

# The Labour-run council accused of waging war on dogs

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Abigail Buchanan



Eleni Chalmers, with her dog Buddy, is the founder of Dogs of Paddington Old Cemetery and is leading the battle against Brent Council's proposed enforcement of dogs on leads Credit: Belinda Jiao

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25 October 2024 3:30pm BST

In some ways, the key problem facing London now is much the same as when Paddington Old Cemetery – a Grade II listed graveyard in the north-west of the city – was constructed in 1855: overcrowding. In the early 1800s, the capital was experiencing an acute shortage of space to bury its dead. The Burial Act, passed in 1852, allowed boroughs to purchase land outside their parish for burials. Three years later, Paddington Old Cemetery was opened in Willesden, then rural land.

In the 1980s, it was landscaped by Westminster Council and then sold to the borough of Brent for the sum total of five pounds. It is not quite as starry as the nearby Kensal Green cemetery, where notable personalities such as Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Anthony Trollope and William Makepeace Thackeray are buried, but it has several claims to fame.

It is the final resting place of Cuthbert John Ottaway, the first England football captain, and more recently the author Michael Bond, whose understated headstone is engraved with the title of the first chapter in the first Paddington Bear book, 'Please look after this bear.' It was reportedly the inspiration behind Zadie Smith's latest novel, *The Fraud* (and is, I'm told, where the author regularly walks her dog.)

Now, the cemetery – still peaceful, lush and green – is a haven sandwiched between the two busy and densely populated London neighbourhoods of Kilburn and Queen's Park. In parts, it has been redefined as a place to celebrate life, rather than just commemorate death, with an area set aside for a wildflower meadow and a corner for hives of honeybees.

It is also at capacity. The cemetery has been declared 'full' numerous times in its 170-year history. Overcrowded cemeteries are a national problem: this month, a report from the Law Commission warned that urban areas are fast running out of burial space, and proposed that graves be reused to tackle the problem.

In Paddington Old Cemetery, new residents have been buried in disconcerting lines down former pathways, as that was the only unoccupied space left. Now, however, it faces overcrowding of a different, canine kind. Some grave owners, and the area's Labour-run council, claim it is overrun with dogs.



Dogs of Paddington Old Cemetery is a tongue-in-cheek spin-off of a local residents' group Credit: Belinda Jiao

In a city as big as London, where green space is sparse and then usually very busy, cemeteries are a much-appreciated resource for dog walkers. On a sunny October morning, I count no fewer than twelve in Paddington Old Cemetery – big and small, fluffy and sleek, one wearing a very fetching orange fleece. Most are off the lead, as this is one of the only places in the area where they are allowed (and able) to roam free.

But not for long. A petition to “stop Paddington Old Cemetery being used as a dog toilet/exercise facility” has garnered nearly 950 signatures. I am “sick of seeing dogs running around the graveyard where both my parents are buried,” wrote one signatory. Another, posted a week ago, said she has had to remove dog faeces from her mother’s grave.

According to Friends of Paddington Old Cemetery, a local residents group, 38 complaints have been lodged against dog walkers in a year; 16 of these were from Brent council staff themselves. They suspect something bigger is going on. Members of a tongue-in-cheek new spin-off organisation, Dogs of Paddington Old Cemetery, say that the Labour-run council has waged war on local dog owners like them and is attempting to ban their furry friends from the cemetery entirely.



For years, the cemetery has been exempt from restrictions, allowing dogs to be exercised and run free in the walled-off space Credit: Belinda Jiao

I met its founder, Eleni Chalmers, on a morning walk with her dog, Buddy. “Every time they [the council] intervene they make a mess of it,” she says. “It is very, very upsetting for a community which is self-policing – most people that come and walk their dogs also pick up

rubbish that's scattered by foxes overnight.

"There is another area, but you have to keep them on the lead. And it's the friendships we've made here – to give you an idea, I started a WhatsApp group and four days later it had over 100 members," she says. "Dog ownership jumped nationally [in the pandemic] and the council are completely out of touch. I'm personally very sad that a Labour council would do this – there are a few anti-dog agendas going on."

