

**FRIENDS OF
EARLHAM CEMETERY**



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The newsletter for Friends of Earlham Cemetery

Issue 1

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Cemetery walks have been arranged for the following dates.

Sunday 13th April 2014 – 3pm.

Sunday 18th May 2014 – 3pm.

Sunday 15th June 2014 – 3pm.

Sunday 20th July 2014 – 3pm.

Saturday 16th August 2014 – 3pm.

Meet up at the usual place outside the main Earlham cemetery office.

The header image in this issue is “Crocus”, photographed by © Ian Senior.
Logo design © Vanna Bartlett.
Layout design and editorial Sandy Lockwood.

Please send any articles, photographs and other images for inclusion in the next newsletter to sj.lockwood@ntlworld.com
Please supply photographs as 300dpi jpegs if possible.



Editorial

Welcome to the first newsletter of this year. I hope everyone has survived the colds and sniffles of winter and is enjoying the better spring weather.

As everyone knows the Cemetery is a great green pair of lungs for Norwich which hopefully with sensitive management will supply a wonderful urban landscape for all forms of wildlife and plant life.

As you will read in this seasons newsletter there have been some rare finds on the monthly walks which I'm sure will get better and better and help the species lists grow.

Many thanks to everyone who sent contributions for the first newsletter whether it was articles or photographs. Please keep them coming so the newsletter can become a regular feature of the group. I'm hoping to produce three to four newsletters a year to follow seasonal goings on in the Cemetery but you're the people I will be relying on to make this happen. So please send your thoughts and ideas, articles and photos to me (Sandy) at the email address in the bottom left hand column. In the subject email heading please add “Cemetery newsletter copy” along with the title of your piece. This will help me filter your articles from my work emails.

I enjoyed reading all the articles as I hope you will and look forward to sharing them with everyone in this and future issues.

Until next time,

Sandy

Review of the year - *Jeremy Bartlett*

These are the main headlines for the year 2013 – 2014:

Walks

- Our monthly walks continue to be well attended and continue to attract new people. The best attended walk was in April 2013, which was attended by 18 people.
- We created a self-guided walking tour of the Cemetery from North Lodge, which was for sale when Peter & Bruce at North Lodge opened their garden for the National Gardens Scheme. Sales of the tour leaflet raised £27 on the two Sundays in July 2013 that the North Lodge garden was open.

Wildlife

- We are working with Norfolk Wildlife Trust (NWT) to produce a Management Plan for the Cemetery.
- We had a joint meeting with the Norfolk Fungus Study Group in November 2013. The first Norfolk records for two fungi both came from the Cemetery this year: *Sowerbyella radiculata* var *radiculata* (found by Norfolk Fungus Study Group) and Yew Club, *Clavicornia taxophila* (found by Ian Senior).
- Group members are discovering new records for insects and plants, not least *Diptera* (flies) and other insects being recorded by Stuart Paston.
- Our website now has twelve lists of animals, plants and fungi that occur in the Cemetery.

Funding

- We received a £500 grant from Norwich City Council and this has helped to fund our website hosting. (Jeremy Bartlett has created and maintains the website free of charge.)

Projects

- We produced a proposal for a wildlife friendly garden near the Earlham Road entrance but this was turned down. However, it is possible that we may be able to create this garden in another part of the Cemetery.
- We have been given permission by Norwich City Council to take cuttings from the two remaining native Black Poplars in the Cemetery. The cuttings will eventually be planted in more suitable areas, such as the Bowthorpe Southern Park.
- Francoise Donovan, one of our members, has produced a book, "Norwich Lives: Selected graves from Earlham Cemetery", which has been very well received and has sold well in the city's bookshops.

- We are planning to produce a book on the Cemetery, covering its natural history and history. We still need to investigate funding but we are planning to publish in autumn 2015.

History

- Jeremy Bartlett has researched the history of the Cemetery and produced a "Short History of Earlham Cemetery", which is on our website.

