

Last January, in these articles, I started to look at the history of Woking in a way that most local history newspaper columns don't (or cannot) now do. I wanted to get away from the normal superficial 'peep' into history and look a bit deeper at some of the facts. For over thirty years I have been writing books and booklets about the history and heritage of Woking, so rather than just cobble together readers' reminiscences', I wanted to give my column some structure – to tell a more complete history of Woking (if a subject such as history can ever be complete).

Starting with the geology and geography, I moved slowly onto the prehistoric before tackling the history of the area from the 'Dark Ages' onwards in an almost chronological order. Arthur Locke followed a similar approach many years ago, with readers cutting out and keeping his series of articles on 'Woking Past'.

At the end of last year we reached the 1840's and 50's and as well as looking at local chapels and schools, I touched upon the London Necropolis Company and Brookwood Cemetery (now owned by Woking Council).

Over the next few months (if not years) I intend to tackle the subject of Woking 'Past and Present' in even more detail, beginning this week with a more detailed look at the Necropolis and why it came to Woking.

THE START OF THE NECROPOLIS

Iain Wakeford 2015



THE LONDON NECROPOLIS AND NATIONAL MAUSOLEUM, WOKING, SURREY.

In the first half of the 19th century the population of London had increased from just under one million in 1801 to almost 2.5 million by 1851, but the amount of land set aside for graveyards had remained almost unchanged at 300 acres.

In 1832 Parliament passed a bill encouraging the establishment of private cemeteries outside of central London, but still bodies were piling up with existing graves being disturbed every time a new one was dug. Some of those bodies had not been in the ground that long and a black market soon sprung up with coffin furniture being sold, coffin wood burned as household fuel and exhumed bones being ground up to make fertiliser.

In 1842 a Royal Commission was established

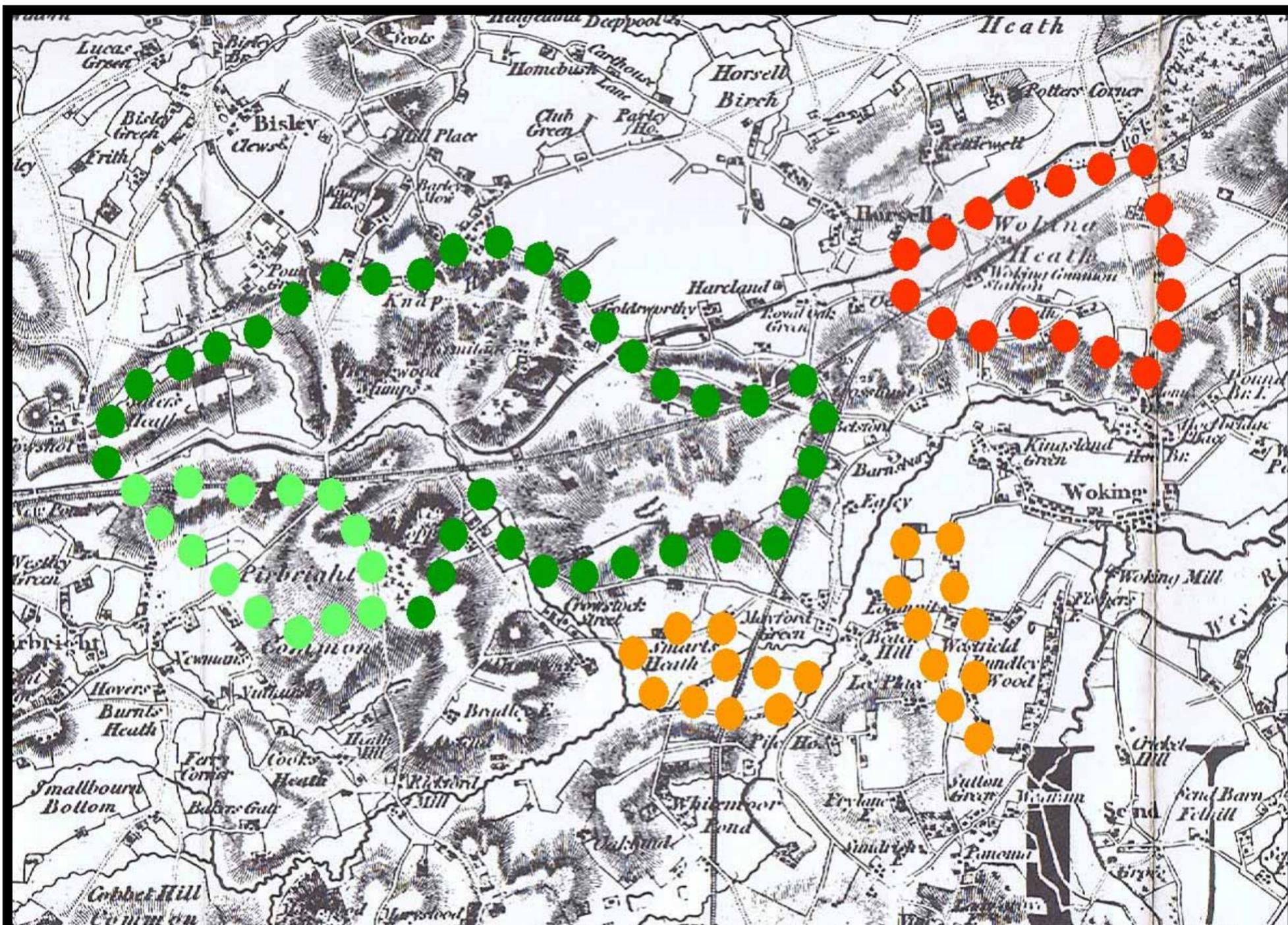
The original plan for a cemetery on the whole of Woking Common used Woking Station with private halts and chapels along the main line.

