



**REPORT TO: PORTCHESTER CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE –
9 DECEMBER 2019**

**REPORT BY: CLERK TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE
in consultation with
THE TREASURER
MANAGER AND REGISTRAR and
THE HORTICULTURAL CONSULTANT**

**PORTCHESTER CREMATORIUM GARDEN OF REMEMBRANCE –
GROUNDS CLEARANCE**

1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this report is to set out for consideration options for dealing with the recurring problems that arise from memorials and other items being placed in the grounds in contravention of the Crematorium Regulations, which are designed to preserve the simple beauty of the gardens.

2. Recommendations

- (1) That the long standing policy (to preserve the simple beauty of the gardens) against the provision of memorials and similar items in the crematorium grounds be re-affirmed, taking into account that this policy is stated on the form completed by families at the time of making application for cremation;**
- (2) That families be allowed to place temporarily one plastic vase supplied by the crematorium in the area where its family ashes have been interred to hold cut flowers, and that as and when flowers have finished blooming, staff will remove the flowers and place the vase into store for collection and re-use;**
- (3) That grounds clearances be undertaken at 3 monthly intervals mid-way between Christmas, Easter, Mothering Sunday and Father's Day, on dates to be settled by the Manager and Registrar;**
- (4) That items removed from the grounds be kept for a period of 6 months, after which they be disposed of if not claimed, and that the Crematorium Regulations be amended accordingly;**
- (5) That the arrangements described in paragraph 8.3.6 of the report be implemented for the storing of items removed;**
- (6) That the Manager and Registrar and the Property Manager consider seeking an alternative location for the storage facility;**

(7) That the Book of Remembrance continues to be promoted as the primary means of memorial, but officers investigate a proposal for an alternative means of memorial in more detail, for the Joint Committee to consider at a future meeting.

3. Background

3.1 The Joint Committee at the meeting on the 23 September 2019 was updated on the clearance of the grounds that had taken place earlier in September, and that as a result complaints had been received. One complaint was about the way in which the clearance had been undertaken and the way in which items had been stored to await collection.

3.2 The Joint Committee, whilst understanding why some families wish to put up a memorial or leave objects in the gardens, felt a balance has to be struck, given the reasons for the long standing policy that there should be no memorials. The Joint Committee therefore agreed there should be a report to the December meeting on options for addressing the problems arising from the unauthorised deposit of memorials, plaques and similar items.

4. Current Long Standing Policy

4.1 The Joint Committee has a long standing policy against the provision of memorials and similar items in the crematorium grounds, in order to preserve the simple beauty of the gardens. This policy has been reaffirmed over the years in the biennial Crematorium Development Plan, the most recent version of which was approved by the Joint Committee in March 2019.

4.2 This policy is stated clearly on the form completed by families at the time of making application for cremation. In practice the form is completed by a funeral director, taking instructions and information from the member of the family responsible for arranging the funeral, after which the family member is asked to confirm the details and sign the form. To reduce the possibility of families claiming they are unaware of the policy, funeral directors should be reminded of the need to draw this specific requirement to families at the time the form is completed.

4.3 Crematorium Regulations are displayed in public areas, and regulation 10 (relating to use of the grounds) includes a requirement that 'no person shall place on or dig or drive into the turf or cultivated ground, any vase, container, receptacle, metal, plastic or wooden stake or plaque, or drive any nail into any tree, or place artificial flowers or ornaments within the grounds'.

4.4 It is quite in order for families to lay cut flowers (out of their wrapping).

5. The Issues

5.1 Whilst ashes are interred in the garden of remembrance in an area requested by a family, specific 'plots' as such are not allocated for their exclusive use. It is not like a cemetery where a specific area for a burial is purchased.

5.2 The placing of memorials of whatever kind whilst, bringing perhaps comfort to the bereaved family, can in turn upset other families who have ashes interred in the same

area. From time to time complaints are received from families asking when such items are going to be removed, because they have become distressed upon finding them. Attention has then been drawn to the regulations that prohibit leaving memorials of whatever kind in the grounds.

5.3 Although the Joint Committee in December 2015 asked that grounds clearance be undertaken every 3 months, this has not always proved possible, with the grounds becoming overwhelmed with objects, which detracts from their overall appearance, and gives rise to complaints.

5.4 The Manager and Registrar and the staff are aware of the sensitivities removing items can cause. They are the front line for the sometimes hostile abuse that follows, but if the process is not gone through the gardens would become unmanageable and overwhelmed.

6. The Grounds Clearance Procedure

6.1 Before any clearance is undertaken notices are displayed prominently in the gardens a month before warning this will be taking place. Some families then choose to remove their personal tributes, often replacing them after the clearance has been completed, in contravention of the regulations.

