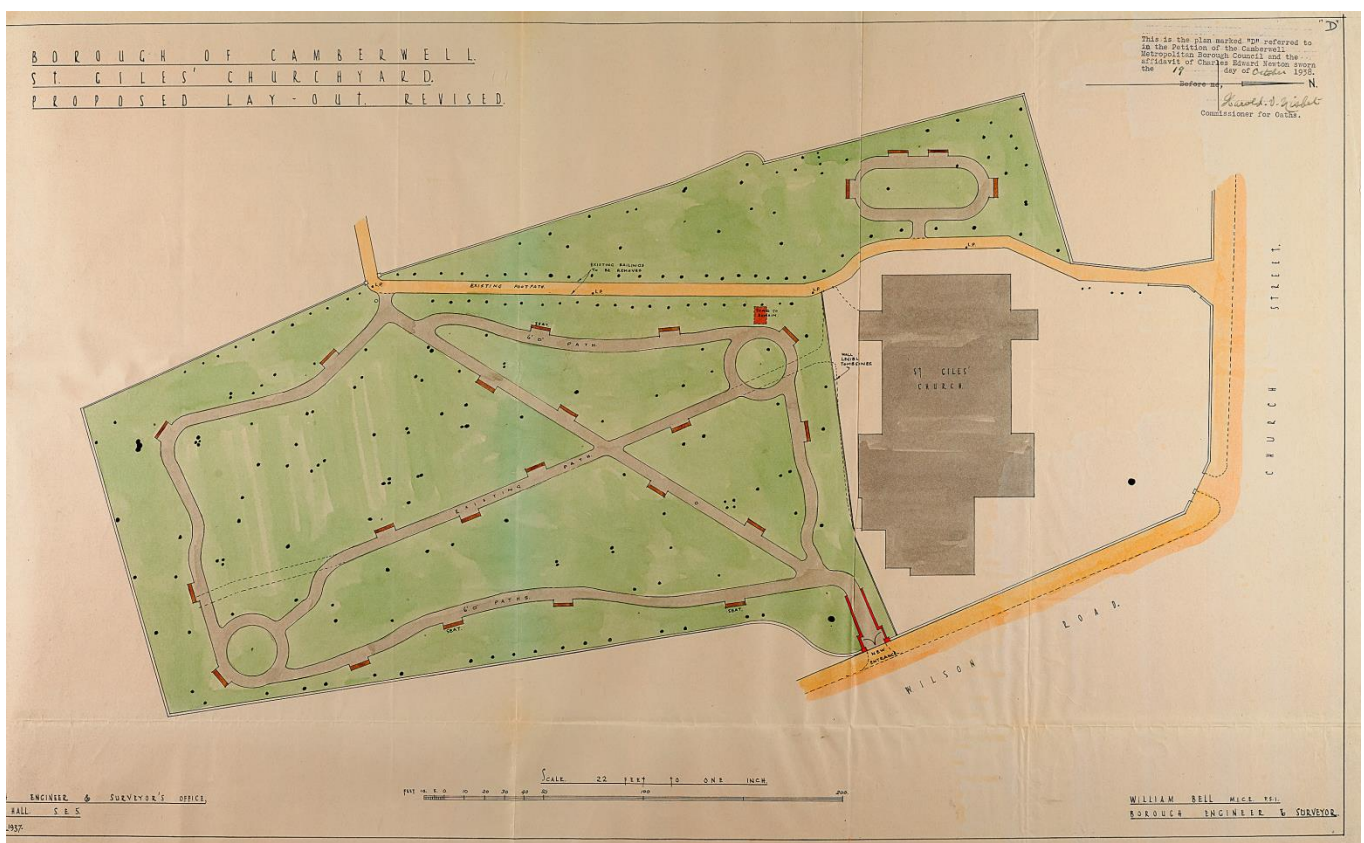
Also Mr. George Goring, son of the above George Forbes Goring, died March 6th 1851 aged 63 years.

Also Mrs. Sarah Ann Bothell, daughter of the above Mr. George Goring died August 28th 1851. Aged 39 years.

The plans were duly advertised in the *South London Press* and in the *South London Observer Camberwell and Peckham Times* on 12, 19 and 26 August 1938.

There is a record of only one response to the advertisements. Alfred C. Dance wrote on 20 September. He described himself as “the fifth grandson of the late Jane Dance”, who was “a great christian [sic]”. He did not mind the removal of her stone but asked that it remain recumbent, and not be placed against a wall.

The present state of the churchyard shows that what was planned is very largely what was carried out.



**1938 plan of the conversion.** London Metropolitan Archive, copyright Southwark Local History Library and Archive.

The gravestones are still to be seen on the north boundary. There are only a few against the east wall, and this may have been because of a minor change in the plan. The layout is as in the 1938 plan; the Bourne tomb remains where it was; and beside it lies recumbent Jane Dance’s stone.

The graves themselves were not disturbed, so we are walking above them as we walk in the churchyard, not just above the graves but above the brick vaults with their steps going down.



There remain unanswered questions about trees. There must have been a lot in 1938, of differing ages. It is plausible that before work started a selection would have been made, those that seemed to fit in well with the planned layout to be kept, the remainder to be removed. Unfortunately the 1938 plan is of no help. We do not know what the black dots on it mean. There are far too many of them to be trees. But those on either side of the graveyard section of Churchyard Passage seem to correspond well to the current (and very possibly then existing) avenue of limes. Further investigation of the trees remains work in progress.

On 23 December 1938, after all the stages had been completed, the Registrar sent the Town Clerk the Faculty. This led to some pleasing bureaucratic spikiness. The Registrar incorporated his bill into the letter: Court Fees of 5 guineas and a further 1 guinea for the certified copy of the Faculty. But he added, "May I also suggest a further fee of 3 guineas, to cover the extra correspondence and perusal of the draft petition etc". The Town Clerk settled the bill in full immediately, but the extra amount may have irked him. On 21 January he wrote, "... the Vicar's solicitors have drawn my attention to the fact that in three places of page 2 of the faculty the Vicar's second christian name is wrongly spelt ... and at the foot of that page reference is made to "subsections (1) and (3) respectively of section 11" instead of to "subsections (1) and (4) respectively of section 11 ..." But he was a little hasty. The Registrar was able to reply on the 23rd, doubtless with satisfaction, "I have duly corrected the slight errors you mention, but in returning the two documents herewith may I mention that in preparing them your Petition was followed."

Churchyards change, but professional needling stays the same.



Workmen engaged in transforming the dilapidated graveyard into a Garden of Rest.

By June 1939 the work was pretty well complete, as shown in this photograph published in the *South London Press*.<sup>8</sup>

Donald Mason and Elaine Clarke, March 2020

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<sup>8</sup> *South London Press* 9 June 1939.