



The Grange Association

The Catacombs

Grange Cemetery, Edinburgh

Of the garden cemeteries established in Edinburgh in the mid-19th century the Grange, Warriston, Newington (originally called Echo Bank), and Dalry have catacombs, as do more than twenty other garden cemeteries throughout Britain. The most notable of these are in Liverpool, Birmingham, Exeter, Sheffield, and Greater London (Highgate, Kensal Green, Brompton, and West Norwood). As happened with all these cemeteries, the Grange catacombs fell out of vogue and in the end were significantly underused, there being just 22 out of a possible two hundred or more interments. We consider why this might have been. But first we look at:

- factors that might have influenced a trend for catacomb inclusion in British 19th century garden cemeteries
- the design and layout of the Grange catacombs
- provisions and regulations for their use, and
- speculation about the practicalities of carrying out the interments.

We have used library sources, contact with relevant professionals and the City of Edinburgh Council, as well as a multitude of internet sources including academic papers, to put together selected information as part of the Grange Association's commitment to encouraging interest in the cemetery.

A Little Catacomb History

Many will have heard of, and some may have visited, the **Catacombs of Rome**. The origin of the word *catacomb* is uncertain. It could have derived from the Greek *kata`* (downward) + *ky`mbh* (cavity), or later the Latin *catatumbas* (among the tombs), which many suggest is a topographical reference to the site of a first century AD pagan cemetery. This lay in a deep hollow between the second and third milestones of the Appian Way, partly dug underground as a series of tunnels. Ultimately, catacombs became the term assigned to the extensive underground burial tunnels in Rome. From the mid-19th century, the term became more widely used to refer to any underground passageway or chamber used for religious practice or burying the dead. The word **vaults** is also used for catacombs and can be the term used by the City of Edinburgh Council, but it is less specific as it can refer to a variety of structures to house the dead.

The Catacombs of Rome were built by Jewish, and later Christian, communities. In Ancient Rome the burial of bodies was not allowed within the city walls, so cremation was the standard procedure to dispose of the dead. However, based on the concept of preserving the body for the Resurrection, Jewish and early Christian communities preferred burial, so they built catacombs *outside* the city walls. The Etruscan civilisation which had previously dominated the area had buried its dead in simpler underground chambers, as had other European peoples before Roman times. Once Christianity was allowed in Rome during the early 4th century, burial of the dead moved "above" ground. The Catacombs of Rome burial tunnels, which span several storeys, became abandoned, particularly after pillaging by a variety of invaders. The tunnels were rediscovered during excavations in the 17th century. Some of these Christian and Jewish catacombs are now open to the public.

In the late 18th century, burial sites in Paris became overcrowded, with the dead not being properly buried, causing a public health issue. In 1786 the Paris authorities had all the skeletal remains in the main cemetery, *Les Halles*, moved to an underground network of old limestone quarries south of the city gate. They became known as the **Catacombs of Paris**. There are almost 300 kilometres of catacombs lying 30 metres underground, housing the remains of approximately 6 million people, their bones packed tightly in 11,000 square metres. Many of the tunnels are open to the public. There are well-known historic catacombs worldwide. Structures like those in Paris, where only unearthed bones are placed (having been removed to provide grave space for new burials) are often referred to as **ossuaries** or **charnel houses**. Although not common in Britain, there are many ossuaries throughout the world.

Catacombs in Garden Cemetery Design

The concern of the Paris authorities in the late 18th century resulted in the opening of the *Père Lachaise* municipal cemetery in 1804. Many suggest this was a major influence on the establishment of British garden cemeteries. The *Père Lachaise* does not include catacombs, yet these were often a feature of our early garden cemeteries. Designers may have been influenced by the British interest in classical Rome, with parts of the Catacombs of Rome opening to the public in 1809.

There had also been an ongoing British fascination with Ancient Egypt, its tombs, mummification, and burial rituals, the spark being Napoleon's Egyptian campaign at the juncture of the 18th and 19th centuries. *Highgate West Cemetery* has its Egyptian Avenue leading to the Circle of Lebanon, a full circle of catacombs (which the cemetery refers to as vaults). The *Glasgow Necropolis* has its Egyptian Vaults which were used for temporary storage of occupied coffins while a permanent burial site was prepared. Look around any large Victorian garden cemetery and you are more than likely to see pyramid mausoleums, obelisk tombstones, sphinxes and the like. In the Grange on its north wall there is the easily recognised sculpture of the "Egyptian portal to the land of the dead" for the family memorial of William Stuart (1820-1888).