6.2 When the clearance is undertaken, crematorium staff remove items and place them into plastic crates, marked with the areas from which they have been removed. Items removed have included stone plinths and plaques, photograph frames, plastic vases, windmills, and balloons. The crates are then placed on shelves in a storage room. Some items are too large or too heavy to be placed in the boxes, and are therefore placed at ground level in the room. Glass vases and glass ornaments left in the grounds are removed by staff as soon as they are seen because these present a particular hazard if they become broken.

6.3 Families wishing to retrieve items are invited to look through the boxes. It is accepted this is not an easy task because apart from knowing the particular area from which they have been removed, most items have no indication as to the family name. Whilst families are asked to treat items with respect when sorting through boxes, it would appear this does not always happen, with the result that items become misplaced or damaged.

6.4 Material that has been removed is kept for collection until the next clearance, at which time it is disposed of.

6.5 To the north of the crematorium is the privately owned Portchester Memorial Gardens. Funeral Directors have been asked to advise families that if a permanent memorial is desired it is more appropriate for ashes to be interred in that setting or a cemetery.

7. The Crematorium Gardens

7.1 Since its opening in 1958 the crematorium gardens have been extended to the size they are today, comprising much appreciated lawns, trees, shrubs and bulbs, and magnificent floral displays and a pond and rockery, all of which are maintained to the highest standard.

7.2 The opportunity was taken to have large attractive planter tubs provided along the building frontage to commemorate the 60th year of the Crematorium, which opened in September 1958.

7.3 The Crematorium has also received on a number of occasions the prestigious Gold Award in the annual South and South East Britain in Bloom Awards. The criteria for the award included not only the quality of the grounds but also the appearance of buildings together with environmental and related matters.

7.4 Brighstone Landscapes (the grounds maintenance contractor) has continued to carry out a very high standard of work, which regularly receives public acclaim.

8. Options for Consideration

8.1 Set out below are options for consideration, together with a commentary on each, highlighting the key advantages/disadvantages of each -

- (a) Abandon the current long standing 'no memorials' policy;
- (b) Continue to enforce the policy, & ensure clearance takes place at 3 monthly intervals, thereby reducing the amount of material to be removed at each clearance;
- (c) Relax the policy to allow only a very simple form of tribute to be placed;
- (d) Provide a Memorial wall or similar means for memorials upon which family names could be inscribed.

8.2 (a) Abandon the current long standing policy

8.2.1 To abandon the policy would allow the grounds to become very cluttered over a short period of time, and inevitably some form of clearance action would be needed. The clearance in September 2019 was the first for 12 months. During that period many objects had been left. Complaints had been received from families asking when a grounds clearance would be taking place. This in itself indicates that many people would be unhappy to see the gardens become over run with a wide range of personal tributes – as mentioned above anything from stone ornaments to windmills and balloons.

8.2.2 Allowing such items to remain also brings with it difficulties for the gardening staff who have responsibility for keeping the grounds neat and tidy so they can be enjoyed by all who visit. It also deprives other families of placing flowers in an area that has been taken over by objects.

8.2.3 Consideration must also be given to families who, fully aware of the crematorium's 'no memorials' policy, spelt out at the time of arranging a funeral, would not wish to see that policy changed.

8.2.4 For these reasons **the officers do not recommend** abandoning the 'no memorials' policy.

8.3 **(b) Continue to enforce the policy, & ensure clearance takes place at 3 monthly intervals, thereby reducing the amount of material to be removed at each clearance**

8.3.1 One complaint received highlighted the complainant's concern that items removed from the gardens had not been properly stored, referenced or looked after, giving rise to items being misplaced and hard to find, and in some instances had 'simply been piled in a corner'.

8.3.2 The room in which items have been stored is of sufficient size to accommodate items removed over a 3 month period, but clearly the longer the period between clearances the greater the number of items. Longer intervals in turn can lead families to believe that it is quite in order to place memorials 'as other people have done', which is a comment often made to staff, irrespective of the 'no memorials' signs that are displayed.

8.3.3 The staff appreciate the need for sensitivity in removing items from the grounds and placing them into store. At particular times of the year the gardens attract a high volume of visitors – for example at Christmas, Easter, Mothering Sunday and Father's Day, at which time the number of tributes increases dramatically.

8.3.4 The Officers consider and **RECOMMEND** that clearances at 3 monthly intervals would ensure that smaller quantities of memorials and tributes would need to be taken into store and hopefully would be found more easily by families when seeking to retrieve a removed item. These clearances would be timed to take place in periods mid-way between the dates mentioned in paragraph 8.3.3 above. These dates should be set annually and publicised. However, on occasion it might not always be possible to keep to the precise dates due to staff holidays, sickness or volume of services.