to look into the problem and heard that each year about 20,000 adults and 30,000 children were being buried in the already full cemeteries of the capital.

The cholera epidemic of 1848-9 was the last straw and in 1851 the Burial's Act was passed. This prohibited the burial of bodies in the built-up parts of London – forcing all coffins to be buried in cemeteries such as Kensal Green (established in 1832), West Norwood Cemetery (1837), Highgate (1839), Abney Park, Nunhead and Brompton (1840) and Tower Hamlets Cemetery (1841).

But these new cemeteries themselves only had a combined area of less than 300 acres and if nothing was done they would soon be full too. The fact that London was rapidly expanding into the areas where the new cemeteries were established didn't help much either – they would soon be back to square one.

One gentleman, Francis Seymour Haden, suggested shipping the bodies down the Thames and using them in land reclamation in the Thames Estuary, but that was soon dismissed and the Board of Health (formed after the 1848 Public Health Act), or more accurately their commissioner Edwin Chadwick, proposed closing almost every existing burial ground in the capital and having everyone from London buried in two large cemeteries – one an expanded and nationalised Kensal Green (for



west London) and the other a new cemetery at Abbey Wood (for the east).

The Metropolitan Interment Act of 1850 allowed the scheme to be pursued (closing all cemeteries), but the government soon got cold feet and in 1852 it was repealed.

In the meantime Sir Richard Broun and Richard Sprye proposed another idea. They wanted to provide 'an area of ground so distant as to be beyond any possible future extension of the Capital, sufficiently large to allow of its subdivision, not only into spacious distinct portions for the burial of each sect of the Christian Public, but also, if desired and deemed expedient, into as many separate compartments as there are parishes within London and its suburbs'.

They foresaw churches, chapels, private mausolea, vaults and catacombs, being built to take London's dead for generation to come, a 'grand and befitting gathering place for the metropolitan mortality of a mighty nation' – and Woking Common was what they had in mind.

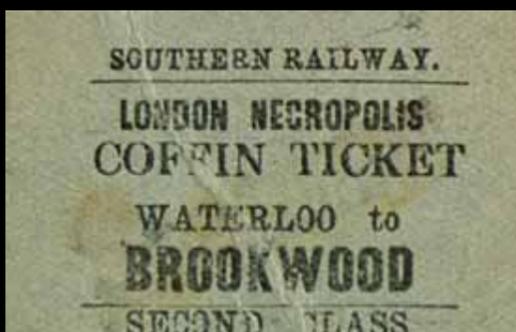
The common had a number of advantages. It was relatively poor sandy soil, easy to dig but not easy to grow crops on. As a result it was also relatively cheap, as the Basingstoke Canal company and the London & Southampton Railway had found when they built their routes across the common in the 1780's and 1830's. It was well away from London yet conveniently accessible by the railway and special coffin trains could bring the bodies each night or early in the morning when the railway was not busy. Mourners could travel down on a special passenger train to Woking Common Station and presumably re-visit whenever they chose on normal train.