Setting fascination with historic cultures aside, for the bereaved family, a catacomb interment provided security against vandalism and in particular bodysnatching from graves by *Resurrectionists*. These robbers supplied cadavers to medical professionals and anatomy students for dissection studies. The legal provision of cadavers in the 18th and early 19th centuries was limited as only the bodies of murderers could be used (Murder Act 1752). Despite the introduction of the 1832 Anatomy Act providing more scope for cadaver provision, bodysnatching persisted for some years after the Act was introduced. (The Act also provided much needed regulation in the use and handling of cadavers for study).

Although not relevant to the Grange, perhaps part of the attraction of the earlier British catacombs, where coffins could be placed on open shelves, was that an ornate coffin on a shelf provided a cheaper stylish alternative to a plot with an expensive headstone. (Open shelves were not allowed in the Grange). Placement on an open shelf may also have allowed family to visit a coffin regularly, giving a closeness that a burial plot did not. An internet search will show many images of open shelf interments in *Kensal Green* and *Brompton* catacombs. Whatever the attraction, there was obviously enough interest in catacomb interments for over 20 British garden cemeteries to offer them.

Design and Layout of the Grange Catacombs

The cemetery was designed by leading Scottish Victorian architect **David Bryce** (1803-1876). The catacombs are situated centrally within the landscaped grounds and in two symmetrical sections (East and West) as shown in the illustration from the original Edinburgh Southern Cemetery Company (ESCC) Prospectus.



Credited to the City of Edinburgh Council – Edinburgh Libraries

Not so obvious is that the catacombs are built into an extensive mound, so are not completely underground. If you look closely, you can see slopes on the East and West approaches.

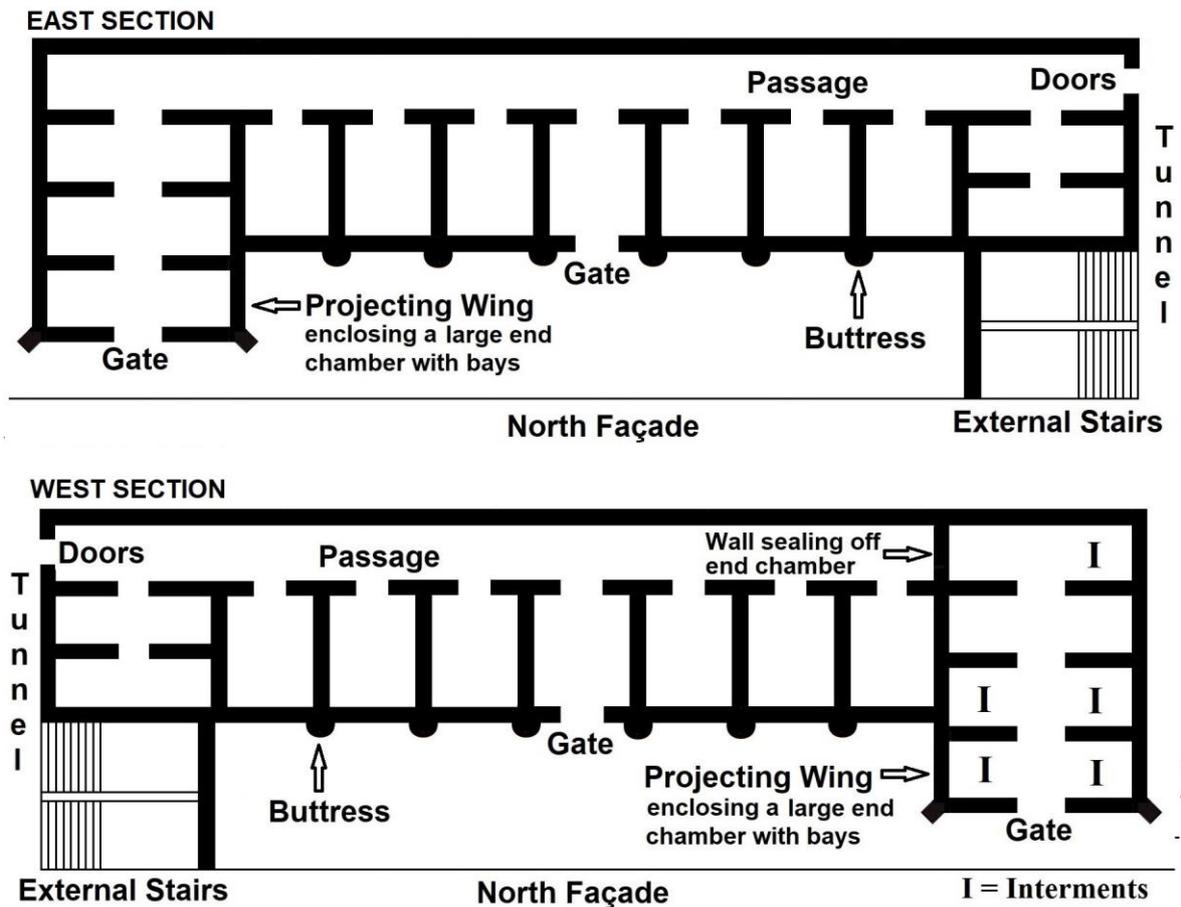
The north-facing façade looks onto burial lawns. Its walls are described in architectural terms as finely cut buff sandstone smooth polished ashlar. Atop the façade is a parapet behind which you will find a raised walkway and grassed terrace sloping southwards down an embankment to an intermediate level (all part of the original mound) then gradually to the cemetery's south boundary wall. Although the illustration shows a Mortuary Chapel, a few years after the cemetery opened, following the wishes of the shareholders the decision was taken not to build it, although the ground originally allocated for it would be kept unoccupied "in order that the Chapel may be hereafter erected at any time should this be called for."

