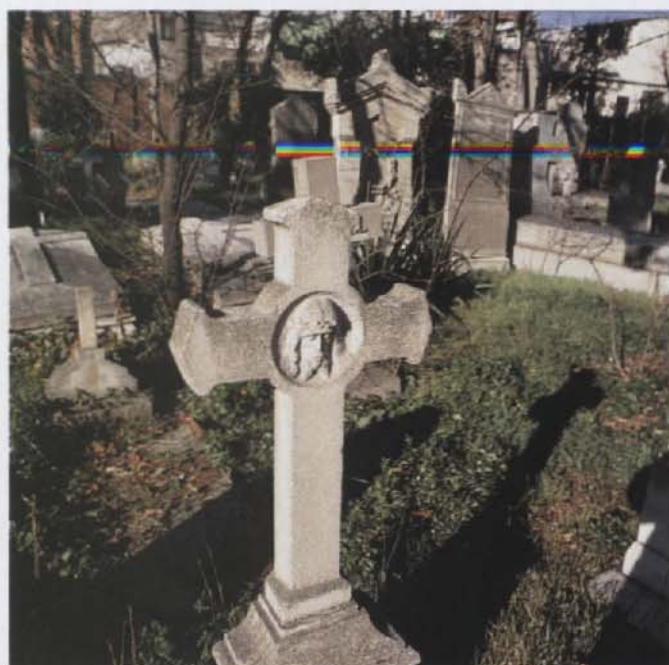


the secret garden



in an unlikely spot behind a shabby high street lies a plot of land with a fascinating history of Madrid's foreign community buried below. The British Cemetery has become a final home to a rich and varied collection of people from all over the world. MARY DE SOUSA reports. Photos: VALERIE DE LA DEHESA.

The British Cemetery lies appropriately enough at the point where Calles Inglaterra and Irlanda meet. Walk through its arched gate and you could be in an old English churchyard. Except that here the gravestones bear inscriptions in Hungarian, Greek, Serbo-Croat, Hebrew, Bulgarian, German, French, Latin and, of course, English.

Its present improved condition is thanks to a unique group of people who call themselves The Gravediggers. Translator Roger Marlow is a member of this dedicated bunch of volunteers. "Over the years the cemetery had

begun to fall into rack and ruin and I became interested in doing something," he explains. "There were rats and snakes and it was completely overgrown."

A small group was formed and they set about tidying up the site. Their interest and research into the site led to the setting up of a foundation in 1997. The site still receives no money except for a tiny sum received from Britain for the upkeep of several war graves. "It would be a great shame for it to fall into disrepair," says Roger. "It's such a peaceful spot and the history is fascinating."

The idea for a British cemetery was first mooted in the 1800s at a time when Spain excluded non-Catholics from burial in the consecrated ground of their churches. In 1796 the then minister of Madrid, Lord Bute, bought an acre-and-a-half of land earmarked to be used as a cemetery. Records kept by the British Consulate show the original plot was near Puerta de Recoletos and is described as being "outside the walls of the capital on the road Pajaritos bordering with the wall of Maroto's orchard opposite one side of Luis Pierna's country house." The site would have been where Plaza de Colón stands.



It remained unused during the French wars and as the city boundaries started to creep out towards Recoletos the British were told it would be impossible to conduct burials there. In 1851 Lord Palmerston fired off an angry letter saying that the land should be sold and a new plot bought. The new plot in Carabanchel was bought in 1853 for £138-6-2d and a request was sent to London for £1,000 to build a boundary wall and keeper's cottage. The first two burials to take place were of Arthur Thorold on February 10, 1854, and Samuel James Lilliot on July 25, 1854, the latter being the eight-month-old son of a builder whose original

quotation for works had been rejected. The burials are mentioned in the Illustrated London News for July 1855 as having had "a hearse with four horses followed by eight carriages".