Networking

- In February 2013 we met with Norwich City Council. We have a good working relationship with Paul Holley, the Natural Areas Officer, and now have links with Friends of the Rosary Cemetery and Norfolk Wildlife Trust.
- Our Facebook page has 73 "Likes".
- Our website has had 2,142 visits and 1,310 unique visitors since its launch in November 2012.
- We were mentioned in the January e-newsletters from Norfolk Wildlife Trust and Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service (pieces on the new fungi in the Cemetery).
- We continue to have mentions in Green Party newsletters to local residents.
- Jeremy Bartlett & Stuart Paston visited Pat Meek, the daughter of one of the Cemetery Superintendents, and have recorded some of her memories of the Cemetery. Her brother, Philip, is going to send us some photographs of the Cemetery.

Awards

- We were presented with a Royal Horticultural Society "It's Your Neighbourhood" certificate (Level 4: Thriving) for the second year running, to recognise our contribution to the city's Anglia In Bloom entry.

Jeremy Bartlett,
Secretary.

February 2014.



A New Cemetery - *Jeremy Bartlett*

In 1848, following a major cholera epidemic, the first Public Health Act was passed and this was soon followed by a series of Burial Acts (1852 – 1857) that established a national system of public cemeteries.

The new cemeteries had consecrated areas for use by the Anglican church and unconsecrated grounds for Nonconformists. The Burial Board Act of 1854 allowed town councils to form Burial Boards to run them.

In April 1854 the Mayor of Norwich received an Order from the Home Secretary that all burials in Norwich churchyards should be discontinued from 1st February 1855, so the Norwich Burial Board was set up to oversee the setting up and running of new cemeteries in Norwich.

The Burial Board held its first meeting on 12th July 1854, chaired by Sir Samuel Bignold. There were several suggestions for sites for new cemeteries:

- Land on Mousehold Heath belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Norwich;
- About 60 acres of land on Earlham Road in the hamlet of Heigham, belonging to Mr. John Cater;
- About three acres of land west of the Dereham Road;
- 30 acres of land in the hamlet of Eaton adjoining Unthank's Road [now Unthank Road] belonging to the Misses Mackie and
- 15 acres of land at Denmark's Farm in the hamlet of Pockthorpe and parish of St. James Pockthorpe (nowadays the Denmark Road area of the city), belonging to Miss Mary Anne Perowne.

The Burial Board advertised in the local press for areas of land 15 – 30 acres in extent that might be suitable for a new cemetery, and local landowners were also approached.

By the end of July, Mr. Hunt of Oulton had offered 24 acres of land at Alington, near Brooke, but the offer was turned down straight away as this was too far from the city.

The Clerk of the Board wrote to the Home Secretary, Lord Palmerston, asking for powers of compulsory purchase of land to be included in the latest Burial Bill, but the suggestion didn't make it into law.

By December 1854 other suggested sites included:

- Another 27 acre site between Earlham Road and Unthank's Road, belonging to James Rump;
- 15 acres in Hellesdon abutting Aylsham Road, about a mile from St. Augustine's Gates;

- 62 acres of land in Catton, about a mile and a half from the city centre, belonging to Mr. W. G. Gowing;
- 16 acres of land off Unthank's Road belonging to Mr. George Day;
- Land near Catton church.

The pieces of land at Mousehold and those belonging to John Cater, the Misses Mackie, Mary Perowne were still candidates at this stage.

A field belonging to Mr. Trafford between the Eastern Union Railway and Lakenham Hall Road was also suggested but Mr Trafford "will not sell any of his land at any price". (Trafford Road and surrounding streets now occupy this land.)

In January 1855 news was received that the Town Close Estate was "determined to resist to their utmost the appropriation of any part of this estate for the purpose of a cemetery". There was no spare consecrated land at the Rosary Cemetery either.

It was clear the selection process was going to take some time, so the Burial Board applied for an extension of the date for banning city churchyard burials and this was granted by Lord Palmerston (who became Prime Minister in February 1855), until 1st August 1855.

