

BUNHILL FIELDS: GRAVEYARD GEOGRAPHY

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Here, Ben, Paula, Steve and Tessa show how using the 'What, Where, When, Why, Who and How?' enquiry approach revealed a wealth of opportunities for pupils to explore an unusual environment from different perspectives.

A change of venue for a recent *Primary Geography* Editorial Board meeting led us to 'discover' the Bunhill Fields burial ground in North London. A mini-field trip to this intriguing site showed how burial sites and graveyards have the potential to become a rich source for an investigation. Our article shows these sites offer many connections from which to develop an enriched curriculum (you can download a presentation – see web panel).

Bunhill Fields

What?

The name 'Bunhill' derives from the term 'bone hill' (see web panel). When St Paul's Charnel House in central London was demolished in 1549, over 1000 cartloads of bones were transported and deposited on what was then moor, and the mound was capped with soil. The resulting hill – rising above the surrounding fenlands – even boasted three windmills. It is estimated that 123,000 interments took place at Bunhill over the years, but just 2333 monuments (mostly plain headstones) now remain (see web panel).

Where?

The location of Bunhill indicates the need to find a suitable burial ground away from the growing city. Today, it is a haven of peace and tranquillity: a small (1.6ha) garden of green in what is now an otherwise bustling area. The site is now listed as a Grade I entry on the National Register of Parks and Gardens.

When?

The burial field probably dates from Saxon times, but it was used mainly from the mid-16th century until its closure to further interments in 1860. The earliest inscription on one of the remaining monuments is dated 1666. Bunhill's significance as a green space was recognised in 1865

with the formation of the Bunhill Fields Preservation Committee. Today, the site is maintained by the City of London as a 'managed public open space' and has a visitor centre (see web panel).

Why?

The significance of the burial ground lies both in the continuity of links with the former residents of London and the recreational and conservation opportunities it now offers. There are around 130 trees in the site, supporting a wide variety of flora and fauna, and its value as a green space for communities was recognised in 2009 when Bunhill Fields received its first Green Flag Award.



Bunhill is home to around 130 trees. Photo © Laurence Arnold.

Our emotional reaction to graveyards and burial grounds make them worthy of further investigation. Some people make a 'pilgrimage' to Bunhill to view the monuments of significant people (see below), while others simply enjoy listening to the birdsong and feeding the squirrels, so the area serves many varied purposes.

Who?

Bunhill Fields has a history of Nonconformist association. It is the resting place of a number of prominent people, including William Blake (1757–1827, poet, painter and printmaker), John Bunyan (1628–88, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*), Daniel Defoe (1660–1731, author of *Robinson Crusoe*) and Susanna Wesley (1669–1742, mother of the founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley).

How?

In graveyard geography, the connections with science, history and art are clear, but others are equally worth pursuing. Looking at the design of monuments, how the area is managed, what facilities are provided and how the dead are respected can take the inquisitive child into other significant areas of learning. These can include creating meaningful links with SMSC on emotional issues around the cycle of life and death. Below, we offer some thoughts on using sites like Bunhill as a learning resource.

A 'Bunstorm'

The enquiry questions shown on page 17 are specific to Bunhill, but they can be adapted for use in any similar location, allowing pupils to explore different faiths and belief systems and enabling them to make comparisons between people and places.

Burial sites and graveyards can give rise to some difficult questions, but studying such sites can offer pupils an effective way to address these questions.

References

Macfarlane, R., and Morris, J (2017) *The Lost Words: A spell book*. London: Hamish Hamilton.



WEB RESOURCES

Download the Bunhill presentation: www.geography.org.uk/pg
Bunhill Fields Visitor Information: <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/city-gardens/visitor-information/Pages/Bunhill-Fields.aspx>
Bunhill Fields on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunhill_Fields
The Hill of Bones: The Story of Bunhill Fields: <https://flickeringlamps.com/2014/06/25/the-hill-of-bones-the-story-of-bunhill-fields/>
William Blake headstone article: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/aug/11/how-amateur-sleuths-finally-tracked-down-burial-place-william-blake>

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Geography

Seasonal change: What is this place like at different times of year or day? What does the site tell us about patterns of death, decay, transformation and renewal?

People: Whose space is this? Does it belong to the dead/the living/its managers/nature? Who are the authorities here?

Land use: How is the land used (e.g. leisure, feeding animals, other uses in the past)? Use maps to locate cemeteries and graveyards in your area: if you were a planner, where would you put them? Why? In what ways can we map the graveyard (e.g. to show emotions, sounds, locations, land use)? Can you show the changing nature of the area around the graveyard using tools like Digimap?



History

Change: Can we create a timeline for Bunhill using the dates on gravestones as clues?

Settlement: Why put the graveyard here? How is the history unique to this location? How has the area around it changed over time?

Perceptions: How have peoples' feelings about dying, death and burial changed over time? What can this tell us about what it was like to live at a particular time in history?



Science

Geology: What different types of rock have been used for the headstones? Why do some wear better than others? Which are more attractive?

Habitats and environment: What different types of trees are there? What do people mean when they say that sites like this form an 'urban lung'? Why is that so important? How do trees such as London Plane benefit the environment? What words describe this environment?



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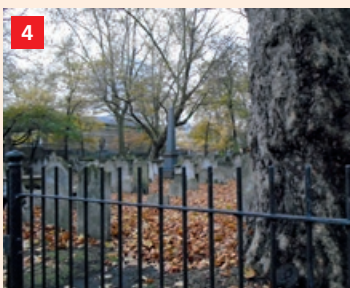
Belief systems: Think about the geography of places of religious or spiritual significance. Why do some graves face East? Which death/burial traditions are observed by different beliefs? Why were Nonconformists buried at Bunhill rather than in nearby churches? Why do people visit the graves of well-known people? How do different religions deal with dying?



PSHE/SMSC

Emotional geography:

How does the burial ground make you feel? Why does this differ from area to area within the same site? What are the long-term benefits of burial grounds and graveyards? Who do people's bodies belong to (e.g. study the patriarchal lists on tombstones)? What alternatives are there to burials in a graveyard (e.g. burial in woodlands, cremation)? Will graveyards be needed in the future? If not, what alternatives might we use?



English

Writing: How can we use poetry and place descriptions to capture the sounds and senses that make up the essence of a graveyard?

Reading: What messages, epitaphs or poems do people inscribe onto graves? If any famous people are buried here, what can we find out about them?

Comprehension: How have the actual words on the headstones changed over time? If there are any words you don't understand, can you think about what they might mean? Why has our vocabulary changed over time? Why are some words such as 'acorn' and 'conker' (Macfarlane and Morris, 2017) disappearing from dictionaries?