Their scheme envisaged buying the whole of Woking Common – not just the bit that is now Brookwood Cemetery – and turning it all into a massive cemetery. As well as Woking Common station, other 'halts' could be created along the line where private chapels could be built. All that was needed was the agreement of the railway company, the Lord of the Manor of Woking (who owned the land), and the people of Woking who had 'commoners rights' that

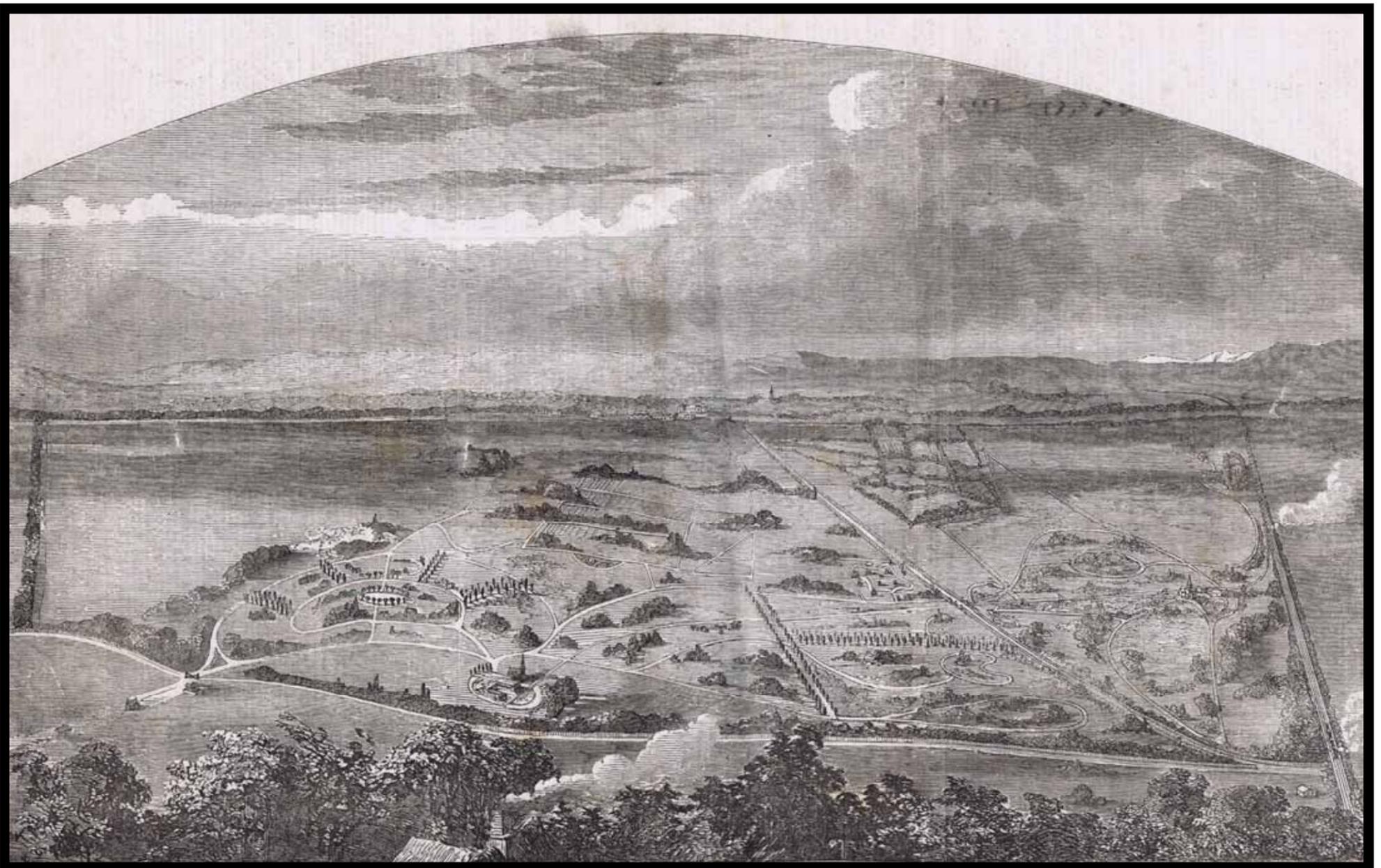
In the end only 400 acres were used for the cemetery (coloured light green), with the rest of the land around Brookwood, Knaphill & Hook Heath (dark green) and the area around Woking Station (red) sold off for development. The outlying areas of common (orange) at Smarts Heath, Prey Heath and Westfield Common were never developed and remain as common land to this day - as does St Johns Lye which was kept back from the sale to the Necropolis Company at the request of the Vicar of Woking.

had to be compensated for - but surprisingly the scheme met with a lot of opposition – not least from those who objected to another aspect of the scheme that Broun and Sprye proposed, namely that 'the high and low, the mighty and the weak, the learned and the ignorant, the wicked and the good, the idle and the industrious' might be all buried together 'in one vast co-mingled heap'!

