

## INTERVIEW

**DAVID JOHN BUTLER, MBE**

*David hails from Newcastle upon Tyne in the north of England where he took a degree in Spanish and Latin-American studies. He originally came to Spain to manage an adult education class for Spanish students. After retiring it was his interest in 19th century history that first brought him in contact with the British Cemetery.*



**Could you tell us about where you were born and grew up and how you became associated with the British Cemetery?**

I was born and bred in Newcastle upon Tyne in England and early years included an education interrupted by being taken to another part of the country because of the War. My University was also a northern one, Durham, where I took a degree in Spanish and Latin-American Studies. I earned my living in the worldwide export trade with industrial products but exactly forty years ago there arose the opportunity to change direction, a very welcome change at that time of Britain's "winter of discontent". My new job in Spain included the management of an adult education academy teaching English to Spanish students, a booming activity at that time.

That job of work kept me very busy indeed until I retired in the early 1990s. I got to know the British Cemetery only because I attended a couple of funeral services there for new friends from the British community.

Even then, and mainly thanks to a Spanish amateur historian friend, I realised the historical importance of the place. I had always been interested in history especially nineteenth century history and being one of a migratory movement myself, I felt I could relate to those past generations who had come to Spain leaving their native culture behind in their countries of origin.

It was common knowledge among the British residents in Madrid that our Cemetery was falling into neglect and I took note that volunteers here were ready to do serious weeding, especially ivy, to

lop trees and to clear the paths. A few Saturday mornings, though, were hardly enough for all that had to be done. I was really pleased when someone - a rather elderly English lady as it happens - began to copy the inscriptions which were becoming illegible with time. That fitted in with my specific interest in family history and genealogy.

Under the guidance or direction of the British Consul, the official representative of the British Government, the owners of the Cemetery, an adhoc committee was formed among some of the longstanding families who have family plots there and their first main task was to investigate ways and means of financing and safeguarding the future of the Cemetery. A Committee member approached me to sort through the documents in a black japanned tin trunk at the British Consulate and write an historical account of the Cemetery. The contents of that trunk now repose in England at the Public Record Office and the booklet I wrote is on the Cemetery website in both Spanish and English.

Around the year 2001 I was asked to join the Committee. Little by little we were able to consolidate a system of annual fees for those families who wished to continue to use their family plots and we began to trace some families who had lost touch with the Cemetery administration. As time went by we were able to pay for a custodian-gardener to open the Cemetery three mornings a week which resolved the problem of accessibility, one of a number of facilities that had been lacking. The under-

growth was cut back and dead trees taken out and trees undermining the boundary walls were removed entirely. The good example of visible improvement made it possible to seek benefactors, which was just as well for it became evident that help was needed for the gatehouse entrance had become unsafe and needed restoration. The Cemetery has a great debt of gratitude for donations from The William Allen Young Charitable Trust and from The Bernard Sunley Charitable Foundation and from several other benefactors, whose names are recorded on the Wall of Remembrance with ceramic plaques. Only philanthropy, much assistance locally and many volunteers save the British Cemeteries worldwide from oblivion. It must be remembered that there are thousands of British Cemeteries all over the world, for example many in India, Malaysia and all the former British overseas possessions, to say nothing of Portugal, many in Italy, and other European countries and there are a considerable number in Spain; the mining companies (Tharsis, Rio Tinto and Águilas etc.) have cemeteries too.

As far as the Cemetery in Madrid goes, certain families continue to make use of their plots and have done for seventy or eighty years and value them highly, all the more so since the general appearance of the Cemetery has improved. A payment is received from a family each time a new burial takes place. The Cemetery has plenty of space for the burial of ashes, and the demand for this far exceeds the demand for traditional burials. There are a very

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