

(No. 89) Vineyard Passage Burial Ground, Richmond



Historical background

Paradise Road - or Paradise Row as it was called originally - is, at first glance, a clue to the Burial Ground's situation as 'Paradise' was a euphemism for a church graveyard. But the original link with 'Paradise' is probably with the earlier St Mary Magdalene Parish churchyard, so the subsequent connection with the Vineyard Passage Burial Ground is fortuitous.

What is known is that by the latter half of the 18th century, St Mary's graveyard was full and a new cemetery was needed. The population had risen from around a few hundred in Tudor times to some 4000 by the latter half of the 18th century (and it was to expand even more during the Victorian era following the introduction of the railways).

The main drivers to this growth included the return of royalty to Richmond during the reigns of George II and particularly George III, and the burgeoning of a new professional and merchant class who had made enough money to be able to have a house outside the more congested confines of London. Speculative building had been underway from the early 18th century around The Green and Ormond Road.

The original plan for achieving more burial grounds was to use land granted for this purpose in 1786 by George III at Pesthouse Common - as it was then known - off Queens Road. The land was also to incorporate a new workhouse.

The grant stipulated that land not actually used for the workhouse or burial ground should be held in trust for the 'employment and support' of the poor of Richmond Parish. This was how the Richmond Parish Lands Charity was established but that is another story for another day.

However, at just about the same time as the grant had been signed by George III, another solution for the burial ground was found. The Trustees of the Church Estate (an endowment in lands originally provided for the maintenance of the Church) owned ½ acre of land on the south side of Paradise Road. The prominent local brewer, Edward Collins, owned another ½ acre adjacent to the Church Estate parcel on which were some old cottages and was willing to sell the property for £350 (around £54,000 in 2020 prices). The Church Estate put up £240 (around £37,000 in 2020 prices) towards the purchase from Collins and Richmond Vestry found the balance.

The deal was concluded in 1790 and the new burial ground - situated in the newly created Burial Passage - was consecrated in December 1791. This facility would prove sufficient for the next 60 years - a further extension was made in 1815 - so the need to use the 1786 grant of land on Pesthouse Common was postponed indefinitely.

A small part of the land, where Collins' cottages had stood at the Paradise Road end of the site, was reserved for a new Vestry Office. On 25 March 1790, the Vestry moved to its new building from its previously held rooms in Church Walk. This Vestry Office was replaced in 1895 by the current Vestry House, when it was used originally as a Magistrates Court; the architect was W J Ansell, who was also responsible for the Old Town Hall in Richmond.

When the Burial Ground was opened in 1791, the geography was very different to what we see now. None of the surrounding late Victorian terraces were here, only a scattering of larger houses such as Halford House, Vineyard House, Clarence House, Hermitage House and Church Terrace.

The news headlines around that time could have included:-

- Europe in crisis as riots spread and the revolution in France leads to the house arrest of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette where they face a worse fate later
- Austerity measures loom on the home front due to the ruinous cost of the American War of Independence - when Pitt the Younger wants to pay down the National Debt to pay for this - as the Government contemplate tax increases
- Boswell's 'Life of Johnson' and Tom Paine's 'Rights of Man' is published

- Excitement in the show business world as the first performance of Mozart's 'The Magic Flute' is given in Vienna : and Mozart dies that same year

Post-1791 events

In the Vestry Minutes for 20 October 1806, mention was made of the natural springs that were common on the Hill:

“Resolved that the Reverend Mr Wakefield and the Church Wardens be requested to examine and report to the Vestry their opinion of the necessity of the new burial ground being drained from the great flow of land springs therein”

Nothing appears to have happened about this, probably due to the death of the Reverend Wakefield in that same year.

In a more gruesome context, body snatching is reported in the Vestry Minutes for 1822 and 1823. This criminal activity was inadvertently prompted by the complaints of medical students that there was a scarcity of bodies for dissection. Spotting a gap in the market, gangs of 'resurrection men' began a macabre trade in exhuming bodies from graveyards at night for sale.

