

6 Cemeteries: Remembering Places

*Camogli: si videro bare
smottare nell'acqua salmastra
discendere dal cimitero
per l'ultima danza scomposta.
[...]*¹

Whereas in the last chapter we focused on remote places in the Alps which are not permanently inhabited, in this chapter we discuss liminal places that are permanently located in settlements: places for the dead, which materialise the dividing line between the living and the dead.

6.1 Places for the dead

Attached to the Protestant church of Safien Talkirch, a village in Safiental, a valley in the Swiss Canton of Graubünden, a wall delimits the area of the cemetery (fig. 44). Gravestones, similar in size, regularly aligned emerge from the snow. This type of cemetery visually suggests the idea of people being equal in death, although in life they differed according to gender, age, education, profession, religious denomination, or familial and social background. The enclosure circumscribes the place of the dead and divides it from the village nearby, where the life of the inhabitants, most of them moun-

1 From Fabio Pusterla's poem *Ruina Belford* in the collection *Tremalume* (Pusterla 2022, 51).
»Camogli: coffins were seen / sliding into the salty water / descending from the cemetery / for the last disassembled dance.« Translation by the author.



Fig. 44: The church with its cemetery in Safien Talkirch, Canton of Graubünden, Switzerland. The gravestones are not identical, but similar in size and material. The wooden cross in the fourth row is temporary; after a year it will be replaced by a gravestone.

tain farmers or artisans, unfolds. The small gate attached to the church wall serves as a threshold between these distinct realms. This cemetery is still in use, with the size, material and style of the gravestones regulated by a communal law. Coffins and urns are put in single graves; alternatively, a collective tomb can be used, but only for ashes without an urn.²

This kind of cemetery located in a churchyard is typical today for many villages in the alpine valleys and rural regions. Formally, it belongs to a type of burial place that was common in many European countries until the modern era. The burial place in Safien Talkirch is, however, a modern cemetery regulated by the municipality. While the formal arrangement corresponds to a traditional Christian churchyard, the individual representation by means of a head-stone as well as the sense of order and rural idyll are typical features of a modern cemetery that were absent in a medieval burial site.³ While

2 The communal law can be downloaded here: https://gemeinde.safiental.ch/uploads/files/gemeinde-safiental_gesetz-bestattungs-friedhofwesen.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025).

3 For a description of the key elements of the layout of a graveyard in medieval times see Sörries 2005.

death as a biological phenomenon universally defines human life, the idea of mortality is embedded in social practices and is transformed and adapted according to the specific cultural context.⁴

In researching the interrelation between space, place and religion, funerary sites are particularly significant. They are delimited places in which diverse worldviews are made visible by means of material arrangements. Furthermore, as a place, the cemetery is characterised by a tension between the diversity of individuals interred there and death as a shared experience of human finitude. This chapter analyses negotiations involving diverse orientations, worldviews and practices in two different urban places dedicated to the dead, both located in the London Metropolitan area: the Victorian Highgate Cemetery and The National Covid Memorial Wall. While the former case study is centred on a cemetery founded in the 19th century which is still in use, the latter is a very recent case of materialising the memory of deceased people.

This exploration focuses on the role of material practices in designing and characterising places where the line between life and death is made visible and the memory of the dead is visualised by material things. The discussion of the two sites is introduced by a concise overview of the modern transformation of dealing with the dead, the introduction of communal cemeteries and their specific spatial traits within the urban fabric.

6.2 Modern cemeteries as shared places

The dead body represents the finitude of individual life and confronts a society with the necessity of dealing with the corpse and death. The deceased are placed in specific sites, which down the centuries have been adapted for the purpose. As inhabitants of those places, they also stand in relationship with the living; the sites for the dead mirror aspects of human society, particularly concepts of death, afterlife and the human body.

Drawing upon a concept of space understood as a relationship of emplacements, Michel Foucault considers the cemetery as a heterotopy. In his article

4 Benkel 2012, 7–11; Höpflinger / Müller 2022, particularly 33–44.

Des espaces autres (Different Spaces) published in 1984,⁵ Foucault focuses on specific places that are in a direct relationship with all other emplacements yet also question them:

But what interests me among all these emplacements are certain ones that have the curious property of being connected to all the other emplacements, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralize, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented [*réflechis*] by them.⁶

While utopias are imagined emplacements that are not located in real spaces, heterotopias are materialised and exist. Still, they share with utopias the quality of »suspending, neutralising or reversing« spatial and social relations. Heterotopias are places of contestation and subversion of a given social order:

There are also, and probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable.⁷

Michel Foucault characterises heterotopia as a spatial tension that can be found in all societies. However, depending on the context, it assumes different traits and functions, and it is always negotiated and transformed. Heterotopias are places where emplacements converge that usually do not coexist or are incompatible with each other.⁸

Burial sites are heterotopic because they bring together the whole web of places that characterise the society of the living by linking it directly with the dead. Furthermore, a gravestone, a tomb, or an entire cemetery can be

5 Foucault 1984. The essay is a written version of a conference paper presented in Tunisia in 1967.

6 Quotation from the English translation in Foucault 1998, 178.

7 Foucault 1998, 178.

8 Foucault 1984, 755–756.

interpreted as a contact zone between the society of living people and other imagined places beyond human time and space. According to Foucault, heterotopias are also heterochronias, since they bring different times that are discontinuous into relationship. Deceased people from different epochs inhabit burial sites, and different imaginations of afterlife time are materialised in cemeteries. In this way, in a cemetery different layers and qualities of time are superimposed.

Furthermore, heterotopia is permeated by a paradoxical relationship between being open and, at the same time, inaccessible. In modern cemeteries, for instance, a wall encloses the burial site: visitors can pass beyond the gate and access the cemetery, but they cannot cross the line between life and death. Eventually, heterotopias question the general organisation of a society. A cemetery mirrors a given society, reproducing ideas of equality or difference, social structures, and power hierarchies. Moreover, it represents the finite and ephemeral site of individual and social life, annihilating at the same time what it mirrors.⁹

According to the Austrian philosopher Thomas Macho, death is an »opaque, impenetrable phenomenon« – that cannot be fully comprehended.¹⁰ While the finitude of human life is a universal experience, ideas of death and mortality are culturally formed and negotiated in specific ways in different socio-political contexts. Funerary sites are places in which the meaning-making processes facing mortality and the tension between death and life take place.¹¹ The burial site inscribes into a place a phenomenon that remains abstract and displaced.¹² By gathering the bodies of the dead, the cemetery, as a het-

⁹ Foucault 1984.

¹⁰ Macho 2000, 91.

¹¹ Barloewen 2000; Benkel 2012, 7–11; on the influence of the dead upon cultural production see e.g. Belting 2000. For an excellent overview of religion and death see Höpflinger / Müller 2022.

¹² Benkel describes the social function of a cemetery as follows: »Indem er [der Friedhof] die ›Ortslosigkeit‹ von Tod und Sterblichkeit verhindert, wehrt er die Gefahr ab, dass das Todesbewusstsein und vor allem der Umgang mit Todesfällen nach rein subjektsspezifischen Lösungen verlangen. Der Friedhof bekräftigt, dass der Tod tatsächlich ein kollektives Einzelfallproblem ist« (2012, 8). By preventing the »placelessness« of death and mortality, the cemetery reinforces the fact that death is indeed a collective, rather than just an individual problem.

erotic place, bridges the gap between the materiality of the corpse and the absence of the deceased person.

These general reflections on death and funerary places arise from a comparative approach to diverse cultures in history and the present time. Death as a universal phenomenon delimits life, but the historical and cultural forms of dealing with it not only vary but are in constant transformation. Before focusing on two selected case studies of urban places in which the relationship with death and the dead is materialised in spatial practices, it will be beneficial to offer a short recapitulation of the main changes in dealing with burial sites in Europe since the early modern age.¹³ However, in trying to concisely highlight some key developments, we need to keep in mind that such transformations were not linear or uniform, given that the cultural history of burial places in Europe is discontinuous and rooted in very diverse contexts.¹⁴

In medieval times, the dead were usually buried in churches or in churchyards, the consecrated territory marked out from the normal mundane place of the village or the town. According to dominant Christian values, the institution of the church conveyed a worldview in which the afterlife was organised according to the conduct of life and provided practices to achieve salvation. In such a religious worldview, which included afterlife domains and the possibility of eternal life and resurrection, the inhumation of the body was considered as a crucial point in preserving the identity of a person through all the processes of the afterlife transformations.¹⁵ Furthermore, the tomb was placed in a direct spatial and symbolic proximity to the church and the saints, which were often present in the form of relics, to facilitate the intercession between the human and the divine sphere. These burial practices were accessible only for members of the community. Other people who did not share the same faith or who were excluded from the community, such as those who died by suicide or execution, murderers, or people in censured professions, like prostitutes, were buried elsewhere, usually in mass graves.

