

Amenities and Leisure Committee Meeting – 31st May 2023

Agenda Item 8 – Mays Lane Cemetery - Extension Project

Background

For some time, officers have been working on a project to extend Mays Lane Cemetery. Although progress has been made, there have been numerous delays for a variety of reasons but we are now in a position to push forwards with our plans.

Owing to concerns about the nature of previous usage of the extension area, the cemetery development company we have been working with arranged for a ground penetrating radar survey to be carried out in order to assist decision making around the suitability of each area of the site for burials. The survey was carried out on 28-03-23. Historical eye-witness accounts suggested that this end of the cemetery land had been used as a 'dumping ground' during the construction of A329 and also during railway works. Isolated incidents of finding concrete debris during the digging of graves in the current section have occurred and officers were concerned that this could be an increasing problem in the extension area.

Following the survey, a written report was provided by Wessex Archaeology and a follow-up meeting was held with the contractor to discuss the survey results.

Notes from Meeting held on 19-05-23

Not all the extension land was covered by the survey as there were some areas of dense vegetation and debris, but a significant proportion of land had been cleared by ETC staff in order that a meaningful survey could be conducted.

Ground penetrating radar surveys were taken at 3 depths: 0.50m – 0.60m, 0.70m – 0.79m, and 0.90m – 0.99m.

Observations were divided into the following categories:

- Possible archaeology
- High amplitude (metallic items/debris)
- Low amplitude (concrete, bricks etc)
- Modern services (gas, electric, water lines)

There were a significant number of findings in all categories across the site but the incidence of these findings did reduce the deeper the radar went.

Most significant findings:

- Significant amount of 'possible archaeology' found in the western section, possibly the foundations of buildings but this could just be rubble
- Two findings of 'modern services' traversing the extension site. Further investigations required to ascertain what service they are and if they are in use or now defunct
- Areas of 'high amplitude' deposits found scattered across the site
- Some 'low amplitude' findings but tended to be in northern section of the site

Primary observations:

- The cemetery extension project can be done but the site will require significant remedial work before it is suitable for use
- As the area has extant planning permission for a burial ground, they are not too concerned about the 'possible archaeology' findings as archaeologists will not be statutory consultees and, should anything be found it will be small in nature (because of the depth of these findings)
- What will probably be required is a scraping of the site to a specific level (either single depth grave or double depth), sifting of the material and laying back down of the soil
- There will be significant cost implications to this work as contaminated waste must be treated as hazardous waste and the removal of this has a significant cost
- Once the soil has been re-laid it will need to settle for 3-6 months before burials can take place

Next steps

A utilities' search will be conducted to ascertain the precise nature of the 'modern services' findings. This has been approved by the Town Clerk.

The cemetery development company to provide a quote for contamination testing. This would comprise of the digging of 10-12 trenches across the site and sending the soil to a laboratory for testing. This work will be approved by the Town Clerk, on condition that the quote is deemed satisfactory.

Matters for discussion and consideration at a later date

Once we have a clearer idea of the scale of remedial works required, and associated costs, there are matters that ETC will need to consider and decide upon. These will include:

ETC to decide if it wishes to aim for single depth burials (1.50 – 2.00m) or for double depth burials (2.00 – 2.50m). The deeper you clear, the greater the cost, but double depth will provide more capacity and more income.

To consider if there are areas where it would be more realistic (practically and economically) to use them for the interment of cremated remains as these are buried at much shallower depths.

ETC has not identified any other areas of land suitable for a cemetery so, if Mays Lane is not extended, it will close to all but second interments and cremated remains once the current burial section has been exhausted.

The costs/benefits ratio will require serious consideration by ETC. It may be possible to provide for c.500 burial plots if all the extension land were utilised (very unlikely), the number of actual burials that could be accommodated would be doubled if double depth plots were provided.

The Town Clerk recommends that a Cemetery Working Party is created. This would enable officers to discuss any developments and considerations in detail with these councillors, update reports would then be provided to the committee and to Council. In line with regulations applying to working groups, the CWP would act as an advisory body, it would not have decision making powers outside of the budget already agreed for the extension project.

Jo Friend
Town Clerk

22/5/23