

DELIVERING A LONG-TERM VISION: A 25-YEAR PROJECT TO 'UNLOCK' HIGHGATE CEMETERY

WHAT LESSONS DOES THE WORK TO CONSERVE HIGHGATE CEMETERY HAVE FOR THOSE CARRYING OUT SENSITIVE HERITAGE PROJECTS? BILL MARSDEN, A PROJECT MANAGER IN ARTELIA UK'S HERITAGE, ARTS AND CULTURE PROJECTS TEAM, EXPLAINS

Highgate Cemetery in North London was opened in 1839 to an initial design by architect Stephen Geary. It is one of the 'Magnificent Seven' London cemeteries developed during the Victorian age on what were then the outskirts of the capital, as the city's population outgrew existing graveyards. Dramatically located on a steep hillside, the cemetery has an abundance of Gothic tombs and mausolea, and smaller monuments ranging from the Victorian to the modern.

The cemetery is also a haven for life, from trees and plants to a variety of insects, birds and mammals. It is Grade I listed in Historic England's Register of Historic Parks and has over 80 listed structures, including some at Grade I and Grade II*, with many more of local heritage importance.

Making the cemetery a more rewarding place to visit

The Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust charity is the owner of Highgate Cemetery. Led by a Board of Trustees, who are volunteers, the trust has a small operational team managing burials and looking after the grounds, monuments and buildings alongside the extraordinary efforts of a team of volunteers. The Friends have three aims:

- to preserve Highgate Cemetery as a place of historic and other interest and beauty
- to permit the cemetery to be



- used as a public burial ground
- to secure the repair, restoration and preservation of the cemetery for the public benefit

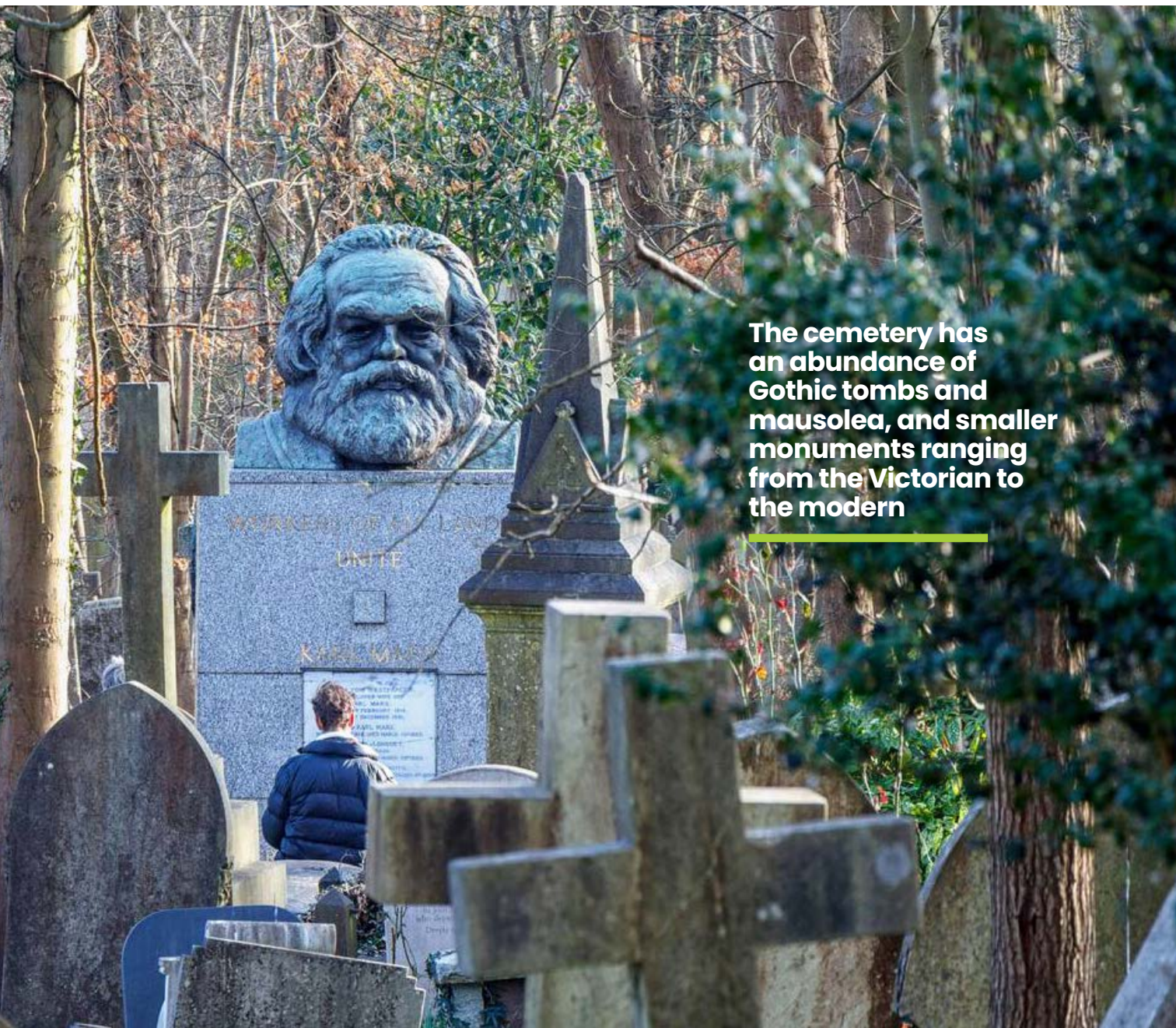
The Board of Trustees has a vision that Highgate Cemetery will remain an active burial ground, while carefully planned conservation works take place to the landscape, including its monuments and other structures, together with the creation of new facilities to make the cemetery a better functioning and more

rewarding place to visit, as well as helping ensure its long-term sustainability. To make this vision a reality, the trust has put in train a project with multiple workstreams, but with one overriding set of objectives, aimed at 'unlocking' Highgate Cemetery.