During the first months of 1855 more potential sites were suggested:

- 30 acres of Mousehold Heath near Rackheath Back Road;
- Land next to Silver Road and abutting Denmark's Farm;
- 30 acres on Unthank's Road belonging to Mr. Dix – known as "Dix's Land". (The land was on the north side of Unthank Road, in the area now between the west side of College Road and Christchurch Road.)

The inhabitants of Pockthorpe were offered free schooling for their poorest children as a condition of using land for a cemetery but they still opposed plans for a cemetery on Mousehold Heath "for they would rather see the furse (gorse) bushes bloom than grave stones planted".

By March 1855 the two strongest contenders were Mr. Dix's and Mr. Cater's pieces of land, though Mr. Dix's land had "a bad approach" (poor access).

The Denmark's Farm site was considered to be "not very eligible" by the Government Inspector, Mr. Grainger, who visited Norwich on 14th March.



Tenants or owners of land within 100 yards of a proposed cemetery had to give their consent to the development and this was not forthcoming for Mr. Dix's land, where three of the six owners and occupiers objected. The Secretary of State then refused to approve the use of the land as a cemetery.

Mr. Cater wrote to the Burial Board to give his terms for the sale of his land and the Secretary of State wrote in support of the site which "appears in all respects superior to Mr. Dix's site".

For a while it looked like Norwich might have two new cemeteries and the Burial Board put the question of one or two cemeteries to a vote in April 1855 and the result was a tie.

The Burial Board continued to advertise for sites to the north and east of the city. Three suggested sites had poor access and were soon rejected:

- 12 – 15 acres between Bishopgate Bridge and Thorpe Tollgate [Thorpe Road];
- Land next to the Rosary Cemetery belonging to Sir Robert John Harvey;
- 22 acres on Plumstead Road owned by Mr. Moore. (The hill from the city centre was just too steep for horse drawn funeral traffic.)

Discussions with Miss Perowne at Denmark's Farm were re-opened for a while, following the unsuitability of these new sites.

At the end of May the Secretary of State approved the use of 25 acres of John Cater's land for use as a cemetery, but

no site for the north and east of Norwich had been found. It was clear that city churchyard burials would need to continue for a while and in July 1855 an extension to the banning Order was granted until 1st January 1856.

At the end of July 1855 there had been a few more offers of sites for a second cemetery, but all proved to be unsuitable:

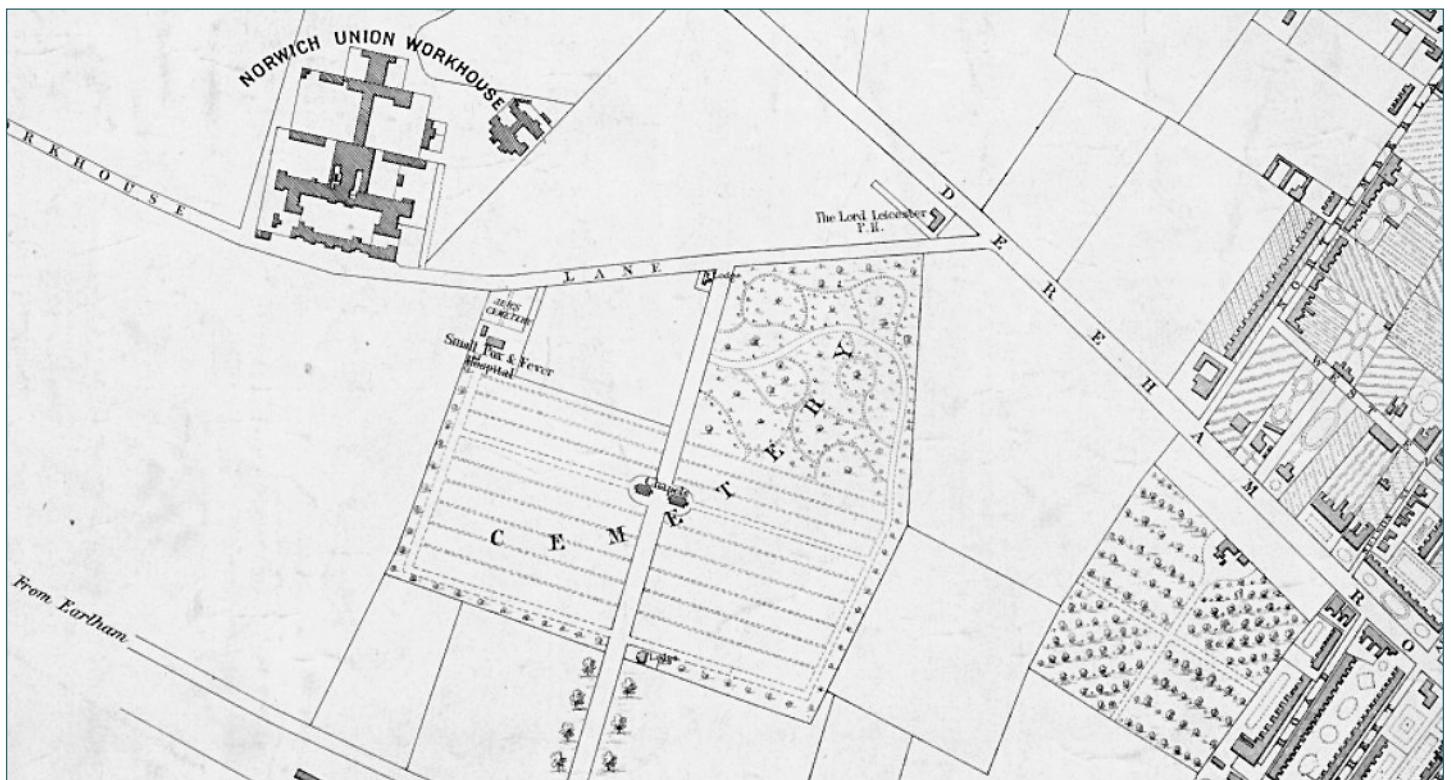
- A site near Mousehold Heath offered by Charles Jecks and a site at Rackheath offered by Edward Steward were both too far from the city and
- A site near St. Augustine's Gate looked promising but marl was found near the surface and a sitting tenant would not give up his six year lease on the land. (Marl is a mud rich in lime (calcium carbonate), which was often dug from marl pits and used to lime fields to increase their fertility. It would have been a difficult material in which to dig graves.)

By August 1855 the Burial Board admitted defeat – there would just be a single cemetery, on Mr. Cater's land on Earham Road.

In August 1855 Mr. Edward Everett Benest, the City Surveyor from 1854 to 1859, drew up plans for a 35 acre cemetery on Mr. Cater's land – the start of what is now Earham Cemetery.

Jeremy Bartlett.

The information in this article comes mostly from the first volume of the Norwich Burial Board Minutes, N/TC 5/4A (1854 – 1857), which can be found in Norfolk Record Office.



Earham Cemetery © Morant's 1873 Norwich map

Blackbirds and Starlings - Jane Boutell

Spring is the time when birds seem to be at their happiest - bringing up the new brood of youngsters. Activity is at its greatest, song at its loudest. Birds are assiduous parents, anticipating their offsprings' needs, teaching them how to find and recognise food. Received opinion tells us that animal and bird parents are motivated by 'instinct' and that ensuring the future of the species is motivated by the 'selfish gene'.

Consider the following incident:

I watched a male blackbird fetch a morsel from the bird table and drop it in front of his newly fledged youngster, clearly encouraging it to recognise and retrieve the morsel for itself. The fledgling, however, was still under the impression that it was to be 'spoon' fed. It sat in front of the parent, gaping and ruffling its feathers, making no attempt to pick up the food. The patient father picked up the titbit and dropped it a little nearer to the youngster. Still no response.

