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# Open to all? Religious Freedom and the Leeds General Cemetery

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*By Imogen Gerard and Kelsie Root*

A mourner first inquiring into burying their deceased loved one in the 19th century would have been faced with a plethora of decisions to make. Which burial ground should they inter their loved one in? What kind of service would the deceased have wanted? Would this be a religious service? Which psalms should be recited, which hymns should be sung?

Just as today, the answers to these questions would have depended upon the personal and religious beliefs of the deceased and their family. However, burial in the 19th century was complicated by a set of social, religious and legal codes around mourning and remembrance that may seem surprisingly prescriptive to us today. Religion generally played a central part in the service of a funeral, starting with its influence over which burial grounds were possibilities.

Most Leeds burial spaces, such as the churchyard at Leeds Cathedral or the Brunswick Methodist burial ground, required the deceased to be a member of the associated religious denomination before the individual could be interred there. In some cases, people could only be buried in a churchyard if they were a known member of that congregation.

This posed a difficult problem in the 19th century. In the midst of the industrial revolution, so many people migrated from rural to urban areas that some died before they had joined a congregation at all, leaving no obvious place to bury them.

There were no such restrictions in place at the Leeds General Cemetery (LGC), which opened in 1835 (you can read more about the history of the LGC [here](#)). The Leeds General Cemetery was deliberately intended to be used by people of any and all religions. It is this that makes it a 'general' cemetery. This also meant that it was a welcoming space for non-conformists: people who were not part of the Church of England or any other major religion, such as the Catholic church. Many of the shareholders in the LGC had purchased their stake in the cemetery, at least in part, because they themselves were non-conformists. The Lupton family, for example, held more than a dozen shares between them and were leading Unitarians.

The committee of the LGC defended the religious freedoms of their patrons fiercely. In a letter to the *Leeds Intelligencer* on 9 May 1840, Reverend James Fawcett accused the proprietors of the Leeds General Cemetery of conducting too many 'socialist' funerals with 'abominable views' in the cemetery, and letting the chapel to be used to promote godlessness. To close, he demanded that 'this freedom be speedily altered'.

The chairman of the company Arthur Lupton wrote a reply, stating that the Company had ‘entirely nothing to do’ with the content of any funeral conducted on their grounds, and that the role of planning the service was left ‘solely to the discretion of the friends of the deceased’. He also stressed the cemetery’s ‘duty to provide full rights to those buried there, regardless of belief’.

This was also reflected in the cemetery company’s attitude to funeral services. A full-time Independent chaplain, the Reverend James Rawson, was employed to lead funeral services and also act as the Registrar for the first 12 years of the cemetery. However, many people chose to have their services led by their own Baptist, Methodist or other Christian ministers, whilst others chose to have services led by friends and family, or even to have no official service at all, instead requesting that attendees spend time in silent prayer. In this way, the cemetery was a melting pot of different people coming together to inter, mourn and remember their loved ones in their own ways.

It is true, then, that at least in terms of denominations of Christianity, the Leeds General Cemetery did its best to be welcoming to all. However, as we’ll explore in our next blog in this series about the LGC, the open-to-all ethos did not stop a large degree of segregation because of class within the cemetery.

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