The Bishop of London, Charles Blomfield, as far back as 1842 stated that he didn't like the idea of using railways to transport the dead – the noise and speed being incompatible with the solemnity of a Christian burial service' - and the thought that the bodies (if not the mourners) of respectable people might be carried in the



Southern Railway issued Coffin Ticket's (Waterloo to Brookwood only - not returns)! Even in death the British 'class system' continued, with 1st, 2nd & 3rd class tickets.



The Necropolis Company's cemetery eventually opened on just 400 acres of land at the far west of Woking Common, with the railway to the north (right), the road from Guildford to Bagshot on the east (bottom) and the road to Pirbright cutting across the site (from bottom right to centre top).

same train as those who led immoral lives was obviously abhorrent to him. The railway company (or at least some of their shareholders) were not too keen either, and the Earl of Onslow still needed persuading.

It was whilst Broun was apparently negotiating with the good Earl (who could presumably be persuaded if the price was right), that the London Necropolis Company and National Mausoleum Company came on the scene, set up on the 1st April 1851 by a group of trustees led by William Voules.

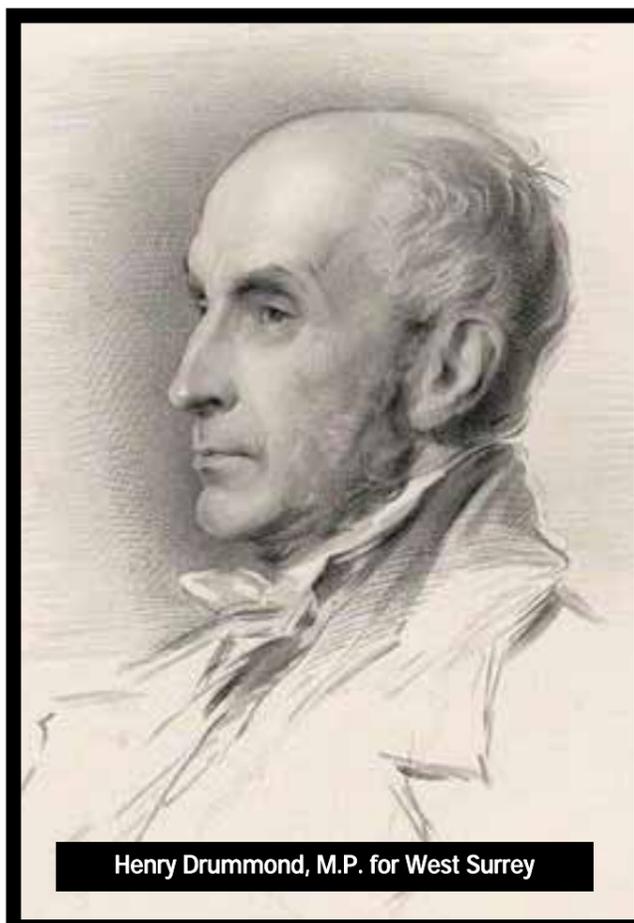
It should be remembered that at this stage it was proposed that burials in all London graveyards should be banned and two large cemeteries created by the Government to the west and east of London. The 'London Necropolis – the city of the dead', was not just a private scheme to replace that idea, but was also the 'National Mausoleum Company'. Their hope was that not just every body from London would be buried at Woking, but literally everybody could be buried here – Woking was to be the 'Dead Centre of Britain'!

An Act of Parliament was needed to formally 'enclose' the common land of Woking and the company promoted such an Act in 1852, which received Royal Assent on the 30th June that year.

It is not clear how far Broun and Sprye had got with their negotiations with the Earl but it appears that they sold the rights to their scheme to the company for £20,000 (although when it came to the commoners of Woking seeking compensation, it seems that Broun, at least, was still in dispute with the company and their plans).

