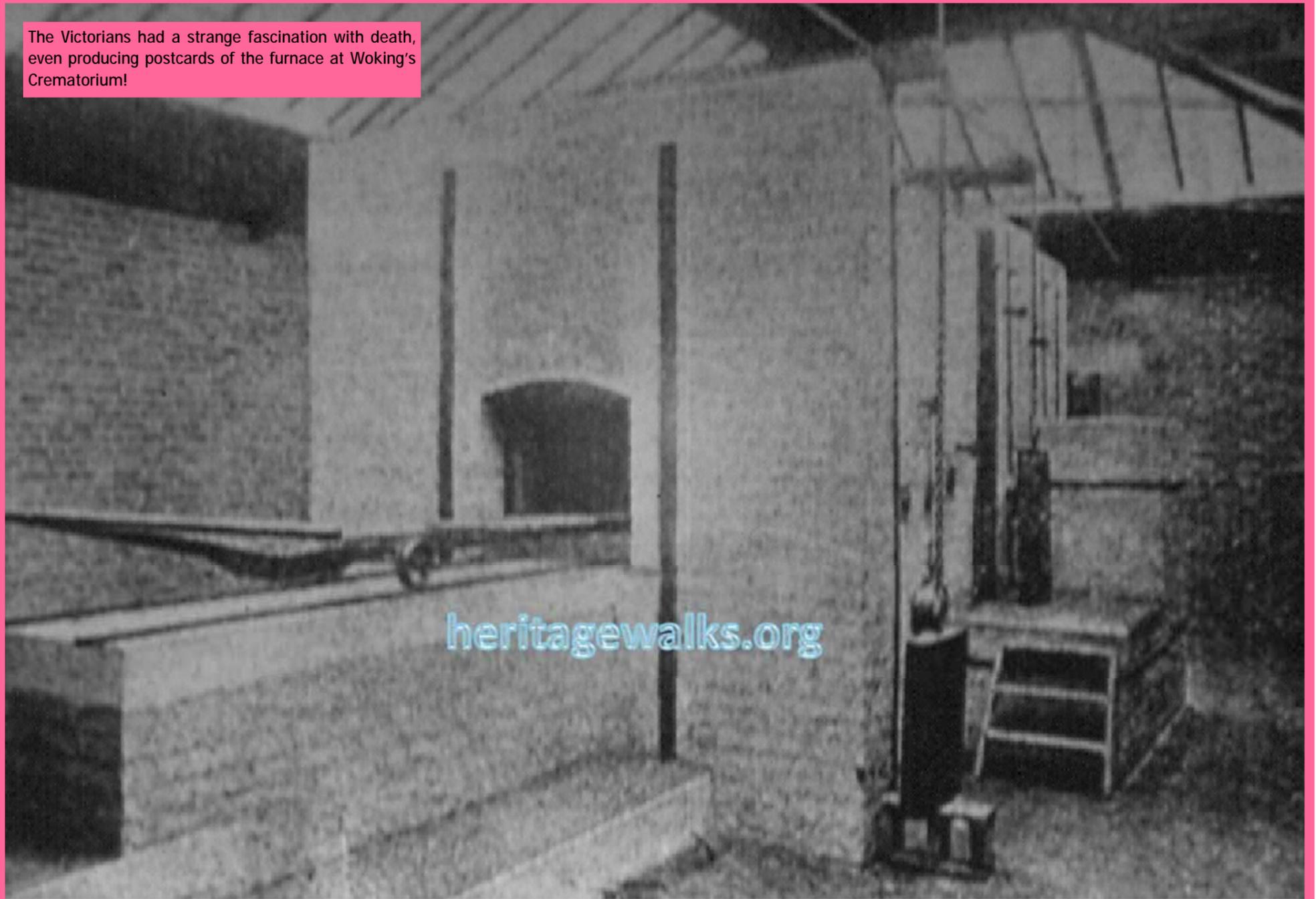


# THE CASE OF DR PRICE & MRS PICKERSGILL

Iain Wakeford 2015

The Victorians had a strange fascination with death, even producing postcards of the furnace at Woking's Crematorium!



