The **Magnificent Seven** are seven generally overgrown Victorian Gothic garden cemeteries, all within a 9 km (5.5 miles) corvid flying distance of St Paul's Cathedral. They provide some of the few substantial areas of woodland, scrub and rough grassland close to central London and all are managed to some degree for their wildlife.

The seven cemeteries are:

- Abney Park Cemetery
- Brompton Cemetery
- Highgate Cemetery
- Kensal Green Cemetery
- Nunhead Cemetery
- Tower Hamlets Cemetery
- West Norwood Cemetery

History

In 1800 the population of London was 1 million but it increased rapidly to reach 2.3 million by 1850. Such rapid population growth resulted in a lack of burial space. The city's small parish churchyards became dangerously overcrowded, leading to decaying matter getting into the water supply and causing epidemics of diseases such as cholera. There were instances of body snatching, bodies left out to rot or not buried deep enough and bodies cleared from graves too soon.

In 1832 Parliament passed a Bill authorising the establishment of a chain of privately operated garden cemeteries around the outskirts of the metropolis to alleviate the scandal of overcrowded city graveyards. Seven cemeteries opened between 1832 and 1841. In 1850 Parliament passed the Metropolitan Interments Act (succeeded two years later by the Metropolitan Burials Act), closing all inner London churchyards and crypts to further burial.

By the early 20th century, most of the garden cemeteries (apart from Brompton, which had been nationalised) were falling into disrepair, for a variety of reasons. By the 1960s most of them were no longer financially viable and their formerly landscaped grounds were left to nature. Shrubs and plants engulfed and destroyed the catacombs and headstones and the sites gradually became woodland. Eventually they were acquired by local council and are now maintained with the help of volunteer groups.

Over the past 20 years or so, there has been a renewed interest in British cemeteries, and their architectural, historical, social and environmental importance is at last being acknowledged by the local councils that, in most cases, now own the sites.

Habitat

The relatively undisturbed nature of many cemeteries has allowed the development of unique natural habitats. The cemeteries are now recognised as havens for flora and fauna, and all the

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cemeteries are managed in accordance with conservation schemes.

Species

Birds

All the cemeteries are havens for typical woodland birds, including Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Jay, tits and, in summer, woodland warblers.

Mammals, reptiles and amphibians

Red Fox, Grey Squirrels and at least one or two species of bat can be seen in most of the cemeteries.

Invertebrates

The grassy areas of all the cemeteries support a number of species of butterfly.

Practicalities

Directions

Because the cemeteries are so close to central London, parking can be difficult around some of the cemeteries. However —and also because they are so close ot central London — they can all be approached easily by public transport.

Access

Wheelchair access is normally possible, although some cemetery footpaths may not be well maintained.

Facilities

Few facilities, if any, are generally available within the cemeteries, but all have shops, cafes and pubs available within a short walking distance.

From an article by Andrew Haynes

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