

Worthing's Heene Cemetery – parallel heritage and conservation projects



Heene Cemetery, June 2022, central pathway, looking north.

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Introduction

Heene Cemetery in Sussex's west Worthing is a one-acre plot surrounded by high brick and flint walls. Used as the graveyard for the nearby, Anglican St. Botolph's Church from its consecration in 1873 until it was closed by Order of the Queen in 1977 (after it could accommodate no more burials), its gates now remain locked for most of the week. This town-centre plot is tended by volunteers twice-weekly, when the cemetery is open to visitors keen to see this hidden oasis. The Cemetery is also a West Sussex Local Wildlife Site.

The *Friends of Heene* come together to research and publish biographies of some of the 1,960 people buried there, to do maintenance work and to identify, log and photograph the species that are seen throughout the year. These varied activities are detailed on their website, <https://www.heenecemetery.org.uk>, which enjoys frequent updating. The website and the heritage

research behind it was launched in 2020 using funds awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. (The website was rebuilt in 2024 with a new design and enhanced functionality by the Friends themselves.)

The Cemetery is some way from being traditional. It occasionally has an unkempt appearance – because nature prefers it that way. Grasses are cut mid-summer and then again at the end of the growing season. Invasive species are selectively reined in to prevent them dominating, and several areas are left to flourish relatively untended. These steps help promote species diversity – seen in the species counts, currently over 730, established with the help of a dozen or so county recorder specialists. With just short of 230 flowering plants and over 310 butterflies, moths, insects and invertebrates, the count which started only five years ago is sure to uncover surprising details.

Volunteers work in the Cemetery on Tuesdays and Saturdays (2 – 4, weather permitting). They try to achieve a compromise between respect for those buried there and protection and encouragement of the environmental riches that surround them.

Documenting the heritage

Behind the scenes, a team of dedicated researchers has been documenting the lives of the nearly two thousand souls whose final resting place is Heene Cemetery. These labours have resulted in over 95% of the biographies having been written up and posted to the project's website. These records are replete with period photographs and archive documents. Census information has been added where available.



Top-left to bottom-right, clockwise: Charles Simmons and family, Eliza Phippard, the Greenfield family headstone, John Emil Morgan.

This steady accretion of detail – of children raised, businesses created, sacrifices made, of charitable works, of creative endeavour, of loss and love – has helped bring to life the families, groups and communities linked by this special place over the years. Making it available on the internet has allowed relatives across the globe to connect with some of their ancestors.

One innovation has been to include photographs of headstones, and the area, row and plot details for each grave, along with a What3Words co-ordinate that enables visitors to rapidly locate each grave using their mobile phone.

Five Commonwealth War Graves are regularly tended, and a number of other headstones function as memorials to the fallen of various wars and conflicts, particularly in India and South Africa. Forty percent of the graves and headstones mark male burials, reminding us that, although it was the men who engaged in conflict on behalf of their country, it was often the women who succumbed to illness at a disproportionate rate.

Documenting the flora and fauna

Those buried in the Cemetery would not have had the slightest inkling of the environmental crisis now facing the generations that have succeeded them. The ancient meadowland that the local church had adopted as its Cemetery in 1873 would have been rich in wildlife beyond compare to that we see today. Its one-acre plot would never have been ploughed, but managed as light grazing for animals, and scythed. The use of chemicals would have been unknown. This lies behind the site's 1992 designation as a West Sussex Site of Nature Conservation Importance, becoming a Sussex Local Wildlife Site in 2018.

This foundational natural richness has lain fallow for generations and, by carefully allowing the Cemetery's flora to thrive more freely, we have been able to see some of that richness return. This is helped by the Cemetery being closed to the public, its higgledy-piggledy headstones just that bit too precarious to allow unsupervised entry. Conventional cemetery neatness can therefore be set aside – on the assurance that visiting relatives will see their ancestor's grave accessible on demand, cleared of overgrowth and tended.

Invasive species are controlled so that variety and species diversity is promoted. Self-seeded saplings, such as Bramble, Sycamore, Holly and Ivy, get special attention. This supports a wider variety of fauna, particularly pollinators and invertebrates, all of which are being documented on the project's website.

Species recording is predominantly a photographic process, a practice that allows the group to display visually interesting species information on their website. Identification from these photographs, when possible, is assisted by a network of perhaps a dozen local and national subject specialists.