Everybody knows that the Crematorium at St Johns is the oldest in this country, but how many realise that this does not necessarily mean that it was the first place that a human cremation took place in this country?

Technically, of course, you could argue that people had been cremated in this country back in prehistoric times (even into the Dark Ages), but that is perhaps being a bit too pedantic. In modern times nobody had been cremated in this country until after the Cremation Society of England was formed and had built their first trial crematory furnace on the acre of land they had bought from the London Necropolis Company at St Johns in 1874.

The problem was that although the law didn't specifically forbid the act of cremation, it didn't actually allow it either, so the Cremation Society to start with contented itself with experimenting on the carcasses of dead horses – to show that their process could work without causing disturbance to the good people of Woking.

Indeed when Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke's first wife, Katherine, died in September 1874 arrangements had to be made to transport her

body to Dresden for cremation, as the Cremation Society couldn't (or wouldn't) get involved.

The Society experimented for some years until in 1884 Dr William Price cremated his dead son and was taken to court by the authorities. I think it is safe to say that Dr Price was what you would call 'a character' – he was a trade unionist, a vegetarian, a naturist, a fervent Welsh Nationalist, and a Druid who believed in the abolition of marriage. Having said that in 1881 he married a twenty-one year old farmer's daughter (he being sixty years her senior), who two years later gave birth to their first son – whom Price named 'Iesu Grist' (Welsh for Jesus Christ)!

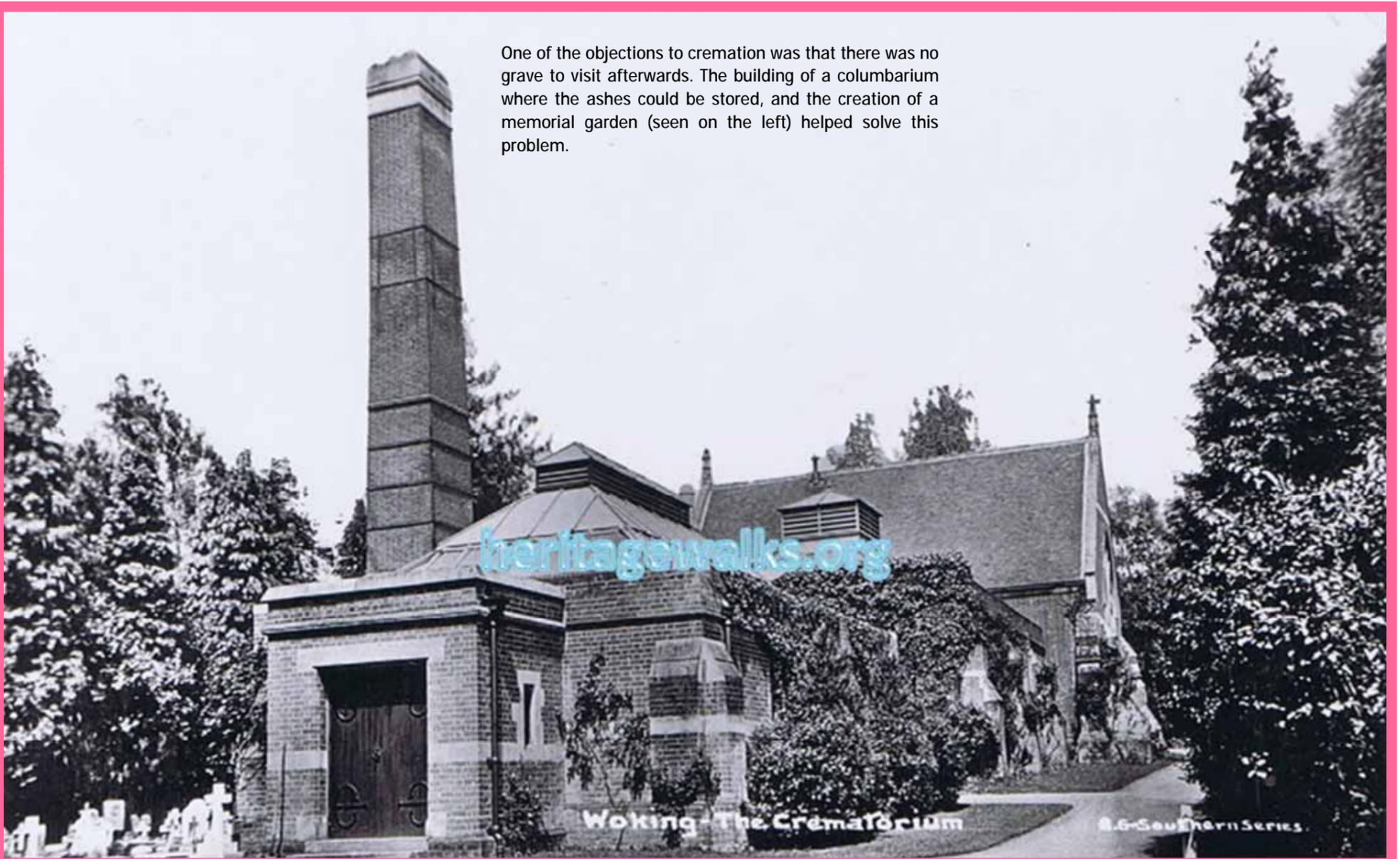
When the infant died of natural causes five months later Dr Price cremated the body on the summit of a hill above his home at Llantrisant. The authorities, who had had dealings with Price on numerous other occasions, decided to take him to court, but Price successfully argued that providing no nuisance was caused (and the body could be authorised for 'burial') then cremation was not illegal.

