

THE SEARCH FOR A NEW CEMETERY SITE – 160 YEARS AGO!

By David Griffiths

LAST WEEK'S NEWS that it was 'back to the drawing board' in the search for a new Huddersfield cemetery site brought to mind the tortuous quest for what became Edgerton Cemetery.

Then as now the starting point was concern that the main existing burial facility – the parish churchyard – was full. Indeed the situation was far, far worse than anything faced today. As early as 1842 the sexton was warning the vicar, Rev J Bateman that he faced "the utmost difficulty" in digging new graves without mutilating the bodies already there. Bateman applied to the Ramsden estate, the ground landlords, to extend the site but got nowhere, and the situation continued to deteriorate. By 1851 a Government inspector reported that there were 21 layers of bodies at St Peter's, with nine burials per square yard. Corpses and coffins were piled 40 feet high – as the height of the churchyard above Kirkgate still testifies. Church windows were closed to keep out the stench.

Serious discussions about a new site began in 1846, but foundered on tensions between Anglicans and non-conformists. The latter wanted a non-denominational cemetery where their own ministers could take funerals; the vicar was determined not to lose the burial fees which flowed to the parish church. By January 1847 negotiations had collapsed and Bateman again appealed for help to the Ramsden estate. To date they had played no part, and their principal agent George Loch would have preferred the town's religious leaders to reach agreement but, accepting that "The horrors of the Church Yard are so dreadful", he urged the estate's trustees to act.

By this time the Ramsdens were planning to erect a new Anglican church at Hillhouse. Eventually this would become St John's, Birkby, but at this stage the proposed site was on Halifax Old Road near King Cliff. Discussions in 1847 centred on adding a new parish burial ground to this, running downhill to the Hebble Beck. From the start there were worries about flooding of graves (shades of today's debate about the Castle Hill site), and the site had to be changed when a branch railway to Halifax through the Grimescar valley was proposed.

By the end of 1847 the Hillhouse scheme had collapsed. Famously this was because it still offered only a consecrated Anglican graveyard, and in December 1847 the Dissenters, at a parish meeting, threw out a proposal to raise a church rate from all inhabitants to pay for enclosing and laying it out. But by then the Ramsdens knew they faced legal obstacles to providing the land, and that exhausted coal workings threatened the safety of a church on the site.

At this point one of the town's 'elder statesmen', John Sutcliffe JP, who had proposed the church rate but stood for tolerance in religious affairs, tried to break the deadlock. He proposed a public cemetery funded by shareholders, and suggested two sites – on New North Rd or at the top of Trinity St. The vicar soon accepted that a new Anglican burial ground was off the agenda, and pledged not to oppose a public cemetery - provided his rights were respected and any loss of his fees compensated - while the estate agreed to survey the new sites.

Though Rev Bateman's stance on fees would complicate future negotiations, to his credit it was he who got the debate going again in autumn 1849. By then the new Huddersfield Improvement Commissioners had been in business for a year, and embraced his challenge to take charge of the

issue. Vigorously led by their chairman, Joseph Brook JP of Greenhead, and clerk of works Joshua Hobson, they quickly reached agreement with Loch about the suitability of the Blacker Lane site which would become Edgerton Cemetery.

But it would take another six years before Edgerton opened. As the town's suburban growth got into its stride, the Ramsdens had second thoughts about whether a cemetery was the best use of valuable land, and suggested two alternatives, at Ashenhurst and Paddock. The Commissioners stuck to their guns. Ashenhurst was outside Huddersfield parish and the ground was unsuitable; the Paddock site, at the bottom of Luck Lane, was far from town and would need a new access road through the grounds of Gledholt Hall.

For Hobson the issue of access was a key one – as it has become again in the current debate. He argued tirelessly that Edgerton was best because it could be readily reached from all parts of Huddersfield township – including Marsh, Deighton and Bradley – without the funeral processions having to pass through the narrow streets of the town. The estate decided it was best to give in graciously, and came up with a lower valuation.

The next problem was to obtain legal powers for the Commissioners to proceed. The process was tortuous, with two public inquiries and three attempts at legislation, finally gaining Royal Assent in June 1852. The second inquiry, in 1851, considered two more sites offered by the Thornhill estate – again in the news recently, in connection with their development proposals for the Grimescar valley. These were on each side of Halifax Road near Sunny Bank, roughly where Hungerford Rd and Kaffir Rd would be developed soon afterwards. William Lee, the inspector who conducted the inquiry, favoured the latter, but the Commissioners again preferred Blacker Lane.

The site there was handed over by George Loch to Joseph Brook on 15 September 1852; the first sod was ceremonially cut; and all then repaired to the George to celebrate Sir John William Ramsden's coming of age. New controversies lay ahead – notoriously over the Bishop's refusal to allow the consecrated and unconsecrated chapels to come into contact – and Edgerton cemetery was not to open until October 1855. But the conclusion was no longer in doubt.

The debates of the 1840s and the 2010s have both been driven by the exhaustion of existing facilities. Issues of access, ground conditions and flood risks have been common to both. On top of that, the Victorians had to contend with denominational disputes, theological controversies and uncertain legal powers; but they had far more open land to look at. They took 13 years to find a way through. Hopefully today's institutions can achieve a quicker result.

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