Site management advice is also provided by the *Sussex Wildlife Trust*, the *Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre*, the *Sussex Botanical Recording Society* and the *Sussex Local Wildlife Site Initiative*. A local member of the *British Trust for Ornithology* has conducted occasional bird surveys using mist nets. Other specialists visit to help with surveys of mosses, lichens, fungi and butterflies. Data shared with *Caring for God's Acre* is, wherever possible, routed through to *iRecord* and the *Beautiful Burial Ground* portal on the *NBN Atlas*.

This documentation of the Cemetery's species serves as a demonstration of the natural riches that can be found in the most surprising places. It validates the benefits of allowing nature to grow at its own speed, rather than being restrained by social convention. It also acts as a scientific benchmark against which the rise and fall of species numbers (although mostly the latter) is happening as environmental and climatic conditions deteriorate globally.



Top-left to bottom-right, clockwise: Viper's-bugloss, Common Ragwort, Common Blue, Common Green Shieldbug, 'Marmalade Hoverfly', Quaking Grass, Speckled Bush-cricket.

This 'controlled liberation' has allowed the *Friends of Heene* to engage in species counts, the result of which – though never finished – stand testimony to the Cemetery's meadowland origins. To date, the species that have been confirmed are as follows, all of which – save for perhaps 30 – have also been photographed in situ. Who knows what this species list may be in years to come?

Heene Cemetery in the Community

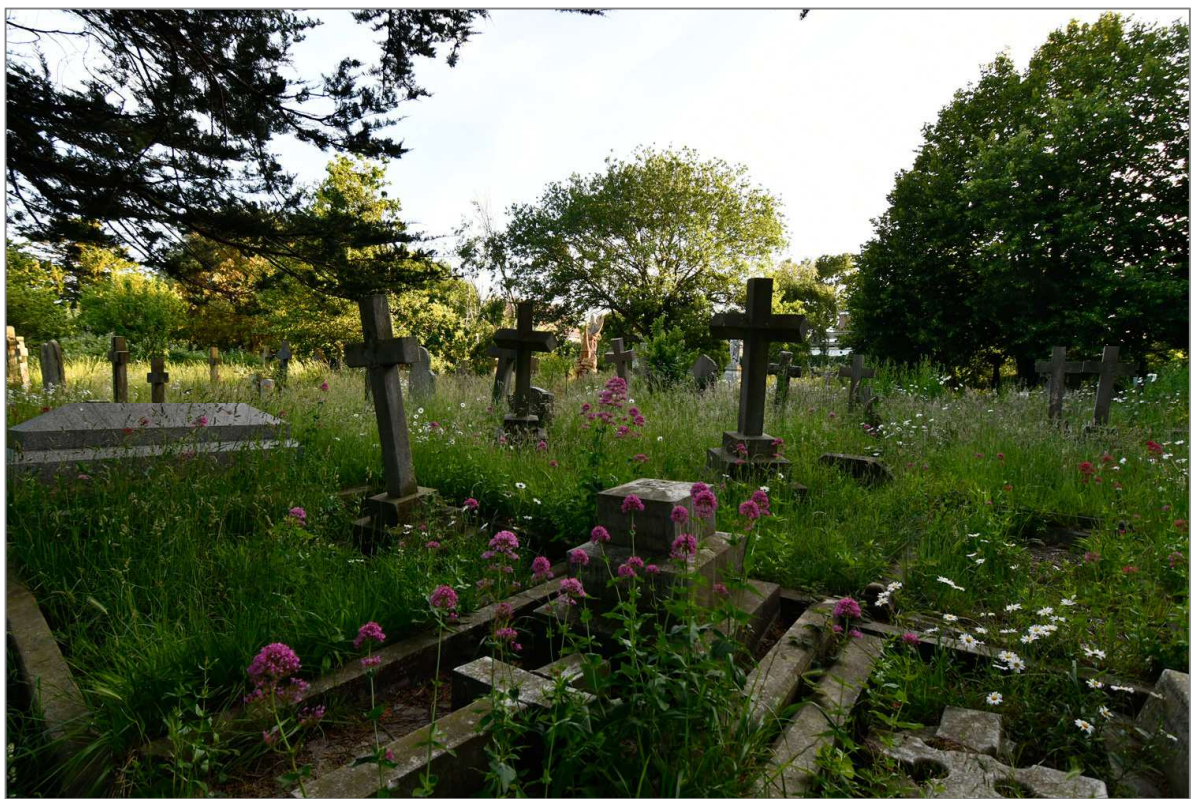
The *Friends of Heene Cemetery*, as well as maintaining the project's website with these burials and species details – and plenty more – are actively engaged in communicating their work to the local community. They submit articles to the local press and to church and community magazines, give talks to community groups and – most importantly – hold Open Days which offer a range of activities from tours to quizzes and competitions for children. Their website holds an increasing range of blog posts that seek to explain the detail of the work they do as well as the significance of the Cemetery's special flora and fauna. Throughout all this, the heritage researchers periodically single out notable biographies from among those buried there.

