

### 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. Had a Mortuary Chapel been built in the Grange 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 24 July 1868, describing (without any practical details) the interment in the Grange catacombs of Ralph Abercromby, 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.”*

There is biographical information about Ralph Abercromby as well as his father, the Right Honourable James Abercromby, on our website.

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We have posed several unanswered questions in the later sections of this leaflet and would be very interested to hear from readers who have views about these, perhaps based on prior knowledge. Please get in touch via our Contacts page at [grangeassociation.org](http://grangeassociation.org). And please do visit the website for more background information about catacombs and their place in British Victorian garden cemetery design.

**Research by Helen Harris and the late Alan McKinney, with support from David Watson and Pat Storey, all Friends of Grange Cemetery. Our thanks also to Bereavement Services, the City of Edinburgh Council for access to records and to the catacombs.**

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# The Grange Association

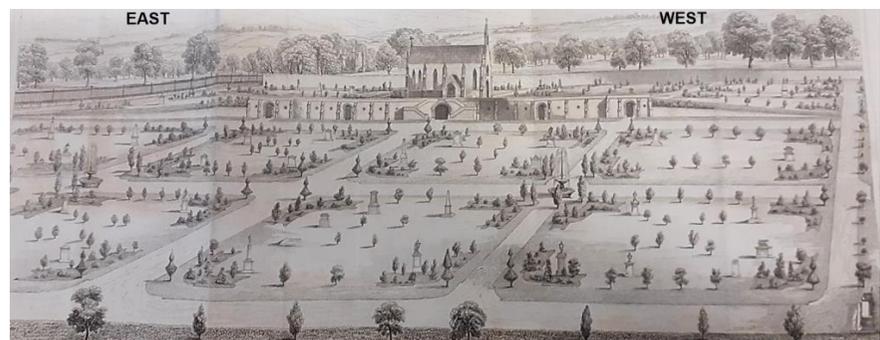
## The Catacombs

### Grange Cemetery, Edinburgh

Of the garden cemeteries established in Edinburgh in the mid-19th century the Grange, Warriston, Newington, and Dalry have catacombs, as do more than twenty other garden cemeteries throughout Britain. The Catacombs section on our website includes a brief history of catacombs, factors influencing the trend for their inclusion in Victorian garden cemetery design, and speculation as to their ultimate limited use. This leaflet focuses on design aspects for you to appreciate while visiting the cemetery, as well as some interment practicalities on which to ponder.

### Design and Layout of the 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.



The illustration is credited to City of Edinburgh Council – Edinburgh Libraries

Not so obvious from the illustration 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.

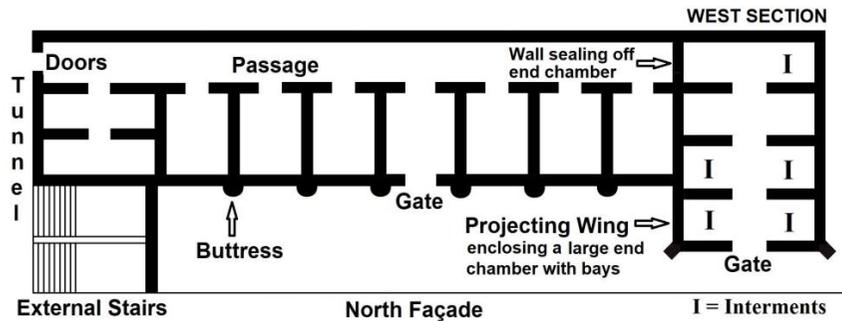
Although the illustration shows a Mortuary Chapel above the catacombs, a few years after the cemetery opened, based on shareholders wishes, the ESCC Directors decided not to build it.

Many other garden cemeteries in Britain adopted a similar approach, making use of an existing hill, slope, or mound for 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 (described later).

In the middle of the catacombs a *barrel vaulted* pend (a 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 internal layout of the West section is shown below. The East section is a mirror image. Within the central tunnel, metal doors provide access to a passage with openings into north-facing chambers. At the section extremity a projecting wing encloses a large end chamber which has **bays** (could be referred to as vaults) 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 internal walls separating them.



Only the West section end chamber has interments (there are none in the East section). The chamber is sealed off from the passage by an additional wall, so the only access to it is via the locked façade gate.

The chambers have **trefoil oculi** (round/oval windows) for ventilation and light, or in the case of the central and end chambers, 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. The passageways and chambers in the West and East sections all have barrel vault ceilings. The overall catacombs design can be described as Romanesque.



### Provisions and Regulations for Use

According to the City of Edinburgh Council, there are just 22 out of a possible two hundred or more catacomb interments. The last was in 1942. Details of those interred are covered on our website and in a separate A5 leaflet. 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.

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.*" 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. With lead-lined coffins the body would be placed in a wooden inner coffin lined with satin. There would be a second shell made of lead and sealed (by a local plumber). These two shells would then be placed in a wooden outer shell. The whole approach was to keep moisture out, slow the decaying process, and prevent the escape of gases.

In the West end chamber, each bay can accommodate up to six coffins placed head-to-foot or foot-to-head in a 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.

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 6 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 as with the existing interments.

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