13 For an overview see e.g. Fischer 1996; van den Breemer 2021, 75–109. On transformations in dealing with death see e.g. Ariès 1977.

14 Fischer / Herzog 2005.

15 Medieval Christian representations of the afterlife domains are discussed on pages 45–46 of this volume. For a description of the relationship between the biological and the social dead and the role the body plays in this dialectic see Höpflinger / Müller 2022, 78–91.

In churchyards, the graves were not arranged in a precise order and often the corpses were interred on different levels in the same ground. Only important people who could financially afford it had a gravestone with an inscription on it. Otherwise, the dead were inhumed anonymously.¹⁶

In early modern times, following the Reformation, new ideas emerged about the interaction between life on earth and otherworldly spheres, as well as new approaches to the human body, illness, and health that had a long-lasting impact on the concepts of death and, consequently, burial practices.¹⁷ The focus on the burial was shifted from the deceased's participation in salvation to the bereaved and their relationship to the deceased and death. Down the centuries, under the influence of new scientific approaches to the human body and the development of modern medicine, the very idea of burial sites underwent a radical change.¹⁸

An increasing interest in the mechanism of diffusion of diseases and so-called theories of miasmas – basically the idea that illness was transmitted from the dead to the living by means of the contagious stench produced by the decomposition of the corpse – led to churchyards being perceived as smelly, unhygienic places.¹⁹ In many European cities, industrialisation had attracted workers from peripheral areas; this population growth combined with a high mortality rate, led to an increase in deaths. The graveyards proved too small for the needs of urban areas. Because of the lack of place, burial practices were increasingly perceived as dangerous and unfitting. Furthermore, corpses were even stolen from graves and sold to medical schools for anatomy studies.

Gradually communal cemeteries run by municipalities or private companies were introduced. They were designed as representative places outside the town's centre; in opposition to the overcrowded churchyards, the new cemeteries were designed as delimited areas with individualised, sometimes monumental tombs, trees and flowers, and above all fresh air.²⁰ A cemetery became a place for remembering the deceased person, and along with

16 Sörries 2005.

17 See e.g. Happe 1991, with a particular focus on the developments in Germany. See also Happe 2003a.

18 Happe 2005; Sörries 2007.

19 Happe 2003b.

20 Winter 2007.

it, to face death as an individual destiny, and as a place of imagination and reflection about death and the afterlife. As the sociologist Thorsten Benkel summarises, in the face of death the cemetery became a »topographically framed signifying construction«.²¹ The introduction of the cemetery as a communal infrastructure was realised by means of diverse forms of regulation, in some countries it was enforced by laws forbidding the traditional burial places and with the closure of existing graveyards.²²

Modern cemeteries were embedded in a multifaceted interaction between urban transformation and the individual and collective challenge facing death. Their layouts and the practices performed in these new burial sites mirrored the transformations of modern cities between the 16th and the 19th centuries.²³ Moreover, they materialised a transformation in the religious interpretation of mortality and the dead body. In contrast to the churchyards, where only members of the religious community were interred, the cemetery offered a dignified burial to people from diverse denominations, religions, cultural and social backgrounds, in urban areas characterised by mobility and plurality. A significant illustration of this development is offered by the *Cimitero acattolico* (literally: non-Catholic cemetery) in Rome. This field in the city's outskirts was used since the 17th century as a burial place for people who did not belong to the Roman-Catholic Church, the vast majority of them being foreigners. In the course of time, it became the monumental cemetery that can be visited today. Modern cemeteries accommodated a variety of burial practices and tombs, where individual differences and social plurality were represented by means of spatial practices.²⁴

Along with the introduction and the consolidation of modern cemeteries, new forms of dealing with the dead body and, consequently, with death emerged. By the end of the 19th century, cremation began to be practiced.

21 Benkel 2012, 42: »[...] ein topographisch gerahmtes Sinnkonstrukt«. Translation by the author.

22 See as an example the city of Munich. All the graveyards in the city centre were closed in 1788. An already existing burial site in the south was developed into a central cemetery, today the *Alte Südfriedhof*. See Denk 2007.

23 See e.g. Arbeitsgemeinschaft Friedhof und Denkmal Zentralinstitut und Museum für Sepulkralkultur Kassel 2003; Denk / Ziesemer 2007; Christ / González Gutiérrez 2022.

24 Leisner 2003.

More generally, strategies were endorsed to tackle death as an individual and collective problem in an efficient way, by means of new technologies.²⁵

These notes on historical changes in locating the dead and organising new burial places principally highlight major trajectories. On a local scale, the transformations were manifold and depended on the specific circumstances. Overall, the emergence of new places to bury the dead also entailed a radical transformation in mourning practices and of the relationship between individuals, the collective and the dead.

The modern idea of the cemetery is still dominant today in Europe, yet, social changes in approaching death, the deceased individual and burial practices continue to influence and adapt the use and the arrangement of this heterotopic place. For example, the increasing desire for anonymous burials or the request to disperse the ashes of the dead body in a natural environment have led to the creation of new areas within cemeteries in order to respond to those needs and ideas of remembering the deceased. Moreover, in a society with a greater mobility and plurality, diverse religious prescriptions in dealing with death have to be accommodated and cemetery rules changed. For instance, the request for areas for members of Muslim communities where various Islamic burial rituals can be enacted has been negotiated following lengthy debates in many European cities.²⁶

Burial sites, particularly in urban settlements, are places of negotiation of individual and social identity. They interact with ideas about human beings, the meaning of human life and the relationship between the individual, the collective, and death. As we will explore more deeply in the following case studies, the strategies to materialise the presence of the deceased may vary. Nonetheless, the very idea of visualising the dead body by material and spatial practices can be understood as a demarcation of the liminal experience of the absence and presence of an individual and the collective society of the dead.

25 Fischer 2003b.

26 On the transformations of burial sites and practices since the 20th century see e.g. Sörries 2003; van den Breemer 2021; Höpflinger / Müller 2022, 137–158.

6.3 Highgate Cemetery and its transformation over the centuries

Highgate Cemetery is a prominent example of a modern cemetery still in use.²⁷ Situated north of London, on a hill in the village of Highgate, on Swain's Lane, it was opened in 1839 as the »Cemetery of St. James at Highgate« by the London Cemetery Company, a commercial, joint-stock company. Its mandate was regulated by a *Burial Act* in 1852.²⁸ In response to the high demand for burial plots, the cemetery was enlarged towards the east in 1854. Following the opening of Kensal Green in 1833 and West Norwood in 1839, Highgate Cemetery became the third of seven so-called »Magnificent Seven«, Victorian cemeteries built in London in the 19th century to accommodate new demand for burial sites in a growing urban agglomeration.²⁹

These Victorian burial places, designed as garden parks, can be contextualised in the wave of similar transformations all over Europe summarised above.³⁰ Even more than in other cities, in London, then the largest capital in the world, the lack of space in churchyards was a major issue. In the 19th century the city was expanding very fast; between 1801 and 1840 the population had doubled.³¹ Driven by the industrial revolution, both the population and the death rates increased sharply which caused an increased demand for burial places in already over-crowded churchyards. Hygienic concerns, the assumption that the »miasmas« arising from the corpses were causing epidemics as well as a new conception of the dead body as endangering the dense population were further important factors which stimulated a change in dealing with the dead. Progress in science and medicine provided arguments in favour of displacing the corpses into suburban parks. As already

27 This chapter is based on my previous study published in Pezzoli-Olgiati 2020c.

28 Burial Act of 01.07.1852, Schedule (B). This Burial Acts also prohibited further burials in the churchyards in London. The text can be downloaded here: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1852/85/pdfs/ukpga_18520085_en.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025).

29 These three named cemeteries were followed in 1840 by Abney Park, Brompton and Nunhead and, a year later, by Tower Hamlets. For an introduction to the London Victorian Cemetery see Curl 1972 and 1975; Barnard 1990; Beach 2013; Rutherford 2008. The volume edited by Mäder / Saviello / Scolari in 2020 explores many facets of Highgate Cemetery from its foundation until today.