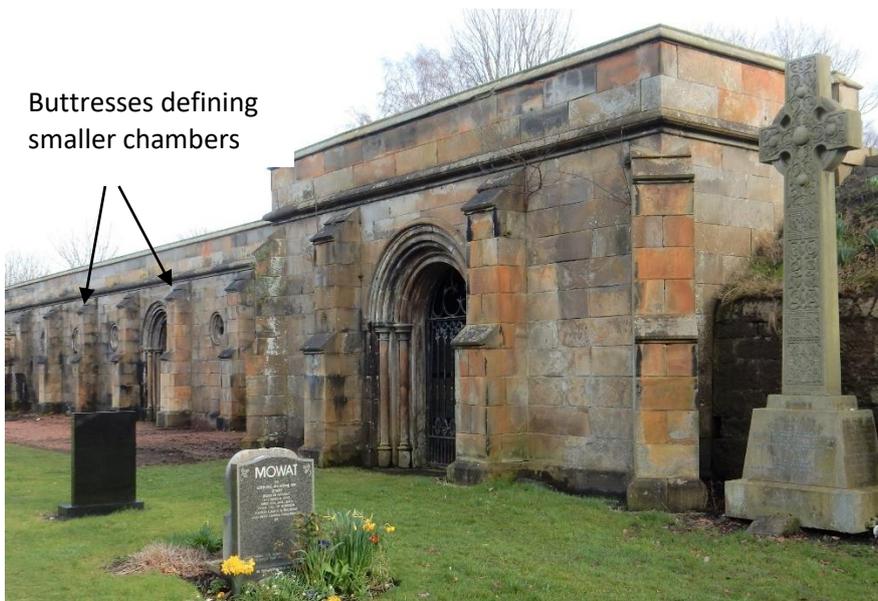
Many other garden cemeteries in Britain adopted a similar approach, where making use of an existing hill, slope, or mound lent itself to more efficient excavation and repositioning of soil compared to building a completely subterranean structure. Such an approach also provided scope for light and ventilation through gates or windows as in the Grange (see later photos). In the case of Liverpool's *St. James Cemetery* (opened 1829), Birmingham's *Key Hill Cemetery* (1836) and *Warstone Lane Cemetery* (1848), the catacombs were built into the sides of what were stone or sand quarries.

In the middle of the Grange catacombs a *barrel vaulted* pend (short tunnel with a semi-circular roof) runs North-South between the symmetrical East and West sections. A staircase either side of the tunnel takes you up to the walkway and grassed terrace above. Barrel vaults are a common feature of **Romanesque** architecture.



