

Article

Robertson at the City: Portrait of a Cemetery Superintendent

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Abstract: Since the nineteenth century the management of burial grounds has been the function of the cemetery superintendent. Responsible as he or she is for maintenance of the site, grave preparation, burial procedures, administration and staffing, the superintendent's remit has gained complexity in the twentieth century through bureaucratization, legislation and more recently from 'customer focus'. The shifting preference towards cremation has further widened the scope of the work. Little, however, has been written about the occupation. Focusing on the career of John Robertson, superintendent of the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium between 1913 and 1936, this paper draws from his contributions to *The Undertakers' Journal* (TUJ), and in particular a series of articles concerning the design and management of cemeteries that forms the largest collection of literature on the subject published in the twentieth century. The paper also examines his involvement with the National Association of Cemetery Superintendents (NACS), an organization founded to support the occupation's quest for professional recognition. From a genealogical perspective this article underlines the importance of surveying a wide range of sources when conducting genealogical researching.

Keywords: cemetery management; cemetery superintendent; cemetery design; cremation; National Association of Cemetery (and Crematorium) Management (NACCS)

1. Introduction

Literature on burial has largely ignored the function of those responsible for managing cemeteries. When burials took place in urban churchyards they were overseen by a clerk or sexton. The emergence of private and public cemeteries in the nineteenth century, however, operating on a more intensive scale, demanded a level of supervision that led to the creation of a role that came to be described as superintendent. Working initially for proprietary cemeteries and then from the 1850s for burial boards, they were responsible for organizing grave preparation and burial procedures, administration, staffing and general maintenance of the burial ground. Despite the essential nature of their work, insights into which are exclusively contained in company or committee minutes, greater awareness of their function finally emerged in the early part of the twentieth century through the pages of *The Undertakers' Journal* (TUJ) later to become *The Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal* (TUFDJ). From the 1890s to 1921 this was the only periodical devoted to any matter appertaining to the disposal of the dead, and its existence was for two reasons instrumental in furthering the identity of cemeteries. First, TUJ published details of the founding and activities of the Professional Association of Superintendents, and second, it included a lengthy series of articles about cemetery operations, landscape and layout written by John Robertson, superintendent at the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium.

Much of the information used as the basis of this article is from sources that largely stand outside the records traditionally associated with genealogical research such as birth, marriage, death, and burial registers along with the census, as identified by Hey (2010) and others. As this article utilizes material from trade journals and official minutes, it seeks to underline the importance of constructing biography from a wide range of sources. Accounts of NACS meetings are particularly useful as they invariably give an

attendance list, which often included the place of employment. The value of such data is useful not only in respect of identifying personnel willing to further their knowledge and occupational status through support of the nascent association, but also for charting geographic mobility. The primarily career-focused nature of this profile is self-contained and unlike many genealogical writings not set in a hereditary context; as far as can be ascertained, Robertson was the only member of his family to work in a cemetery.

This article commences with a short biography of Robertson's career, followed by an assessment of his publications and his support for cremation along with his contribution to the founding and activities of the National Association of Cemetery Superintendents.

2. John Duncan Robertson

In the absence of an existing biographical profile for Robertson, this information has primarily been extracted from two sources: *TUJ* and cemetery committee minutes. Born in Invermoriston, Scotland on 28 December 1868, John Duncan Robertson completed a six-year apprenticeship in forestry and gardening at Edinburgh School of Forestry.¹ After commencing his career in Ramsgate, Kent, he moved to London to be a foreman at the Royal Park in Greenwich, working for four years under Angus Duncan Webster, a noted writer on horticulture and historian of the park. During this time Robertson was engaged as an instructor in horticulture at a school in Eltham. His diversion to cemeteries was around 1901 when he became foreman first at Plumstead Cemetery and then at Greenwich Cemetery. This was followed by eight years as superintendent of Hammersmith Cemetery before being appointed to the City of London in April 1913 at the age of forty-three. Robertson remained there until he retired on 30 June 1936.² During his twenty-three-year tenure he became a Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society. He was the founder, first member and first president of the National Association of Cemetery Superintendents (and also president 1924–1945; he was described as the 'Father' of the Association), and also served on East Ham Council.³ After retirement, and the death of his wife Isabel, Robertson toured around Africa, New Zealand and the Far East, contributing accounts of his travels to *TUJ*.⁴ He died on 8 March 1942, aged seventy-three, and following cremation at the City of London his ashes were buried in his wife's grave in the cemetery there.⁵ See Figure 1.



