

The History of London's Highgate Cemetery by Alissa Hall, copyright 2005

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The land on which the Highgate Cemetery lies has a history and reputation that perennially draws visitors to its gates. Some seek the tourist opportunity to view the Gothic funerary architecture or to visit the final dwellings of several of Victorian England's elite. Still others have haunted the green hills seeking a more insidious and undead prey.

A fashionable new burial spot

By the 19th century, the Victorian Parliament faced a crisis as the growing number of deceased necessitated monumental changes in the country's burial practices. As a result, seven private cemeteries were given permission to operate within the periphery of inner London. For the first time, citizens could be charged for burial, and a new business was born. In 1836, the newly formed London Cemetery Company acquired a 17-acre plot for cultivation, originally a decrepit orchard estate of former Lord Mayor of London's, Sir William Ashurst, since deceased. In only three years, the Cemetery of St. James was consecrated by the Bishop of London and ready for business. The name, in time, would be commonly known as Highgate, a name which recalls the point's original intent as a northern entry for farm goods to ship in to the metropolitan area.

Following the nondenominational custom set by the Pere-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, two chapels were constructed on the grounds that were designed as a place of elegance and repose for the living and the dead, as well as two acres of unhallowed ground for those not of Anglican faith. The wilderness was tamed into serene gardens ideal for strolling, and the many terrace catacombs, which ran between £10 to £94, would ensure eternal residents an abode worthy of their life's achievement. While the best plots were taken by the wealthy and often elaborately adorned, the average man could purchase a burial for approximately £14; £5 would buy a final resting spot for a pauper... still quite a bit to save when the average wage was approximately £1 a year.

The Victorians embraced the new trend in burial with enthusiasm. By 1860, the cemetery's grounds had expanded to 37 acres with the addition of the eastern lot, an area which is still operational with approximately a burial a week. Over 168,000 names are buried in more than 52,000 graves within the cemetery, 850 of which are considered notable. Highgate tour guides have described a working tunnel leading from the chapel under the cemetery's main road, Swain's Lane, so the deceased's body would never leave consecrated ground once blessed.

A fashionable final resting place could elevate one's place in Victorian society, perhaps as much, or even more so, than their deeds in life. Although Highgate couldn't compete with the posh Kensal Green Cemetery, many Victorian notables and celebrities chose this north London spot for their final home – Christina

Rossetti, George Eliot (a.k.a Mary Ann Cross), Radclyffe Hall, Charles Dickens' family, and the philosopher Karl Marx, whose prominent bust still marks his grave, are only a few who rest within these hallowed grounds.

Inspiration from the grave

One tragic Highgate tale is popularly thought to have inspired Bram Stoker while creating his novel "Dracula." The beautiful Elizabeth Siddal, model of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, as well as muse, mistress and wife to poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, fell into a dark depression after the death of their stillborn child, ending her life with a laudanum overdose in 1862. At her Highgate funeral, the distraught husband placed a handwritten book of poems within her coffin before it was sealed. However, as his finances floundered, Rossetti became convinced he was going blind and would only be remembered for his poetry, not his paintings. In October 1869, permission to exhume Lizzie's coffin was given for Rossetti to retrieve his lost volume, but only if the operation was held at night, so as not to disturb neighbors or patrons of the cemetery.

Upon disinterment, the only evidence left of Elizabeth's remarkable physical beauty was her famous, long auburn locks of hair, described as still lush and silken even in death. News of the bizarre grave robbing was leaked to *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, a newspaper Stoker (once a neighbor of Rossetti's) was believed to peruse while reading reviews of his "King Lear" production. Several literary scholars have theorized that news of Lizzie's deathly beauty inspired Stoker's character, Lucy Westenra. Undoubtedly, the author was creatively inspired by the locale – his fictional newspaper accounts of Lucy's sanguineous attacks on children take place in Hampstead, the town west of Highgate.

Egyptian Avenue

The Victorian enthusiasm for all things Egyptian made its way into this glen of the deceased as well. Iron gates give way to Egyptian Avenue, with obelisks (symbols of eternal life) flanking the road and lotus-flower columns lining the entrance to the family vaults. Originally painted red, blue and yellow, Egyptian Avenue's pale gray elegance of today blends with the cemetery's many shadows. The Avenue's shallow valley and enclosed atmosphere provides a cool escape, even during London's humid summers.

Egyptian Avenue ends in a ring of catacombs called the Circle of Lebanon, named for the magnificent 300-year-old cedar of Lebanon which predates the cemetery by nearly two centuries. A feature of the original Ashurst estate, the tree's limbs tower an amazing 20 feet above the ground, however its current life is feared for due to receding grounds beneath. Both the British National Trust and British Heritage have funded conservation efforts for the cemetery's grounds and continuing groundskeeping services are donated to the organization, as well as funded by tourist fees.

Funerary monuments

Within Highgate are many stunning examples of Gothic masonry architecture. The Columbarium, or “place for urns,” pays homage to the prevalent Roman influence also seen on this hallowed terrain. Other deathly stone symbols seen throughout the grounds include wreaths, a circular and evergreen symbol of eternal life; broken columns, signifying a life cut short; upside-down torches, whose eternal flame remains unextinguished; and grieving woman, elegantly adorned in flowing Roman robes, as if exhausted from weeping over a cross or urn. Efforts to clear vegetation are kept after with vigilance by the Friends in order to keep the monuments of elegant mourning unencumbered from their grief.