The illustrations below show the internal layout of the East and West sections. Within the central tunnel, heavy metal doors provide access to a passage which has openings into north-facing chambers. At each section extremity a projecting wing encloses a large chamber. This has **bays** created by ceiling-high walls. A smaller chamber adjacent to the tunnel has been subdivided into four bays. Between these chambers there are seven others, with external buttresses giving an indication of the walls separating them. The large East section end chamber has not been sealed off from the passage as in the West section, which is the only one that has interments. Note, individual bays and chambers could also be referred to as vaults.





Buttresses defining smaller chambers

West section showing projecting wing, buttresses, and parapet

Along the façade you will see *trefoil oculi* (round or oval windows) for ventilation and light, or in the case of the central and end chambers of each section, an iron-work gate incorporating the trefoil pattern. This **Gothic** pattern of three interlocking rings is often used as a symbol in church architecture to represent the Holy Trinity.



Trefoil Pattern

The Warriston, Newington and Dalry catacombs all had grilled lunettes (semi-circular apertures) in the roof for ventilation and light. Due to vandalism in recent years, except for Dalry catacombs, these lunettes have been covered over. Barrel vault ceilings are used throughout the catacombs. You can see these in the photo showing three of the bays in the empty East Section end chamber.

The overall catacombs design is Romanesque, but Bryce was well known to embrace many styles hence perhaps the decision to include the more Gothic trefoil pattern.



Grange Gate



Grange Window



Dalry Lunette



Barrel Vault Ceilings

Provisions and Regulations for Grange Catacombs Use

The first of the 22 interments was carried out in 1858, the last in 1942. Details of all those interred are covered separately under [Interments In The Catacombs](#). If you look through the façade gate of the West section end chamber you can see some of the interments. Each is housed in a **loculus** (pl. **loculi**). This is the term used for the niche or space housing a coffin in catacombs. The City of Edinburgh Council records a 23rd name but there is no loculus for the individual. It is possible the coffin was temporarily stored in the chamber awaiting burial elsewhere, although this was not a service mentioned in the ESCC original prospectus.

ESCC stipulated that all interments in the catacombs (or in above ground vaults in the cemetery) had to be in *“coffins of lead, and the vault or catacombs to be hermetically closed in the most sufficient manner.”* Hermetic closing/sealing means no air can enter or leave the space. There had been reports of *“unhealthy vapours”* leaking from coffins on open shelves in catacombs elsewhere, even instances of explosions caused by the gases released from a decaying body within a coffin. With lead-lined coffins the body would be placed in a wooden inner coffin lined with satin, then there would be a second shell made of lead and sealed (usually by a local plumber). The inner and second shell would then be placed in a wooden outer shell, often richly decorated. The whole approach was to keep moisture out and slow the decaying process, as well as prevent the escape of gases from the coffin.

In the West section end chamber, each bay can accommodate up to six coffins placed head to foot/foot to head in their loculus and sealed in with a marble or sandstone memorial slab. A maximum of three tiers is possible in each bay with two loculi in each tier. In the photo the bottom two loculi have not been used in this bay. Were the coffins always placed with the head to the West so that, following Christian tradition, the body faces East to see the second coming of Jesus? Or were they always placed feet first into the loculus with the head next to the inscribed slab, feet first being the conventional way of carrying a coffin? Our research has not provided any indication of the likely orientation. Perhaps it varied according to the bay used and the wishes of the family.



The Prospectus mentions the possibility of conventional burials within the catacombs (rather than interments within loculi) – *“admit of interments either under ground or upon the walls”*. The original *“Rates of Charges”* states *“The vaults as built are of three sizes: vaults containing two Spaces or Layers £30, vaults containing three Spaces or Layers £45, vaults containing six Spaces or Layers £120”*. A **layer** or **lair** is a Scots term for grave space. In the West section end chamber each bay, as used, is equivalent to two *“Spaces or Layers”*. In ground burials three interments were allowed, unlike today when the maximum is two, so these bays could accommodate six interments whether stacked above ground or buried. However, regarding the smaller chambers, the available information does not allow us to work out how *they* might have been used, had space in them been purchased. Their dimensions do not accommodate side-by-side end-on coffin orientation.

Based on the original ESCC Rates of Charges, grave space outside the catacombs was significantly less expensive, ranging from £2 to £12 per lair, depending on the scope for enclosure or erecting a monument, and on location. Those nearer the Broad and Narrow walks were more expensive.

Practicalities of Grange Catacomb Interment

We have not unearthed any detailed documentation explaining how an interment in a loculus would have been conducted but there is a description we came across regarding catacomb interments in the Exeter Bartholomew Street Cemetery that suggests part of the procedure. Here the catacombs were built under the city wall to accommodate 1400 coffins.

