

2.9 Burial grounds

As in many large towns, the burial situation in Shrewsbury was, by the middle of the nineteenth century, complicated. There remained the four ancient burial grounds attached to the mother churches of the town. But St Chad's had a new burial ground attached to the church erected under the 1791 statute, and in 1810 St Julians had acquired additional land in the heart of the town to extend its graveyard.¹ In 1836 they bought half an acre in Coleham for use as a further burial ground, but this was then assigned to be the site of the new chapel of Holy Trinity.² Holy Trinity, in common with the other daughter churches of this period had a graveyard attached as a matter of course. The nonconformist sects had also developed their own graveyards.

The conduct of the old established central graveyards was a matter of comment. It is clear that they could not cope with the number of bodies being interred, especially as the space available was limited by family vaults. Evidence was offered in 1854 that current interments frequently disturbed the decaying remains of previous interments: these were quietly removed by the gravediggers. One of the justifications for a new graveyard at Belle Vue was the constant disturbance of earlier interments in the parish graveyards. The young Henry Pidgeon recorded in his diary in 1824 that graves had been made in St Mary's churchyard within 18 inches of the surface, but also that an accumulation of soil had raised the height of the graveyard some distance up the walls of the church, requiring steps down into it. Pidgeon reports that a decision was taken to lower the surface of the graveyard and that hundreds of cartloads of 'soil' were taken to a field in Coton Hill. He felt 'sympathetic disgust' at the removal of human remains in this way, and lamented that the practice of burial in towns should ever have been allowed.³

Not only was there an obvious shortage of burial space in the town by this time, and some disquiet about the practices employed in its management, there was also much resentment amongst dissenters about having to bury in Anglican graveyards using Anglican rites and Anglican clergy.⁴

¹ Consecrated 1812. SA, P256/B/7/2/1-5. The conveyance, P256/B/7/2/1 includes an inset map of the site: it was only 360 sq. yards.

² P256/B/7/3; P251/B/4/1 p. 17.

³ Pidgeon diary, 2 May 1824, from WWW.Shropshirelocalhistory.org.uk.

⁴ See, for instance, the letter signed 'A Dissenter' in SC 11 Apr. 1856.

Other than those already mentioned, there were several initiatives to increase the available space before the general reforms of the mid-1850s.

At the end of 1819 the vestry of St Mary's had the opportunity to buy a parcel of land close to the church in Ox Lane (now St Mary's street). This lay on the opposite side of the street to the Drapers Company's almshouses which then stood in the churchyard facing Ox Lane. Having secured the land, it was suggested, possibly by the Street Commissioners, that it offered the opportunity for the widening of Ox Lane. The Drapers were willing to give up the site of their almshouses so part of it might be incorporated into the widened street. They proposed to rebuild the almshouses on the street frontage of the new graveyard facing their former site. Negotiations were protracted and it was late 1823 before a series of exchanges were agreed. In 1826 the new graveyard was ready to open as rules for the digging of graves were laid down by the vestry, but it seems fairly certain that no burials ever took place. Instead, in 1829 the vestry agreed to raise money to purchase a site on Castle Foregate for a new church and burial ground: this became St Michaels. Later that year the vestry agreed to sell the prospective graveyard at auction but was persuaded to accept tenders. The New Market Company and the Drapers both offered £450. The vestry preferred the former, but they proved to be unable to raise the money and ultimately the land was sold, not without some acrimony, to the Drapers in 1833. The removal of the Draper's almshouses served to open up the view of the church from the road and, as we noted, the churchyard was remodelled in 1824. In 1826 new railings were erected. It seems unlikely though the church had, in any real sense, resolved the problem with which it started, that its burial ground was 'crowded' and posed a danger to health.⁵

The Abbey cemetery, to the east of the abbey church, was established by private act of parliament in 1840. Its purpose was not only to provide a new burial ground but also to protect the view of Shrewsbury Abbey from development. The approach to Shrewsbury from the east originally ran round the abbey on its north side in a bow-shape. This road was considered dangerous as approaching vehicles were concealed from each other by the abbey wall. In 1836 Telford took the road on its modern line to the south of the church, cutting through the monastic precinct. This made the abbey garden between the old and new road available for building and it was offered for sale as building plots with frontages on the new