30 Rugg 2008. On the role of nature in a Victorian Cemetery see Jeffers 2020a.

31 Jeffers 2020b, 82–85.

mentioned above, at the same time, the scientific exploration of the body, had stimulated a greater demand for dead bodies used for dissection, which encouraged so-called »body snatchers«, who sold corpses stolen from graves to academic institutions.³²

Furthermore, in a plural society with a diverse population, the monopoly of the Church of England over burials contributed to dissatisfaction in many groups in civil society. Non-conformists were denied appropriate funeral rituals and burial sites. The commercial cemetery companies, by contrast, could provide places for performing rituals and arranging graves according to individual needs and preferences.³³

With the *Burial Act* of 1852, London churchyards were definitively closed.³⁴ The new commercial park cemeteries were designed and built as places in a natural environment with fresh air, promoting health, which were morally uplifting and aesthetically pleasing.³⁵ They addressed diverse religious and social groups, making areas available for specific denominations and plots at different prices.³⁶ The lush nature of the Victorian cemetery resulted from the entanglement of gardening and architectural design, which was influenced by imaginations of Arcadia, the Elysian fields, or even Ancient Egypt, inspired by the history of religion.³⁷ The anthropologist Paola von Wyss-Giacosa recapitulates the role of the garden in the Victorian cemeteries as follows:

The new cemeteries offered a liminal space animated by the timeless quality of nature perpetually renewing itself; they created attractive public places, thus the implicit argument, in which the performativity of nature would help ease the pain of the bereaved, supporting their

32 Jeffers 2020b.

33 Sarah Rutherford (2008, 13–23) emphasises that religious motifs were paramount in the creation of new burial places in England: »The earliest English garden cemeteries were set up primarily for religious motives rather than reasons of health. The first cemetery in England, the Rosary in Norwich, was set up by a dissenting clergyman, Thomas Drummond, in 1819, using his own money. It was non-denominational and its 5 acres offered space to Non-conformists and Anglicans alike, a great innovation« (13). See also Curl 1972, 86–103; Meller 1994.

34 Walvin 1982, Jeffers 2020b.

35 Wyss-Giacosa 2020; Saviello 2020.

36 Rutherford 2008, 5. On the importance of a decent burial for the working class in the 19th century see Walvin 1982, especially 353–357.

37 Rutherford 2008, 13–23 and Saviello 2020.



Fig. 45: *Highgate Cemetery 1841*, with a view of London, wood engraving printed on a contemporary postcard.

common hope for an eternal peace of the dead, while at the same time inviting visitors to enjoy the beautiful landscape.³⁸

Highgate Cemetery was designed as a stunning garden with wonderful views of the city and exclusive burial sites (fig. 45). It was planned by Stephen Geary (1797–1854), an architect and civil engineer, entrepreneur, and founder of the London Cemetery Company. The cemetery was built in partnership with the landscape gardener David Ramsey (1795–1852) and the architect and surveyor James Bunstone Bunning (1802–1863),³⁹ who was also a keen antiquary and designed the underground parts of the burial complex. The Bishop of London consecrated the area dedicated to Anglicans on 20 May 1839. Two further acres were provided for the burials of Dissenters, members of other religious groups, agnostics, and atheists. Overall, this older part of the cemetery encompassed 17 acres (7 ha). The two unequal sections of the orig-

³⁸ Wyss-Giacosa 2020, 312.

³⁹ For the biography and achievements of the founders see Curl 1972.

inal cemetery were unobtrusively divided by trees that screened any direct visual contact with the Non-conformist plots.

The cemetery entrance consisted of a building encompassing two chapels, symmetrically built on the left and right of the entrance: the first for the members of the Anglican Church and the other for Non-conformists. Fifteen years after its opening, once the extension on the east part with an additional 19 acres (7.7 ha) had been completed, the cemetery company installed innovative technology, an underground hydraulic lift, for transporting the coffins across Swain's Lane, the street dividing Highgate Cemetery in two parts.⁴⁰ Highgate Cemetery became a fashionable place for remembering the dead equipped with the latest inventions of the 19th century.

Highgate Cemetery was very well received; it became popular and praised for its quality and beauty.⁴¹ The positive reactions to the burial site had been anticipated by advertising campaigns and media reports circulating before the opening of the cemetery. In *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, a weekly magazine published in London since 1822, the foundation of the London Cemetery Company was announced on 15 September 1838 with an illustrated description aimed at reassuring the upper-class inhabitants of Highgate who may have been sceptical of having a burial ground close to their villas (fig. 46). The magazine stated that the task of constructing the garden and the architecture of the cemetery had been given to the most distinguished experts and that the new cemetery would add value to Highgate:

that is one of the most beautiful and picturesque spots in the vicinity of the metropolis, commanding, not only a view of the giant city, but of many miles of the country beyond it.⁴²

40 Curl 1975, 25–26; Barker / Gay 1984, 7–20.

41 The cemetery was reviewed enthusiastically in various publications, see Curl 1972, 92–94. As an example of a report of the time see the issue of *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* from 21 December 1839, 490.

42 *The Mirror* 1838a, 178.

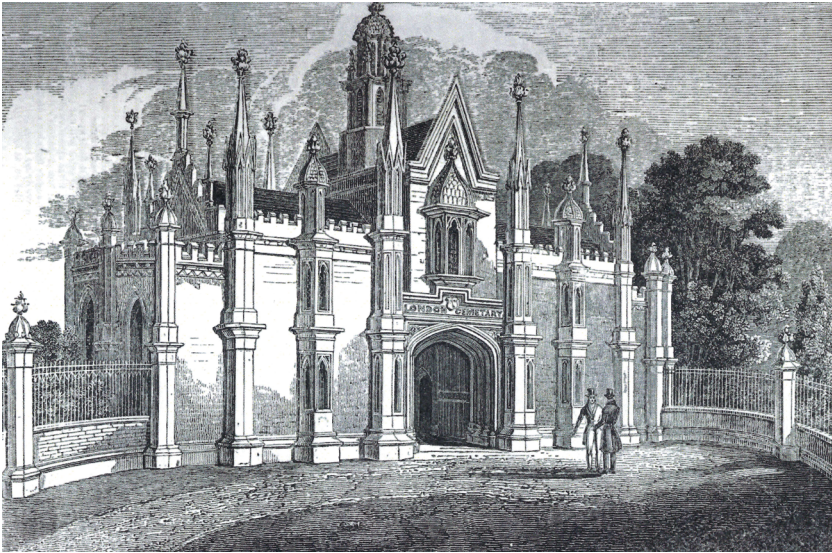


Fig. 46: Illustration of the entrance to Highgate Cemetery with the chapels for Conformists and Non-conformists as depicted in *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* on 15 September 1838.

Later, on 3 November of the same year, once the buildings were completed, they were favourably reviewed in *The Mirror*, praised as an improvement to the London area:

We understand that the company intend commencing cemeteries in the eastern and southern parts of the metropolis, of fifty acres each; and if the architect, Mr. Geary, and the landscape gardener, Mr. Ramsay, perform their several works with as much taste, in appropriate architecture and beauty of design, as they have displayed at Highgate, they will confer additional honour on themselves, by further ornamenting the suburbs of London with those peculiarly useful and interesting establishments; and though the beauty or gloom of the place of sepulture can make no difference to the departed, it is consolatory to the minds of the survivors to be enabled to visit the tombs of relatives and friends, without being disgusted with the revolting scenes

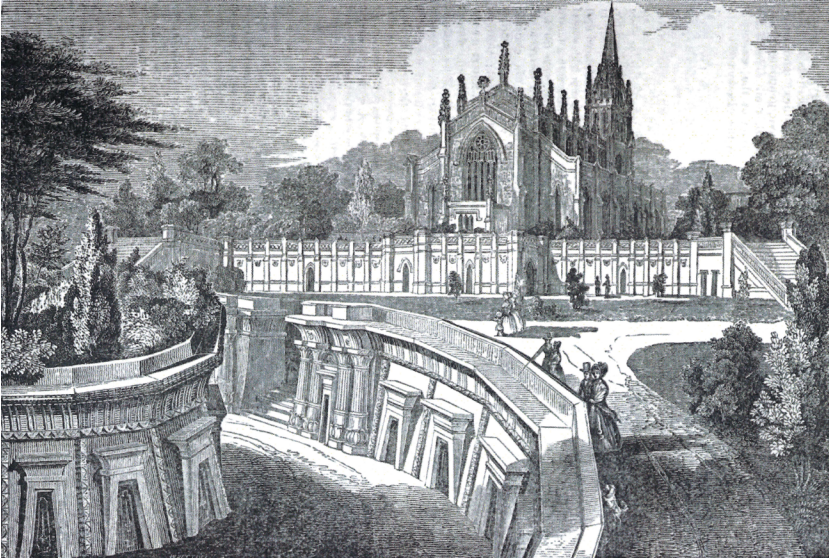


Fig. 47: View of the Egyptian catacombs and the Cedar of Lebanon, with the church of St. Michael in the background of the cemetery as printed in the *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* on 3 November 1838.

that are so continually recurring in the over-crowded and gloomy churchyards of the metropolis.⁴³

Illustrations of the stunning sites underline the positive impression of the author (figs. 47 and 48). In the text quoted above, the change in the attitude towards cemeteries is made very explicit: the burial site no longer addresses the dead, but the living, affording them an aesthetic, healthy, and uplifting experience while visiting the remains of deceased people.

