Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire

The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research &Recording Project

St Mary's Cemetery, Amersham

July 2020

HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY

St Mary's Cemetery, Amersham: boundary of historic designed landscape interest

Produced by the Council Archaeology Service
July 2020

Scale: 1:1,755   at A4

Buckinghamshire
Gardens Trust

St Mary's Cemetery, Amersham: 2015 aerial photograph

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Produced by the Council Archaeology Service
July 2020

Scale: 1:1,771   at A4

Buckinghamshire
Gardens Trust

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Project

This site dossier has been prepared as part of The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust (BGT) Research and Recording Project, begun in 2014. This site is one of several hundred designed landscapes county-wide identified by Bucks County Council (BCC) in 1998 (including Milton Keynes District) as potentially retaining evidence of historic interest, as part of the Historic Parks and Gardens Register Review project carried out for English Heritage (now Historic England) (BCC Report No. 508). The list is not definitive and further parks and gardens may be identified as research continues or further information comes to light.

Content

BGT has taken the Register Review list as a sound basis from which to select sites for appraisal as part of its Research and Recording Project for designed landscapes in the historic county of Bucks (pre-1974 boundaries). For each site a dossier is prepared by volunteers trained by BGT in appraising designed landscapes.

Each dossier includes the following for the site:
- A site boundary mapped on the current Ordnance Survey to indicate the extent of the main part of the surviving designed landscape, also a current aerial photograph.
- A statement of historic significance based on the four Interests outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework and including an overview.
- A description, derived from documentary research and site visits, based on the format of Historic England's *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest* 2nd *edn.*
- A map showing principal views and features.

The area within the site boundary represents the significant coherent remains of the designed landscape. It does not necessarily include all surviving elements of the historical landscape design, which may be fragmented. It takes no account of current ownership.

NOTE: Sites are not open to the public unless advertised elsewhere.

Supporters and Acknowledgements

The project was funded by BGT, with significant grants from the Finnis Scott Foundation, the Roland Callingham Foundation, BCC (since April 2020 part of Buckinghamshire Council) and various private donors. Buckinghamshire Council also provided significant funding, and help in kind including current and historic mapping and access to the Historic Environment Record. The project is supported by The Gardens Trust.

The Trust thanks the volunteers and owners who have participated in this project and given so much time and effort to complete this challenging and rewarding task.

Further information is available from: www.bucksgardenstrust.org.uk

COUNTY:	BUCKINGHAMSHIRE	**ST MARY'S CEMETERY, AMERSHAM**
DISTRICT:	CHILTERN	
PARISH:	AMERSHAM	**BCC HER** 0649800000
OS REF.:	SU 959 974	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

A simple Burial Board Anglican cemetery (1858-59) for a Chiltern market town. It was designed by WF Poulton of the Reading-based architectural firm of Poulton and Woodman as the consecrated one of two burial grounds he laid out in the town, the other for non-conformists, The Platt, being near the chapels off Whielden Street. The 0.55 ha. grid-pattern layout by Poulton, enclosed by a fine and unusual ornamental boundary wall, makes good use of the Chiltern materials, site and setting. It was extended to the present 1.2 ha in the early C20. Poulton and Woodman were Reading-based architects and prolific cemetery designers in the 1850s-70s, their cemetery work including Windsor, St Helier, Jersey, and Guernsey (all 1856) and Aylesbury (1857-58). This is a modest example both of its type and of their work, without the more usual chapels or lodges, which were dispensed with as it lay close to the parish church.

Archaeological interest

A typical example of successive burials of a rural market town since the 1850s, including war dead. Further archaeological potential largely arises from evidence relating to former agricultural uses and close association with the nearby town and River Misbourne, but this is unlikely given the high subsequent level of disturbance. There is some potential for Roman evidence as the supposed course of a road clips the east edge of the cemetery extension.

Architectural interest

The main significance is the brick boundary wall by Poulton and Woodman with ornamental capping, diaper work on the exterior and unusual flint plaques on the inner side. The brick and stone gateway survives on the south side, but the gates have gone. A collection of modest memorials survives.

