

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

The Novo Cemetery

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Name:	The Novo Cemetery
County:	Greater London Authority
District:	Tower Hamlets (London Borough)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.524441 Longitude: -0.039233934 National Grid Reference: TQ3612482436 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1416421 Date first listed: 11-Apr-2014 Location Description: The Novo Cemetery is situated entirely within the grounds of Queen Mary University of London at the following address: The Novo (Nuevo) Cemetery, Queen Mary-University of London Mile End Road London E1 4NS Statutory Address 1: Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London, E1

Historique de la conservation

Between the expulsion of England's Jews by Edward I in 1290 and the 'Resettlement' that began in the 1650s, London officially had no Jewish population. In fact, a few Sephardim (Jews from the southern European, Middle Eastern and North African portions of the diaspora) settled in London and other British cities from the late-C15, especially from the 1490s when thousands of Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal. Some of these were, or became, very wealthy through trade, and a handful achieved great influence at court as financiers and economic advisers; nevertheless, Jewish religious practice was still not officially tolerated, and Jews who died in London had to be buried in parish churchyards under the Anglican rite. Under the Protectorate, a group of leading British Jews petitioned Oliver Cromwell to grant them extended civil rights, including the conduct of religious services and the burial of the dead – a request that Cromwell seems tacitly to have accepted. There followed a large influx of Sephardi Jews into London, mainly from the Iberian peninsula where persecution by the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition continued.

Jewish law, like Roman law, forbids burials within the walls of a city. Prior to 1290, London's Jewish population had buried its dead just outside Cripplegate; the first post-Resettlement burial ground, the Velho (old) cemetery, was established in 1657 a mile and a half to the east of Aldgate, on the site of a former orchard in what was then known as Mile End Old Town. An adjacent site, on what is now Alderney Road, was used from 1696 as a cemetery by London's growing Ashkenazi (eastern European Jewish) community. The Velho was by this time nearly full, and the site for a second, much larger Sephardi burial ground – another former orchard, about 400m to the east of its predecessor – was leased in 1726. The first burials at this, the Novo or Nuevo (new) cemetery, took place in 1733, and in that year a mortuary chapel or ohel was built near the southern entrance. Over the next hundred and fifty years, virtually all Sephardi burials in London took place here, including those of Diego Pereira, Baron Aguilar (1699-1759), financier and adviser to the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa; the merchant Benjamin D'Israeli

(1730-1816), grandfather and namesake of the great Victorian prime minister, and Daniel Mendoza (1764-1836), celebrated prizefighter and author of the first English boxing textbook.

In the mid-C19 further expansion was necessary, and a further 1.7 acres were added to the east, between the pre-existing cemetery and the Regent's Canal, in 1855. Those buried in this section include the comic actor David Belasco, alias David James (1839-93); Joseph Elmaleh (1809-86), chief rabbi of Mogador and Austrian consul in Morocco, and several prominent members of the wealthy and prestigious Montefiore family. But by the end of the century London's more affluent Sephardim had moved away from the City and East End, their place taken by the great influx of poor Ashkenazi refugees from eastern Europe, and in 1897 the Novo was effectively superseded by a new Sephardi burial ground at Hoop Lane in Golders Green. The north-eastern part of the Novo remained open for adult burials until 1906, and for child burials until 1918, with a dwindling trickle of ad-hoc interments continuing into the 1970s.

The area immediately to the west of the Novo had, meanwhile, become the home of Queen Mary College, the successor to the 'People's Palace' of 1887 and by now a part of the University of London. The college too had outgrown its site, and negotiations to acquire and develop the now-defunct cemetery were under way from the 1940s, although legal obstacles – and objections by some members of the Jewish community – delayed the purchase until 1972. The 'old' (1733) part of the Novo was cleared, with the remains of about 7,000 people carefully excavated and reburied on college-owned land near Brentwood in Essex. The 1855 portion of the cemetery, its occupants more recently deceased and hence more likely to have living relatives, largely escaped redevelopment, becoming a fenced-off enclave surrounded by the new library and faculty buildings of the expanded college, which holds a 999-year lease on the site. Its boundaries were re-landscaped in 2011 by Andrew Abdulezer of Seth Stein Architects, in collaboration with the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation of London.