Unique project, big vision

Since the cemetery's opening in 1839, people have enjoyed the dramatic architecture and sinuous paths of the its landscape. Today, time and climate change have





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exposed the fragility of the historic structures, and access to some areas is now difficult or closed. Following the development of a Conservation Plan by Alan Baxter

Ltd, the trust has scoped the project around priorities.

The most urgent needs are the conservation of listed funerary structures, dealing with diseased ash trees, restoring historic views to central London, reopening areas of the cemetery that are currently inaccessible to visitors, and providing an exhibition space for the public to explore nearly 200 years of human stories. This space will be in a part of the Victorian chapel that is currently used as the cemetery's management offices.

All designs are being developed so they help improve accessibility, appeal to a more diverse public and maintain and enhance the cemetery's role as a place of sanctuary. The effects of climate change and ash dieback disease have degraded the richness of the habitat, and the project provides an opportunity to restore biodiversity with climate-resilient planting and improved drainage.

Through the project, the trust will partner with local organisations to develop oracy skills for school

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groups, vocational training in landscape management, as well as free online learning resources on universal themes such as grief, memory or celebrity. A new heritage interpretation plan will expand the range of stories told, welcoming a greater diversity of people.

Taking on such a special heritage project

When the trustees embarked on this visionary project, they engaged Artelia UK to help establish processes and the capability to plan and deliver a project that is several orders of magnitude larger and more complicated than any the trust has delivered previously. I am a Project Manager working in Artelia UK's Heritage, Arts and Culture projects team. This team has been successful in restoring or repurposing many historic buildings and delivering exciting and engaging cultural venues. Our experience ranges from medieval castles and 900-year-old cathedrals to creating new buildings and facilities that replicate the quality of the surrounding heritage.

I have been privileged to assist the trust in progressing the special and unique Highgate Cemetery project, which is currently at RIBA Stage 3 (Spatial Coordination). Visiting the cemetery, you feel you are stepping into a different world, an oasis of peace and a sanctuary in a big city. Going there for work, this experience is enhanced, and I see the possibilities for achieving the trustees' vision for the cemetery's future.

The project has four workstreams, as follows.



1 Landscape design. Procured through an international design competition, the landscape design team is led by Gustafson Porter + Bowman, and includes specialists in trees, soil and ecology along with engineers who are designing a new site-wide drainage scheme.

2 Architecture. Also procured via international design competition, this design team is led by Hopkins Architects, with specialists in engineering, acoustics and materials.

3 Conservation architecture. Heritage specialists West Scott Architects lead this design team.

4 Public programming. This work will be led by a new Head of Programmes for the cemetery. Underpinning all four workstreams

are stakeholder engagement (led by Steve McAdam), interpretation and the visitor experience (led by Barker Langham) and sustainability (led by Useful Projects). Montagu Evans, experts in town and country planning, are steering the trust through the process of gaining planning and heritage consents, and Huntley Cartwright are the quantity surveyors. The structure of the project team allows experts to focus on their specialist areas and requires particular attention to coordination. The trust has appointed joint project directors to lead this coordination and provide the link between the trustees and the consultant teams, giving strategic direction to the work.



With my Artelia colleague Luciele Mendes, I support the project directors in this work.

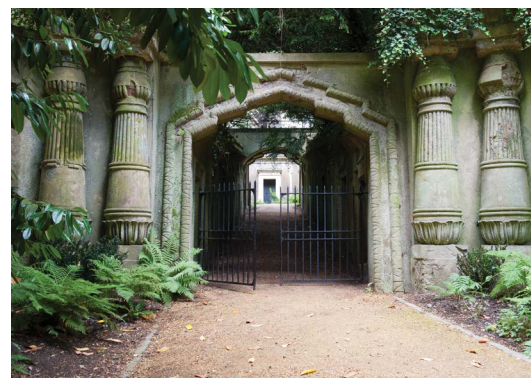
The trust has been successful with a development phase application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for 'Unlocking Highgate Cemetery', and the project team is making good progress towards a planned delivery phase next year, with work due to start on-site in 2027.

Aside from the heritage listings described above, the cemetery is in a Conservation Area, is designated Metropolitan Open Land (with its openness and character given the same status and level of protection as Green Belt) and is also a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation for London. With

work needing to be planned with great care and precision around the approximately 50,000 graves, it is a sensitive site in which to plan a project.

Durable and sustainable

This is a long-term project – the master plan for the cemetery will be implemented over 25 years. This might be compared with Crossrail (the Elizabeth Line), which emerged from the Central London Rail Study in the late 1980s (there was an earlier east-west tunnel proposal in 1974), with the first trains running through the central London tunnels in 2022. (I did a little work on that scheme myself, in 1989, as a graduate trainee project manager on the land referencing



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team). However, if the leaders of that project will forgive me, the Highgate Cemetery project is different in that it is planned to unfold over a long term.

The approaches, methods and techniques being applied to the Highgate Cemetery project will be familiar to any project professional: deep engagement with stakeholders; working with an operational team to ensure their views and expertise contribute to the design and to achieve a 'smooth landing'; coordination of design development and planning advice; procuring a range of specialist consultants; programme scheduling; risk management; reporting and communications.

So what makes this project special? In my view, there are three things: the clarity of the trustees' vision for a long-term sustainable plan based on engagement with the widest possible public; the outstanding project and operations teams the trustees have assembled; and perhaps most of all, the unique landscape of Highgate Cemetery. If you are in or coming to the area, why not book a guided tour and experience it for yourself?