

RAIKES ROAD BURIAL GROUND, SKIPTON – PROJECT PLAN

Visit to Houghton-le-Spring Hillside Cemetery – 7th October 2014

Purpose of visit

To see how the Friends Group has involved the community in its restoration and management projects.

Hillside Cemetery Background and Situation

Like Raikes Road, Houghton-le-Spring Hillside Cemetery is a burial ground lying separate from the church it serves – St. Michaels and All Angels - and, again like Raikes, was created to deal with the fact that the churchyard was full. The area had expanded rapidly as a result of the growing coal industry.

However, there was a cholera outbreak in 1854 and a new cemetery had to be found urgently and Hillside was created in a disused quarry, much to the disgust of the local people. It was closed in 1892, with the last burial in 1971 and there are around 7,000 people buried in the ground.

The ground is almost split in two with a large, open plateau on entering, from which the quarry face rises. This site was levelled at some stage and the headstones cleared, but are believed to still be somewhere on the site. There is a lower area, much overgrown, in which the majority of remaining gravestones are situated.

The cemetery used to be alongside the main road but in the 1960s/70s, the A690 was built which by-passed the area and resulted in the entrance to the cemetery being at a dead end. After this, the cemetery became neglected and ruinous. The lower portion became completely inaccessible because of coverage by brambles, ivy etc. with the graves becoming completely covered. Standing gravestones underneath thick undergrowth are still being found by the Friends.

A disputed bridleway runs through the site, but goes to a dead end. An urban farm is next to the cemetery. The ground is not closed to the public and there are no gates at the entrance. There has been some vandalism – graffiti – but the Friends are in contact with the local police and community, particularly involving the local Community Support Officers.

The Friends were formed in December 2003 to try and restore the cemetery to its former glory and their restoration work is on-going.



Hillside Cemetery at Houghton-le-Spring. The plateau area showing the quarry cliff face.

Work with the local community

The Friends are all drawn from local people with many of them having relatives in Hillside. On formation, the Friends received a lot of support from the locality – which they still tacitly have – and about 15 members who take part in regular work and activities on the site.

Grant aid was given for the restoration of a monument to miners who had died at Houghton Colliery during its years of opening between 1823 and 1981. There were two disasters in 1828 and 1850, but other miners are buried in the cemetery. The Friends organised a dedication service and open day, involving the local community in commemorating the miners. The memorial still attracts interest as part of Houghton's culture and heritage



There are also four World War I soldiers buried in the cemetery and the War Graves Commission has provided temporary markers, prior to renovating the Portland stone memorials at which stage, the Friends intend to have a special day for the community in re-dedicating the stones and commemorating the local men.

The Friends have an annual Open Day (an afternoon event) to bring in local people to see what has happened in the previous year and interest new visitors in what is being done. Many of the Friends dress up in appropriate costume and they have a colliery display, a colliery banner, tombola, raffle and tours of the cemetery. They also serve refreshments.



(Friends of Hillside Cemetery, Houghton-le-Spring at one of their annual Open Days)

The Friends also include the community in a number of sponsored walks for various charities. For example, a recent one was to raise funds for the Friends and Cancer Research, with the Friends group splitting the proceeds 60/40, Cancer Research being the main beneficiary. This helps to bring the Friends into the local community, promoting the cemetery whilst raising funds for charity. Both the Open Day and the sponsored walks are advertised in the local paper for maximum coverage.

Working Party Days also operate as invitations to the local community. The Friends decide what activity they are going to undertake – e.g. further bramble clearance – and organise their own routine and then advertise the days in the local press for all to come along and help or see in practice the work of the Friends. This helps to generate continuing interest in the cemetery from the local population, whether or not they take part in the work or join the Friends.

Local children have been encouraged to take an interest via the local schools. One school has recently started a History Group and visited the cemetery as part of group work. A schools pack has also been produced by the Friends, but also a general children's activity pack, including colouring books and explorer trails and identifying headstones, which is available for all children irrespective of school involvement.

The Friends feel it important for the community generally and the long-term care of the cemetery for children to be aware of and actively involved in the work of the cemetery as they will be the ones, as adults, who will hopefully continue the work and management of the cemetery.

Another local community group involved with the Friends is called Springboard, a voluntary group for youngsters who are having difficulty finding employment and who are encouraged to help with the work of the Friends as part of a disciplinary routine. This group helped to provide steps in the lower part of the cemetery.



Steps in the lower cemetery with which the Springboard volunteers helped.

The Friends have a close working relationship with the Church, producing a heritage display in St. Michael's whenever the Church hosts an open activity, not just for its own congregation but for the public at large.

They have a display at a Church "care" group – a drop-in session for everyone, but particularly vulnerable people who want to come and talk over problems or just come along, be part of a group and have a tea/coffee. Many people have long-standing family connections with Houghton, particularly in the coal industry, and they are encouraged to find out from the Friends if their relatives are buried in the cemetery. This activity appears to be a successful way of not only engaging vulnerable people in the community, but also gets them actively involved in something in which they can do as much or as little as they can manage.

A lady in this group has recently come along with a box of old photographs from which the Friends have been able to identify parts of the cemetery, as well as helping the lady build a photo montage and details of her family.

Although not as large or as diverse as Hillside Cemetery, nonetheless it is suggested that future work at Raikes Road could be usefully informed by the examples at Houghton-le-Spring.

With thanks to the Friends of Hillside Cemetery, Houghton-le-Street for their help in providing the information contained in this report.

Jean M. Robinson
October 2014.