Figure 1. Robertson 1. John Duncan Robertson (1868–1942).

¹ Robertson, J.D. (1938) Horticulture in the Cemetery *TUJ*, October, p. 378.

² 'Presentation' (1936) *JNACCS*, No 4 November, vol. 2, p. 19.

³ See 'London News Items' (1920) *TUJ*, November, p. 344

⁴ 'Death of Mrs JD Robertson' (1933) *TUJ*, February, p. 60. Robertson, J.D. (1938) 'From the Cape to the Zambezi' *TUFDJ*, August, pp. 299–300 & Robertson, J.D. (1940) 'A Tour of New Zealand' *TUFDJ*, January, pp. 9–10 & Robertson, J.D. (1940) 'A Tour of the Far East and Back' *TUFDJ*, December, pp. 327–28.

⁵ 'Mr JD Robertson' (1942) *TUFDJ*, May, p. 102.

3. Robertson at the City of London Cemetery

Selected from 185 applicants, Robertson succeeded Alfred Bell, who had been superintendent for sixteen years. Of the twelve shortlisted, most had between three and sixteen years' experience of cemetery management, with many having progressed to superintendent from the gardener level. The appointment was clearly viewed as the cemetery's key position as applicants included those managing significant cemeteries in major cities and towns around the UK, such as Birmingham, York, Bath and Bristol, in addition to the London area. Many had considerably more experience than Robertson, but he was appointed, on a salary of £200 per annum (including a house, fuel, and light), which would rise to £300.⁶ The terms of his employment required him to become a Freeman of the City.

At the time the City of London Cemetery was carrying out around 3300 burials each year and fewer than fifty cremations. Although it now comprises 200 acres, when Robertson commenced work only 121 were in use, with the remaining part used for sports facilities. By 1913, 327,000 burials had taken place.⁷ The fifty members of staff were employed as carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths, groundsmen and gravediggers along with a very small administrative staff. Up to thirty extra casual workers were engaged during the winter months.⁸ Cemetery income just about equated with expenditure.⁹

In his first year Robertson identified areas where improvements could be made in the cemetery and compiled a sixteen-point plan including resurfacing the main entrance; attending to the trees; replanting flower beds and shrubberies; provision of seating in the crematorium chapel; preparing additional burial ground; and reorganizing the staff. After this initial activity, Robertson settled into the routine and occasional tasks including the annual inspection by the Committee; supervising the reburials of crypts from City churches; replacement of cremators due to lack of use; gradually replacing horses with motor vehicles; the fifteen-year attempt to get an organ in one of the chapels; and supervising around twenty exhumations a year. He remained friendly with Angus Webster at Greenwich, who included a photograph of an unusual specimen of tree found in the cemetery in his text entitled *London Trees* (Webster 1920). See Figure 2.



Figure 2. Robertson 2. The entrance to the City of London Cemetery. Robertson was superintendent and registrar from 1913 to 1936.

⁶ London Metropolitan Archive Col/CC/PBC/04, p. 25.

⁷ 'The City of London Cemetery and Crematorium' (1915) *TUJ*, August, pp. 223–26.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ This was the case for 1914. See Col/CC/PBC/01/02/07 23, February 1915.

4. Robertson and the National Association of Cemetery Superintendents

Shortly after Robertson was appointed to the City he was instrumental in the founding of what would become the National Association of Cemetery Superintendents (NACS). Initially called the United Kingdom Association of Cemetery Superintendents, by 1918 it had morphed into NACS. The inaugural meeting was held on 17 October 1913 and he was elected president.¹⁰ Twenty-five gathered for the second meeting in January 1914, while the Association's first congress in July was attended by sixty-two members.¹¹ In an interview with Robertson in 1915 he outlined the threefold objectives of NACS:

