

Dead end: no room left to rest in peace

Kaya Burgess

Britain is fast running out of space to bury its dead, a *Times* investigation has revealed, leaving local councils and the Government with less than a decade to find more graves before many of the nation's cemeteries are full.

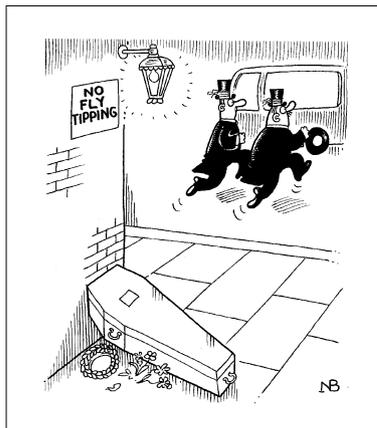
As the baby-boomer generation approaches old age and with 150,000 people a year still choosing to be buried, councils are being forced to consider requisitioning local allotments and playgrounds to compensate for the shortfall, while there is pressure on the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to grant nationwide permission for the re-use of abandoned graves, currently allowed only in parts of London.

More than 300 local councils replied to a request for information from *The Times*, revealing an average of 30 years before public cemeteries in Britain reach full capacity. Of these, more than 70 will run out of space in a decade or less; there is an average of only 15 years before public graveyards in London are full; and six boroughs in the capital have already closed their cemeteries to new burials.

"If the public are to continue to have access to local and affordable burial space, there is no alternative to the re-use of old, abandoned graves," said



Tracy George is fighting to stop the expansion of this overcrowded southeast London cemetery into a recreation ground



Tim Morris, chief executive of the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management. "Some London boroughs have long run out of burial space and their residents have to go to neighbouring boroughs, where they pay double or treble fees."

Most graves in Britain are already dug to take three burials on top of each other for use as family plots but the increase in Muslim and Jewish cemeteries, where only one body may be buried per grave, has also put pressure on space.

Many young, healthy people are being advised to buy up burial space.

An MoJ spokesman said: "We are looking into what other options could be made available to burial authorities in future. Clearly, this is a sensitive subject and the Government will give careful consideration before any decisions are made."

The re-use of old graves is permitted only under the London Local Authorities Act 2007, where bodies buried more than 75 years ago may be exhumed and reburied at a greater depth to allow the rest of the grave to be used for fresh burials, in a process known as the "lift-and-deepen" method.

Though public graveyards are outnumbered by Church of England cemeteries — which make up 70 per cent of the total — an MoJ survey in 2007 revealed that C of E graveyards will run out of space on average about five years earlier than public cemeteries.

A spokesman for the Church said it was "well aware" of the issue and said that reclaiming old graves had been "normal practice for centuries".

Questions about death left unspoken

Kaya Burgess
Commentary



Death is, in every sense, the final taboo. There is a reluctance to talk about it in Britain. Research by a group of health professionals and charities shows today that very few people have discussed funeral arrangements or palliative care with their loved ones.

With burial space rapidly shrinking across the country, a private grave in the corner of a quiet cemetery is now far from guaranteed, but a survey by the Dying Matters Coalition and ComRes shows that only a third of people have discussed with their partners what type of funeral they would like, while fewer than one in five have talked about the type of care and support that they would want at the end of their lives.

With plots becoming increasingly scarce and the cost of burial rising to more than £4,000 on average, the cremation rate has risen to one of the highest in the world over the past two decades, at around 70 per cent. Though it is the cheaper option at around £2,000, the rise in cremations is thought to have levelled out because of its prohibition in the Islamic and Jewish faiths. This has left councils and religious bodies needing to find a way to accommodate the 150,000

'Now I can't be buried beside my family'

Case studies Southwark and South Wales

The next area of Britain to run out of public burial space will be the London Borough of Southwark, where there are only 155 graves left — about three months' supply (Kaya Burgess writes).

Residents turned out in protest last month at council proposals to convert the recreation ground at Honor Oak Park into a cemetery.

In response to a similar shortage of graves in the 19th century, extra land was bought for burial space in the area, including, in 1901, the land at Honor Oak Park. As, in the event, it was not needed for burial purposes, the land was later converted into a recreation ground for the community.

In response to the protests, Southwark council, which spends £620,000 a year on the maintenance and management of its cemeteries, has confirmed that the recreation ground would be reclaimed only as a "last resort", but has launched a consultation process to identify ways to extend "short-term" burial space in the borough.

Tracy George, a member of the Friends of Honor Oak Park group, said: "We want our campaign to be the start of a burial revolution. For

burials to exist in the future, there has to be a change now. Using the rec would not solve the problem; it would just delay the inevitable and in the process we would lose valuable green space.

"A decision has to be made concerning the re-use of graves that are over 75 years old. This is the only solution to providing burial as a local, cheaper option for people in the future. This would also mean that neglected cemeteries would get a cash injection."

She added: "Despite the Government saying ten years ago that re-using [graves] was the solution to solve burial shortage, we are still in the same situation, only worse because the space they had then has now been nearly exhausted."

Barrie Hargrove, a Southwark councillor, said: "Obviously we want all possible options to be considered, but I would now like to reassure residents that we are treating the option of Honor Oak Recreation Ground as our least preferred

course of action." He urged people to take part in the consultation process.

Merril Jenkins, 65, below, lives in Ealing, West London, but comes from the village of Hafodyrnyys in South Wales. Her great-grandparents, grandparents and parents are all buried in the cemetery of nearby Cefn-y-Crib church, but a lack of space in the graveyard means that she cannot be buried next to them.

"I was very upset to think I couldn't continue the tradition," Ms Jenkins said. "I was writing my will a few years ago and put down that I wish to be buried where my family have been buried, but I was told on a recent visit that, because they are so short of graves, they can give new graves only to local church members. I feel strongly about wanting to end my days in that beautiful church and always knew I wanted to be buried, but may have to consider cremation now, as it takes up a lot less space."



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people a year who choose to be buried.

Launching Dying Matters Awareness Week today, Eve Richardson, the chief executive of the Dying Matters Coalition, said:

"Although someone in Britain dies every minute, our research has found that many people do all they can to avoid talking about dying. Unless we talk openly about dying and death we won't be able to get the care and support we want, where we want it, at the end of our lives."

The results of *The Times's* investigation show that this issue of location may become more pressing as burial space runs out. Selby, in North Yorkshire, and Tandridge, Surrey, have already closed all their municipal graveyards to new burials, while Moyle, in Northern Ireland, has room for burials only within existing family plots. The London boroughs of Brent, Camden, Hackney, Islington, Lambeth and Tower Hamlets have all run out of public cemetery space within their boundaries, while Brent, Newham and Croydon have had to start reclaiming old graves to extend burial provision.