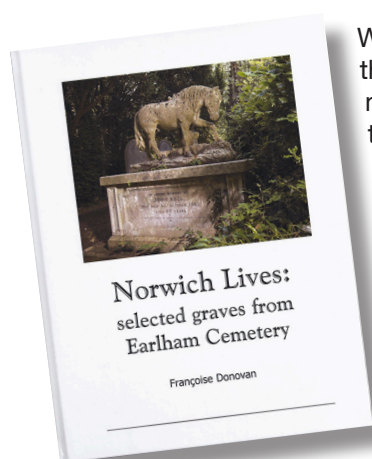
At this point, a starling which had been watching from the rockery behind the pond, apparently lost patience and could resist no longer. It dived in, snatched the morsel and flew into the apple tree to consume its stolen meal at leisure. The blackbird father, not wishing to lose face took his frustration out on... another blackbird!

It was like, 'What are you laughing at, then?'

When I had finished laughing I wondered - do birds share in the so called 'higher emotions' such as patience or empathy? I would suggest that yes they do, they need these feelings in order to successfully bring up their offsprings. Witness my blackbird father.



Norwich Lives: - Book Review by Thea Nicholls



Whenever I walk through the Cemetery I often find myself wondering about the lives of those buried there. Who were they? What did they do? What was life like for them? Now, thanks to this fascinating book written by one of our members, Françoise Donovan, some of my questions can be answered.

Norwich Lives starts with the Cemetery's creation in the 1850s and continues right up to the present day mixing local and social history with potted biographies of some of the Cemetery's residents. Some of the names are locally famous such as Caleys (the chocolate-makers) and George Skipper (architect and designer of several Norwich buildings including

Jarrollds and the Royal Arcade). Others, such as Ann Mussett, (a domestic servant), led more ordinary lives. The book also includes a look at some of the epitaphs and carvings that can be found on the gravestones - often giving a clue to the character, life or passing of the person they commemorate. There are lots of photographs (some taken by another Friends member, Jeremy Bartlett) and drawings throughout the book which significantly add to the text and a location map of many of the graves mentioned is also included.

All in all, Norwich Lives is an enjoyable and informative book. It has been written in a way that is easy to read without being patronising. I have read and re-read my copy several times and eagerly await the sequel that Françoise has said is in the making. If you haven't already picked up a copy of this book then I encourage you to get one. It can be found in the 'Local' section of the bookshops in Norwich and, at £12, it's a worthy addition to your library.

Holly Blue Butterfly - *Vanna Bartlett*



© Thea Nicholls

The Holly Blue butterfly (*Celastrina argiolus*) is a distinctive little blue butterfly, on the wing from April to May (sometimes emerging in March) and again in July and August, with some persisting into September.

Both sexes have lilac blue uppersides to the wings, with the female having a dark blackish edge to the forewings which is broader in the second generation. The undersides of the wings are a pale powdery blue with tiny black markings, distinguishing it from other British blues which have white rings around the black markings and often have small areas of orange too.

Holly Blues rarely visit flowers, preferring to feed on honeydew on leaves and tree sap and have also been recorded supping on carrion juices. You are most likely to encounter one when it whizzes past you on a sunny day, flying a bit above head height with a characteristic jittery flight as it follows a hedge line in a garden or park.

The Holly Blue is widespread but commonest in the south of the country and as well as parks and gardens it has a strong association with churchyards and cemeteries. This is in no small part due to the fact that, unique amongst British butterflies, the two generations feed on two completely different plants. The spring females lay their eggs on the developing flower buds of Holly (larvae have also been found on Gorse, Dogwood and Spindle) whereas those that emerge later in the summer oviposit almost exclusively on ivy. In all cases, the eggs are invariably laid on the buds or flowers of the food plant. The spring brood caterpillars feed up and mature and pupate in just a few weeks and then emerge as adults, while the summer ones overwinter as a chrysalis, usually anchored to an ivy leaf by silken threads.

If you notice a Holly Blue visiting ivy flowers it may well be a female laying eggs – they will be laid singly and are difficult to spot. The larvae are also well camouflaged, being green like the flower stalks of ivy with darker, purplish lines. You are more likely to find small circles or grooves nibbled out of the flower buds – tell tale signs – rather than the caterpillar itself.