- a. To further the interests of cemetery superintendents and promote the efficiency of cemeteries in the United Kingdom
- b. To promote the knowledge of work appertaining to the management of cemeteries
- c. To provide facilities and foster social intercourse amongst members.¹²

NACS was the first stage in professionalizing the occupation. The formation of a collective organization, a code of ethics, education, and membership by qualification, along with regulation of practitioners, are some of the broad characteristics of professionalization. It is worth viewing this in a broader context, as other occupations within funeral service had embarked on a similar trajectory. From 1900, embalmers had been represented by the British Embalmers Society, out of which emerged the British Undertakers' Association (BUA) five years later. Robertson would have known one of the founders and national secretary of the BUA, James Hurry, who regularly visited the City of London Cemetery in a professional capacity.

Embracing superintendents as it did in both local government and the private sector, the name of the organization was important to avoid making it seem exclusive to the former. The early membership was largely London-centric and between founding and 1917, all meetings were held in London. Issues that NACS dealt with in its formative years were proposals to halt funerals on a Saturday afternoon; the exemption of staff for military service; and superintendents' salaries.¹³ Robertson's salary was indicative of the disparity between cemetery superintendents and other colleagues in local government, a situation perhaps indicating how the role was viewed by the public sector. Employed on £200 per annum (plus house and fuel), he received the smallest salary of colleague officers within his own authority:

Gas Meter Inspector £250

Chief Inspector of Weights and Measures £400

Inspector of Sewers £250

Chief of Cleansing and Watering £400¹⁴

NACS subsequently surveyed superintendents' remuneration and contacted the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) for assistance in setting a minimum salary, which NACS suggested should be £110 per annum but NALGO suggested should be £210. The extent to which these were recognized by authorities is unclear.

With education being an essential part of professionalization, it was Robertson who took the initiative, probably mindful of his comprehensive training and modest teaching experience. In the early years visits to cemeteries were the only way of enhancing knowledge and the annual congress always

¹⁰ 'Association of Cemetery Superintendents' (1913) *TUJ*, November, p. 303.

¹¹ 'Association of Cemetery Superintendents' (1914) *TUJ*, February, p. 51, 'The United Kingdom Association of Cemetery Superintendents' (1914) *TUJ*, May, p. 146 and *TUJ*, August, p. 213.

¹² 'Interview with Mr JD Robertson' (1915) *TUJ*, June, pp. 165–66.

¹³ 'The United Kingdom Association of Cemetery Superintendents. Annual Congress' (1916) *TUJ*, September, pp. 255–56. See also 'The National Association of Cemetery Superintendents' (1918) *TUJ*, July, p. 190.

¹⁴ Col/PBC/01/02/016. 25 November 1913.

involved a tour. Short papers were introduced at the second congress, with Robertson delivering one about the history of his cemetery.¹⁵ It was at the 1921 congress that he spoke of the need for the education of those supervising the burial of the dead and proposed that NACS should run classes, conduct an examination, and award a diploma. A syllabus should include botany, bookkeeping and plan making.¹⁶ A year later this was explored in conjunction with NALGO, then through a subcommittee. But progress was frustratingly slow, largely because the services of professional external educators were not engaged. A syllabus was only put in place in 1927 but was not progressed due to lack of finance and then adjourned followed by negotiations with NALGO to follow their pattern of preliminary and intermediate examinations.¹⁷ Further discussion in 1929 did not yield any progress and the syllabus was still being finalized in 1936 as Robertson was retiring.

5. Robertson and Cremation

A crematorium had been constructed in the City of London Cemetery in 1904 and was the eleventh to open in the UK. Robertson was an advocate of cremation, a factor perhaps influenced by his acquaintance with the Vicar of Greenwich, the Revd Brooke Lambert (1834–1901), a social reformer and early member of the Cremation Society of England.¹⁸ The preference for cremation was very modest; in Robertson's first year at the City there were twenty cremations and between 1904 and 1913 only 188 cremations took place. In 1936, the year of Robertson's retirement, the number of cremations had increased to 295.

