

Esther Oxford
12 Mount Lodge
53a Shepherds Hill
London N65QR
Grave-owner
Highgate Cemetery

Ms Miriam Baptist
Planning Application Case Officer
Camden Council Planning Department

Development Management,
Camden Town Hall, Judd Street,
London WC1H 9JE

2rd April 2025

Subject: Objection to Planning Application –2024/5407/P – 2024/5423/L Highgate Cemetery

Dear Ms Baptist,
I hope you are well.

I have been a grave owner since February 2021. I love visiting Highgate Cemetery to sit beside my mother's grave, every week or two. Thank you to the team at Highgate Cemetery for keeping it so beautiful – and for coming up with a long-term plan to protect the important monuments in the West Cemetery.

However, I would like to express my alarm at receiving an email last week proposing that a public/staff toilet block (referred to in the plans as the Gardeners' Building) should be built right next to my mother's grave – and all the other carefully tended graves, up on the Mound.

I'm also concerned at the plan to dig-up – on a mass scale – so many historic graves, many dating back nearly 170 years. These graves are an anthropological history of Highgate, recording multiple child deaths, tragic drownings, lost sons who have died fighting in far flung countries around the world.

Finally, I object to the team's efforts to 'greenwash' plans to chop down swathes of woodland trees in the East Cemetery by suggesting that the cemetery will benefit from being "returned" to an 1854 "open meadow" version of itself (a euphemism for a tree-less landscape with row upon row of modern gravestones, one foot apart). I consider this disingenuous, to say the least.

A 'public consultation' – which leaves out the key stakeholders: the grave owners

The first I heard of this proposal was on the 28th March, when Dr Ian Dungavell, chief executive of Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, wrote an email to grave-owners expressing surprise that "despite our consultation efforts we understand that some grave owners have not been made aware of our proposals which include a new building for our gardeners on the edge of the Mound."

The timing of the email is interesting: nearly three months after the deadline for public comment (5th January 2025).

This was the first I had heard of this proposal despite a keen ear for news, having spent 35 years as a national newspaper/television journalist, and being a regular visitor – and grave owner at the Mound.

I now understand that there have been posters up on the West Cemetery since November. But that is the not the side of the cemetery where grave owners from the East Cemetery's Mound (which is the site which runs alongside the proposed two-storey brutalist toilet block), actually go.

I am curious to know why there have been no posters or leaflets or emails alerting grave owners on the Mound to the proposed toilet block before now – or any invitations to participate in the 'public consultation'. We are the people most seriously affected by the proposal to build a two-storey brutalist-style cement block, 20 feet from our loved ones' resting place.

A final resting place – next to a toilet block

The Mound, as it is known, was sold to my father as a private woodland burial spot - for grave-owners *only*. In fact there is a sign – still there - as one approaches the Mound, stating very clearly that the Mound is a private space for grave owners only.

The bereaved need that privacy. The Mound is a very alive, vital, attentive community of newly bereaved parents, sons, daughters, husbands and wives, who support each other. There is the young couple whose nine-month-old baby is buried right next to the path leading up to the proposed entrance to the public toilet. They visit every week to lay fresh flowers at their baby's grave. There are at two teenagers who regularly visit their lost parents' graves to sob their hearts out. There is a mother who re-plants the flowers on her son's grave every June, ready for the day of his birthday, when she hopes that his friends will still remember him, and visit his grave. There is an elderly woman who takes two buses, *every day*, to put red roses by her husband's grave – and has done – for more than five years.

And that is just a tiny sample of the many, many raw, human beings who come to the Mound for peace, solace, and quiet comfort.

The proposed two-storey building will turn this private section of the graveyard into a public thoroughway for anyone busting to go to the toilet.

This is a serious invasion of our privacy and a devastating betrayal of all that we were promised.

When Claire Freston, Registrar at Highgate Cemetery, sold this grave plot to my father and I, we were led to believe that the site was private and secluded. In an email exchange with Ms Freston in January 2021, I repeatedly express how grateful I am to be able to be buying a plot "in a beautiful spot", how my father and I like the grave site because it "faces the cemetery and trees rather than the estate", and because it gives us "a greater sense of space".

I now feel mis-led. At no point did Ms Freston – or indeed any other member of staff - warn my father and I of this possible development. And yet I now know, that the Mound was already being discussed as a possible site for a columbarium as far back as 2019, for the Highgate Cemetery 2019 Conservation Plan¹.