Holly Blues can be very common and frequent in some years and virtually absent (especially the spring brood) in others. These 'boom and bust' cycles are caused by a parasitic wasp, *Listrodomus nyctemerus*. It lays its eggs in the developing caterpillar, so that in spring a new wasp emerges from the chrysalis rather than a butterfly. Numbers of these parasitic wasps build up to such an extent that it is believed that 99% of all Holly Blue larvae become parasitised. This leads to a crash in the butterfly population as well as in the wasp's. Numbers of butterflies gradually build up and recover but then so too do the wasps, usually taking 6 or 7 years for the wasp numbers to peak.

Despite this, the Holly Blue survives and has actually been increasing its range northwards. There are complex issues that govern butterfly distribution, from food plants and habitat, to parasites, as well as weather patterns. Enjoy them when you see them, but don't take them for granted!

Vanna Bartlett.

Black Poplars in Earlham Cemetery - Jeremy Bartlett

Earlham Cemetery contains many fine trees, including the native Black Poplar, *Populus nigra* subspecies *betulifolia*, one of our largest and most striking native species. Until recently there were six trees but four have now been felled, leaving just two survivors.



The native Black Poplar is a rugged, heavyweight tree with a straight trunk, usually with a distinct lean. In suitable growing conditions it can reach 30 metres in height, with a girth of 1.3 metres at chest height. The branches arch and sweep downwards. The trunk appears black from a distance because the bark is deeply ridged and gnarled, though at closer range it is actually a grey-brown colour.

While the English name comes from the colour of the trunk, the scientific name comes from the Greek *papaillo*, to shake, after the movement of the leaves in the breeze. *Betulifolia* describes the birch-like shape of the leaves.

There are separate male and female trees. In early April, male trees are covered in bright red catkins sometimes known as “Devil’s fingers” and said to bring bad luck to those who pick them up. Female trees produce huge quantities of down seeds that float in clouds upon the wind.

Black poplars are one of only two native poplar species in Britain, the other being the Aspen, *Populus*



tremula. The related Hybrid Black Poplar (*Populus x canadensis*) and Lombardy Poplar (*Populus nigra* “*Italica*”) are found much more often. The Lombardy Poplar has a fastigate (upright) growth habit, very different from the native Black Poplar.



The native Black Poplars in Earlham Cemetery are rather out of place and it is probably too dry for them, though they can withstand atmospheric pollution, such as the fumes of cars on Bowthorpe Road. The tree’s natural habitat is along riverbanks, where the seeds can fall onto mud and germinate. The mud must remain wet during the critical first summer of growth. The fallen twigs also grow easily if they fall onto wet mud. But wild riverbanks are now very scarce and most native Black Poplars have been planted and occur in fields and hedges, often near farms and ponds.

The tree can be used to make stakes, bowls, veneers and even artificial

limbs and poplar wood arrows were found aboard the wreck of the “Mary Rose”. A well in Viking York was made from a hollowed out Black Poplar trunk.

In medieval times the native Black Poplar was relatively common in East Anglia, especially Suffolk and Essex, but by the end of last century there were fewer than fifty trees left, all of them male. Since the early 1990s, cuttings have been taken from as many remaining trees as possible and planted out in suitable sites.

There was a native Black Poplar in Chapelfield Gardens until 1932, when it was felled. The Earlham Cemetery trees appear to date from this time and, though there is no conclusive proof, it is likely that “our” trees are from cuttings from the Chapelfield tree.

During spring 2014 we took cuttings from the remaining native Black Poplar trees in Earlham Cemetery and, once they are rooted, we will pass them on so they can be planted at suitable locations such as Bowthorpe Southern Park.



Thanks to Imogen Mole (Arboricultural Officer) and Paul Holley (Natural Areas Officer) from Norwich City Council.

Jeremy Bartlett.

Witches Butter, Beeswax and National Rarities - by Ian Senior

During the summer of 2013 I was asked if I could do a list of fungi found in the cemetery. I knew that there were some interesting species to be found in there as I had noticed them on my autumn walks in the past. These included a range of waxcaps, earth stars, earth tongues, boletes and death caps. I began looking for fungi during mid August but it wasn't until early to mid September that fungi really started to appear. From then on more and more fungi emerged both in number and in types. The number of species identified started to grow rapidly.

