

## The Greek Necropolis at Norwood

West Norwood's South Metropolitan Cemetery, located in Lambeth, South London, is one of the "Magnificent Seven," large private London cemeteries that were established in the 19th century to alleviate the problem of overcrowding in parish burial grounds. It was opened in 1837 and enjoys the distinction of being the world's first Gothic Cemetery, containing some 69 monuments designated as nationally important by English Heritage. Members of the Anglo-Greek Community purchased an enclosure there in 1842, thus establishing the Greek Orthodox Necropolis. The monuments and graves they built constitute the jewel in the crown of West Norwood, despite the fact that they are currently in urgent need of restoration.

My own reason for visiting this graveyard relates to ongoing research for a biography of C.P. Cavafy, whose family was part of the London Greek community, the most prominent members of which lie buried at West Norwood (including close relatives of the poet). The cemetery's plethora of engraved names, mausolea, crypts, crosses, and headstones are a testament to the unique history of these Anglo-Greeks—their social status, aesthetic tastes, religious piety and determined efforts to be memorialized in high style. The Necropolis is comparable to other remarkable 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek cemeteries that were founded in great urban centers where Greeks prospered commercially and culturally (most notably Trieste, Alexandria, and Istanbul). These particular graves, however, even in their deteriorating state, remain exceptional in terms of the high quality of their design and their powerful manifestation of grief, loss and hope. More importantly, they bear witness to the shared cultural aspirations and mercantile connections that were cultivated by a tightly-knit coterie of intermarried families who wished to preserve and exhibit their wealth and social status. The irony here is that, despite these intentions, the Necropolis in its current fallen condition now conveys something quite different: an unsustainable and even decadent opulence. Indeed, the paradoxical convergence of such differing impressions speaks to the complex identities of the founders who lie buried in this elite enclosure. The Necropolis' sad predicament, despite the ongoing and determined efforts of the Friends of West Norwood Cemetery\*, calls for an intervention, a concerted campaign to restore and protect this extraordinary heritage site where architecture, commerce, and cosmopolitanism come together at the intersection of grandeur and death.

Even in its overwhelmingly ruinous state, the Necropolis impresses with the beauty of its landscape, the solidity of its monuments, and the lingering auras of the deceased. Cavafy would have been moved by these details—one of his early poems "In the Cemetery" bears witness to this, as does his lifelong fixation on tombs, death and epitaphs. The families buried here comprised an extended family of sorts, a network of eminent personalities that permeated the adolescent poet's life in 1870s London. My poem is intended as an ekphrastic tribute to the grand ambitions and Victorian tastes of those interred at West Norwood; to their exquisite vanity; to the silent funereal forms they commissioned that tease us out of thought and into a lingering meditation on death; to the very idea of a Greek Necropolis.

Peter Jeffreys

\*See their website and newsletter for the ongoing efforts to maintain the cemetery:

<https://www.fownc.org/> <https://www.fownc.org/newsletters/>

I am indebted to their invaluable guide, "West Norwood Cemetery's Greek Necropolis"

by Colin R. Fenn and James Slattery-Kavanagh (2011) for the factual history of the site.