⁴³ *The Mirror* 1838b, 291.

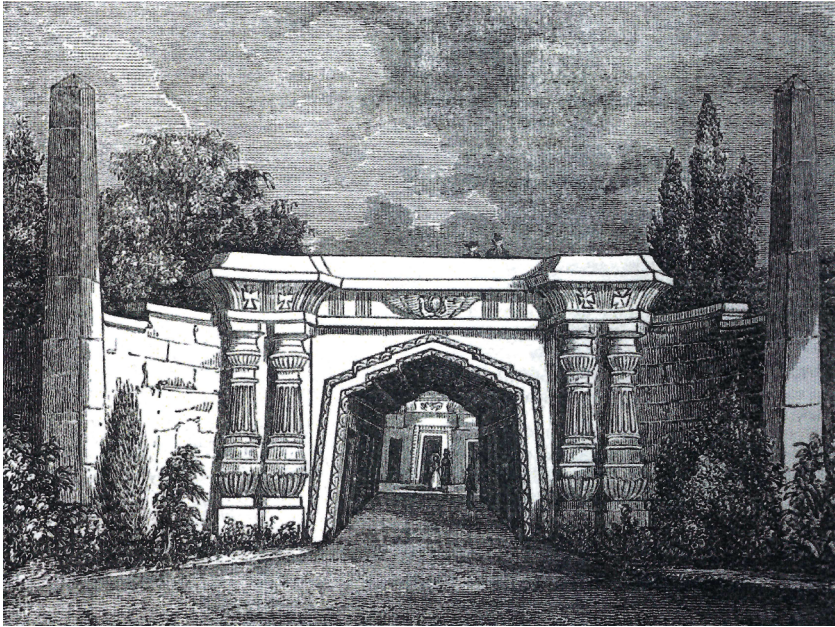


Fig. 48: The entrance gate to The Egyptian Avenue as printed in *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* on 3 November 1838.

Soon the Cemetery became a destination not only for the bereaved, but also visitors. With a mix of references ranging from Gothic to Ancient Egyptian buildings, which were very much *en vogue* in the Victorian era, Highgate Cemetery became an attraction. In 1865 William Justyne published the first *Guide to Highgate Cemetery*. In the introduction, the cemetery is described as follows:

Highgate Cemetery is situated on the southern slope of Highgate Hill, and close beneath the picturesque church whose lofty spire, towering above the topmost trees, reflects the first glimmering light of morning, and the last lingering rays of evening. No Cemetery near London can boast so many natural beauties. The irregularity of the ground, rising in terraces, the winding paths leading through long avenues of cool shrubbery and marble monuments, and the groups of majestic trees casting broad shadows below, contribute many natural charms to this solemn region. In the genial summer time, when the birds are

singing blithely in their leafy recesses, and the well-cared-for graves are dazzling with the varied hues of beautiful flowers, there is a holy loveliness upon this place of death, as though kind angels hovered about it, and quickened fair Nature with their presence, in love for the good souls whose tenantless bodies repose there.⁴⁴

The guide contrasts the idyllic description of the western part of Highgate with the previous, miserable conditions in churchyards:

The ancient churches of London – venerable relics of olden piety – which survive to witness the growth of this great Babylon, and stand like hoary sentinels in the midst of the surging flood of life that rolls along its echoing streets from earliest dawn to almost dawn again, were once surrounded by quiet grounds where the green grass nodded in the sunshine over the graves of citizens. Those sacred spots were passed with reverence then! Now they are blocked in, narrowed, and in many instances have totally disappeared before the advancing tide of brick and mortar. They sturdily resisted encroachments, and long after the sunshine had been excluded and all vegetation gone, they were used for purposes of burial. The unpleasant truth, however, that the city burial vaults and grounds were becoming so many sources of death-dealing pestilence gradually forced itself on public attention, and at last became too apparent for even the respectable blindness of official routine; so after years of procrastination, and many violent controversies with those individual interests which always impede a social reform, the solemn old places have been closed, and the advantages of rural cemeteries recognised by every class of society.⁴⁵

44 Justyne 1865, 7.

45 Justyne 1865, 12–13.

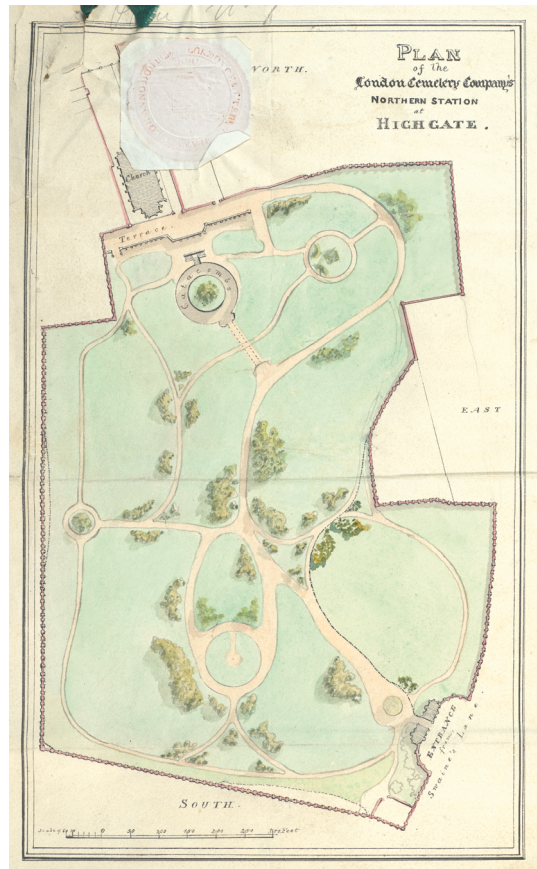


Fig. 49: Plan of Highgate Cemetery as a garden from 1839.

After vividly depicting London as a Babylonian, restless place and the unpleasant churchyards within the city, the author invites his readers to a promenade that starts by the principal gate in Swain's Lane, then goes to the colonnade standing in front of the entrance chapel. By ascending the flight of stairs that leads to the higher avenue, Justyne takes the Circular Road, and finally reaches the Egyptian Catacombs, graciously disposed around the Cedar of Lebanon. On his way, the author describes selected gravestones including their inscriptions, adding impressions of the overwhelming natural elements, the hymns and poems, describing impressive monuments, recalling

famous personalities buried there.⁴⁶ The suggested walk takes the reader to the Dissenter's area:

The chestnut-tree to which we have alluded is one of a long, stately row which separates the Church of England ground from that of the Dissenting portion of the community.⁴⁷

Along the path, William Justyne further comments on selected funerary monuments and the people they remember, passing by the Lebanon Catacombs, also for Non-conformists, and eventually concludes the tour at its starting point. »Advertisements« for cemeterial items such as monuments, marbles, tombs, railings (with drawings) and funeral companies are added at the end of the booklet, which also contain a foldable map of the site. This first guide highlights a radical transformation in the perception of the cemetery that becomes a recommended destination for an excursion in a quiet, enjoyable, restful landscape (fig. 49).⁴⁸

During the 20th century, Highgate declined. Over the decades, the well-tended garden became a wild woodland, with the growing vegetation invading and jeopardising monuments and graves. In an article published in 1975, the architectural historian and architect James Stevens Curl describes Highgate Cemetery's state of preservation in these words:

The general state of the cemetery is absolutely lamentable, and the cemetery company, which was taken over by a body known as United Cemeteries Limited, subsidiary of Raybourne Holdings, has not maintained the cemetery adequately. Vandalism has played its part.⁴⁹

In the same year, a trust to ensure the preservation of Highgate Cemetery was founded. The Friends of Highgate Cemetery pursue the following goals: first, the preservation of Highgate Cemetery as a »place of historic and other interest and beauty«, considering not only the architectural heritage, but

46 On the role of poetry and hymns in Highgate Cemetery and, more generally, on Victorian ideas of a »good death« see Ryan 2020.