My own finds were amply supplemented by the two fungal forey's that took place during October and November. These both helped to increase the number of newly identified species and to confirm some of my own finds. The first was led by Jon Tyler in October and the second by the Norfolk Fungus Study Group (NFSG) in late November. The most important find was made by the NFSG. On this walk we discovered a rare, yellow cup fungus called *Sowerbyella radiculata* var *radiculata*. This is the first time that this species has been found in Norfolk, and is a great find for the cemetery!

Around the same time James Emerson informed me of his find that Tony Leech (Norfolk fungi recorder) had identified as *Arrhenia spathulata*. The cemetery is only the 9th site in the county where this species is known to grow.

By the end of November the number of identified species had gone past 140. Some of the more interesting ones were the waxcap fungi. These are mainly old grassland species associated with mossy areas. I've previously spotted a few different waxcaps growing and had managed to identify some of these. However, this autumn has been a real waxcap autumn. More species have appeared that have been seen there before. Both the Meadow (*Hygrocybe pratensis*) and Slimy (*H. irrigata*) waxcaps have been seen for the first time and, with the help of the NFSG, some of the yellow/orange waxcaps were also identified as 'new to the



Yellow cup fungus (*Sowerbyella radiculata* var *radiculata*)

cemetery'. While these finds have not been rare, the sheer number of species identified has really caught the attention of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. They like people to inform them if you find two or more species growing in grassland, so 9 species is of great interest to them! The areas where these fungi are growing will be the subject of a management plan to help maintain this great diversity into the future.



Yew Club (*Clavicornia taxophila*)

During November I spotted a small club fungus growing out of moss under Yew. A little bit of investigation later it appeared to me to be a 'Yew Club' (*Clavicornia taxophila*). I needed confirmation though. As I knew that Kew would identify fungi, I checked their website and found that they had a specialist in UK club species.

I sent in an email describing my find and offered to send them some photographs. After a few weeks I received an email back from Kew saying that my description sounded interesting and was possibly a Yew Club. They then asked for photographs and they copied in the UK's chief mycologist to the email conversation.

I sent over a few photographs of the club and a few days later the chief mycologist replied saying he thought it was a Yew Club. He wanted a sample though to confirm the find. Luckily the club was still growing in late January 2014 due to the very mild and wet winter. A small sample was sent over and I expected it would be several months before I heard any more.

To my great surprise and delight, 2 days after receiving the sample, Kew replied confirming my find as the rare Yew Club (*Clavicornia taxophila*).

This is a widely distributed fungus but a rarely found one, probably due to its small size (approximately 1cm). There are very few records of this species so to find one in the cemetery is lucky indeed!

News of the Yew Club was relayed back to the Wildlife Trust via Twitter and Tony Leech soon heard about it. I arranged to meet him one Saturday in early February as Tony was very keen to see my new find. I led him straight to the site so he could see it without delay. Afterwards we had a two hour wander around the cemetery and found a large number of species still fruiting, which surprisingly including a yellow waxcap. This later turned out to be Butter Waxcap, *Hygrocybe ceracea*, our 9th waxcap species.

Other finds included the two types of Witches Butter, *Exidia plana* & *E. glandulosa*, and one species I had been puzzling over called Aromatic Pinkgill (*Entoloma pleopodium*). The highlight though was finding another rarity for Norfolk. I showed Tony a bracket fungus growing at the base of an Ash tree. He was delighted with my find as he identified it as Beeswax bracket (*Ganoderma pfeifferi*). Interestingly its unusual to find this species growing on Ash as its normally associated with Beech. This is another species that has only recently been spotted in Norfolk. The cemetery is now the second site for it.



Butter Waxcap (*Hygrocybe ceracea*)



Beeswax bracket (*Ganoderma pfeifferi*)

The first year of studying fungal species in the cemetery has been amazing. We've identified over 170 species in the last 6 months, including 9 waxcap species, found 2 species new for Norfolk and which are national rarities and one of these has its pride of place in the National Fungi Collection at Kew. All in all, a good start.