The pandemic boom in puppy ownership didn't help matters, but most of those in the cemetery today have been walking their dogs here for years, if not decades – and for them, there is something greater at stake. "There's a real community of people – it really brings [us] together," says 62-year-old Bertrand Pierson, who has been walking his dog Monty, and new puppy Dotty, in the cemetery twice a day for the past 12 years. "As a result, Queen's Park is a little village – everybody knows everybody."

Brent is subject to a borough-wide Public Space Protection Order (PSPO), which is "in place to tackle dog fouling and problematic dog behaviour across the borough," according to the council's website. It prohibits dog owners from letting their pets off the lead in specific areas, and prevents more than four dogs being walked at one time. But for some years, the cemetery has been exempt from the restrictions, allowing the animals to be exercised and run free in the walled-off space.

"We literally bought the house because of this," says Dasha Sobornova, 43, a lawyer who lives opposite the park with her labradoodle. "We're devastated," she says. "I don't quite understand how the process is this badly run. I don't think there's been any research done [by the council] on how often we come here, and how often grave owners come here. I've never seen anyone be disrespectful."



Dasha Sobornova is a frequent user of the cemetery Credit: Belinda Jiao

Local dog owners say the cemetery is a vital green space where they can exercise their dogs in peace and quiet. They also argue that their use of the space does good for the wider community – that it discourages antisocial behaviour and gives it a safe, community feel. Their detractors, however, say there should not be free-roaming dogs playing fetch while mourners tend to graves, and that some dogs urinate and defecate on or near gravestones.

Following complaints, the council amended this to force dogs to be on the leash in the cemetery – without consulting community groups and with little notice, according to local residents. Uproar ensued, and Councillor Muhammed Butt, the leader of Brent council, enacted an 11th-hour U-turn on the policy pending a public consultation, which went live last Friday.

Dog walkers suspect the wording of the consultation has been designed to gather evidence for a total ban. “The questions repeat themselves, the options are unbalanced and the language is loaded such as options to ‘agree’ with ‘dogs urinating and defecating on graves,’” says Chalmers.

One resident, who prefers to remain anonymous, said they “seem determined to extract as much money from the site as they can, regardless of the consequences to the community. Getting rid of dogs is being seen as the first step in that process”.

It is a local disagreement that could set a national precedent. This is far from the first battle of its kind. In August, after mourners called for a ban on dog walking in city cemeteries in Edinburgh, councillors voted to allow dog walking to continue, but only if the dogs are kept on leads.

Meanwhile, in Lincolnshire, a petition to have dogs banned from all cemeteries quickly gained traction after a woman posted pictures of the flowers on her sister's grave stained yellow with dog urine. Rules vary across the country – some councils, including Brighton and Hove, maintain a total ban prohibiting dogs from cemeteries, excluding guide dogs, hearing dogs and disabled support dogs.

Nor is this the first time the Brent's cemeteries team have made headlines for the wrong reasons. In 2017, it emerged that the artificially raised section (locals call it 'the mound') constructed to house new graves contained asbestos.



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As a result, the council allowed the use of pathways for digging new graves – although further testing concluded the raised section was safe and that asbestos was only present at trace levels. Paddington Bear author Bond's grave is in one such area and is already leaning to one side. A dog walker tells me that after heavy rain, it is often left temporarily underwater.

The bottom line, for Chalmers, is that the council have made a dog's dinner out of policing the park. "They are not recognising that communities are made up of lots of constituents, and they are ignoring us, sidelining us and manipulating the results," she says. "They're trying to take away one of the few self-policing historic green spaces we have."

Brent councillor Harbi Farah, cabinet member for public safety and partnerships, said: "This detailed and balanced consultation seeks to gather everyone's views through a series of questions, and we welcome all perspectives."

"The consultation was launched in response to a growing number of complaints about dog behaviour in the cemetery, including dogs urinating and defecating on graves, being out of control near mourners, and incidents of dog attacks – behaviour that is completely unacceptable in a place of remembrance."

"The consultation is open now and runs until December 10."

The rule-abiding majority are being penalised for the actions of a disrespectful few dog owners who won't clean up their mess, she says. For Chalmer's part, she has never seen a dog urinating where it shouldn't. I don't have the heart to tell her that I've just spotted a pug cocking its leg by a grave in the corner.

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