The bills passage through parliament was not as smooth as they might have hoped, however, with Lord Ashley (later Lord Shaftesbury) concerned with a private company profiteering from the dead and the health implications of

storing bodies at stations awaiting transportation; James Mangles (the M.P. for Guildford) worried about the loss of common right; and Henry Drummond, the M.P. for West Surrey (which included Woking), apparently claiming that only 400 acres would be required for the cemetery based on the Necropolis Companies figures of between 10,000 and 50,000 burials a year and that the remaining land would be sold off for development.



Henry Drummond, M.P. for West Surrey

One of the objections to the scheme was that the London & South Western Railway would have a virtual monopoly on carry the dead bodies to the cemetery, but this was countered by the introduction of a clause that would set a maximum tariff on how much the company could charge for funeral trains.

That was to have other unforeseen implications later on, but of immediate concern was the fact that the trustees of the Necropolis Company were allegedly 'inept', wasting money and according to Broun making 'misrepresentations and ambiguous assertions', with the result that they had problems raising enough money to buy the land and pay their promised dividends. The result was that even before the cemetery could be opened a number of directors, including Voules, resigned as confidence in the scheme collapsed. Eventually a Committee of Enquiry recommended the expulsion of all remaining trustees and the setting up of a new board of directors.

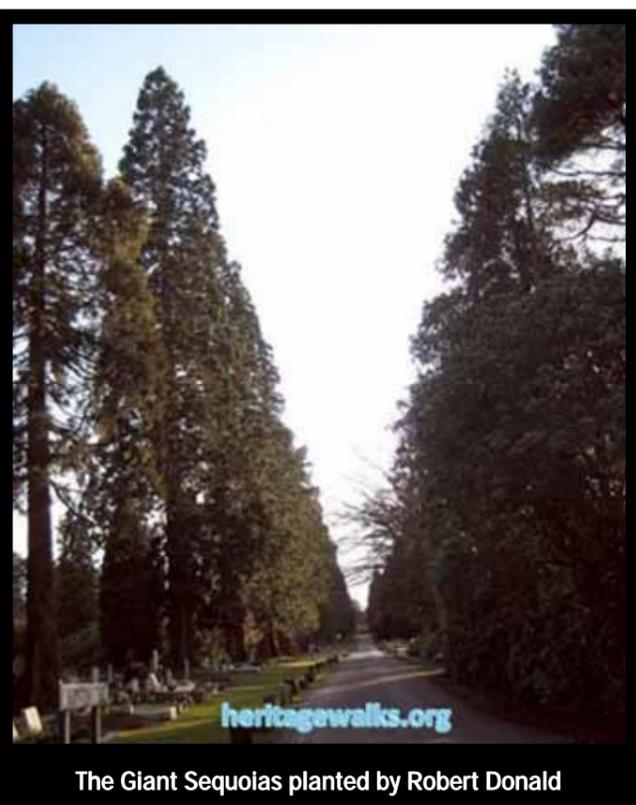
The fact that the day after the Necropolis Company's Act of Parliament allowing them to buy Woking Common and build their cemetery had been passed (30th June 1852), the Burial Act that was forcing all cemeteries in London to close was repealed!

The Necropolis Company had wasted too much time and the rug had well and truly been pulled from under their feet.

Broun's opposition to the plans continued especially as the Company's new consulting engineer, William Cubitt, rejected some of his earlier ideas. Cubitt apparently thought the idea of dedicated coffin trains travelling at night unrealistic as relatives would naturally want to travel to site with the coffins, but perhaps more controversially he recommended that the company start off by developing just a small area (about 400 acres) to the south of the railway line at Brookwood for the cemetery,

with a small branch railway coming off the main line into the cemetery (that presumably could be extended back towards London as and when the cemetery became established and expanded). Coincidentally (or not as the case may be), 400 acres is what Drummond had said was all that was necessary for the cemetery, so you can see why some have viewed the cemetery company as a building company in disguise.

In Woking there was obviously some concern from local farmers and others at the loss of their rights over the common and what the establishment of this vast cemetery would mean. The nurserymen might benefit slightly - after all the grounds of the cemetery would need to be planted (and in the end Robert Donald at Goldsworth Nursery was given the job supplying the Giant Sequoias and other trees and shrubs), but what sort of employment would there be for local labourers who would undoubtedly lose out from the enclosure of the common.