During World War I he wrote to *TUJ* about the pressure cemeteries were under due to high death rates and a shortage of staff, and lamented that despite the promotion of cremation in some national newspapers, there was no change.¹⁹

He was the first cemetery superintendent to speak at a British Undertakers' Association (BUA) conference, and in his 1917 paper Robertson identified the need for a close working relationship with undertakers.²⁰ As a pragmatist, he recognized the importance of funeral directors in the promotion of cremation through advertising and recommendation. However, he acknowledged that cremation was likely to lead to a financial loss for funeral directors as lower-grade coffins would be used.²¹ Speaking on 'Cremation and Economics' at the 1924 Conference of Federation of Cremation Authorities, Robertson acknowledged that burial in a common grave was likely to continue as it was considerably less expensive than cremation.²² In a paper given two years later at the Federation of British Cremation Authorities conference he claimed that while municipal authorities were anxious to dispose of the dead by cremation, they did little to promote it. Disappointed at the low figures at his own crematorium, he even described it as 'more or less a white elephant.'²³

In 1934 he arranged for the crematorium to be photographed so funeral directors could display the photos on their premises, while his authority also published a leaflet entitled *Garden of Rest*.²⁴ He also supported advertising the crematorium in *TUJ* and in the local press; both strategies were adopted by other cremation authorities. His belief in cremation never faltered and in 1931 he declared:

¹⁵ 'United Kingdom Association of Cemetery Superintendents' (1916) *TUJ*, September, p. 254.

¹⁶ 'National Association of Cemetery Superintendents: Sixth Annual Congress' (1921) *TUJ*, August, p. 283.

¹⁷ 'National Association of Cemetery Superintendents: Council Meeting 21 January 1928' (1928) *TUJ*, February, p. 68.

¹⁸ Robertson, J.D. (1918) 'Cremation—A War-Time Consideration' *TUJ*, May, p. 132.

¹⁹ 'No One to Bury the Dead. Cremation for all' (1917) *TUJ*, January, pp. 25–26 and Robertson, J.D. (1918) 'Cremation—A War-Time Consideration' *TUJ*, May, p. 132.

²⁰ Robertson, J.D. (1917) 'The Relationship between Undertakers and Cemetery Superintendents' *TUJ*, July, pp. 189–90. He also contributed 'Undertakers and the Law of Burials' (1926) *BUA Monthly*, March, pp. 186–87.

²¹ Robertson, J.D. (1920) 'Cremation: its Advantages over Earth Burial' *TUJ*, May, pp. 145–46; Robertson, J.D. (1931) 'Cremation from the Cemetery Superintendent's Point of View' *TUJ*, August, p. 268.

²² Robertson, J.D. (1924) 'Cremation and Economics—Individual, Municipal and National' *TUJ*, September, pp. 319–20.

²³ 'Fifth Annual Conference of Cremation Authorities' (1926) *TUJ*, November, p. 362.

²⁴ See Superintendent's Day Book 28 April 1931, p. 91.

'... let me say that no modern cemetery is fully equipped unless it has a crematorium ... The modern cemetery, like the great departmental store which is fully equipped in all departments, should be able to offer to the public all the known legal forms of disposal, which of course includes cremation.'²⁵

To further encourage cremation Robertson was mindful of the need to provide facilities for depositing ashes and in 1928 proposed the creation of a garden of remembrance with concrete chambers in which urns could be placed.²⁶ A similar scheme had already been created at Hull, and again in the 1930s when Stoke Poges was created (Parsons 2005). In the event, three bays of the catacomb range were converted into a columbarium, containing niches for the deposit of urns. In a talk given to the West Ham Rotary Club entitled 'Crematoria: bright and cheerful' he said he believed that a well-planted garden of remembrance would help to encourage cremation.²⁷ It was 1933 before the National Association of Cemetery Superintendents added 'and Crematorium' to its title.²⁸

6. Robertson as a Writer on Cemetery Management

Robertson was the first twentieth-century writer on cemetery layout, horticulture, and management. As far as can be traced, not since John Claudius Loudon's 1843 text *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries; and on the Improvement of Churchyards* has any literature on the subject been published (Loudon 1843).