⁵ P257/C/2/1, pp/ 79-232 passim; B/28/6-9 (B/28/7 is a map of the premises).

road in 1839.⁶ The whole area, including the New Road Tavern and a number of cottages, was acquired by a group of gentlemen who secured an act of parliament in 1840 establishing the Abbey Cemetery Company.⁷ The act authorised a further adjustment in the road layout to enlarge the area of the cemetery. The company then cleared the site of both the standing monastic ruins and also the modern buildings.⁸ Apart from two donations, the company's capital was raised by the sale of £50 shares totalling £2350: an additional £1100 was raised on mortgage. Small sums were also received from the sale of demolition materials from the New Road Tavern and other houses on the site. Retrospective accounts made in 1846 show that the major expenditure was on the acquisition of land and the costs of securing the private act.⁹ The graveyard was consecrated by the Bishop of Lichfield on 18 October 1841.

The cemetery company was more successful as an early act of conservation than as a graveyard. Whilst its establishment was applauded in the Shrewsbury papers, only 148 burials took place between 1841 and 1888.¹⁰ By 1879 there was comment in the Shrewsbury papers that its continued use as a graveyard was inappropriate and a risk to health, and calls for its closure. An inspection by the Home Office did not however result in its closure.¹¹ The graveyard was sold to Abbey church in 1887: as early as 1903, when there was an attempt to have the borough council take over the maintenance of the graveyard as a public space, the church's title to the land seems to have been obscure.¹²

Belle Vue cemetery was the private initiative of a group of nonconformists in the town who came together in 1851 or 1852 to establish The Belle Vue General Cemetery Company with five-pound shares. They acquired around 4 acres of land. An advert was placed for iron railings for the cemetery in August 1852: the first burials took place that same year.¹³ From early 1854 the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* carried advertisements for the scale of fees applying at the cemetery. In 1856 the company erected a mortuary chapel, designed by the Shrewsbury architect Mr Pickard in an early English style. It was reported that the total expenditure had

⁶ SC 1 June 1839.

⁷ 3 & 4 Victoria cap. 85; copy in SA, P250/V/1/1.

⁸ *Salopian J.*, 24 Feb. 1841, 28 Feb. 1841, repr. in *Salopian Shreds and Patches* 00 (0000), pp. 000. For the area of the cemetery, P250/V/6/1.

⁹ SA, P250/V/9/1, 2.

¹⁰ Francis, *Matter of life and death*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Eddowes*, 9 16, 23 Apr., 7 May, 14 May 1879.

¹² SC 21 Aug. 1903 and see the correspondence in P250/V/8.

¹³ SC 13 Aug. 1852; for the burials the report of the laying of the chapel's foundation stone in SC 1 Oct. 1856. No records of the cemetery company appear to be available.

been around £1000 for the purchase of the land, its walling around and the laying out of the site. A further call on shareholders was envisaged to enable the chapel to be completed.

Speaking at the laying of the foundation stone for the chapel, Mr John Blower of Besford House, who was identified as the prime mover behind the project, explained that their motivation behind the establishment of the cemetery was ‘the crowded state of most of the burying places in Shrewsbury and the scenes of desecration constantly witnessed there’ as well as their wish to have services conducted according to the wishes of the departed. He admitted though that had they anticipated that the town would be compelled to provide a town cemetery, they might not have proceeded.¹⁴ The creation of the municipal cemetery may have compromised the success of the Belle Vue cemetery and the company was formally wound up in 1872.¹⁵

The cemetery then appears to have passed into private hands until sold to the Apostolic church in 1944. The original chapel was damaged by fire in 1943. The last interment in the graveyard is reported to have taken place in 1944.¹⁶ A new church building was erected by the Apostolic church on a different part of the site and opened in 1949.¹⁷ Personal inspection in 2016 showed that the mortuary chapel had been demolished to its foundations, but gravestones, some of them apparently moved, could still be seen.