The Giant Sequoias planted by Robert Donald

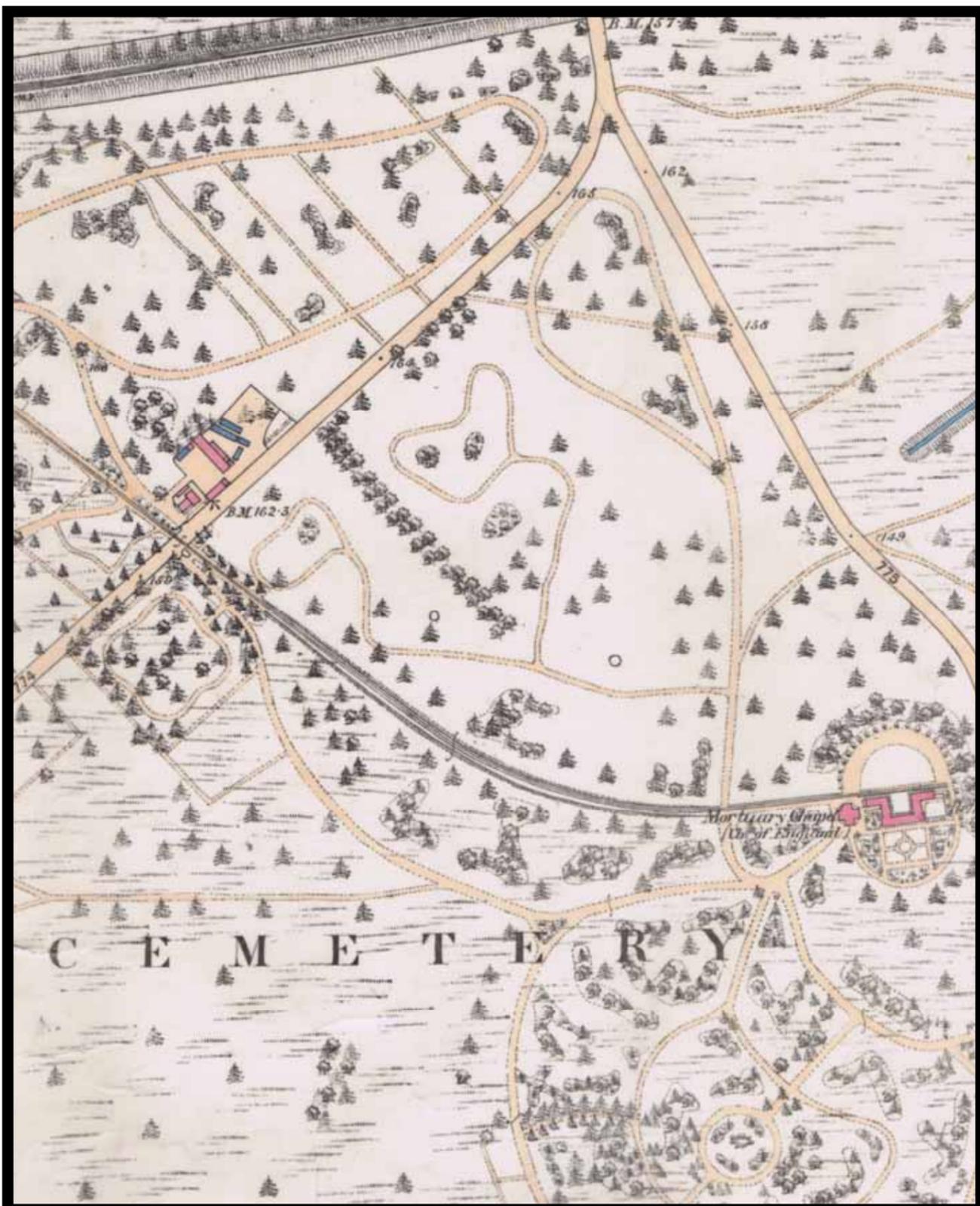
In the census of 1851, 58% of the population of the Woking area were employed in agriculture (by 1911 it was less than 10%). Perhaps more interestingly, in that census for the first time you had to say where you were born – and two-thirds of those recorded in our area in 1851 were born within the four parishes that now make up the borough! Within a few decades all that was to change.

Work at Brookwood began the following month with an embankment for the new branch line begun and drainage work on some of the marshier parts of the site.

At London a separate station, between Westminster Bridge Road and what was then called York Street, was built to handle the bodies and mourners away from the hustle and bustle of Waterloo. The architect William Tite and William Cubitt came up with the design, which was apparently approved in June 1854.

