

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

Bunhill Fields Burial Ground

Auteur(s) : Historic England <https://historicengland.org.uk/>

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Name:	Bunhill Fields Burial Ground
County:	Greater London Authority
District:	Islington (London Borough)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.523738 Longitude: -0.088723690 National Grid Reference: TQ 32693 82267 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: I List Entry Number: 1001713 Date first listed: 05-May-2010

## Details

Bunhill Fields is a Nonconformist burial ground of the 1660s, with its current boundaries established by the mid-C18. In 1867 it closed for burials and became a public garden, at which time new walls, gate piers and gates were built and paths laid out. In the intervening years, there had been around 123,000 burials, and grave-markers and tombs survive from every period of the ground's use, the oldest being that of Theophilus Gale d 1678. The most recent major phase in the history of Bunhill Fields began after WWII, when the northern part of the ground was cleared following bomb damage and the southern section re-landscaped to designs by Bridgewater & Sheppard.

**HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT** A burial ground was first established in the present location in the 1660s, although a place to the north of the City of London called Bunhill Fields, though not necessarily this site, had been associated with burials from the C16. The name may be a corruption of 'Bone hill'. Initially only the southern part of the ground appears to have been a place of burial. This area was enclosed by brick walls in October 1665, with gates erected in 1666, as recorded in inscriptions on the burial ground's Victorian gate piers. The phrasing of the C19 dedication is taken from a C17 inscription at the western entrance to the ground, recorded in John Strype's 1720 edition of John Stow's 'A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster', which read: 'This Churchyard was enclosed with a Brickwall, at the sole Charges of the City of London, in the Maioralty of Sir John Laurence, Kt. Anno Dom. 1665. And afterwards the Gates thereof were built and finished in the Maioralty of Sir Tho. Bloudworth, Knight, Anno Dom. 1666'. It was never consecrated.

The map accompanying Strype's text shows an east-west strip labelled 'Burying Ground' (corresponding roughly to the area south of the current main pathway), with the area to the north simply marked as 'Bunhill Fields'. The burial ground was extended in 1700 and its full extent is shown on John Roque's map of 1746. At this time there were still two distinct portions: that to the south is labelled 'Tindall's Ground', that to the north 'Burial Ground'. The southern part is an expanded version of the area described by Strype; the northern takes in those parts of Bunhill Fields that had not been lined with houses by the early-mid C18, resulting in an inverted T-shaped area. By the publication of Richard Horwood's map of the capital in 1799, the two sections had joined and the whole known as Bunhill Fields Burying Ground. It remains thus to the present day.

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Strype's 'Survey' describes how the ground had originally been intended as a plague pit but was never used as such and 'Since thence this Place hath been chosen by the Dissenters from the Church of Engl. for the interring their Friends and Relations, without having the Office of Burial appointed by the Book of Common Prayer, said at their Graves. There be a great Number of raised Monuments here with Vaults underneath; and Grave Stones with Inscriptions not a few. The Price of Burial in the Vaults, I am told is 15s.' Thanks to its location just outside the City boundary, and its independence from any Established place of worship, Bunhill Fields quickly became London's principal Nonconformist cemetery, the burial place of John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, William Blake and other leading religious and intellectual figures. This is the pre-eminent graveyard for Nonconformists in England and one of the first established specifically for dissenters in London. Few places in London, or indeed nationally, document this as vividly or with such time-depth as Bunhill Fields with its dense concentration of hymn-writers, dissenting ministers, evangelical preachers and divines, their worthy deeds recorded in inscriptions.

The burials in the cemetery were arranged to an orthogonal plan, with a main axial path running east-west along the southern part of the ground from the main entrance fronting City Road to the cemetery wall alongside Bunhill Row (though there was no through access at this point as there is today). A second network of paths, designed straight and perpendicular to the main avenue, gave access to the tombs. Burial areas were numbered and iron plaques on the south wall, these probably early Victorian replacements of the originals, provided a legend for visitors which corresponded with burial registers.

In 1852, an Act of Parliament authorised the closure of graveyards in towns and burials ceased at Bunhill Fields from 29 December 1853. By the time the ground closed for burials, there had been around 123,000 burials at Bunhill Fields. The Corporation of London assumed responsibility for maintaining the ground by an Act of Parliament in 1867 and it opened as a public amenity in 1869. New walls, gate piers and gates were built and paths laid out. The irregular paths between the graves were emphasised to create a more picturesque effect, trees were planted, tombstones straightened, and inscriptions deciphered and re-cut.

Bunhill Fields was damaged by bombing during the Second World War. Vera Brittain describes the Fields as the location of an anti-aircraft gun in the London Blitz, which may have also caused damage to the monuments. In 1964-5 Bunhill Fields was landscaped to designs of one of the foremost landscape architects of the period, Sir Peter Sheppard (1913-2002). Sheppard trained as an architect, worked with Sir Patrick Abercrombie and was a significant figure in the Festival of Britain. His 1953 book 'Modern Gardens' remains highly regarded. He was first engaged at Bunhill Fields in 1949, and completed his revised plans in 1963. He was President of the RIBA in 1969.

Initial proposals at Bunhill Fields were to clear the entire area, but thanks to protestations from the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Fine Art Commission, gravestones were only removed from the northern part of the ground, the most severely damaged section, which was laid out as a garden. A broadwalk, paved with salvaged York stone and brick, was laid linking this garden with the main east-west path. It was placed to take in the Defoe and Bunyan memorials, which were restored and made focal points, cleared of surrounding monuments. The graves of William Blake and Joseph Swain (1761-96, a Baptist minister and hymn writer) were resited nearby at the same time. The remainder of the burial ground, in an increasingly dilapidated condition, was railed off from public access but left largely undisturbed.

#### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION** Bunhill Fields lies just without the former walls of the City of London, in what is now a densely-developed urban environment, but would have originally been on the fringes of the metropolis. There are two other Nonconformist burial grounds nearby: a Quaker burial ground on Chequer Street (now a public garden with few historic features) and the the burial ground to Wesley's Methodist Church on the City Road which contains the tomb of John Wesley (d.1791).

**AREA** The area is roughly T-shaped, with the main thoroughfare running west-east along the broader southern part of the burial ground. The flagstones on the east-west path are notable, for both their size, traces of inscriptions and the subtle erosion of their central sections.

The southern section is divided into five areas, railed off in 1965. Here there are over two thousand monuments: mostly simple Portland or sandstone headstones; some chest tombs; some ledger stones; a few grander monuments. The contrast with Victorian cemeteries and burial grounds is marked. The monuments are almost entirely Portland stone, with some in sandstone brought

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in by the late Georgian canal network; few railway-era materials such as granite or cast-iron railings are in evidence. The symbolism (where it can still be discerned) is of a traditional, pre-Victorian kind and overall the flavour of the monuments is fairly plain, as befitting their Nonconformist associations. The gravemarkers are cramped together, defying the geometry of the orthogonal plan to give a sense of the densely-thronged nature of Georgian burial grounds that so shocked Victorian reformers. Metal plaques fixed on the southern wall survive and were part of the former system to locate graves, in conjunction with the burial registers.

Straight and winding paths run through the densely-packed burials. Trees include London planes, oaks and limes. The headstones and tombs are in various stages of decay, some upright, others fallen, with the inscriptions and decorative carving indecipherable and distorted on those in the path of the prevailing south-westerly wind. The antiquarian's loss is the aesthete's gain, however, for the organic patterns of weathering and decay are highly poignant. There is a striking chiaroscuro effect where the wind and rain have cleaned parts of the soot-covered stone.

In contrast, the northern part is grassed, with scattered tombs alongside the circular perimeter path and against the boundary walls. There are flower beds set in paving of brick or re-used headstones. Lavatories and the gardeners' hut are on the east side of this zone. Two north-south paths, one broad, the other narrow, both paved with re-used York stone and brick, link this garden to the main west-east thoroughfare. The broadwalk takes in the Bunyan and Defoe tombs, in their original locations, and the resited Blake and Swain headstones. While clearing bomb-damaged burial grounds was common practice after WWII, the special treatment given to Bunhill Fields, as seen in the commissioning of a renowned landscape designer and the use of salvaged York stone for the paving, is unusual. The realignment of paths to focus on Bunyan, Blake and Defoe in the 1960s scheme has historic interest in the context of post-war national pride and identity.

**BOUNDARIES** The burial ground is bounded by walls, railings and gates dating to 1868 (east side) and 1878 (west side), both separately listed. A listed brick wall to the south dates to the C18 or early C19 whilst the northern side of the burial ground is bounded by brick walls of 1964-5. The eastern boundary comprises a low coped wall of dressed stone between five granite piers, the piers square in plan and coped and gabled in a Greek Revival manner. The piers record the history of the burial ground and the names of some of the luminaries buried there, quoting verbatim an earlier inscription on C17 gate piers recorded by Strype in 1720. The railings have spearhead standards and finials and are gathered at intervals in clusters of eight. There are iron gates in second bay from the north. The western boundary, also separately listed, is a low brown brick wall in Flemish bond surmounted by fourteen square brick piers, capped with stone. Iron railings with bracketed supports are set in a plinth of cast-iron, with gates in the sixth bay from the north.

**OTHER ITEMS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST** There are a number of listed tombs in Bunhill Fields Cemetery, some designated at high grades. Most are located in the southern part of the burial ground, with others along the western perimeter of the grassed area to the north.

**REFERENCES** Corporation of London, *A History of the Bunhill Fields Burial Ground* (1902). Jones, J, A, *Bunhill memorials, sacred reminiscences of three hundred ministers and other persons of note...* (1849). Light, A, W, *Bunhill Fields Volumes I and II* (1915) Meller, H & Parsons, B, *London cemeteries : an illustrated guide & gazetteer* (2008) Rawlinson, R, *The inscriptions upon the Tombs, Grave-Stones etc. in the Dissenters Burial Place in Bunhill Fields (1717, reprinted 1867)*. Rippon, J, *Manuscripts relating to Bunhill Fields Cemetery, early C19, at British Library (Ms.Add. 28516)* Stow, J, *A survey of the cities of London and Westminster .... corrected, improved and enlarged by John Strype* (1720).

**REASONS FOR DESIGNATION** Bunhill Fields is designated at Grade I for the following principal reasons: \* outstanding historic interest as the pre-eminent graveyard for Nonconformists in England \* a rare surviving inner-city burial ground which is unsurpassed as evidence for the cramped appearance of metropolitan burial grounds in the Georgian period \* a large number of listed tombs, notable either for the person they commemorate (for example, Blake, Bunyan and Defoe) or their artistic quality \* distinctive aesthetic character in contrast to Victorian cemeteries, with monuments almost entirely in Portland stone or sandstone \* an extremely well-documented place where antiquarians have recorded inscriptions from the 1720s and for which the City Corporation holds extensive burial records \* high quality design and materials of 1964-5 phase, by the renowned landscape architect Sir Peter Shepherd

## 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.