Robertson's writings appeared in *TUJ*. Founded in 1886, it was the only funeral-related periodical until the British Undertakers' Association launched their *BUA Monthly* in 1921. *TUJ* reported on the formation and progress of NACS until its own journal started in 1934. Entitled 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery', Robertson's series commenced in December 1916 and a total of nineteen articles appeared, with the last being in January 1920. (A full list is provided in Appendix A and other writings in Appendix B.) Returns to the subject were made in 1929 and 1931, while his final contribution was in 1938. In addition, there were five articles on cremation. A few originated as conference papers.²⁹ Robertson's series remains the largest collection of articles to have been published on the subject by one person. He intended to integrate them into a book, but this was never realized. See Figure 3.

The series is sequential. Starting with 'selecting a site' and 'preparing the plans' they move on to 'construction, enclosing and drainage', 'roads', 'lawns', 'planting', 'staff' and 'monuments', before finally reaching 'law, rules and regulations'. Some were in two parts, while 'planting' was in three, reflecting not only the importance of this subject, but also his area of expertise. Some directly reflect his experience at the City of London Cemetery; that on 'road construction' came only a few years after he organized the resurfacing of the main drives.

The articles contain advice based on best practice and experience. They were not academic in the sense of containing footnotes, but he does quote from religious texts, poetry and even the Greek historian Plutarch. Some also have historical information such as a remark about the first person to have drained land in Britain.

It is not known if Robertson was acquainted with Howard Weed's 1912 volume *Modern Park Cemeteries*, but there are distinct parallels between this text and his series. The titles of at least eleven chapters are either the same or very similar, as are the length of the contributions (Weed 1912).

²⁵ Robertson, J.D. (1931) 'Cremation from the Cemetery Superintendent's Point of View' *TUJ*, August, pp. 266–68. Robertson, J.D. (1931) 'Cremation from the Cemetery Superintendent's Point of View' *BUA Monthly*, October, pp. 93–94. See also 'National Association of Cemetery Superintendents Annual Congress (1923) *TUJ*, July, p. 256.

²⁶ Col/CC/PBC/01/01/032.

²⁷ Robertson, J.D. (1931) 'Crematoria: Bright and Cheerful' *TUJ*, November, p. 372.

²⁸ See 'National Association of Cemetery and Crematoria (sic) Superintendents' (1933) *TUJ*, May, p. 161.

²⁹ At the NACS conference in 1929 he gave 'The Modern Cemetery—Selection and Planning.' 'Fourteenth Annual Conference' (1929) *TUJ*, June, p. 193.



Figure 3. Robertson 3. A view towards the catacomb range in the City of London Cemetery taken around the time Roberson commenced his tenure as superintendent in 1913. The extensive planting has since been thinned out. All images from the author's collection.

There are six features to Robertson's 'ideal' and 'modern' cemetery. First, it was to be based on the park model. While identifying that cemeteries had parallels with public parks, he always cautioned against saying there were similarities. He noted:

'... although park-like schemes should be introduced, sight should not be lost of the fact that many features suitable to park planning may not always be in accord with cemetery requirements, but a combination of both would bring into being the most suitable for the cemetery; always bearing in mind the area of land to be treated, and its topographical features.'³⁰

Again, he noted the differences:

'In the preparation of the plans, the designer should visualize a park for, in the words of an authority of this subject, cemeteries in this country are becoming more attractive from an aesthetic point of view, while many of our parks are gradually given over more and more to sports of various forms which generally curtails space for floral display.'³¹

The hallmark of an ideal cemetery was good planting and in one article he commented that, 'The seasonal floral displays in many cases compare favorably with many of our public parks and gardens.'³² This leads into the second point, that planting should be coherent. Showy or what he termed 'gay displays' were to be avoided and should be replaced with

'... tasteful attractions ... to lure the visitor to a continual round of fresh discoveries that would in no way exhaust interest or appear improperly placed, and would reveal a combination of efforts in harmony with our best landscape traditions.'³³

In his article 'Preparing the Plans' Robertson said that cemeteries should become places of 'knowledge and information.'³⁴

³⁰ Robertson, J.D. (1931) 'Development of Cemeteries and Crematoria: Cemetery Plans' *TUJ*, April, p. 131.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Robertson, J.D. (1919) 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Planting' *TUJ*, March, p. 85.