Details

DEVELOPMENT AND EXTENT The original Novo Cemetery of 1733 occupied a site of somewhat over three acres just to the north of the Mile End Road, about 400m east of its predecessor, the Velho of 1657, and about 3km from the old Sephardi synagogue at Bevis Marks. This area, known as Mile End Old Town, formed part of a ribbon of building that stretched east from Aldgate through Whitechapel and Stepney towards the river crossing at Bow. The cemetery was bounded to the west by Bancroft's Almshouses (later the site of the 1887 People's Palace and Queen Mary College), and to the south by what is now Mile End Road. A mortuary chapel or ohel, demolished in 1922, stood at the street entrance. A further 1.7 acres, comprising an L-shaped strip of land between the original cemetery and the Regent's Canal, were added in 1855.

The 1733 cemetery was completely cleared in the 1970s, and the land subsequently developed as part of the Queen Mary campus. What remains is the southern part of the 1855 extension, a rectangular site of approximately an acre, now completely surrounded by university buildings.

BOUNDARIES AND APPROACHES The original boundary wall, of stock brick with a triangular coping, survives along the eastern side, with a row of large old trees just inside it. Midway along the wall is set a pedimented Portland stone plaque recording that 'this plot of land, being a portion of 4.5 acres belonging to the synagogue, was added to the adjoining space – Tammuz 5615 – July 1855'. [The figure given seems to be inaccurate: the entire cemetery, at its fullest extent, amounted to no more than 5 acres.] The main approach is from the south, where a cantilevered walkway installed in 2011 (stone-flagged, with planters, low benches and a parapet of Corten steel panels) runs across the southern end of the cemetery, connecting Westfield Way in the east with the college library to the west via a small paved terrace. The boundary wall also survives here, though its upper part has been rebuilt; against it has been re-set the cemetery's original foundation plaque of 1733, an upright Portland stone slab with scrolled sides and a Hebrew inscription. The west and north boundaries were also re-landscaped in 2011, with simple concrete planters and widely-spaced silver birches; another old tree stands just inside the western boundary.

LAYOUT AND MONUMENTS The area within these boundaries is gravelled, with the plots arranged in east-west rows or *carreiras*, originally divided by boards; rows of adult graves (*carreiras grandes*) are interspersed with smaller children's rows (*carreiras pequenas*). The grave markers, of which about 2,000 survive, are (in accordance with Sephardi tradition) plain flat

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ledger slabs, coped stones or low altar tombs. Families are often buried together in the same row, sometimes – as with the prominent group of Sassoon graves towards the northern end – surrounded by low iron railings. Inscriptions, incised or leaded, are most often in English, though some are in English and Hebrew, and a few in Hebrew alone. The text ranges from a simple record of name and dates to more lengthy encomia and sentimental rhymes. The names themselves are those typical of Spanish and Portuguese Jewry: Belifante, Conquy, Da Costa, Lindo, Mendoza, Pezaro, Romano, etc. Many inscriptions also include the name of one or other of the Jewish burial societies, membership of which guaranteed poorer members of the community a decent funeral and monument during times of economic hardship. Sometimes places of birth, residence and death are given; these range across Europe, the Middle East, northern Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean and Australia, giving a vivid sense of the London Sephardi community's global reach. A few also bear simple carved ornament: typical motifs include open hands (indicating a member of the Cohanim or priestly caste) and a palm tree cut down by a hand from heaven (suggesting a life cut short). Near the middle of the cemetery a circular enclosure surrounded by a low stone wall marks the spot where a bomb fell during WWII; the flagstone paving within the circle forms a six-pointed Star of David, and a pedestal in the centre commemorates those whose memorials were destroyed by the blast.

Summary

Sephardi Jewish cemetery, opened in 1733, the surviving portion being part of an extension of 1855.

Legal

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.

Reasons for Designation

The Novo Cemetery has been inscribed on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens at Grade II for the following principal reasons: * Historic interest: as the sole remaining portion of one of Britain's earliest post-Resettlement Jewish cemeteries, whose connection with the London Sephardi community goes back nearly three centuries; * Landscape interest: as the expression of distinctive Sephardi burial practices, and especially the avoidance of all upright monuments; * Rarity: one of only two exclusively Sephardic cemeteries in England; * Location and group value: part of a cluster of early Jewish burial grounds in the Mile End area, within the historic heartland of London Jewry.

Bibliographie

Books and journals

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Ben-Ami, I, 'Folklore Research Centre Studies (Jerusalem)' in *Death, Burial and Mourning Customs among Sephardic Jews in London*, , Vol. 5, (1975), 11-36

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