Ian Senior

Grave digging, A Hazardous Occupation - by *Jeremy Bartlett*

Nowadays, small mechanical excavators are used to dig graves, but until the 1970s graves in Earlham Cemetery were dug entirely by hand.

Spare a thought for grave diggers, who had - and still have - a hazardous occupation.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a grave as “a hole dug in the ground to receive a coffin or corpse, typically marked by a stone or mound”.

In the early days of Earlham Cemetery graves were dug six feet deep but this was increased to nine feet (for non-Jewish burials) in 1892 to allow more than one body to be buried in each grave space. By law, graves should normally be at least three feet deep¹ but between four and six feet is the usual depth these days.

Although they are deep, graves are not much over seven feet long by about three feet wide and digging a relatively deep but narrow hole has several dangers.

Graves have a tendency to cave in and, if dug by hand, a grave can fall in on the person digging it. Earth is heavy and a cubic yard of soil can weigh over one and a half tons. A person buried under only a few feet of soil can experience enough pressure to prevent their lungs from expanding and can suffocate in as little as three minutes². Heavy rain or frost can load soil with excessive moisture, increasing its weight and decreasing its stability, making collapse more likely. In wet conditions, ground water can “spring” or “boil” up into the base of the grave and make matters worse.

Shoring up the sides of a grave will help to prevent a cave in, but the gravedigger is still at risk from toxic gases, such as carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide and methane. Carbon dioxide and methane are produced from the decay of organic matter in the ground and can displace oxygen and cause suffocation. Carbon monoxide is actually poisonous and if machinery is operated too close to a grave, the exhaust fumes, which are heavier than air and contain carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide, can sink into the grave.

There is also the chance of being hit by machinery or tripping up on uneven ground. Materials stacked too close to a grave can topple in and nearby monuments or headstones might collapse onto the work site.

Gravediggers also need to be careful to avoid injury when lifting heavy objects. And once excavation is complete, they must take care not to fall in the newly dug grave.

It is not surprising that gravediggers are now given thorough Health and Safety training before starting work.

Looking through the Norwich Burial Board Minutes³, I only found a couple of accidents involving gravediggers, one of which was a near miss:

- 17th December 1858: “Upon digging a grave adjacent to Mrs Tuck’s monument the soil beneath it gave way for want of a solid foundation for the monument to rest upon and a grave digger had a very narrow escape.” The Burial Board ruled that “all monuments hereafter to be erected be placed upon a proper foundation so as to prevent similar accidents in the future”.
- 10th October 1902: Thomas Masham, a gravedigger, on 30th July injured his fingers when a railing of a grave enclosure fell on his hand as he was cutting the grass. He was absent from work until 6th September, on full pay, and was compensated by the Norwich and London Accident Insurance Association.

A gravedigger features in Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” (Act V, Scene 1).

Wikipedia lists several famous gravediggers, including Joe Strummer from The Clash and Abraham Lincoln, but apparently the story that Rod Stewart was a gravedigger is an urban myth⁴.

Jeremy Bartlett.

(Endnotes)

1. “The Local Authorities’ Cemeteries Order, 1977 provides that: No body shall be buried in a grave in such a manner that any part of the coffin is less than three feet below the level of any ground adjoining the grave; provided that the burial authority may, where they consider the soil to be of suitable character, permit a coffin made of perishable material to be placed not less than two feet (60.96 cm) below the level of any ground adjoining the grave.”
See http://www.chester.anglican.org/page_dac.asp?Page=19#.UwSRW87oxDk.
2. For more, see http://www.technetrain.net/Articles/gravesite_safety.pdf.
3. The Norwich Burial Board Minutes are in Norfolk Record Office, N/TC 5/4A-D, N/TC 5/5 and N/TC 5/6. When writing this piece I also referred to a Health and Safety booklet in a batch of uncatalogued files, ACC 1977/143.
4. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gravedigger>.