³⁴ Robertson, J.D. (1917) 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Preparing the Plans, Continued' *TUJ*, April, pp. 98–99.

He returned to this in his penultimate article on ‘color’, where he reiterated that the ‘blaze’ of color seen in public parks should be avoided. He believed that white and differing shades of green, particularly where trees were concerned, should predominate.

Third, cemeteries were to avoid the ‘chess-board plan’ of straight lines and roads, such as the main avenue heading directly to the chapel. The roads should curve, just like the schemes that were proposed by Loudon and also adopted by Col Hayward, who was responsible for the layout of the City of London Cemetery (Lambert 2006). Fourth, planning should be in the hands of qualified landscape architects, whilst other external specialists should be engaged for other areas, such as ecclesiastical architects for designing cemetery buildings. Fifth, in respect of trees, he opined that the ‘... monotonous repetitions of ordinary tree, such as Lime, Oak and Elm, along with common shrubs such as Privet and Laurel’ have no place in the modern cemetery. Yews were similarly regarded. ‘Sharp foliage contrasts’ should be replaced with groupings and the last of three instalments on ‘plantings’ contained many suggestions. Rhododendrons were particularly recommended, a shrub found in abundance in the City of London Cemetery.

Sixth, he provided a person specification for the superintendent. He should be ‘... fully acquainted with the rules and regulations of the cemetery under his charge, a disciplinarian and good manager of men, expert in horticulture and park cemetery arboriculture, landscape, general surveying and plans, building materials and construction, finance, general office routine, and the burial laws.’³⁵ Such a comprehensive list reveals to external observers the wide-ranging duties and areas of expertise required of the superintendent.

Last, Robertson focused on memorialization and the future direction of cemetery layout. In his two-part article on ‘monuments’, Robertson identified a number of issues stemming from the legacy of the previous century, including memorial stability. He then went on to suggest considerations when planning new cemeteries: that memorials of a defined size and value should be placed together according to the landscape; that ugly structures should be prohibited; that earth mounds marking out graves should be removed; and that granite should replace the use of white marble. He also recommended the establishment of a fund contributed to by private grave-owners for the purpose of maintaining monuments.³⁶

Five years before Robertson commenced his series, *TUJ* reprinted an article from *The Field* that indicated the emerging style of American cemeteries, as already written about by Weed, where stone memorials and iron fencing around graves were being removed and the grounds extensively planted with shrubs and grass.³⁷ It is likely that Robertson would have agreed with these principles, but only to a point as the definition of a ‘modern’ cemetery found in his writings is one carefully planned by a landscape designer, with memorials grouped according to type and spaced to prevent monotony. He stopped short of saying that cemeteries should be restricted to one style of memorial.

It was the idea of the regulated grouping of memorials that heralded the start of what would become the lawn cemetery. Rugg attributes its introduction to the deterioration of nineteenth-century cemeteries, a rejection of the old and embracing the new, pragmatism, and the professionalization of cemetery management (Rugg 2006). Robertson’s writing would only just pre-date the adoption of the Imperial War Graves Commission uniform headstone design, set in rows surrounded by lawn. However, it would be 1935 before a municipal authority opened the first lawn cemetery in the UK, Leicester’s Saffron Hill (Ware 1932; Mawson 1935).

Although responsible for preparing additional land for common graves at the City, Robertson never designed a cemetery. Twice he suggested displaying a model cemetery at an exhibition, an idea

³⁵ Robertson, J.D. (1919) ‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Staff’ *TUJ*, November, p. 340.

³⁶ Robertson, J.D. (1917) ‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Preparing the Plans, Continued’ *TUJ*, April, pp. 98–99, and Robertson, J.D. (1919) ‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Monuments’ *TUJ*, June, pp. 175–77.

