

Chris Johns, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the General Cemetery Company responds to the recent article by Johanna Holmes Telamon 93

A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

On behalf of the board of the GCC I would like to respond to the article by Dr Johanna Holmes in volume 93 of Telamon and in particular the question of the suggested bridge between the development and the Kensal Green Cemetery. Let me say straight away there is no pent-up demand for a bridge on our part, we recognise that it presents issues and concerns that need careful thought and management. However, we are philosophical and in a difficult climate, the cemetery is nearing full and when that moment arrives, maybe within ten years, most of the cemetery income will dry up. Therefore, new sources of income must be sought and encouraged if we are to preserve the estate.

Confronted by a development such as Canalside we need to ask ourselves what would our founding directors have done? Let's not forget that they were very entrepreneurial in building the cemetery and then welcoming traffic from the canal by enabling two gates into the cemetery from the canal bank. These gates brought funerals into the site and were in their day greatly valued as a second income stream. Would they have resisted a request for a bridge, I think not, more likely they would have embraced it wholeheartedly recognising as the current directors do the opportunity that such a structure presents.

I suspect that the proposal for a crematorium at Kensal Green in 1939 was unwelcome in some quarters and resisted by a few. Traditionalists resisted cremation at the outset, but it became not only acceptable but the preferred method of disposal. That said had not that nettle of advancing cremation been grasped at the time by the GCC the cemetery might already be closed and have joined the ranks of decaying and bankrupt cemeteries that litter our big cities. Of the so called "magnificent seven" only Kensal Green remains as a commercial operation, the others have no crematorium.

I can make a simple analogy, my great uncle a veteran of the First World War ran a garage selling and repairing Morris and Wolseley cars from shortly after the First World War and into the early 1970's. He was a patriotic sort of chap who with the collapse of the British motor industry balked at selling German and Japanese cars. However, as a businessman he knew that it was adjust and survive or go into liquidation.

The board are in a not dissimilar situation, we face massive costs in the restoration of the Anglican Chapel – confirmed now as north of 10m. The GCC is not sat on those funds and if the chapel is to be saved then they must come from external sources. The development on the canal does potentially offer two sources of funds, firstly a section 106 agreement and secondly a settlement for the access via a bridge. The bridge will offer access to green space and will also facilitate easy access to the Underground which in turn will help the reduction of pollution and carbon from increased vehicle activity. That it would need to be designed sympathetically is not in any doubt.

Of course, we are acutely aware of the security issues in opening a new access, but the truth is the cemetery has never been totally secure. No new access would be allowed without stringent safety precautions in place, and it is not envisaged that it would be accessible after dark. The increased foot fall is seen as a positive for the Anglican Chapel. Our vision is for a building able to function not only

as a funeral chapel but as several different things, art gallery, exhibition centre, performing arts and café/wake facility.

The Board looks forward to working with the Friends to address the challenges and to achieve the optimum outcomes for the cemetery in the years ahead.

Chris Johns

Chairman of the Directors