So technically, this cremation pyre on Sunday

13<sup>th</sup> January 1884 was the first legal cremation in Britain, even though Woking's Crematorium was some six years older. The first human cremation here was over a year later when Mrs Jeanette Pickersgill (a well-known figure in literary and scientific circles, according to her



One of the objections to cremation was that there was no grave to visit afterwards. The building of a columbarium where the ashes could be stored, and the creation of a memorial garden (seen on the left) helped solve this problem.



obituary in The Times), was cremated on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1885.

She had been a member of the Cremation Society, but despite the Price case (or maybe because of it) there was still widespread scepticism and two doctors were required to examine her body (just to make 100% certain she was dead) and that no foul play was

involved. By the end of the year only three more cremations had taken place at St Johns (out of almost 600,000 deaths in this country), and it would be well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the practice became widely accepted.

Coincidentally William Price, as a medical adviser, worked for the Crawshay family at their iron works in South Wales (Richard Crawshay

living at Ottershaw Park until he died in 1859) and the judge who found Price not guilty was Justice James Fitzjames Stephen, who in 1889 found Florence Maybrick guilty of murder, sentencing her to death (later commuted to life imprisonment, part of which she served at Woking Prison) - although that is a story for a few weeks' time!



The Memorial Garden can still be found at the back of the Crematorium.

## THE DILKE'S & PYRFORD ROUGH

**I** mentioned above the cremation in 1874 of Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke's first wife, Katherine, but in 1884 he married the author and art historian Emilia Francis Pattison, and the following year they bought Pyrford Rough as their 'winter retreat'.

Emilia was a prominent member of the Women's Trade Union League, whilst Sir Charles was a well-known Liberal and Radical politician (for Chelsea) – tipped by some to be a future Prime Minister.