The Report of the General Board of Health of 1854 took a great deal of interest in the town’s burial grounds, and usefully included a list of the ones still open at that date. The inspector, W. Ranger, also included in his report a long account of the burial practices employed at that time compiled by Dr Styrap. Styrap urged the immediate closure of all of the town graveyards on public health grounds. He was especially appalled by the practice of making interments inside the churches (and the prospect that the projected Roman Catholic church intended to do this) although in general it seems to have been less often resorted to by the time he wrote.¹⁸

¹⁴ SC 1 Oct. 1856.

¹⁵ *London Gazette*, 1 Oct. 1872, p. 4573.

¹⁶ SA, MI 6238/4, research notes of Constance M. Evason.

¹⁷ Francis, *A matter of life and death*, p. 6, for a picture showing the new church and chapel belfry behind it.

¹⁸ p. 84. He reports that no interments had been made inside new St Chad’s and only five interments inside St Mary’s in the previous twenty years.

The report identified 15 burial grounds within the borough's boundaries, of which the last was at the House of Industry at Meole Brace and so is not considered further here. The fourteen are listed in Table 00. To them needs to be added the Roman Catholic burial ground in Belmont although Styrap found that only a handful of interments (three in the chapel and three in an adjacent plot) had been made there.

Opinion, both local and national, was strongly against the continuance of the urban graveyards and legislation passing through the parliament at about the time of Ranger's investigation gave the government the means to close them to further interments. Orders closing large numbers of burial grounds (or restricting their use) were issued in late 1853 and early 1854. The orders for the Shrewsbury were anticipated but were dated 23 January 1854, before Ranger's report had been received by the town. Whilst some of the town's graveyards were closed with immediate effect, others were allowed one or two years' grace whilst alternative arrangements were made. It was noted through that the orders did not touch the enlarged burial ground at the Abbey, or the new Belle Vue cemetery, and the burial ground at St Giles was allowed to continue under conditions.¹⁹ There was also a question as to whether the legislation had it within its power to close the new St Chad's graveyard which had been created by the statute authorising the erection of the new church.²⁰ Quibbles such as this apart, vestry meetings in early 1854 had to take the closure the town's graveyards as a given, and discussion turned to whether the town should in future have a single burial ground or whether the parishes should maintain their own. A meeting on 16 March agreed that to create a single municipal cemetery.²¹ St Giles though did toy with the idea of enlarging its churchyard, but after correspondence with the Home Office, it became clear that permission for this would not be forthcoming, and it had to fall into line with the general move towards an out-of-town cemetery.²² A burial board for the town was established which had its first meeting on [date?]. Meole Brace also agreed to join in the project.²³ The burial board was cumbersome body consisting of 54 members, nine from each of the town's parishes.

¹⁹ Burial grounds closed under the acts 15 and 16 Victoria c. 85 and 16 and 17 Victoria c. 134 were the subject of a return to the House of Commons dated 11 April 1854: PP 1854 (199). The closure orders were reported in *Eddowes*, 1 Feb. 1854.

²⁰ It was confirmed by the Home Office that burials could continue, but it was held in Shrewsbury that they would be stopped by an amending act. *SC* 17 Mar. 1854.

²¹ *SC* 17 Mar. 1854; *Eddowes* 22 Mar.

²² *Eddowes* 26 Apr., 24 May; *SC* 26 May.

²³ *SC* 26 May, 9 June, *Eddowes* 19 July.