¹ <https://camdocs.camden.gov.uk/CMWebDrawer/Record/10765082/file/document?inline>
Point 5.35 on page 36

To get lawyerly about it, this proposed development of a two-storey building – within 30 feet of my mother’s grave, significantly alters the character of the Mound by disturbing the peaceful, private area we understood we were buying. This constitutes a material change to my mother’s plot and to all the other plots on the Mound.

Selling a grave plot in an area of the cemetery signposted as for private grave owners only (ie: the place where only the owners of those graves can go) and then deciding to build a paved road/throughway – and a public toilet – right next to it, constitutes ‘misrepresentation’

under consumer protection laws and is a clear breach of contract.

If my father and I had known that such an oppressive, ugly building were to turn the resting place of my mother into the backyard of a toilet block, I would never have chosen that grave site for my mother’s coffin.

An alternative proposal

I am sympathetic to the idea that the gardeners need a place to train/put their gear/etc, but I suggest that these facilities are provided by the proposed West Side Building, set into the embankment away from the view of the Courtyard and Colonnade on the west side of the cemetery. It makes sense to me that management would want to consolidate the needs of staff and volunteers into one building.

As it says in the planning documents, this site on the west side of the cemetery “represents a valuable area of usable land as there are limited number of graves situated in this location”. All key visitor and operation requirements could be housed within this structure, serving both visitors and staff (who would be moved out of the Dissenters’ Chapel). This site is the only site within view of the entrance gateway that can reasonably be developed, according to the plans. The grass bank is not used for burials.

Alternatively, I suggest that a one-storey building, rather than a two-storey building, could be created on the proposed spot by the Mound. If it was one-storey, the building could be longer in length – the area of grave-free land on ground level (ie: tucked under the Mound), is extensive. This would have the added advantage of providing a retaining wall to the whole bank, rather than a part of it. By embedding itself into the side of the Mound, the public toilet/office/storage block would have limited impact aesthetically.

Most importantly no grave owners would be affected: the graves under the Mound (ie: on ground level) are several hundred years old.

Historically precious graves

I am further concerned at the lack of detail with regard to the preservation of old, historically/aesthetically interesting graves. I am not clear, having looked at the development proposals, who will be deciding which graves to dispose of – and how.

The managers of Highgate Cemetery now have the right, under the Highgate Cemetery Act 2022, to remove graves which do not have relatives tending to them. But some of the most precious, beautiful, artistic, historical graves in the cemeteries fit this description. I think it is important that the decision-making is done with thoughtful care, and a focus on preserving the ethos and history of Highgate cemetery.

At the moment, the apparent secrecy around this process does not inspire trust. It looks like the focus is on demolishing beauty and history to make way for someone with £25k in their pocket, and an appetite for a freshly cleared-out grave.

Woodlands – set for the chop

My final point is this: the team behind Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust want to re-invent Highgate Cemetery into a graveyard which is no longer wild, and woodland-y.

It wants a stripped-down open space and modern graves, lined by immature, light-root trees, to ensure future customers are not dissuaded (by tree roots) from buying every inch of land available.

Who wants a grave memorial, reduced to a pile of crumbling granite?

However, much of the damage done to the beautiful, ancient grave stones in the East Cemetery, is nothing to do with trees. It is to do with management neglect.

Decades and decades of neglect. And the self-planting sycamores are an inevitable echo of that.

I hope that the plans to chop down Highgate Cemetery's woodlands are staggered over the 20 years, and undertaken thoughtfully.

I can't imagine anything worse than seeing a full-scale massacre of Highgate Cemetery's trees to make way for a series of little twigs – in protective plastic coverings - and neat rows of shiny, fresh-out-of-the-shop gravestones.

Moving forward

To conclude, Highgate Cemetery is re-inventing itself as a cemetery which is open for new grave-owners, and new business.

However, the sad reality is that the grave owners who have chosen Highgate Cemetery to be the resting place of their dearly loved family members, have been shabbily treated by the team behind this plan.

May I suggest that Highgate Cemetery calls a meeting of grave owners from the Mound, *then* re-submits the plans to Camden council – once we have been given the opportunity to be part of the discussion.

Nobody wants to mourn their loved ones in a backyard to an office block - hemmed in by a concrete bunker, and the sound of farts.

Thank you for reading this letter.

Yours faithfully,

Esther Oxford