Pauper burials in private and public cemeteries in Bristol
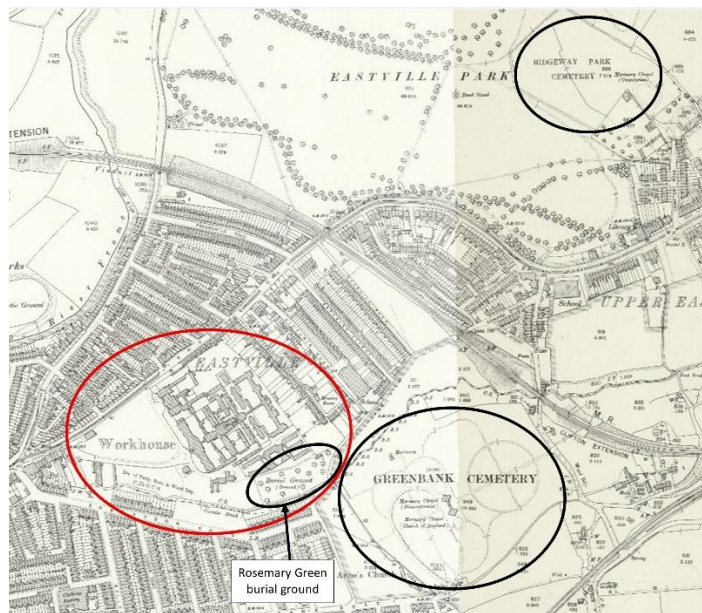## New research – Ridgeway Park, Greenbank and Arnos Vale cemeteries

Mass unmarked pauper burials hidden in the pleasant landscape of Greenbank Cemetery

In 2015, to great public interest, **Eastville Workhouse Memorial Group (EWMG)** released details of more than 4,000 paupers who had been buried in unmarked graves in **Rosemary Green, Eastville** in **east Bristol**. These were inmates from **Eastville Workhouse** which was situated on the present-day **East Park** housing estate on **Fishponds Road**. Over the following years EWMG, supported by the local community, marked the pauper burial ground at Rosemary Green, the entrance to the workhouse and the final resting place of the remains in Avon View cemetery, St George with two memorials and a plaque. Many people from Britain and further afield have also been able to track down their friends and family members who died in the Victorian period in the Eastville workhouse.

The unmarked burials at Rosemary Green covered the period 1851-1895, but the question remained: **what happened to deceased paupers after this period?** Over the last four years local researchers have painstakingly collated data on pauper burials from the workhouse death registers for the years **1895-1914**. This research shows that **2,375 unclaimed bodies** of paupers were interred in three private cemeteries, the majority in **Ridgeway Park (1,264)** and **Greenbank (962)** close to the workhouse and just over **100** in **Arnos Vale** cemetery in south Bristol. A similar number of deceased paupers from the Eastville Workhouse were claimed by friends and relatives who could prove they could pay for a simple funeral but were also unmarked burials in these and other private cemeteries. The full data can be downloaded here.

Eastville Workhouse, Ridgeway Park and Greenbank cemeteries in the early twentieth century

Why is this important? Burying deceased paupers in unmarked 'common graves' in private cemeteries was common practice in late Victorian Britain. Today these private cemeteries (nowadays usually owned by local authorities) give the impression of order, progress and compassionate values with defined burial plots, gravestones and in many cases elaborate sculptures and crypts. What they hide is the huge number of unmarked graves of the Bristolian working class, many of whom were forced into the workhouse through infancy, age, infirmity, disability, sickness, pregnancy, mental health and industrial injury who then passed away in these dreaded institutions.

Some excellent recent research by local historians from the **Friends of Ridgeway Park Cemetery** group has demonstrated that of the nearly **25,000 people** buried there, more than **22,000 were in unmarked graves.** These cheap lower-class graves were **repeatedly desecrated** to allow further burials and 'packing and stacking' of corpses, with in some cases up to **84 bodies in one plot**. This disgraceful and disrespectful activity was driven by **profit** and **competition between cemetery owners** and continued up to World War II.

What do we want? EWMG have two demands:

- Mass unmarked graves in private (now public) cemeteries **need to sign-posted by a plaque, memorial or other means**, rather than being merely hidden in the landscape.
- The general public should be able to **access the data on who is buried in a particular cemetery for free**, perhaps via a QR code on a plaque or sign.

We believe to really understand the history of Britain in the Victorian era we need to be aware of how that society treated the disenfranchised working class and those who were deemed 'unproductive' and were consigned to the workhouse, in life **and in death**.

Recent memorial to indicate unmarked graves in Bridgwater (Photo: Eugene Byrne)

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