47 Justyne 1865, 45.

48 Wyss-Giacosa 2020; Saviello 2020.

49 Curl 1975, 27. See also Barker / Gay 1984, 18–20.

also the natural dimension of this human-made site; second »to permit the Cemetery to be used as a public burial ground«; third securing »repair, restoration and preservation of the Cemetery for the public benefit«. ⁵⁰ Overall, until today, in the western and eastern part of Highgate Cemetery around 170,000 people have been buried. However, the number of burials has declined since the middle of the 20th century. ⁵¹

The meaning of the cemetery has been transformed during its history: Highgate cemetery is not only a burial site, but also a tourist destination, ⁵² a place for observing flora and fauna, ⁵³ vampires and ghosts, ⁵⁴ a popular stage for films and performances, and a setting often quoted in literature and other media. ⁵⁵ The cemetery is also a destination for »pilgrimages« to the graves of famous people, above all to the tomb of Karl and Jenny Marx in the eastern part. ⁵⁶

The Friends of Highgate, seeking to secure a long-lasting plan to restore and upgrade the cemetery, organised an international competition in 2021 to provide a masterplan, which was won by Gustafson, Porter and Bowman (landscape project) and Hopkins Architects (architectural project). ⁵⁷

6.4 Materialising the presence and absence of the dead

From its foundation in 1839 until today, the question of providing a burial place for diverse social and religious communities and individuals has characterised the planning, realisation and preservation of Highgate Cemetery. Over the decades, besides being a place for the dead and their remembrance, further activities have developed such as walking in an idyllic park and visiting tombs and monuments of famous personalities. The cemetery

50 <https://highgatecemetery.org/about/the-friends>. The rules for burials and the conditions for purchasing a lot are published on <https://highgatecemetery.org/burials> (accessed on 26 August 2025).

51 See Bulmer 2014, 48.

52 Mäder 2020.

53 Jeffers 2020a.

54 Höpflinger 2020.

55 Penke 2020.

56 Bertschinger 2020; Scolari 2020.

57 <https://highgatecemetery.org/future/competitions>; <https://www.gp-b.com/highgate-cemetery>; <https://www.hopkins.co.uk> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

is also a heritage site that needs huge efforts not only to ensure its continued functioning as a cemetery, but also for preserving it as an historic landscape and architectural site, and a remarkable space for flora and fauna in a densely populated urban area.

Drawing on these observations, in the following pages we will discuss selected graves from different eras that illustrate how a plurality of religious and other worldviews and belongings have been negotiated and promoted down the centuries in Highgate Cemetery. The tombs that can be seen today in this Victorian cemetery are often comprised of a gravestone with epitaphs, bas-reliefs, diverse kinds of images, sculptures or very complex mausoleums. Some graves are plain, others sophisticated, depending on the means of the people who commissioned them and the fashion of the different epochs. Despite all the differences, one element characterises all the tombs: they materialise in a specific place the presence of a dead body. In this context, the materiality of the grave is to be understood as a spatial practice in which the body of the living person visiting the cemetery and the (invisible) body of the deceased are involved in a relationship by means of representation.⁵⁸

Figure 50 shows tombs in the eastern part of the cemetery with grave-stones from different times, in various styles, designs, materials, and sizes: diverse types of crosses, angels, pyramids, mourning figures or sober tombstones with inscriptions, some of them with floral ornaments, are placed very close to one another. Daffodils, ivy, and older trees are an important part of the composition; from the beginning real and represented vegetation were part of the concept of this garden cemetery. However, the woodland in fig. 50 does not correspond to the standards of the London Cemetery Company for a well-tended garden, as it used to be in Victorian times, but can be perceived as a tangible sign of the transformation the site has undergone over the years: the whole spatial arrangement and the relationship between architectural and landscape elements convey the historical dimension of the site.

58 On the role of materiality in performing memory see e.g. Assmann 2010.



Fig. 50: Graves in the east part of Highgate Cemetery today.

Notwithstanding the differences, the burial complex locates the presence of the dead as a homogeneous community. Within the bounded area of the two parts of the cemetery, mortality is represented as a shared human destiny by means of the materiality of the tombs.

The presence of the dead in the cemetery is ambiguous: the gravestone refers to the invisible remains of people from different centuries, recalling some unique attributes according to the habit of a specific time and social context, such as the name, the date of birth and death, the profession, or the family relationships. Sometime the affiliation to a religious community, a political party, or a nation is explicitly represented by symbols and inscriptions. Furthermore, in the eastern part, people sharing a political or national affiliation are buried in the same area.

The gravestones materialise the threshold between the domain of the living and the realm of the dead, and, depending on the worldviews of the deceased and their relatives or friends, and the visitor to the cemetery, it may also mark the passage between the present world and otherworldly dimension of the afterlife. Moreover, the tomb is, at the same time, a physical spatial extension, a delimited ground with peculiar traits that stands in



Fig. 51: The family vault of Sir Benjamin Hawes K.C.B., who died in 1862, in which Anglican and Non-conformist members of his family were buried together but on different sides of the building, as indicated by two inscriptions. Highgate Cemetery, west part.

a relationship with other graves, the paths of the cemetery, and the natural environment. At the same time, the grave results from a precise planning process. The location within the burial site, the material elements composing the tomb, the use of ornaments, visual representations, or epitaphs, as well as the combination with vegetal elements are arranged according to a layout aimed at highlighting specific aspects of the life of the buried individual and the practices of remembering the social context, within the rules of the cemetery operator. Finally, the graves condense multilayered symbolic representations, referring to the life of the dead person, her familial and social position, and her worldview.

Considering the interaction of these spatial dimensions, the burial place stimulates a diversity of meaning-making processes, involving visitors in a variety of interpretations. The entanglements between the corpse of the deceased, the body of the person in front of a grave and the imagination arising in the perception of the grave are the crucial elements in the interpretation process that takes place within the cemetery. A relative or a friend has a different perception of the same site compared to a tourist, or a scholar conducting research on burial grounds. Still, in all interpretations that may occur in the encounter between such diverse bodies, the ambiguity of

the presence and absence of the dead is constitutive. Let us explore the heterotopic spatial quality of the cemetery by looking at a few selected graves.

The vault of Sir Benjamin Hawes (1797–1862) is located in the western part, in the avenue leading from the entrance gate towards the Egyptian Catacombs by keeping to the right (fig. 51).⁵⁹ The iron gate contains popular Victorian symbols of mortality, such as the inverted torch (in the upper part) representing the end of life, with a flame, referring to the continuity of the soul after death, or, in the panels in the lower part, the winged hourglass, representing the passing of time.⁶⁰ An inscription indicates the name of the owner and the use of the site for a family:

FAMILY VAULT OF
SIR BENJAMIN HAWES K.C.B.⁶¹

Above, a lunette contains a bas-relief depicting snowdrops: the first flowers blossoming at the end of winter were a symbol of hope and consolation.⁶² On the edge of the lunette, a quotation from 1 Corinthians 15:36 is painted in black capitals:

THAT WHICH THOU SOWEST IS NOT QUICKENED, EXCEPT
TO DIE

⁵⁹ Meller 1994, 164; Boase 2013.

⁶⁰ Bulmer 2014, 28–29.

⁶¹ K.C.B. stands for »Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath«. It is a British chivalric order introduced by King George I in 1725 conferred for exemplary military or civil merits. See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Most-Honourable-Order-of-the-Bath> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

⁶² In Victorian time, flowers were promoted as a precisely coded language, which was explained in magazines and illustrated booklets. In an issue from March 1883 of *Golden Hours. A Monthly Magazine for Family and General Reading* published in London since 1864, in an article dedicated to spring flowers, the snowdrop is described as follows: »When the heart of man has been saddened by the gloom of the winter; when the north wind whistles, and the hoar frost clothes the verdure-despoiled trees; when the earth is covered with her carpet of snow; when not even the bold Crocus dares show its head; and when the more brilliant flowers are in their winter's sleep, – then are the pearly flowers of the Snowdrop a symbol of hope, an emblem of consolation, an assurance of coming spring.« (*Spring Flowers* 1883, 165). On the language of flowers see also Seaton 1995.