Artistic interest

The design is a typical simple mid-C19 grid pattern, focussed on an axial path and originally ornamented with conifers, probably yew and cedar. The later phases and their planting respected this pattern along the drive and paths. The layout survives intact including some fine mature trees, particularly yew and cedar. The original rural Chiltern setting survives intact, set away from the core of the town against agricultural land and woodland, the main feature being views of the associated parish church, particularly the roofs and tower, which links it Picturesquely to the town.

Historic interest

There are strong associations between the cemetery and the history of the town and its community. The cemetery provides an important link with the past and a place for contemplation by the local community.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

By the early C19 the site was in agricultural use, lying in a rural area detached to the north-east of the parish churchyard and immediately north of the River Misbourne.

With the advent of the Burial Acts in the mid-1850s in response to the general lack of decent burial space, the Amersham Burial Board was set up. Land was given by Mr Drake, the squire, of Shardeloes, for two cemeteries. One piece for the Anglican consecrated ground to succeed the parish churchyard lay near St Mary's parish church. The other 0.5 acre of land, for non-conformists, was adjacent to the Baptist chapel off Whielden Street, south of the High Street (*Bucks Herald* 1860), near an existing burial ground. It is now called The Platt Cemetery.

In April 1858 the Board commissioned Mr WF Poulton of the architectural firm Poulton and Woodman of Reading to design the new cemeteries and furnish plans, estimates and specifications (Burial Board Minutes 23 April and *Bucks Herald* 1858). WF Poulton was responsible for the simple layouts as well as the design in the Anglican cemetery of the brick walls which used local flint and brick in an ornamental manner. Poulton published a book of the work of his firm, *Illustrations of Some of the Chapels, Churches, and Other Buildings, Erected from the Designs of W.F. Poulton and of the Firm of Poulton & Woodman, Architects, of Reading, Between the Years 1844 and 1878* (188?).

The cemetery was designed in conventional style, in grid pattern, divided into two equal halves by an axial path aligned on the central gateway, and ornamental trees were planted, with a mix of conifers and deciduous trees (OS, 1887).

In June 1858 tenders were invited by the Amersham Burial Board for building the new burial grounds, cemetery including their approach roads and the inclosure and laying out of the grounds. Plans and specification were available for inspection at Poulton and Woodman's Reading office. They were divided into three: 1. Brickwork and Masonry; 2. Roads and laying out; 3. Cast-iron Gates and Railing. (*Bucks Herald*, 26 June, 1858) There were no chapels, perhaps because each burial ground was close to its respective place of worship. Ownership of 1.1.39 ARP of Tenter Field was transferred from Charles Bennett Drake Garrard and Thomas Tyrwhitt Drake to the Rector John Tyrwhitt Drake as Chairman of the Burial Board on 09 June 1859 in exchange for another piece of land of similar size (Deed).

Sheahan noted shortly afterwards that 'Two Cemeteries were opened here on the first of January, 1860, at a cost of about £1,600. One is situated near the church, and the other close to the Dissenting Chapels – an arrangement carried out to save the expense of building cemetery chapels.' This explains the absence of chapels often found in similar Burial Board cemeteries of this period.

By 1875 (OS) the grid-pattern paths were lined by conifers, probably yew, with further trees around the boundary, particularly along the south-west.

The 1.3 acre cemetery was extended in the early C20 to 2.5 acres to the south-east with a rectangular area of similar size. A gateway was created in the original south-east wall to give access to the new circuit path. In the mid-C20 (RAF AP) the main path was lined with mature yew, probably from the original planting, but these have since gone.

The cemetery is managed by Amersham Town Council.

SITE DESCRIPTION
LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Old Amersham lies in a picturesque situation c.100m AOD on the southern slope of the chalky range of the Chiltern Hills. The cemetery is located in agricultural land north of the historic centre of Old Amersham, 80m north-east of St Mary's parish church and churchyard, with a former meadow to the south, now a public open space, from which it is divided by the River Misbourne.

The cemetery as laid out in 1858-59 covered 0.5ha. and was extended to the south-east in the early C20 so that it now covers 1.2ha. Red brick boundary walls enclose the original site, with moulded brick coping ornamental and hexagonal flint panels on the inner sides. The west and east walls are stepped up to the north. The south wall, against the approach path, drops in sections to accommodate ornamental cast iron railings in Gothic pattern and has blue brick diaper work on the outer side. The extension is fenced and hedged.