Before long the cemetery was complete, with the Rev. Charles Sumner, Bishop of Winchester, consecrating the ground on the 7th November that year, a week in advance of the opening to the public when the first scheduled train left London for Brookwood on the 13th November and the first burial took place – the bodies of the stillborn twins of Mr & Mrs Hore of Ewer Street, Borough.

As The Times commented on the 8th November 'it is fitting that the largest city in the world should have, as it will now have, the largest



Ordnance Survey 25" Map of 1870 showing the southern, Anglican, portion of the cemetery

The Necropolis Station in York Street was later rebuilt (towards the end of the 19th century) at the cost of the London & South Western Railway Company, when the number of lines into Waterloo were increased.



cemetery in the world' – a title that Brookwood Cemetery can no longer lay claim to (and probably shouldn't have claimed in the first place as the Wadi Al-Salam Cemetery in Iraq was already centuries old by the time Brookwood was thought of and at least three times its size!)

Having said that Brookwood is still the largest cemetery in this country, the second largest in Europe and tenth largest in the World - having very quickly been exceeded by cemeteries in the United States (of course) and the similarly named 'Rookwood Cemetery' in Sydney, Australia which even boasted its own railway line as well.

Space will not permit the full history of the founding of the London Necropolis & National Mausoleum Company, nor the original plans by Sir Richard Broun and Richard Sprye (not even on my website). But the story is extensively covered by John Clarke's excellent *London Necropolis* (published in 2004), and the website of the Brookwood Cemetery Society (tbc.org.uk), so I don't think it is necessary to repeat it all here.

But as I say no history of Woking would be complete without a history of the Necropolis Company and the role they played in developing the new town of Woking and over the next few weeks I hope to tackle the complex story of how they came to influence the growth of our area (past and present).

THE NECROPOLIS RAILWAY

There were two stations at Brookwood Cemetery, with this one serving the northern (Nonconformist) section.



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One of the unique features of Brookwood cemetery was its railway. Again John Clarke's books are the place to go if you want to know all you can on the subject, but briefly the story of how the Necropolis came to have their own branch line is contained here.

As mentioned above the original plan of Broun and Sprye was for Woking Common station and small private 'halts' to be used to service the cemetery, but the Necropolis' resident engineer, William Cubitt, thought it best to start off small and rather than use the

whole of Woking Common for the cemetery, only a small portion at the far west of the site would be used to begin with.

His plan necessitated a small branch line coming off the main London to Southampton route. A cemetery railway had never been done before so it was unclear how best to layout the buildings. As a result Cubitt decided that the cemetery stations should perhaps be built temporarily of wood and then rebuild later in brick or stone once the cemetery was established. Only the platforms, the foundations and the chimneys were made of brick therefore

with the chapels, refreshment rooms, staff accommodation and first class waiting rooms being made of wood.

Of course the cemetery was never the success that the founders had hoped for, so the 'temporary' wooden buildings remained – until vandals in the 1960's and 70's decided to destroy the stations buildings, with only the chapels now remaining.



Temporary wooden chapels were built beside each station, with waiting and refreshment rooms for the mourners. A new church at South Station was later added – now the church of the St Edward Brotherhood.

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LONDON'S GRAVEYARDS



The majority of burials at Brookwood in the early days were pauper funerals for London parishes, with St George's at Bloomsbury, St Giles-in-the-Fields, St Luke's at Chelsea and St Saviour's in Southwark being amongst the first to take advantage of the cheap rates the Necropolis offered. Something like 80% of burials were for London parishes that were no longer able to bury their dead in their own churchyards, although the Necropolis also soon established agreements with a number of societies, guilds and similar organisations to have plots within the grounds.

Although the Necropolis were not originally allowed to dig mass graves, with the pace of development in London in Victorian times – the underground, the sewers, and other major engineering projects – there were times when whole churchyards had to be exhumed and the bodies reburied elsewhere. In 1862 when the railway to Charing Cross Station was being built, the burial ground of Cure's College in Southwark had to be relocated. About 5,000 cubic yards of earth was apparently dug and nearly 8,000 bodies recovered which were packed into 220 large containers to be taken to Brookwood for reburial.

Apparently Brookwood was one of the few places allowed to perform burials on a Sunday, which helped to make it popular with the poor as it was the only day they could get off work. It may also account for why the 'actors' acre' became well used as theatrical performances were banned on Sundays meaning their funerals could easily be attended by colleagues and friends.

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