Inevitably there were disputes over how the burial ground should be funded and proportional contribution of the parishes. A meeting of the board on 8 August was told that arrangements had been made to purchase 20 acres in Moele parish ‘opposite the Red Barn, on the Old Bishop’s Castle Road’ from Hon. H. W. Powys at £200 an acre and an advertisement was placed offering £25 for the best plans for the design of the cemetery. Two chapels were envisaged, one for Anglicans and the other for nonconformists.²⁴ The site was not inspected by the Home Office (whose sanction was needed) until the end of March 1855 but its approval was received late in April. The designs of the Shrewsbury architect S. P. Smith were accepted in May. Tenders were sought for the necessary building works late in June. The plans of the burial board were heavily criticised on grounds of their expense at the vestries held at the end of August.²⁵

Planning for the cemetery provoked further conflicts between the Anglican and Dissenting interests. There were complaints that the dissenters were being allotted the best parts of the cemetery.²⁶ The *Shrewsbury Chronicle* carried a letter signed ‘A Dissenter’ complaining that they were being compelled to pay for a cemetery they did not want, having made provision for their own cemetery at Belle Vue. In the end the Dissenters were allocated 4½ out of 19½ acres in an area of the cemetery marked off from the remainder by a white paved line and stone markers.

Smith’s cemetery buildings were praised by contemporaries. Built in a perpendicular style, in Grinshill stone, they consisted first of a chapel range divided into two chapels, the larger one for Anglicans and the smaller for dissenters. (The Bishop of Hereford doubtless further antagonised dissenters by arguing that the roofline of their chapel should be lower than that of the Anglicans and when told that that was not possible, demanded a clear demarcation between the two chapels.²⁷) The two separate chapels were approached by covered walkways around a central space giving the sense of a monastic cloister. Hearses and the carriages of those attending the funerals drew up under a covered carriageway at the front of the building. On the roadside two lodges guarded the approach to the chapel and cemetery. A tower with

²⁴ SC 11 Aug. 1854.

²⁵ *Eddowes* 4, 25 May; 16 May; 27 June: SC 31 Aug. 1855.

²⁶ SC 4 Apr. 1856.

²⁷ SC 4 Apr. 1856.

spire 130 feet high was carefully positioned as though shared by the two chapels: it contained a bell. The assemblage of buildings remained largely intact (if apparently unused) in 2016.²⁸

The purchase of the cemetery and the erection of its buildings was financed by a loan of £13,505 on a 50-year term.²⁹ The cemetery was consecrated by the Bishop of Hereford on 26 November 1856 and the first burial took place on 5 December.³⁰ By the time of the abolition of burial board in 1895, some 20,267 people had been interred in the cemetery at an average rate of 533 per year.

The burial board was a victim of the Local Government Act 1894 which transferred the responsibilities of the out parishes to the new parish councils.³¹ This necessitated the reconstruction of the board as a joint committee of Shrewsbury and the surrounding parishes to which Shrewsbury nominated 12 of the 20 members. Three of the parishes had their own burial grounds and did not draw on Shrewsbury cemetery. By 1906 the joint committee was anxious to enlarge the cemetery and entered into negotiations to buy additional land, but realised that it was inequitable for Atcham, Bicton and Berrington to contribute to the development of a facility which their ratepayers did not use.³² An approach was made to the Local Government Board in October 1907 explaining the difficulties and suggesting reconstructing the joint board to exclude these parishes. The Local Government Board could not identify any solution to the problem and the answer finally adopted was to secure the abolition of the Joint Committee by the Shrewsbury Corporation Act of 1909 and the transfer the cemetery to the Corporation. It then became the burial ground for the town, Moele Brace, Bicton and the rural parish of St Alkmond.³³

The burial board had agreed in 1907 to buy some land from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Shrewsbury: it was 1909 before this was completed by the Borough Council.³⁴ The owner of other lands, E. W. Bather, was unwilling to sell all that the council sought, wishing to retain

²⁸ For a charming account of the cemetery, based around those buried there, see Francis, *Matter of Life and death*.

²⁹ Financial details may be found in DA5/292/1/2/2/1/1/11.

³⁰ Pevsner, p. 535; *Eddowes* 26 Nov. 1856 (which includes a full account of the buildings); *SC* 5 Dec. 1856.

³¹ DA5/292/1/3/2/1/1-15, 23.

³² *SC* 3 May 1907 and the complaints of Bicton, *SC* 19 June 1908.

³³ The problems are rehearsed in DA5/202/1/3/2/1; Report of the Burial Board meeting in *SC* 15 May 1908; Shrewsbury Corporation Act 1909, Part VI.

