



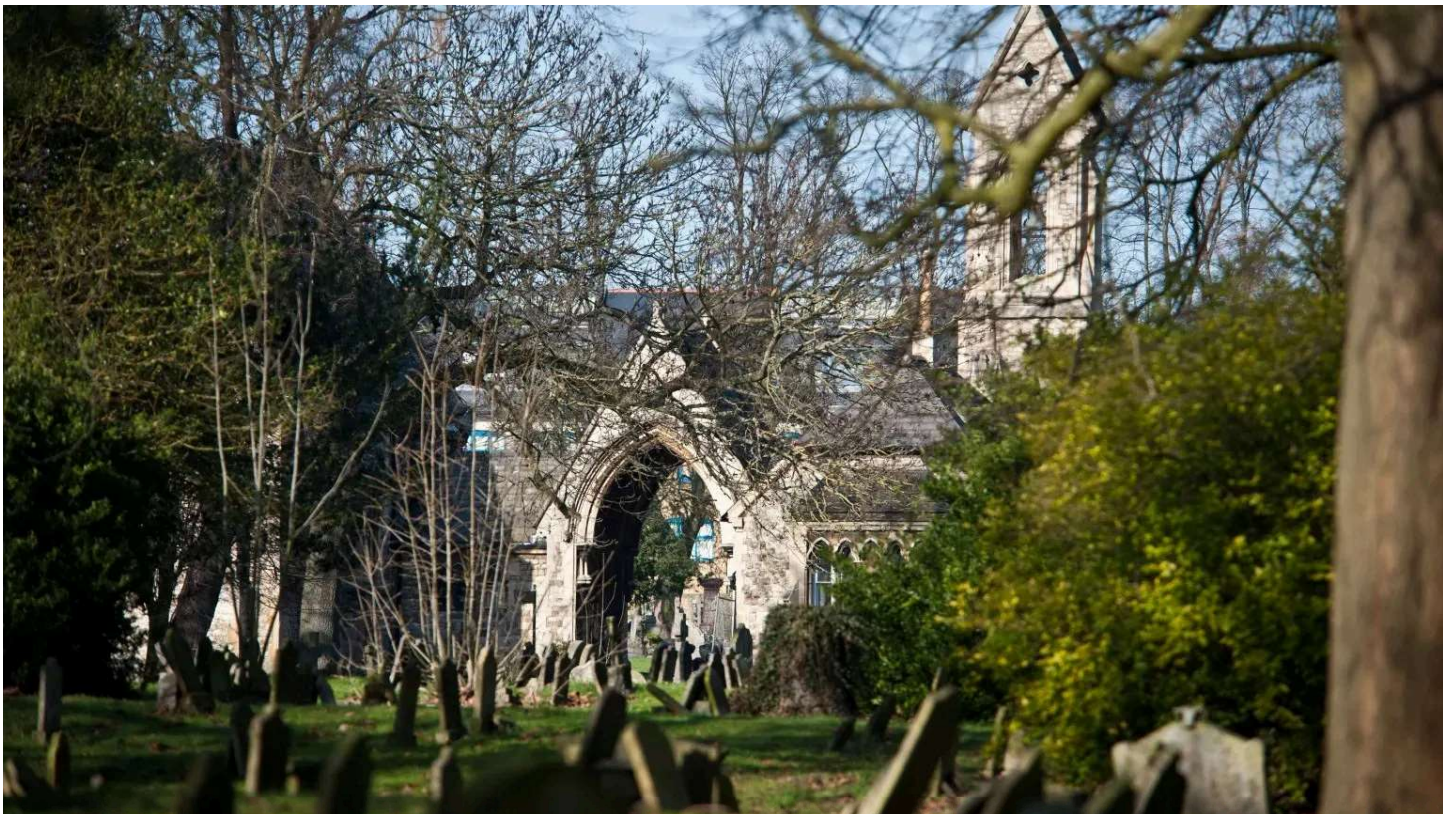
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Ben Lazarus

Will councils soon be digging up the dead?

Many are in desperate need of cash

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Paddington Cemetery (Alamy)

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Brent recently launched a rather biased consultation looking at whether off-lead dogs should be banned (my favourite question in the survey: ‘Do you agree with dogs urinating on graves?’). The council claims they have received ‘a growing number of complaints’ from mourners about dogs but won’t say how many complaints. Data from previous years show that no more than around a dozen (and probably the same) people have registered a complaint each year. Even before the consultation was launched, council wardens wearing video cameras began appearing in the cemetery to warn people with dogs that they will be fined £100 if their dog is off-lead. Locals are distressed; not burly blokes with XL bullies, but mostly older ladies with shih tzus.

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and drinkers*

I spend quite a lot of time walking in the cemetery with Nelly, my four-year-old giant schnauzer. It’s a sanctuary for me, so I’ve found the idea that the space could be taken away depressing. There’s a WhatsApp group of more than 100 angry local dog walkers, all concerned at Brent’s overreach; an online petition against the move, meanwhile, has received 488 signatures. In a densely built up area, it’s rare to find spaces for dogs to run freely. There’s general bemusement too that, at a time of rising knife and gun crime, and with homelessness also on the rise, the council have decided to focus their energies on dog walkers.

What’s particularly alarming is that most residents (and even some councillors I’ve spoken with) believe that Brent’s actions have been inspired by the Law Commission, an arms-length government-funded body for ‘improving’ Britain’s laws. Because urban areas are running out of burial space and many cemeteries are already full, the Commission is looking at changing the law to allow graves to be reused. The suspicion is that by getting rid of dog walkers now, it will make it easier for the council to change the cemetery’s status from a park and green space to a working cemetery.

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It isn't straightforward being a dog owner in fairly-central London. I live in Maida Vale (where the council is Westminster, not Brent). Yes, there are nearby parks, but none that provide the balance of being able to walk, contemplate life, and have your

Sean Thomas

dog off-lead. There is Paddington Recreation Ground, which is full of joggers and children. There's Queen's Park, where you can't have dogs off-lead. There's Regent's Park up the road and Kensington Gardens a couple of miles away, but both require getting in the car (not exactly eco-friendly) and also the luxury of time.

There are homeowners whose flats overlook the cemetery – those without dogs – who are also concerned. Without life, cemeteries attract foxes (who mess on graves), and the *wrong* type of people – drug addicts and drinkers. Certainly in the case of Paddington Old Cemetery, dog walkers protect the space by providing a free and constant watch. I've occasionally seen human waste but it remains, fortunately, rare. I've also seen the odd drug deal take place. These unpleasantries would no doubt become far more frequent if Paddington – and other historic cemeteries – are used only sporadically for funerals.

However, there's more to the cemetery than the fact its good place to let my dog walk freely. Being among the dead is not only very tranquil but reminds us that we will soon be little more than dust and ashes. I also worry that respect for those people buried here, whose families organised their final rite in accordance with their faith, will be swept away so that a local authority can make more money. It's crass.

Along my walks in Paddington Old Cemetery, I've paid my respects to *Paddington Bear* author Michael Bond (inscription: 'please look after this bear'), the first captain of England's football team Cuthbert Ottaway (who died aged 27), Holocaust survivors, a Muslim princess and those buried in war graves. If these graves can be dug up and recycled, much of that history will be lost. There are no doubt family members out there – many who come with their dogs – who will still want to visit

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