8.3.5 Although undertaking a clearance every 3 months may reduce the size of the task, it is suggested that items removed are kept for a period of 6 months, after which they are disposed of if not claimed. Wording to this effect would be included in the grounds clearance notice, and the Crematorium Regulations amended accordingly.

8.3.6 The officers' **also recommend** that the type of plastic boxes used to collate items should be of a more sturdy construction with improved labelling, and that where necessary transparent bags be used to hold some items – for example photo frames and small mementos.

8.3.7 Whilst the present room, close to the south chapel, continues to be available as a store, the officers **recommend** that consideration could be given to seeking to find an alternative location for this facility, possibly involving the construction of a new storage building. This would require careful assessment and a provisional estimate of cost before a final decision on a new facility is made.

8.4 **(c) Relax the policy to allow only a very simple form of tribute to be placed**

8.4.1 Coupled with the recommendations set out in Section 8.3, the officers have noted that a considerable number of flower vases were retrieved as part of the recent grounds clearance. Most of these vases were made of black plastic, some bearing personal family tributes. Whilst the regulations allow for the placing of floral tributes on the ground, there appears to have been a growing desire from families to place cut flowers in vases so that they stay in bloom for longer.

8.4.2 The officers **recommend** that families be allowed to place temporarily one plastic vase in the area where its family ashes have been interred to hold cut flowers, and that as and when the flowers have finished blooming staff will remove the flowers and place the vase into store for future collection and use.

8.4.3 To facilitate the arrangement set out above, it is suggested that the crematorium makes available green cone shaped vases, and makes clear these are the only vases acceptable for use in the gardens. Families could collect these from a racked area to be provided at the back of the crematorium close to a water tap. When the gardeners clear dead flowers each Friday, the vase too could be removed and replaced in the racking for reuse.

8.5 **(d) Provide a Memorial wall or similar means for memorials upon which family names could be inscribed.**

8.5.1 Some crematoria have created a focal point – such as a wall or similar structure or provision, within their grounds which families can use for a memorial plaque. The crematoria make a charge for such a facility. It does however encourage families to leave flowers at that point, although there is no guarantee that flowers or memorial tributes would not be left in the grounds where a family has chosen not to purchase a ‘space’ in the crematoria’s facility.

8.5.2 Historically at Portchester Crematorium, the Book of Remembrance has been the preferred way in which loved ones could be remembered with a personal tribute, for which a charge is made. Each day the Books of Remembrance are open at the anniversary date, and this has proven to be a popular facility, where families can leave flowers in the Book Room, in vases that have been provided by the crematorium, or in their own receptacles.

8.5.3 The Property Manager & the Manager and Registrar are currently working on a scheme that will refresh and improve the Book Room, and make available an increased area where flowers can be displayed.

8.5.4 There is, however, the opportunity to provide a different facility, for those families wishing for a permanent memorial that can be viewed daily, particularly given the size of the grounds. Providing a memorial wall, or similar, would require careful consideration about design, siting cost and maintenance. Consideration is currently being given to the future of the Area of Contemplation (the water fountain area) and it may be that members might wish this to be taken into account as part of the review of the area.

8.5.5 Alternatively, there are a number of alternative means for offering a different type of memorial. For example, other Crematoria (such as South Essex, South Tyneside and Altrincham) offer attractive memorial trees that allow families to have leaves inscribed for a fixed period, for an appropriate fee. These facilities can be indoors, or located outdoors within the grounds, require very limited maintenance and provide an alternative which is less intrusive than a built structure.

8.5.6 Finally, to the north of the crematorium is the privately owned Portchester Memorial Gardens, where funeral directors have been asked to advise families that this provides a means for ashes to be interred in that setting if a permanent memorial is desired, or a cemetery.

8.5.7 Officers **recommend** that members endorse the continued promotion of the Book of Remembrance as the primary means of memorial, and request officers to investigate a proposal for an alternative means of memorial in more detail, for the Joint Committee to consider.

9. Conclusion

9.1 The placing of memorials and other objects in the gardens is a sensitive and emotive issue, raising concerns from some families who wish to place a lasting tribute to a loved one and to other families who object to items being placed in an area where they too have a loved one's ashes. The long standing policy against the provision of memorials and other objects was first set at the time the crematorium opened in 1958, and is clearly stated on all cremation application forms. It is a policy designed to ensure primarily the long term simple beauty of the gardens for all who have occasion to visit the crematorium.

9.2 This report has set out to examine and consider within section 8 the options for dealing with the recurring problems and concerns that have been expressed, and members are asked to approve the recommendations set out in Section 2 of this report.

John Haskell
Clerk to the Joint Committee

Background List of Documents –
Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972: *None*

JH/me
20 November 2019