The ground within the cemetery slopes gently northwards up from the south boundary. The cemetery enjoys panoramic views northwards over the rising agricultural land to Parsonage Wood. Views south towards the town are screened by mature trees along the Misbourne, except for a gap maintained to the south-west so that the church remains prominent, particularly the east end and tower.

When it was laid out, the cemetery was surrounded by agricultural land, and this remains largely the case. The Misbourne adjacent is an attractive chalk stream, with associated brick bridges and walls. It is possible that the line of a Roman road passes the cemetery extension along the east edge (Viatores) but this is speculative.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance is off the path running parallel to the south-west boundary, beyond which is the Misbourne. The central gateway is set a little back off the path, with curved flanking walls leading out to the boundary wall in similar style, with brick diaper work and moulded coping, which drops to inset Gothic pattern iron railings. The gateway is marked by brick and stone piers with stepped pyramidal caps, but the iron gates mentioned in the 1858 tender advertisement have gone. A mature cedar stands just inside near the west pier.

The entrance gives access to the central axial path running north-east and linking with the circuit path around the boundary, leading to the gateway in the south-east wall to the early C20 extension.

OTHER LAND
The cemetery is laid out in a grid plan with a backdrop of agricultural land beyond. The cemetery was constructed so it would be regarded with civic pride and therefore care was taken over the design; the ensemble by Poulton and Woodman remains largely intact. The paths that define the grid layout are integral to the design as was the planting of trees, as shown on the 1877 OS 25", based on conifers lining the paths and boundary in a distinctive pattern. Some mid-C19 planting survives, principally mature yew around the boundary but the pairs of yews lining the main axial path that survived to the mid-C20 (RAF APs 1947, 1950; OS 1963) have gone.

The early C20 extension to the south-east is laid out with a rectangular circuit path and specimen trees.

There is a collection of modest memorials including Commonwealth War Graves for over 20 casualties, from both World Wars.

REFERENCES
Bucks Herald (13 Sept 1856 [re Poulton & Woodman]; 26 June 1858; 09 July 1859; 21 July 1860).
Amersham Cemetery Web site: http://www.amersham-tc.gov.uk/council-services/cemeteries/
Pevsner, N & Williamson, E. *The Buildings of England, Buckinghamshire*. (1994), 138. [NB this entry is wrong, as it mentions chapels of 1859 by Poulton and Woodman in a C20 cemetery on Stanley Hill to the east]
Poulton, WF, *Illustrations of Some of the Chapels, Churches, and Other Buildings, Erected from the Designs of W.F. Poulton and of the Firm of Poulton & Woodman, Architects, of Reading, Between the Years 1844 and 1878* (188?).
RIBA, *Directory of British Architects 1834-1900* (1993), 733, 1018.
Rutherford, Sarah. *The Victorian Cemetery* (2008).
Sheahan, J.J., *History and Topography of Buckinghamshire* … (1862), 804.
Viatores, *Roman roads in SE Midlands* (1964), 210-12, and maps.