A potentially scandalous spin-off from this murky practice arose in 1822 when the local sexton was charged with conniving at dead bodies being stolen from the burial grounds but he was ultimately found not guilty.

Concerns continued to surround the threat of grave robbing. In 1823, the Vestry offered a reward of £50 - around £6000 in 2020 prices - for 'the apprehension of those guilty of stealing or attempting to disinter any bodies in the Churchyard or Burial Ground with intent to steal the same.'

Cessation of burials

Reflecting the growth of Richmond during the Victorian era following the advent of the railway in 1846, the 'new' Burial Ground had become filled by 1852. The return of this capacity problem led to the development of the present day cemetery in Grove Road - on the Pesthouse Common area covered by the original grant of land for this purpose some 70 years earlier.

Burials were prohibited in the Parish church graveyard and the Burial Ground from 7 April 1854 - ironically, just as the third major cholera outbreak in London took hold when 10,738 people died (6536 had died in the first outbreak in 1831-32 and 14,137 died in 1848-49). However, some political pressure from Richmond's wealthier classes was brought to bear on these restrictions. The Vestry resolved in that same year that Lord Palmerston, the Prime Minister, be petitioned to authorise the use of family vaults and graves.

Eventually, in 1857, the Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, advised that 'interments

in Richmond be modified to allow the use of vaults and brick graves in the burial ground which adjoin each other for the interment of husbands, wives (sic), parents and unmarried children of persons already buried there provided the vaults and brick graves be opened without disturbing soil that has already buried in, and that each coffin be imbedded in a layer of powdered charcoal 4" thick and be separately entombed in brick or stonework properly cemented.'

Burials under this modification did not continue for much longer. It is believed that the last interment was in 1874; Sir Anthony Rugge-Price is shown on the family vault in 1892 which is probably a memorial reference only rather than a burial. The effective redundancy of the Burial Ground was recognised when, in 1892 - almost 100 years after the opening of the Burial Ground - the address was changed from Burial Passage to the more salubrious Vineyard Passage. The Richmond Vestry had passed the Burial Ground to the newly formed Borough of Richmond Council following the grant of Borough status in 1890.

A formal petition for a Bishop's Licence, or faculty, was made in 1963 to repair and to re-arrange the gravestones to allow for the design and landscaping of the grounds. After some 200 years, many of the gravestones were extremely worn to the point of illegibility or broken in pieces through a combination of natural causes, grave robbers and latter day vandalism: it was around this time of re-arrangement that the tracing of names to burial places became difficult.

In 1964, the Burial Ground in Vineyard Passage was declared a public Open Space and garden of rest, maintained by Richmond Council. Finally, in 1995 - following a move by Richmond Council to create a public playground - a local voluntary support group, the Vineyard Passage Burial Ground Group, was set up under the aegis of the then Environment Trust for Richmond upon Thames (now Habitats & Heritage since 2020) to help keep this historic area in good condition through conserving the natural beauty of the grounds in the form of a wild woodland garden; restoring deteriorating monuments and headstones; and keeping the area litter free.

Some the characters buried here include the father of a Countess of Essex, a mentor of Robbie Burns, a Gardener to George III, a Steward of the Manor of Richmond, the Surveyor to the Grosvenor Estate in Belgravia and Pimlico - the Cundy family vault is a Grade II listed monument - and a French Princess who fled the French Revolution.

Sources

This note draws on factual accounts and material in the following books and publications:

- 'Monumental Inscriptions in Burial Ground Richmond (John Challenor Smith 1891: Richmond Local Studies Library (L929.5 RAI)
- 'List of Graves in Vineyard Passage Burial Ground' (Judith Filson 1985: Richmond Local Studies Collection)
- 'Cottages and Common Fields of Richmond and Kew' (John Cloake)

- 'Royal Bounty: Richmond Parish Lands Charity 1786-1991' (John Cloake)
- 'History of Richmond Parish Church' (A C Piper: privately published 1947)

The debt to the writers of these books and publications is acknowledged.