Fig. 52: The gravestone on the tomb of Mary Ann Brown who died aged 25 on 11 August 1883, Highgate Cemetery, east part.

The New Testament text reinforces the floral symbolism and links it to an explicit religious tradition; referring to resurrection, it explains rising from the dead using the image of the seed that has to die in order to generate a new plant. Inscriptions symmetrically placed on either side of the gate and highlighted by indentations in the wall reads »CONSECRATED« (on the left) and »NON CONSECRATED« (on the right), pointing out that the vault has been built over the boundary between the areas for Anglicans and Non-conformists. Through its austere layout and the strong symmetry, the building (which has traces of further inscriptions damaged by the weather) suggests a sense of equality between the remains of the people laid on the two different sides of a denominational border.

In the eastern part of the cemetery a tomb remembers Mary Ann Brown (fig. 52). From the gravestone we learn that she was »the beloved wife of Walter Brown, departed this life August 11th 1883, aged 25.« The epitaph states:



Fig. 53: The tomb of Harry Thornton (1883–1918), Highgate Cemetery, east part.

THE CUP WAS BITTER THE STING SEVERE
TO PART WITH ONE I LOVED SO DEAR
MY TROUBLES WERE GREAT I WILL NOT COMPLAIN
BUT TRUST IN CHRIST TO MEET AGAIN.

In the gravestone arrangement, the suffering of being divided from the beloved woman and the hope of meeting her again in Christ is combined with the motif of the clasped hands, a recurrent symbol at Highgate Cemetery, which expresses the desire of bodily contact between the living and the dead, anticipating a reunion in an imagined otherworldly place and time. The hands are framed with the sentence: »WE SHALL MEET AGAIN«; carved in stone, they refer to the tension between the absence of the living body and its presence in a transcendent afterlife.

The tomb of the pianist Harry Thornton (1883–1918),⁶³ who died during the influenza pandemic, expresses the tension between presence and absence

63 <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/tomb-of-william-henry-harry-thornton-1883-1918-312096> (accessed on 6 August 2025). Originally, a portrait relief was part of the grave.



Fig. 54: The grave of Patrick Caulfield (1936–2005) in the east part of Highgate Cemetery.

with a sculpture enacting the contrast between music and deadly silence (fig. 53). A grand piano made of stone refers to his artistic talent and profession. The burial sculpture does not reveal his age, only his family name »THORNTON«, placed over the keyboard. On the left side, an epitaph quotes from *Madame Butterfly*, an opera by Giacomo Puccini that premiered in Milan in 1904 and was soon translated into English.⁶⁴

SWEET TH[O]U ART SLEEPIN[G]
CRADLED ON MY HEART
S[A]FE IN GOD'S KEEPIN[G]
WHILE I MUST WEEP APART
PUCCINI

⁶⁴ The quotation is taken from the final aria of the opera (Act III, second part). Butterfly, the protagonist of the drama, says goodbye to her son before committing suicide.

In this tomb, the reference to religion is mediated by the opera quotation. The grand piano is open, however, no sound resonates in the cemetery. The boundary between life and death is articulated by means of an acoustic image.

A comparison with a more recent gravestone highlights a further way to materialise the same tension between absence and presence (fig. 54).

The grave of the painter and printer Patrick Caulfield (1936–2005)⁶⁵ was the last work of art he designed. It is a sculpture made of a dark granite. The stele is perforated with holes in the shape of the stylised letters D – E – A – D. The reading direction suggests a descending stair, an allusion to the course of human life that ends finally under the earth. The sculptural contrast between void and massive stone may be interpreted, on the one hand, as a visual representation of the contrast between the fullness of life and the intangibility of death. On the other hand, from a visual perspective, the void letters are small windows through which we see the surrounding cemeterial landscape: when one looks at the gravestone, the void letters form our gaze here and now, shaping our view of life. The inscription is tautological: it points at death as the final stage of human life, suggesting that life has to be seen through its end. There is no reference to a transcendent or otherworldly dimension.

I have chosen Highgate Cemetery as a striking example of a modern urban burial place that from its very foundation has been promoted as a shared place. Negotiations of religious plurality are inscribed in its historical heritage and in contemporary burial practices. Albeit in this chapter only a few cases chosen from the great number of tombs could be discussed, diverse strategies of dealing with the ambiguity of the presence and absence of the body in remembering the dead could be described. The »invention« of the cemetery articulated the relationship between an individual whose unique characteristics are recalled in his grave, and the burial site as a place enacting remembrance for relatives and friends, as a spatial practice. Furthermore, the cemetery also established itself as a leisure and a tourist destination. As an urban installation delimited from other places, the cemetery stands as the place for the collective group of its dead inhabitants, whose bodies have crossed the opaque line between the realms of life and death.

65 <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/grave-of-patrick-caulfield-19362005-312095> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

6.5 Representations of the dead in the Covid-19 pandemic

Making deceased individuals visible and gathering them in a place where their uniqueness and plurality could be represented by means of a material thing – a tomb, a gravestone, a sculpture – has been one of the crucial factors in the transformation of burial practices from the 18th century onwards. Interestingly, in the contemporary world, while individual tombs and niches in cemeteries are still being used, anonymous burials are increasingly practiced. In the 21st century, the scattering of ashes in forests or waters, in common graves, or in specific areas of cemeteries – with minimal or no references to the buried persons – are becoming more and more widespread. The individual localisation of the dead by means of a tomb is no longer a socially obligatory habit.⁶⁶

During the Covid pandemic, death became omnipresent and the need to handle a great number of deceased, combined with the strong regulations of public space transformed mourning and burial practices. The tension between the presence and absence of the dead and their representation became a controversial matter. The practices of visualisation and materialisation for remembering the dead were no longer easily accessible. In the second case study of this chapter, we focus on the contested practice of representing the finitude of life during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly on The National Covid Memorial Wall in London. The analysis is introduced by some general remarks on the representation of the deadly consequences of this unexpected, socially distressing situation in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak.

In spite of the advanced knowledge and technologies of contemporary biomedical sciences, there was not an immediate response to SARS-CoV-2 that was spreading worldwide in the first months of 2020. The virus proved to be highly infectious, recalling in dramatic ways that the human body is not a secluded island, but a permeable being interacting with others.⁶⁷ The virus did not care about individuals, social, or national borders and roamed through human bodies, and places, according to its reproductive rhythms. To curb the epidemic, political and health authorities reverted to isolation, an ancient means of tackling the spread of the infectious agent, while science

66 For a general introduction to transformations in burial culture see Fischer 2003a and Süßmann 2022 and, with a focus on the transformation in dealing with the dead, Clark 1993.

67 Dickel 2020. On the significance of the body in contemporary society see also e.g. Le Breton 1990.

and industry were searching for solutions to this social crisis. With lockdown and so-called »social distancing« measures, public space was soon deprived of its material dimension and relegated to the intimate sphere of private living places and the Internet.⁶⁸ This abrupt and challenging rearrangement of public space profoundly transformed all social relationships, including dealing with death and the dead, which was, in fact, the main reason why such measures were implemented.

According to the World Health Organisation, since March 2020 Covid infections caused more than 7 million deaths worldwide.⁶⁹ With individual mobility restricted and gatherings strongly regulated or prohibited, the representation of the deadly consequences of the illness was transferred to the media and the Internet.

Death became a current topic in media coverage, which was illustrated with graphs and press photographs: images of common graves dug with bulldozers, coffins aligned in a neat order, quickly enlarged burial sites, or funerary pyres were often used to convey the ubiquity and spread of death and the fragility of the human body facing such a contagious virus.⁷⁰ The visualisation of the diverse practices of dealing with a great number of victims all over the world reached people secluded in their homes, communicating the specific strategies of tackling the crisis and, at the same time, death and human fragility as a shared challenge.