“The coffin was slid into a brick lined vault [loculus] while the officiating priest would conduct the service. Nearby was a bricklayer who would wait for the end of the service when he would then brick up the entrance. A brass plaque or in some cases a square stone with details of the deceased would be fixed to the bricks.”

In the case of the Grange catacombs, the existing loculi are all sealed with an inscribed memorial slab of marble or sandstone.

We wonder at the process of moving a heavy lead-lined coffin from the hearse into its allocated loculus. In *Kensal Green* Cemetery, a coffin could be lowered from the chapel catafalque to the catacombs below via a lift. The procedure originally involved a screw mechanism which was later replaced by a hydraulic one. Had a

Mortuary Chapel been built above the Grange catacombs as planned, perhaps mechanical lowering of a coffin into the catacombs would have been an option. Grange local undertakers suggest pall bearers would carry the coffin through the gate to a position alongside the empty loculus, orientate it to be end-on to the niche, lower or lift it depending on the allocated tier, and finally slide it into the waiting space.

We have also wondered about the ceremonial aspects of conducting a Grange catacomb funeral and came across a Kelso Chronicle article dated Friday 24 July 1868, describing (without any practical details) the interment in the Grange catacombs of Ralph Abercromby, 2nd Lord Dunfermline.

“About two o’clock, the cortege arrived at the Grange Cemetery, where it was joined by a number of private and other carriages At the conclusion of the service, the coffin was placed in the vault in the centre of the cemetery. A great number of spectators were assembled on the top of the vaults and in the grounds, and remained during the whole of the solemn ceremony.”

The Abercromby niches are in the south corner bay of the West section end chamber. This would have been the end of the passage before it was sealed off – we wonder if it was an original intention for this position to be used for interments. Ralph Abercromby’s father had been interred there ten years earlier. It had been the first use of the catacombs and that was ten years after the cemetery opened. Biographical information about father and son is covered separately under [Interments In The Catacombs](#).

Thoughts on Limited Use of the Catacombs

As previously stated, there are just 22 out of a possible two hundred or more interments in the Grange catacombs. The Warriston Cemetery catacombs list 40 interments out of a much greater possible number. According to the City of Edinburgh Council records, Newington and Dalry Cemetery catacombs have no interments. Why were catacombs included in these cemeteries in the first place? In a time of significant investment mania in the service as well as industrial sectors, it may be the cemetery companies felt there was a growing middle-class population in Edinburgh who would be interested in, and could pay for, the privacy and exclusiveness catacomb interments offered to families.

As it turns out, none of the catacombs in 19th century British garden cemeteries could be termed successful from a long-term investment perspective. For example, Brompton Cemetery in London has 500 interments out of possible thousands. Perhaps fashions changed and the Victorians felt that an ornate imposing memorial on a visible plot allowed greater expression of social position and status. Perhaps a graveside burial lent itself better to the Victorian funeral procession, with all its trappings, than did manoeuvring a coffin into a space in a catacomb. Bodysnatching from graves had also become a thing of the past. We have also found reference to later 19th century cemeteries avoiding catacombs because they were considered unhygienic.

[Victorian funeral and mourning trappings could include hearse, horses, hearse decoration, pall bearers, mutes (professional silent mourners), mourning coaches, fashionable mourning dress, mourning stationery plus black sealing wax, and mourning jewellery, all evidence of pecuniary success and therefore evidence of social worth].

Then there was the issue of body decomposition, so there became the requirement for only lead-lined coffins to be used and the coffin to be hermetically sealed in its resting place. This added significantly to the expense. Towards the end of the 19th century, cremation began to feature as a means of disposing of the dead. Some of the catacombs elsewhere in the UK do have urns containing cremated remains placed on shelves but there were a variety of alternatives available for disposing of or retaining cremated remains in a sacred space.

Unanswered Questions

We have posed several unanswered questions throughout the later sections and would be very interested to hear from those who have views about these. Do get in touch via our Contacts page at grangeassociation.org.

Material researched and compiled 2021-22 by Helen Harris and the late Alan McKinney, with photographic assistance from David Watson, and newspaper research by Pat Storey, all members of Friends of Grange Cemetery. Our thanks also to the City of Edinburgh Council Bereavement Services for access to records as well as to the catacombs.