MAPS
1812, Ordnance Surveyor's Drawing, 2" scale (BL).
OS 6" and 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition, s. 1877.
                                              2nd edition, s. 1897.
                                              Revised 1923
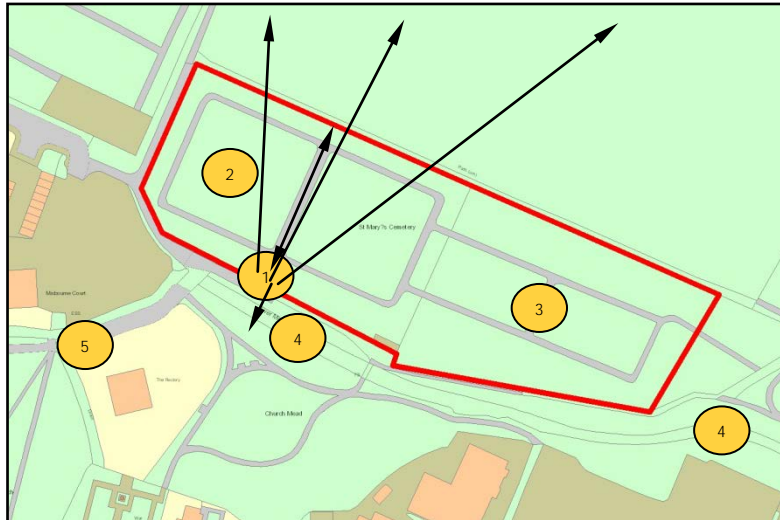**ARCHIVAL MATERIAL**
Amersham Town Council
Burial Board Minute Book, 1850s
Deed of Transfer of land of St Mary's Cemetery (part of Tenter Field), 09 June 1859
RAF Aerial Photographs, 1947 and 1950 (Buckinghamshire HER)
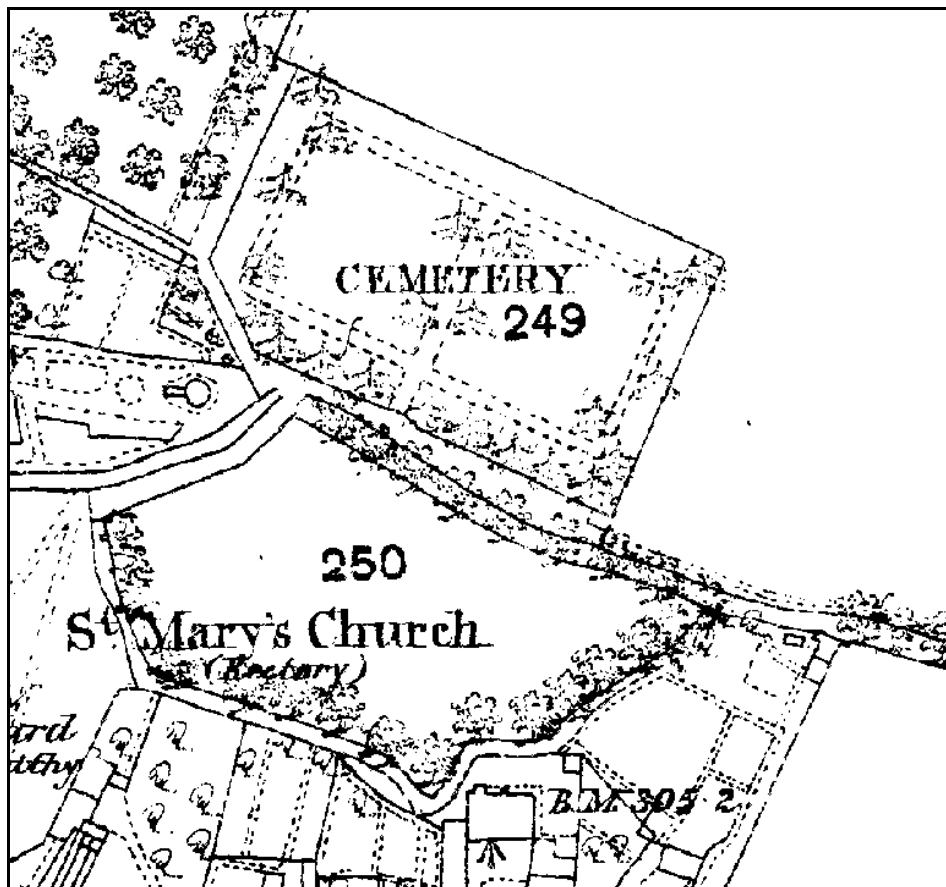
SR, June 2020.

KEY HISTORIC VIEWS & FEATURES

Key to numbered features

1.	Entrance	2.	1858 area
3.	C20 extension	4.	River Misbourne
5.	Path from parish church		

HISTORIC MAP

1878 Ordnance Survey 25" scale showing original planting of cemetery with conifers.
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CURRENT PHOTOGRAPHS

ApproAches to the cemetery: from the west and north (left & centre); from St Mary's to the south-west over the Misbourne (right).

The south-west wall and gateway.

The gateway, view in (left); view out, south over the Misbourne (right).

The 1857 section: west half (left); north wall (centre); east half (right).

Views of St Mary's church to south-west (left, centre); north boundary path, running east (right).

Early C20 extension: gateway from 1850s section (left); boundary with 1850s section (centre); view south-east (right).