³⁴ *SC*, 3 May 12 July 1907, 12 Nov. 1909. This was the land to the west of the cemetery: see the map in Borough minutes 24 July 1933 opp. p. 202.

land which he saw as having future building potential. To strengthen his hand, he ran up a cottage ('Mushroom Cottage') to take advantage of the rule that the cemetery had to be 100 yards from a dwelling house. Bather gave evidence against the bill in the House of Lords and wrote a self-justificatory letter to the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*.³⁵

Bather appears to have succeeded in delaying the extension of the cemetery for a generation. In 1931 the cemetery Committee negotiated the acquisition of 2.3 acres from Major Bather (including Mushroom Cottage) which lay against the new by-pass. In 1933 they purchased a further 4¾ acres from Bather lying between the cemetery and the railway line. It was 1938 before plans to lay out the land acquired in 1909 and 1932 as an extension to the cemetery were brought forwards.³⁶ The addition to the cemetery was consecrated by the Bishop of Lichfield on 13 October 1939.³⁷ Further extensions between the 1854 cemetery and the railway line followed in 1974 and 1991.

Emstrey crematorium

As early as 1906 a correspondent in the *Wellington Journal* urged Shrewsbury to build a crematorium which would serve the neighbouring counties: he thought that it would cover its costs. In the fullness of time the Burial Board acted on his other suggestion, that they acquire the fields around the general cemetery so it could be extended.³⁸ Provision was made in the plans drawn up in 1938 for the cemetery extension for a crematorium and Garden of Remembrance.³⁹ The cemetery extension opened in the first weeks of the Second World War but by the end of the war there was a realisation that a crisis of space once again loomed. A report from the Cemetery Committee to the Borough Council in February 1946 reported that interments were running at a higher rate than anticipated, and the allocation of part of the new cemetery for servicemen's graves had reduced the area for civilians' graves. The provision which had been made in the 1938-9 extension for the future erection of a crematorium had not been proceeded with because of the war. The report pointed to the rising popularity of cremation and suggested that there was an unmet demand, with the bodies of Shrewsbury residents being taken to Birmingham for cremation. Whilst at this time the committee did not

³⁵ SC 14, 21 May 1909.

³⁶ Reports of the Cemetery Committee 20 Nov. 1931, 8 Apr. 1932, 00 Feb. 1933, 14 July 1933 (and attached map), 8 Apr. 1938.

³⁷ Photographs in SA.

³⁸ 6 Oct. 1906. For another letter advocating a Shrewsbury crematorium, SC 10 May 1907. In 1909 it was said that the council had not considered providing one. SC 8 Jan. 1909.

³⁹ Report of the Cemetery Committee, 8 Apr. 1938.

bring forwards firm proposals, it was agreed in principle that a crematorium should be erected in the future.⁴⁰

There seems to have been no urgency about this, perhaps because it was a low financial priority and it was 1949 before the Cemetery Committee made a proposal for a crematorium on a site off Berwick Lane and recommended that the site be safeguarded for this purpose.⁴¹ What had been a Borough initiative then became caught up in a larger strategic review of crematorium provision by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government: in late 1953 the minister decided that Shrewsbury Borough would be the lead authority for the provision of a crematoria in the county and called for plans and costings to be submitted for Ministerial approval. The Cemetery committee proposed to make a compulsory purchase order for the land off Berwick Road, but the council asked the committee to reconsider the appropriateness of the proposed location.⁴² The following year they returned with the suggestion that the crematorium be on a nine-acre site straggling the Borough boundary on London Road. This was agreed by the full council but drew public opposition on a number of grounds, including its proximity to schools, built and projected, its location in a largely residential district and anticipated traffic problems.⁴³ The proposal was the subject of a public enquiry held in December 1954 and ministerial permission, with minor conditions including screening by trees, was received in late 1955.⁴⁴ Permission to borrow £50,000 to fund the scheme was received in the summer of 1957 and building work began that autumn of 1957.⁴⁵ The building has a ‘dramatic “A” frame construction’: the body of the building is of brick with Westmorland slate roofs.⁴⁶ The opening ceremony, conducted by the Bishop of Lichfield, took place on 20 November 1958 and the building was opened for public use on 24 November. At the end of the first full year of operation, it was reported that 411 cremations had taken place, double the anticipated number.⁴⁷

In 2009, on the abolition of the district councils in Shropshire, ownership of the Crematorium and its site passed to the new Shropshire Council. In turn they entered into a management

⁴⁰ Report of the Cemetery Committee, 11 Feb. 1946.