³⁷ ‘Cemeteries as Parks’ (1914) *TUJ*, March, p. 73.

inspired by those included at continental events. In the plan for the 1917 Industries of the Empire Exhibition (which did not take place), he outlined

‘The grounds to be laid out on the park cemetery principle (you know how much one sees of the chess-board cemetery in this country). The artistic relations between memorials and landscape; drainage and sanitation; models of modern and up-to-date chapels, crematoria, columbarium, and urn courts and model office administration.’³⁸

The second model would have been displayed at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition. Sadly, this was not progressed either.³⁹

Other than through his writings, the closest Robertson came to realizing his ideas about cemetery design was in 1933 when he gave expert evidence on behalf of the Borough of Wimbledon for their proposed Randall’s Park Cemetery at Leatherhead.⁴⁰ He gave members of the Council a tour of the City of London Cemetery and on three occasions visited their proposed site.⁴¹ Cross-examined during a House of Lords Select Committee enquiry in March 1933, Robertson displayed his knowledge of the layout of cemeteries around London and further afield. He said that the cemetery should be laid out in a ‘modern style’ but regrettably did not elaborate on this term as the focus of the questioning centered around an expenditure of £15,000 on drainage.⁴² When finally opened in 1961 it was a lawn cemetery.

7. Conclusions

Robertson’s four decades of cemetery management, his contribution towards the professionalization of the occupation and his writings on cemetery design provide a unique insight into a hitherto neglected subject. In ‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery’ Robertson was keen to foster an appreciation of the relationship between the key features of a cemetery, its memorials, operations and heritage, the latter being of vital importance to the genealogist. He was also mindful of the changing scope of the work, not only through the very modest shift towards cremation but also in terms of identifying and learning from problems concerning the management of burial grounds that superintendents had inherited from an earlier period. Coinciding with the founding and formative years of the NACS, these articles highlighted for the first time the importance of education for the superintendent. Although forgotten today, it is hoped that this article represents an appreciation of John Robertson’s legacy along with the fruitful nature of surveying a broad range of sources when researching into an individual’s life and achievements.

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Appendix ‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery’ by JD Robertson

‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery’ (1916) *TUJ*, December, p. 328.

‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Selecting a Site’ (1917) *TUJ*, January, pp. 12–13.

‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Preparing the Plans’ (1917) *TUJ*, February, pp. 42–43.

‘The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Preparing the plans, continued’ (1917) *TUJ*, March, pp. 70–71.

³⁸ ‘An Exhibition that may be’ (1915) *TUJ*, October, p. 265.

³⁹ ‘The Official Organ of the NACS’ (1923) *TUJ*, February, p. 59. This was not carried out due to lack of space.

⁴⁰ Col/CC/PBC/01/02/037, 24 January 1933. See also Superintendent’s Day Book, 24 January 1933, p. 101.

⁴¹ Wimbledon Borough Council: Minutes of the Council, 10 May 1933, para. 1088.

⁴² Minutes of Proceedings taken before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Wimbledon Corporation Bill, 24 March 1933, pp. 82–92.

- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Preparing the Plans, continued' (1917) *TUJ*, April, pp. 98–99.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Construction—Enclosing and Drainage' (1917) *TUJ*, May, pp. 126–27.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Construction—Enclosing and Drainage' (1917) *TUJ*, June, p. 162.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Road Construction' (1917) *TUJ*, October, p. 266.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Cemetery Lawns' (1918) *TUJ*, September, pp. 241–43.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Planting' (1919) *TUJ*, January, pp. 27–28.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Planting' (1919) *TUJ*, March, pp. 85–86.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Planting' (1919) *TUJ*, April, pp. 113–14.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Monuments' (1919) *TUJ*, May, pp. 145–47.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Monuments' (1919) *TUJ*, June, pp. 175–77.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Cemetery Buildings' (1919) *TUJ*, October, pp. 305–6.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Staff' (1919) *TUJ*, November, pp. 339–40.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Colour' (1919) *TUJ*, December, pp. 371–73.
- 'The Modern or Ideal Cemetery: Laws, Rules and Regulations' (1920) *TUJ*, January, pp. 27–29.

Appendix Other Articles by John Robertson

- 'The Relationship between Undertakers and Cemetery Superintendents' (1917) *TUJ*, July, pp. 189–90.
- 'Cremation—A War-Time Consideration' (1918) *TUJ*, May, p. 132.
- 'Cremation: its Advantages over Earth Burial' (1920) *TUJ*, April, pp. 129–30.
- 'Cremation: its Advantages over Earth Burial' (1920) *TUJ*, May, pp. 145–46.
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