The Friends of Heene have been awarded the Green Flag Community Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024. This internationally renowned award is attestation to the achievements the Friends have made to this fascinating place.

Additional photographs



A drone's-eye view of Heene Cemetery, June 2022. The right edge of the photograph is north.



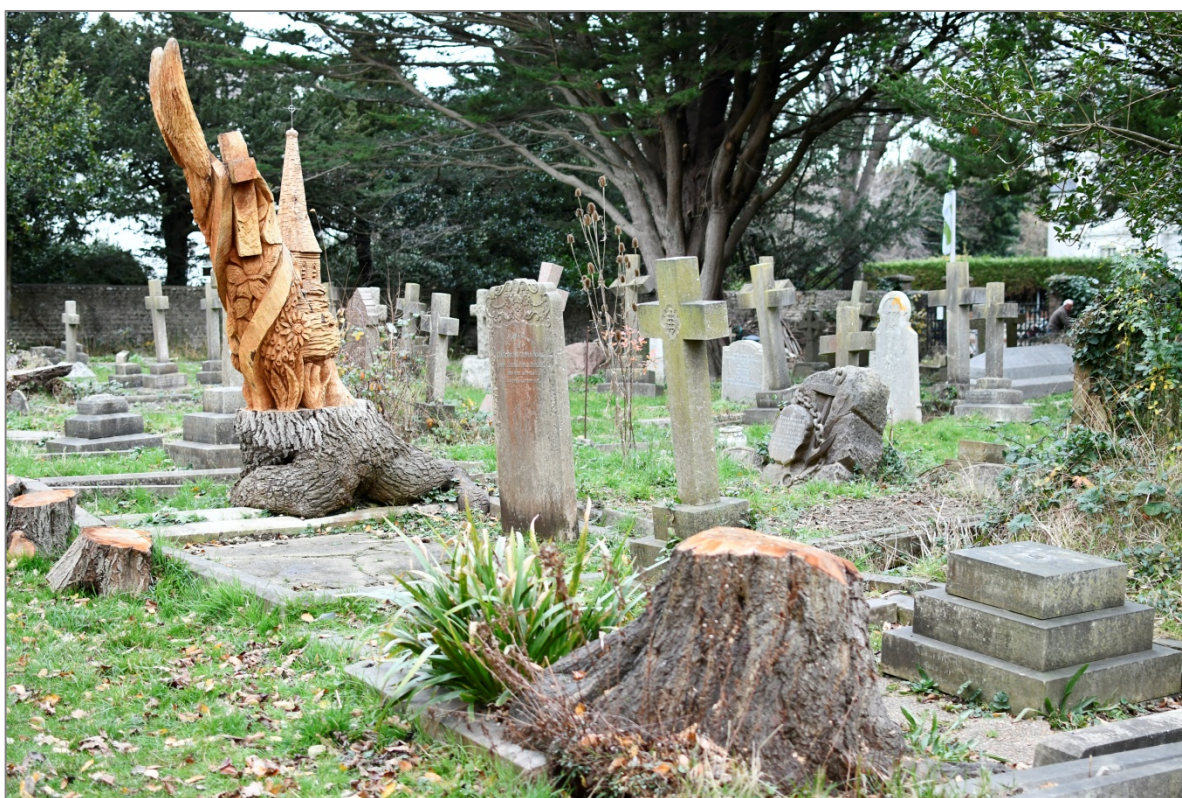
Heene Cemetery, June 2022, looking south-east, as early summer's flush gets under way.



Heene Cemetery, June 2022, the south-west area, in the flush of early summer.



Heene Cemetery, August 2022, in severe drought, looking south-east.



Heene Cemetery, December 2021, seasonal rest, view north-east towards the gates.

St. Michael's Graveyard (Heene Cemetery), Manor Road, Worthing, West Sussex, BN11 4RY
 (Note that this is not a postal address – use it for GPS and navigational purposes.)

www.heenecemetery.org.uk