

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

KEY HILL CEMETERY

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

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**KEY HILL CEMETERY**

Name: KEY HILL CEMETERY

District: Birmingham (Metropolitan Authority)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.490818  
Longitude: -1.9146092  
National Grid Reference: SP 05895 88104  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II\*  
List Entry Number: 1001352  
Date first listed: 26-Feb-1996

## Details

Birmingham City's first cemetery, laid out by Charles Edge for the Birmingham General Cemetery Company, and opened in 1836 as 'The Birmingham General Cemetery'.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Key Hill Cemetery (c 3ha) was laid out for the Birmingham General Cemetery Company as a burial ground for use by all denominations by the local architect Charles Edge (d 1867). Opened in 1836, and thus the earliest of the City's cemeteries, its planting was at least partly the responsibility of John Pope and Sons of Handsworth. In 1852 it was said to be 'tastefully laid out in walks, interspersed with lawns and shrubberies' (A Pictorial Guide to Birmingham (1852), 154-5). It continued to be run as a joint stock company until acquired by compulsory purchase by the City Council in 1952.

The site chosen lay on the edge of the city and had for centuries formed part of the waste of Birmingham Heath. This was enclosed in the early 1800s, the land which was to become the cemetery being allocated to the Guardians of the Poor, from whom it was purchased by the Company. The land had by then been divided into nursery gardens, orchards and small fields. The area to the east and south was already where Birmingham's jewellery and small metal goods manufacturers were established. Later this developed still further, into the area now called the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter.

### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** The cemetery lies c 2km north-west of the city centre. Key Hill bounds the site to the north, Icknield Street to the west, and various streets off Hockley Hill, the old jewellery workshop area, to the east. To the east the cemetery is bounded by sandstone cliffs, up to 10m high, stabilised in the late C20 with a casing of engineering bricks. Houses and workshops rise above the cliff edge. As originally laid out, the cliffs were set with terraced walks, but these were lost as mining of the site progressively cut into the cliff face. Mining continued to extend the cemetery to east and south-east until the 1930s. To the south, the site is bounded by the Birmingham to Wolverhampton railway line which redefined the boundary when constructed in 1854. A tall, late C20 retaining wall formed the boundary in 1999.

**ENTRANCE AND APPROACHES** An iron gateway with sandstone piers (dated 1835) breaks the boundary wall and railings which form the western boundary of the site, separating the cemetery from Icknield Street. The gates provide the main point of access to the cemetery, a straight drive leading from here to the site of Edge's neo-Classical mortuary chapel (demolished 1966) which was aligned on the entrance. A very similar gateway stands on Key Hill at the northern end of the site.

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**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The site of the chapel, a raised platform under which accommodation was provided, lies to the west of centre of the crossing of the main paths which divide up the south-western quarter of the site. The rectilinear layout continues to the base of the cliffs to the east, but, since this land was at first in active use as a quarry, the paths were not laid down to this pattern until a decade after the opening of the cemetery.

To the north of the chapel site, set into the rising ground, is a curving rock face and brick wall into which are set extensive catacombs. These were extended in several phases in the 1850s and 1860s as mining cut further back into the cliff face. On the land above, a platform and promenade offer views west, originally to the countryside beyond the city. In the 1990s a memorial wall was constructed here, with inscribed tablets carrying the names of those buried in the cemetery.

The rising ground from the top of the catacombs to Key Hill road to the north is laid out with an informal design of winding paths. To the west of this area, a sandstone wall divides the cemetery ground from Cemetery Lane and the petrol filling station beyond; to the east, the land runs to the foot of the cliff face. The brick retaining wall against the cliff was under repair and replacement in 1999. Prior to its demolition in the late C19, a mansion, Key Hill House, looked down over the cemetery from a site on the high land above, its garden walls standing above the cliff.

Throughout the cemetery are good monument groups, amongst them the tombs of many of Birmingham's leading C19 figures, including those who had manufactories in the nearby streets. Many however were in a damaged state in 1999.

#### REFERENCES

Gardener's Magazine 15, (1839), p 456 A Pictorial Guide to Birmingham, (Josiah Allen & Son, Birmingham, 1852) R K Dent, The Making of Birmingham (1894), p 428 E H Manning, Guide to the Birmingham General Cemetery (1915) C Upton, History of Birmingham (1993), p 139 S Phipps, A History of Key Hill and Warstone Lane Cemeteries, near Birmingham, (unpublished dissertation, Thames Polytechnic 1981)

Maps [all held in Local Studies Collection, Birmingham Central Library] Snape's Map of Birmingham Parish, 1779 J Piggot Smith, Map of Birmingham .. from a ..survey made in the years 1824 and 1825, 1828 J Pigott Smith, Board of Health Map, c 1851 Tithe map, St Thomas St Martin & All Saints, 1845

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1888 2nd edition published 1904 3rd edition published 1918

**REASONS FOR DESIGNATION** Key Hill Cemetery is designated at Grade II\* for the following principal reasons: \* Key Hill Cemetery is a good example of an early Victorian garden cemetery (opened 1836). \* The cemetery is a good example of the work of a locally significant architect, Charles Edge (d 1867). \* The cemetery design makes effective use of a former quarry to produce a varied and picturesque layout with sandstone cliffs, rock-hewn paths and catacombs. \* The original planting was carried out by a notable local nursery, John Pope & Sons of Handsworth; some of this planting appears to survive. \* The cemetery contains a very good collection of funerary monuments reflecting the social and economic development of Birmingham in the 19th century; it also contains a group of late 19th century pauper or Guinea graves.

Description written: January 1999 Register Inspector: PAS Edited: October 1999 Upgraded: November 2009

## 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.