While the lethal consequences of SARS-CoV-2 and the representations of mass mortality were negotiated in mass media, attending a funeral or visiting relatives and friends of deceased people was almost impossible. Depending on the period and the specific country, the regulations for gathering in public areas and the strategies of distancing affected people differently. At the same time the performance of funerary rituals and mourning practices for the dead was being dramatically staged in the media during the pandemic, which made it omnipresent on the one hand and, paradoxically, even more abstract and distant in everyday experience. Let us illustrate this with

68 Knoblauch / Löw 2020.

69 As of 7 August 2024, 7,059,612 death cases worldwide had been reported to WHO with regular weekly spikes between April 2020 and April 2023. In Europe, over 2 million people died of the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/deaths?n=o> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

70 Pezzoli-Olgianti 2022.



Fig. 55: The Roman-Catholic Chiesa di San Giuseppe in Seriate was turned into a communal funeral chamber. A soldier in white overalls sanitises the coffins with a spray. The footage of this place went viral and circulated in media all over the world. This photograph was published in *The Guardian* on 30 March 2020.

an image that went viral in March 2020, showing a row of coffins neatly arranged in a north Italian church (fig. 55).

Photographs and video coverage from the Chiesa di San Giuseppe in Seriate, a town close to Bergamo, were published in newspapers, news websites and broadcast on many television networks.⁷¹ Being one of the first hotspots of the pandemic in Europe, Italy immediately became the focus of politics, media and mass audiences. The images from Seriate visually conveyed the lethal effects of the virus on the population. Since the usual practices in dealing with the dead collapsed because of the sudden surge in demand, this Roman-Catholic church was turned into a communal funeral chamber. The aligned coffins transmitted not only the enormity of the disaster, but also the difficulties for the political and health systems in addressing them.

71 For an analysis of the media coverage of how this church turned into a communal funeral chamber see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2021.

The photograph depicts death as a social threat. The video footage showed the following mass transport of the coffins to crematoriums in military trucks, which emphasised the logistical challenge local, national and international institutions had to cope with. Audiences did not know who was lying in those coffins; each one was very similar to one another, they remained anonymous. The pictures from Seriate anticipated what would soon happen in other countries. The rearrangement of spatial practices and, consequently, the shift into media and virtual places impacted all aspects of individual, familial and social life and, along with it, the relationship to the deceased. Religious and other forms of funerary practices were drastically reduced, with strong regulation for taking part in ceremonies. Often, digital surrogates were offered.

6.6 The National Covid Memorial Wall as a spatial initiative against oblivion

Overall, during the pandemic, death, jeopardising the life of many, moved into the centre of state policies and legitimated social regulation in all domains of life. At the same time, it became a distant phenomenon, secluded in private places, in almost inaccessible intensive care units or in isolated institutions. Whereas in the public sphere death turned into a logistical challenge, individual and collective mourning and burial practices were neglected. The second case study I present in this chapter focuses on a funerary practice enacted for questioning this social tendency in the United Kingdom and providing bereaved people with a place for remembering their relatives and friends who died of Covid.

On 29 March 2021, on the south bank of the Thames, just in front of the Houses of Parliament, a collective began to paint hearts in different sizes, all of them outlined in red.⁷² The graffiti was initiated and coordinated by a group of relatives and friends of people who had died with a SARS-CoV-2 infection called Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice. The group was founded in 2020 by Jo Goodman and Matt Flower, who had both lost close members of their families. In their opinion, deaths could have been avoided if a different political approach to the pandemic had been taken. In the course of time

72 See. e. g. Rawlingson 2021; Townsend 2021.



Fig. 56: Beginning of The National Covid Memorial Wall on the Westminster Bridge side. On a weekly basis, the number of people who died with Covid in the UK is updated. On 9 July 2023, the day this photograph was taken, 227,871 victims were counted.

this initiative was sustained by a growing number of members. The group supports bereaved relatives and friend of victims of the pandemic as well as investigations into the Government's policies in dealing with the pandemic.⁷³

The graffiti on the River Thames stretches from Westminster Bridge to Lambeth Bridge, a walk of over 500 metres, and is composed of more than 240,000 hearts (figs. 56 and 57), that represents all the people who died with Covid until the present day in the UK. The heart is associated with life and feelings, particularly love. It remembers the person as being in a positive, strong relationship with others.⁷⁴

For several years, members of the Bereaved Families for Justice joined by volunteers kept painting the hearts, using art pens. Relatives and friends of people who died with Covid from all over the country wrote dedications and epitaphs with black pens on a heart. Later, the Friends of the Wall assumed the

⁷³ <https://www.covidfamiliesforjustice.org/about-us>.

⁷⁴ For an overview of the many meanings of the heart in the history of religion and in the present see Meslin 2005.



Fig. 57: The wall underneath St. Thomas's Hospital. The fading hearts have turned pale pink.

task of preserving and continuing the work. Every week, they repaint faded hearts with a long-lasting paint, restore the writings and remove other graffiti.⁷⁵

The National Covid Memorial Wall is a shared place for mourning and remembering the victims of the pandemic. Painted by volunteers and bereaved families, it is a spontaneous work that can be interpreted as a piece of street art which shares an attitude of criticism toward political authority and, in this precise socio-political context, an anti-establishment attitude towards various facets of Conservative Party policies in the pandemic.⁷⁶ Being accessible in central London and painted without permission, it expresses empathy towards bereaved people, publicly denounces a social concern, and engages in a political debate (fig. 57).

As with many works of street art, The National Covid Memorial Wall is located in a concrete place and at the same time online.⁷⁷ Soon after the wall

75 <https://www.nationalcovidmemorialwall.org>. The story of the wall is told in podcasts on the website (accessed on 6 August 2025).

76 Tollerton 2022, 332.

77 On the use of graffiti during the pandemic see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2024a. On graffiti as a form of art see pages 17–23 in this volume.



Fig. 58: Screenshot of a virtual walk on the <https://walk.nationalcovidmemorialwall.org>. The number of hearts passed by are indicated on the lower right edge. While virtually walking, the visitors can listen to stories of people relating to the wall while hearing the sound of the city.

had been initiated, Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice published a website, designed in cooperation with the activists Led By Donkeys, at the beginning an anti-Brexit group, for enabling a virtual walk through the graffiti.⁷⁸ The digital tour combines a visualisation of the graffiti with an audio reproducing the sounds of the city (fig. 58). During the digital visit to the funerary memorial, the walk can be stopped to hear voices sharing their experience of losing a close person and commenting on what the painted heart and the memorial means to her or him. Courtney, judging by her voice a young girl, is mourning her grandmother:

I'll do the heart for my nan, she passed away last year on the 9th of April. I come from a very tight knit family. My nan was without a doubt my best friend in life. They say you only got one soul mate and that was my nan ... with her passing, it was so cruel ... you don't know where to look to or where to go ... so coming here ... we don't have a headstone for her because we haven't had the opportunity to put her in the ground ... so this is almost like a headstone ... it is almost

⁷⁸ <https://walk.nationalcovidmemorialwall.org> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

somewhere where she is remembered and somewhere where people will walk past and think like you can see her as clear as daylight. For someone to just walk past and recognise the fact that my nan and these other 150000 people in this world is so significant because ... everyone is so desperate to get back to normal life but ... something that worries me most is ... my normal life was spent with my nan ... it evolved entirely around my nan. How do I go back to normal live ... Embrace risk, risk forgetting everybody here. I don't think anyone got the proper opportunity to say goodbye so this wall represents a 150000 ways of saying goodbye, like our way.

Zarina is mourning her father:

So this is my heart here ... Syed Mohammed Khadri. This is my father and he passed away in the first wave. I think this wall has been a great memorial to all the people that have lost their lives to Covid. As you can see there's so many names here and people from all different backgrounds, religion, colour, and it's a great way for everyone to come together and be united ... of different faiths, religions. As you know the pandemic doesn't discriminate.⁷⁹

The audiovisual, interactive reproduction of The National Covid Memorial online allows people to participate in this funerary practice without having to travel all the way to London. Dedications to be published online can be posted on the website.⁸⁰

Furthermore, the website offers the possibility to send a dedication via social media or email that will be written by a volunteer of Friends of the Wall on a heart. The memorial is conceived as being interactive with bereaved people and passersby, in situ and online; digital and analogical places are blurred.

79 Both audiotracks from <https://walk.nationalcovidmemorialwall.org> (accessed on 6 August 2025), transcription by the author.