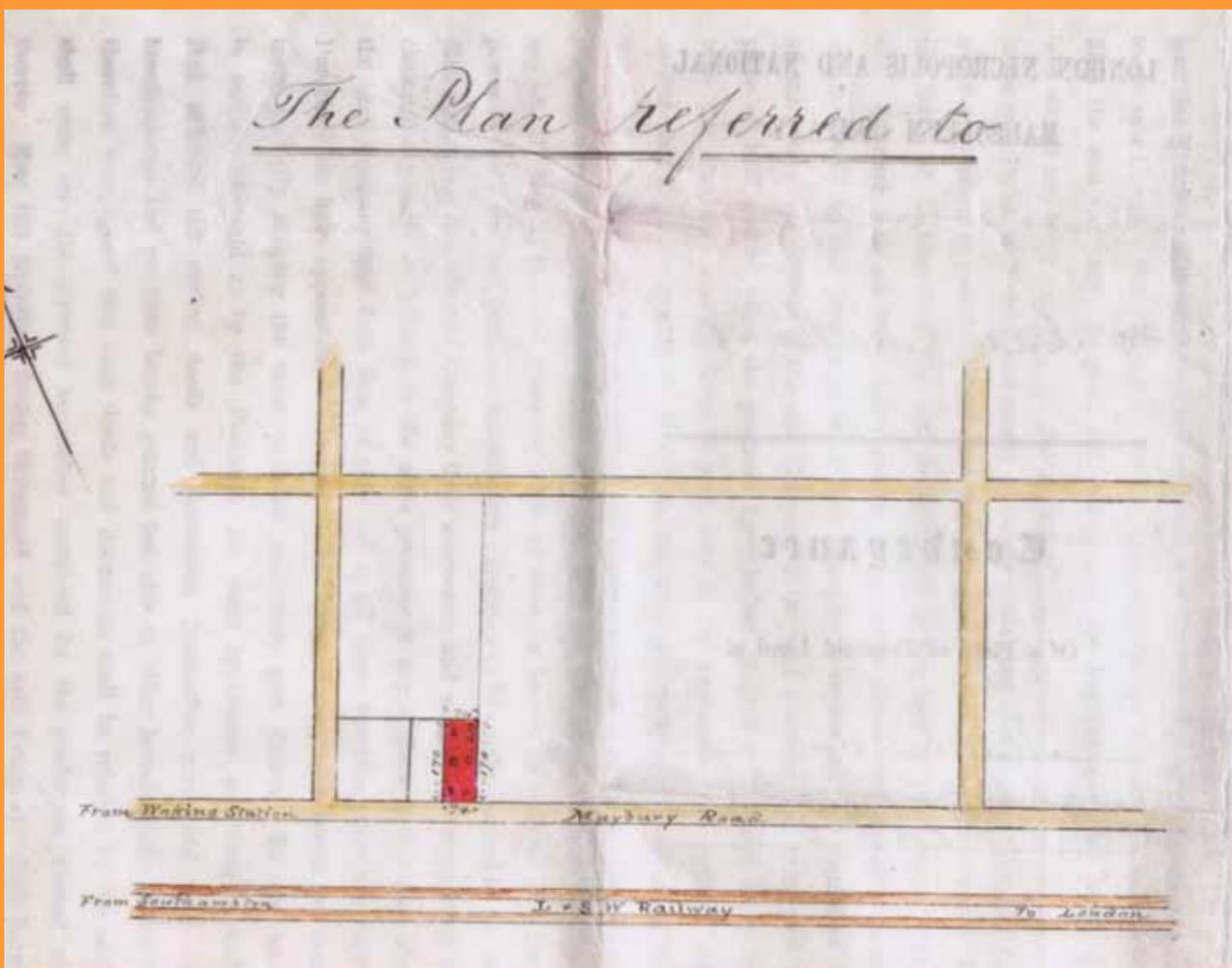
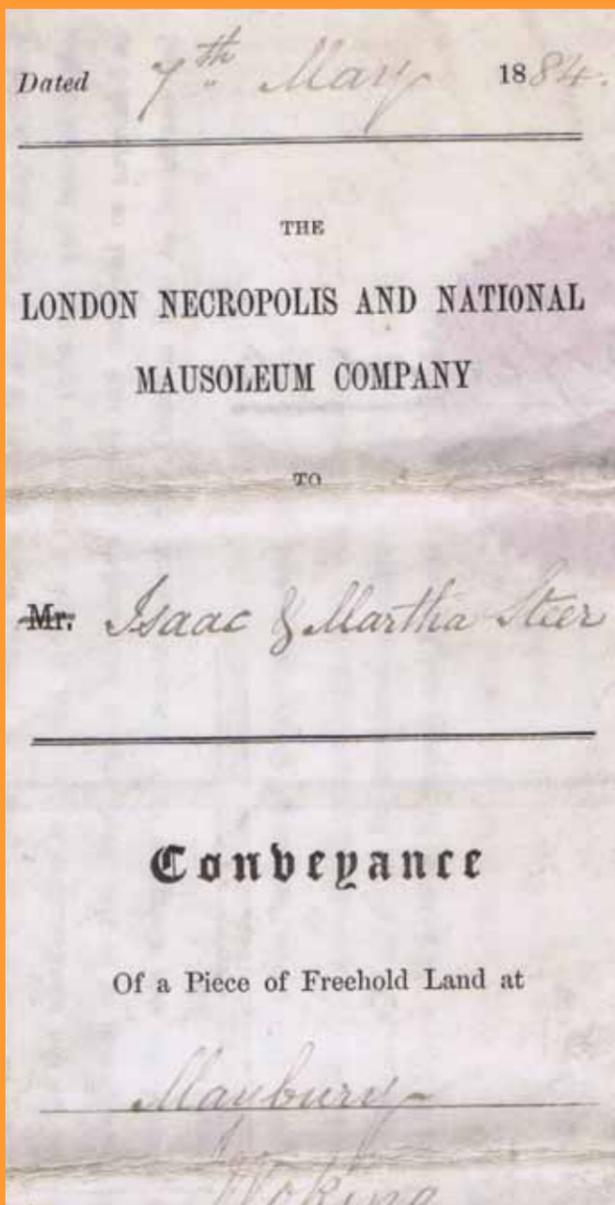
He pushed through the Third Reform Act (giving the vote to all men holding or renting land worth more than £10), supported limiting working hours and improving working conditions and was a great campaigner for universal schooling. Unfortunately he was also a bit of a womaniser and in 1885 got caught up in a divorce case when his fellow Liberal MP Donald Crawford claimed Dilke had had an affair with his wife, Virginia.