⁴¹ Report of the Cemetery Committee, 10 Oct. 1949.

⁴² Report of the Cemetery Committee, 10 Nov. 1952, 9 Nov. 1953.

⁴³ Report of the Cemetery Committee, 8 Mar. 1954; 10 May 1954.

⁴⁴ Report of the Cemetery Committee, 11 Oct. 1954, 8 Nov. 1954, 12 Dec. 1955, 7 May 1956.

⁴⁵ Report of the Cemetery Committee, 29 July, 14 Oct. 1957

⁴⁶ Hilary J. Grainger, *Death Redesigned. British crematoria: History, architecture and landscape* (2005), pp. 476. The architects are never named, and may well have been the council’s own architects department.

⁴⁷ Report of the Cemetery Committee, 13 Oct. 1958, 11 Jan. 1960.

contract for 30 years in 2011 with Co-op Funeralcare. In 2016 the Co-op's interest was sold to a specialist Sutton Coldfield firm called Dignity PLC.⁴⁸ By this time about 1700 cremations per annum were being held at Emstrey. It was reported in 2014 that over the previous decade the parents of deceased infants had not received any ashes from the crematorium: the Council convened an enquiry into the crematorium's working practices which recommended changes both there and nationally.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Shropshire Star 31 May 2016 (online version); <https://shropshire.gov.uk/committee-services/documents/s12483/13%20Transfer%20of%20Emstrey%20Crematorium%20Contract.pdf> (paper prepared for the Shropshire Council cabinet, 13 July 2016) and <https://shropshire.gov.uk/committee-services/documents/s13153/26-09-16%20Scrutiny%20Report%20on%20Emstrey%20Crematorium%20v%202007-09-16.pdf> (paper prepared for Scrutiny Committee, 26 Sept. 2016) gives details of the arrangements.

⁴⁹ <http://shropshire.gov.uk/independent-inquiry-into-infant-cremations/inquiry-report/>

Table 00. Burial grounds in Shrewsbury, 1854

	Date of first interment	Number of burials
St Chad's parish	Antiquity	
Burial ground at the Old Church	Antiquity	6700 since 1813 ^a
Burial Ground at the New Church	Opened 1793	
Friend's Burial Ground, St John's Hill		
The Independent's burial ground, Swan-Hill	Opened 1779	328 since 1779
The Baptists Burial Ground, Dog-lane		About 80
E		
In St Mary's parish		
Burial ground at St Mary's church	Antiquity	2473 since 1813
The burial ground at St Michael's	Opened 1830	2793 since 1830
In St Julian's parish		
The old burial grounds at St Julian's church		1918 since 1813
The new burial ground at St Julian's church	[consecrated 1812] ^b	
The burial ground at Trinity church	Opened 1838	664 since 1838
The general cemetery at Coleham [Belle Vue General Cemetery]	[Opened 1852] ^b	
St Alkmond's parish		
The burial ground at St Alkmond's church	Antiquity	1541 since 1813
Holy Cross and St Giles parish		
The burial ground at St Giles church	Antiquity	1396 since 1813
The abbey cemetery	[1840]	20

Source:

'Report by J. Styrup Esq., M. D. in the burial grounds in Shrewsbury', pr. in W. Ranger, *Report to the General Board of Health ... on Shrewsbury* (1854), pp. 77-88.

Notes:

^a Styrup reports that the registers did not distinguish between the graveyards.

^b SA, P256/B/7/2/1-5.

^c See text.

Correction:

Rev. Debbie Martin reports that the first burial at the Swan Hill Congregational Church is actually 1768. Email 19 June 2017.