80 <https://nationalcovidmemorialwall.dedicationpage.org/?q=Courtney#search> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

Remembering Places



Fig. 59



Fig. 60



Fig. 61



Fig. 62



Fig. 63

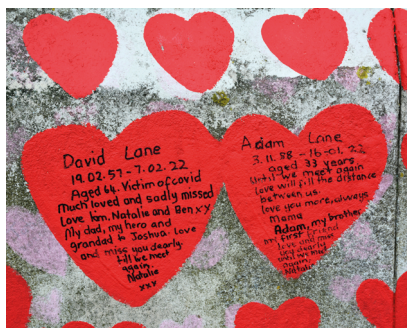


Fig. 64

Figs. 59–64: Personalised hearts on The National Covid Memorial Wall, displaying diverse designs, languages, symbols, objects, nationalities, and relationships between the people indicated by a name and a dedication.



Fig. 65: Information about the graffiti on the Westminster Bridge side on 9 July 2023.

The initiative has been well received by a large audience, by people from diverse social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. There is a strong expectation by citizens who recognise the wall as a dignified place for mourning and remembering the dead that the British Government will develop a long-lasting strategy to preserve this unique memorial.⁸¹ The wall is used as a remembering place, albeit there are no remains of the bodies buried here. The dedications recall the dead and the relationship between the anonymous writers and the deceased (figs. 59–65). Flowers are placed on the wall and on the ground (fig. 58 and 63); the hearts represent the person, the dead body and the loving relationship with the bereaved (fig. 64). As is the case with the graves of a cemetery, all the different hearts, painted by hand and dedicated to a specific person, are unique as they remember an individual who died. The wall, as a memorial, visualises death with Covid as a shared social phenomenon.

81 Booth 2021a; Booth 2021b; Grierson 2022; Vernon 2024. In Britain, there have been a range of initiatives for a national covid memorial, involving diverse institutions and civil society; for an overview including an analysis of The National Covid Memorial Wall see Tollerton 2022.

Spatially, the memorial is not enclosed within a wall like Highgate Cemetery. However, inscriptions on both sides of the graffiti (fig. 65) inform visitors and passersby about the site. Panels indicate some rules to be followed. They read:

The National Covid
Memorial Wall
created by bereaved families

The hearts on this wall are in memory of our fellow citizen who have died since March 2020 with Covid-19 on their death certificates.

Every heart represents a person who was loved.

The wall belongs to us all, and we all have to share it. If you want to add an inscription to the wall in memory of someone whose life was lost to Covid-19, please abide by the original principles:

- ♥ Please only take one heart for each person
- ♥ Find a freshly-painted heart and make a dedication
- ♥ Hearts should be similar in size and no larger than an adult hand

The Friends of the Wall are a group of bereaved volunteers who maintain the memorial by removing graffiti, repeated inscriptions and re-painting fading hearts. All efforts are being made to maintain original dedications.

We can be contacted on Twitter at @CovidMemorialUK. Please get in touch if you would like to volunteer. Donations for the upkeep of this memorial can be made at nationalcovidmemorialwall.org.

Even if there is no owner or communal body behind this spontaneous action initiated by a very small group, the wall is well tended. Its multifaceted functions – as a site for mourning and remembering individuals, as a visualisation of the impact of the pandemic and as political criticism towards government policies – frame the tension between the absence of the people who died with covid and their presence in the form of single hearts.

Overall, the graffiti on the south bank of the Thames, impressively conveys a need to materialise and localise the memory of very diverse people. By means of a spatial practice, that may be performed either at the memo-

rial in London or online, death as a common anthropological constant, the transiency of the human body and mourning practices are linked with social-political engagement.

6.7 Remembering the dead as a spatial practice

The tiny cemetery in an alpine valley introduced this chapter dealing with shared places dedicated to the dead. This approach to the spatial performance of remembering the deceased is developed by considering the difference between death as a biological process and the social elaboration and significance of mortality. From a socio-cultural perspective, death is a challenging, opaque phenomenon, that cannot be fully grasped either as an individual or as a collective experience. The two case studies discussed in this chapter show different spatial approaches to death and the dead at different times. Being located in the same city, their comparison allows one to draw out some lines of continuity as well as transformations in dealing with the finitude of human life.

Highgate Cemetery is a representative case of the change in dealing with burial places in many European cultures since modern times: the garden cemetery provided dignified burial places in a society undergoing radical changes and soon became a place for promenades and enjoying an extraordinary quiet and lush park with a magnificent view of London. Over the centuries, while remaining a burial site until today, the cemetery slowly declined, took on diverse uses and meanings, until it became a heritage site to be preserved. All through its history, it has always remained in private hands. The National Covid Memorial Wall, despite not being a burial place, offers a place for remembering the dead by means of visualising individuals with red hearts. The urban graffiti provides a place for bereaved people who lost relatives or friends because of a Covid infection. In front of the wall or in its digital reproduction, they can remember them.

In both cases, the body plays a crucial role. The Victorian cemetery and The National Covid Memorial Wall are place of remembering the body of the deceased. In the first case, the transformed corpse (that may be inhumed or cremated) lies in the tomb, in the second it is only represented. In the cemetery, the presence of the dead body is visualised with a three-dimensional

construction, while on the wall, deceased individuals correspond to a visual symbol, the heart. In both cases, the absent person is remembered by means of a material, visual thing: the tomb or the heart can actually refer to the dead body only when a living body is interacting with it. The materialisation in the form of a gravestone in the cemetery or as a graffiti on the wall is a practice enacting the impassable limit between death and life by linking the body of the deceased with the living person. In the process of representation and of reception, the bereaved recall the absent person by looking, touching or simply standing in front of the materialisation and visualisation of a dead person. Being present as a body in these liminal places connects the living person with the dead by remembering him or her, and imagining transcendent places they may inhabit or elaborate upon ideas of afterlife as the very end of human life.

Both funerary sites are delimited places within a complex urban formation, with specific territorial characteristics: Highgate Cemetery is still a green area located on a hill; the memorial wall stands in central London on the south bank of the Thames. Besides being a place one can visit in a grieving process or as a traveller, Highgate Cemetery and especially The National Covid Memorial Wall are places that can also be seen online. All these places are merged to enlarge and facilitate the interaction between the funerary sites and their users.

The cemetery and the wall are both the result of accurate planning aimed at gathering diverse ways of dealing with death. Initially the London Cemetery Company, and later the Friends of Highgate Cemetery took over a function that was traditionally provided by a religious institution. The memorial wall is an initiative deeply rooted in civil society involving activists and volunteers. Diverse actors also provided those places for remembering and representing mortality in different historical contexts. From the very beginning, the cemetery was conceived as a park in which nature and architecture were moulded into a stunning arrangement, conveying an idyllic enclosure in the larger London area: in the garden cemetery, diverse types of graves represented social, religious, or gender differences; though, overall, the cemetery represented the place for the dead as a homogeneous society in continuity with and in contrast to the society of the living. The National Covid Memorial Wall was planned as a mourning place and a political action against the government. The location facing the House of Parliament is part of the planning process.

Both funerary sites are places of representation of death as a universal phenomenon that delimits and defines human life and of individual and familial ways of addressing it. As spatial arrangements, both places refer to mortality and the practices that have been developed to deal with it. The tension between the meaning of death and life represented in the contrast between the delimited funerary places and the urban settlement is intertwined with meaning-making-processes linked to the single tombs or hearts, respectively. In the material representation of each deceased, diverse individual, familial, social and religious identities emerge. A plurality of references to after-life dimensions are expressed by epitaphs, dedications, visual and material representation as well as by means of images of nature or real flowers and plants. From the perspective of representation, the meaning-making processes enacted by being in front of a funerary place may also vary according to the position of the visitors and his or her relationship to the deceased.

Materiality and visibility are paramount in the spatial practices of remembering the dead: the materiality of the invisible corpse or the mere reference to a dead person buried elsewhere is evoked by the single tomb or heart as well as by the overall arrangement of both sites every time a living person enters those places. The meaning of death and life is negotiated in these processes of communication that take place in the cemetery, at the memorial wall, and in their representation on the Internet.

These communication processes are dynamic, involving also changes and adaptations over time. In the cemetery, transformations over the centuries are also represented and can be read in the diverse architectural designs of the graves as well as in the development of the natural environment. Even the memorial wall, initiated in April 2021, shows a development over time: the original hearts being of an ephemeral nature are fading away; preserving the wall is possible only thanks to the engagement of several actors repainting and rewriting the hearts.

Both Highgate Cemetery and The National Covid Memorial Wall are spatial practices in which death is negotiated in multifaceted processes, whereby the interaction between religion and politics play a dominant role. By enacting new ideas about mourning and representation of death, a plurality of religious and other worldviews and traditions are gathered in common funerary places mirroring the diversity of society and its strategies to face human finitude.