Dilke had almost certainly had an affair with Virginia's mother, but was found by the Judge (The Hon Mr Justice Butt) not to have had an affair with Virginia, although somewhat confusingly he did think it likely that Virginia had committed adultery with Dilke!

The scandal led to him losing his seat in the General Election of 1886, no doubt leaving the Dilke's plenty of time to enjoy their new home at Pyrford.



# MAYBURY ROAD CONVEYANCE



I have in my archive the deeds for a property in Maybury Road that was conveyed by the London Necropolis Company in May 1884 to Isaac & Martha Steer (see archive section, under Woking Town Centre). Isaac Steer was a builder, who bought the quarter of an acre plot in Maybury Road for £62.18s.6d. (almost £252 per acre)! Unfortunately there is no indication where in

Maybury Road the plot was (other than the plan shown here).

It seems to indicate that it was between Portugal Road and North Road (the only two that cross Walton Road as shown on the plan). If that is the case it shows that Marlborough Road was not one of those originally planned by the Necropolis Company. In fact it is possible that the property is the one on the corner with

I have already written about Sir James Whittaker Ellis and how he founded the Byfleet Volunteer Fire Brigade after a fire at his home in the late 1870's, but when it comes to the building of the fire station, I can find no information whatsoever!

The date stone clearly shows that it was erected in 1885, but other than the fact it was built and owned by Sir James I have been unable to find out much else. Can any readers shed any more light onto its construction?

## 1885 - THE BUILDING OF BYFLEET FIRE STATION