Beyond the Circle of Lebanon stands the crown jewel of Highgate Cemetery, the Mausoleum of Julius Beer, described in the souvenir guidebook as the “largest and grandest of all the privately owned buildings in the Cemetery.” Beer’s monument in death bespeaks a life spent seeking proper recognition – its design was inspired by King Mausolus’ tomb at Halicarnassus, Turkey, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The monument, built by Italian craftsmen, sits at 1000 feet above sea level and cost £5000 to construct, £2 to £3 million in current exchange.

Born in poverty, the Jewish immigrant made his fortune on the London Stock Exchange, yet found himself ostracized by Victorian high society. Despite converting to the Church of England, Beer, who owned *The Observer*, did not receive an obituary in the *London Times*. Some say he extracted his final revenge by placing his towering memorial so as to obstruct the view of couples picnicking on the land above the Circle of Lebanon.

Highgate’s demise

However, financial conditions for the cemetery did not prosper as well as the vegetation; the legalization of cremation in 1888 slowly began eating away at company profits. Despite the horrific losses of two World Wars, by the 1950’s, dwindling funds necessitated the release of the cemetery’s many groundskeepers. With few of the deceased’s living to assist with clearing, brambles and self sown sycamores quickly overtook the manicured lawns of the past, creating an entirely different atmosphere than the one of pristine elegance envisioned by the founding Victorians.

However, horror moguls of Hammer Films found the umbrage and decaying atmosphere of the site ideal for their brand of cinema and shot several movies on location at Highgate. One of the most memorable, “Taste the Blood of Dracula,” starring Christopher Lee as the Count, was filmed in 1968 and features the darkly picturesque Egyptian Avenue, as well as the cemetery’s dense vegetation as discomfiting vampire-hunting ambiance.

The Highgate Vampire

The success of Hammer Film's movies may have inspired one of the cemetery's most malevolent spirits believed to have haunted the heath. The first Highgate Vampire sighting occurred in winter of 1967, when two schoolgirls traveling home on Swain's Lane through the cemetery, claimed to witness graves open and bodies rise from within. The specters vanished upon the girls' horrified screams.

At the same spot near the north gate, only weeks later a couple insisted an extraordinarily tall figure dressed in black with a faceless mask of evil materialized, accompanied by a terrifying silence and the sensation of overwhelming mental and physical weakness. The woman's horrified shriek banished the demonic figure into the shadows, which retreated into the cemetery's darkness.

Rumors of a Highgate Vampire caught several paranormal investigators' attention. Sean Manchester, director of the Occult Investigation Bureau, who claims lineage to Romantic poet Lord Byron, interviewed those who claimed to witness the fiendish events. In 1969, one of the schoolgirls, Elizabeth Wojdyla, said her nightmares, which began right after the horrific vision, had markedly increased in frequency and severity over time. Manchester, seeing two wounds upon the girl's neck, believed a vampire was indeed involved and treated her by filling her room with garlic flowers and bags of salt. Elizabeth reported her nightmares diminished and her health soon returned.

But Manchester's quest for the Highgate Vampire had only begun. On March 13, 1970 Manchester led a group into Highgate, to a vault he believed the unholy creature dwelled within. When unable to spring the lock, the paranormal investigator and several companions lowered themselves into the tomb and sprinkled three caskets found within with holy water before quickly exiting. Manchester's interest in the vampire continued for several years, until he claims to have destroyed the media-dubbed "King Vampire" in a London mansion. He self-published his entire supernatural account in his 1985 book, [The Highgate Vampire](#), which was revised in 1990.

Public interest and dark rumors grew intensely in the early 1970's and Highgate soon found itself the victim of overzealous vampire hunters, vandals and grave defilers. Reports of toppled tombstones, desecrated graves and animal carcasses drained of blood all surfaced, although the consensus seemed unclear as to whether the cause of the poor creatures' exsanguination was a blood-thirsty fiend, or the bizarre sacrifices of ritual killings.

Another paranormal investigator also became intensely involved in the Highgate Vampire, David Farrant of the British Psychic and Occult Society. Farrant claims to have witnessed the foreboding figure of the specter in black himself, first in 1969 and then during several other cemetery investigations thereafter. The initial sighting has been called into question, as amateur filmmakers were using the cemetery during the time, and some insist what he witnessed was merely an actor in costume.

Farrant was unconvinced and his efforts persisted. He was arrested while searching Highgate in 1970, although a mysterious visitor in jail convinced him to plead not guilty, paid his bail and escorted him to a place in Hertfordshire. Farrant was later cleared of the charges of vampire hunting. His efforts continued for many years, taking him all the way to Romania for his own investigation, and were chronicled by himself in his 1991 book, Beyond the Highgate Vampire, later revised several times.

Highgate's Restoration

Despite the media and public interest in Highgate, then-owners United Cemeteries, concerned about further vandalism, were unable to financially support the facility and closed the western gates in 1975. Concerned for the historic property's welfare, the organization known as the Friends of Highgate Cemetery was formed to assist in preserving the site. Their modest early efforts began with routine vegetation removal, but culminated in 1981 when both parts of the cemetery were acquired. Continuing support to their conservation efforts by charities and private citizens has assisted the organization in restoring the grounds to conditions similar to what the Victorians themselves enjoyed, a green valley where serenity is hoped to be found.

The cemetery is currently open every day of the year, except December 25 and 26, or unless temporarily closed for a funeral in progress. The picturesque western grounds, whose conditions the Friends of Highgate Cemetery describe as "managed wilderness," can only be seen by taking their guided tour. No week day tours are offered in December, January and February, however special tours can be arranged. Should you ever find yourself a visitor at Highgate Cemetery's north gate, remember... if you see a monstrous, unholy figure dressed in black, your best hope, given history's lessons, is to pierce the night with a blood-curdling scream.