The cemetery was consecrated by the Bishop of Illinois, John Whitehouse, on February 7, 1866, and then managed by the consulate. In its early years the British community supported the cemetery which had an annual expenditure of £79-15-0. The 1854 fees for burials record a grave at 100 reales (£1) and a family vault measuring 10ft by 10ft at 2,000 reales. One despatch to the

Foreign Office in 1855 asks for money for "various articles for the cemetery viz a Gun, Spade, Wheelbarrow, Bucket, etc." From the outset other nationals living in Madrid were interested in using the cemetery and burials for them were charged at twice the rate.

One man active throughout his life in British affairs in general in Spain and the cemetery in particular was George Fitch who was buried there on July 16, 1882. He set out to regularise the administration of the cemetery and keep proper registers. Most importantly he produced a hand drawn plan of burial plots. A glance at the



register for 1875 shows there were 13 burials that year, 10 of them under the age of 37.

Records show a marked fall in the number of burials in the 1890s which can probably be put down to the fact that better health care and transport allowed people to return home quickly in case of sickness. The decline in burials may have caused the financial difficulties of 1894 when the then Vice Consul Mr Montague E Loftus put out an appeal that there was not even enough money in the kitty to pay the sexton's wages, a modest 82.50 pesetas a month. The sexton himself Luis Garrido was charged to hand deliver letters to 26 potential benefactors and the crisis passed.

After the turn of the century, burials were permitted to all other faiths. The cemetery houses one exiled ruling family, the Bagratians, who lost Georgia in 1801 to the

Czar as well as railway magnates, bankers (Bauers from the Austro-Hungarian empire) many German and Swedish protestants (the Loewe family famous for their leather empire are there) Swiss and French protestants (Lhardy of Madrid's well known restaurant and delicatessen) as well as Britons and Americans.

There has never been any formal grouping together of faiths but the imposing mausoleum erected for the Bauer family is surrounded by Jewish graves. One pyramid monument carries a Masonic inscription and in one area, which no-one is able to pinpoint between inner and outer boundary walls, there is at least one Moslem grave. The Parish monument documents the great theatrical family who founded the Circo Price still remembered by older Madrileños. In 1932 a year when the cemetery seemed threatened by Spanish plans to secularise private cemeteries 518 people were buried

135 of them not British. All burials dropped off during the Civil War with few Britons remaining in the country and the cemetery placed in the front line of defence in the city. A retired British subject, Amy Constance Gifford, who died on November 30, 1936, had to be buried in the Cimiterio del Este until she could be transferred to the British Cemetery.

The cemetery registers offer a wealth of detail for the period 1939 to 1967. One of the cemetery's most intriguing gravestones carries the insignia of the RAF. In 1944 a plane taking the British Minister to Barcelona to discuss repatriation of prisoners crashed at Prats de Compts killing the pilot, Squadron Leader H C Caldwell and the diplomat Mr Arthur Yendken. Both are buried in the cemetery. In 1948, with Spain in isolation, there were just two burials, one of an American dentist and the other a Hungarian film director.

Alongside the story of the ex-pats buried there, runs that of the sextons, a job passed down through families who also have the right to be buried on the site. One of the most famous, Luis Ruiz who died in 1992, kept highly detailed records having learnt his skills as a pupil of the last of the Garrido sextons, a dynasty dating back to 1862.

Inscriptions range from the simple recording of a name and date to the poetic. Five Spanish girls pay tribute to their British nanny with the verse "For the kindness you bestowed on us. For all the sweet wise words you spoke, for all your loving ways. Our hearts go out to you in gratitude and praise." It is signed Hilda, Mimi, Paz, Zena and Rocío.

New projects include the creation of a garden of remembrance for cremation urns. The cemetery is full and closed to all but those who already hold plots. "The main problem remains the upkeep," says Roger. "We have small teams of volunteers who come in to clear up the garden which can turn to jungle very quickly but many of the graves have no one left to tend them." For that reason there are some cracked and tilting headstones to be seen. Despite that it remains a uniquely peaceful spot. ■

