

Friends of Ilkley Cemetery – Looking Back

April 2026

1. Ilkley Cemetery:



In 1861 Ilkley had a population of 1043 people and just 185 houses.

Ben Rhydding Hydro opened in 1844 and was the first purpose-built hydro in England and offered the water treatment to visitors. The growing popularity for hydrotherapy treatments meant that many more spas wanted to open in the town for people wanting to experience the 'water cure', fresh air, pure water – so the arrival of the railway to Ilkley in 1865 made it much easier for visitors to get to Ilkley.

And by this time the Middelton family, the lords of the manor, fell on hard times and needed to raise cash - and they owned much of the land as well as the stone quarries in Ilkley. The first Middelton Land Sales started in 1867 and continued for much of the rest of the century – selling off plots of land for building houses and businesses to meet the needs of the growing numbers of residents and visitors.

By 1871 the town's population had more than doubled to 2511 and continued to grow rapidly as more land became available and houses were built.

By the mid-1870s the graveyard around All Saints Parish Church in the centre of town was almost full and a new Cemetery was urgently required to cope with the growing town population and a need for burial space for other denominations as more churches were also establishing themselves in the town.

The local council launched a competition for the design, building of new cemetery chapels, mortuary lodge, and laying out of the grounds, and the successful competitor, announced in September 1876, was Mr John Shaw, architect, Corn Exchange, Leeds.

The new Ilkley Cemetery which opened in 1878 is laid out with two chapels, and as was the fashion at that time, with wide walkways dividing the burial areas into consecrated and non-consecrated land with areas allocated for Anglicans, Catholics, and Non-Conformists. The walkways were lined with trees, mostly conifers and other evergreens but there were also a variety of deciduous trees along its boundaries and planted as memorial trees.

In 2028 we hope to be celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the opening of Ilkley Cemetery.

2. Memorial Avenue:

In 1968 there was a redevelopment of the area in the centre of Ilkley around the junction of Church Street, Brook Street, and Leeds Road which involved the demolition of the old Wheat Sheaf Hotel, and work to create a car park using part of the graveyard by All Saints Church to provide a turning area for funeral hearses.

The headstones were removed from all the graves in the All-Saints' Parish Church graveyard. The graves themselves were left intact, but the old headstones were moved to a corner of Ilkley Cemetery where they were stored in piles for what turned out to be some 43 years – by which time many of them were in a bad condition.



The Civic Society worked with the local Councils and other local organisations and supporters to secure agreement and funding to get some of the surviving stones laid out in an avenue within Ilkley Cemetery – a project which was finally achieved by 2011.



3. Friends of Ilkley Cemetery:

There would originally have been a team of gardeners to look after the Cemetery and the graves to keep it looking attractive. Some of you may remember back to when there were greenhouses on the plot next to Wychwood and gardeners used to plant out the graves with heathers and similar plants.

Times have changed - and whilst there is still some grass cutting during the spring and summer months around the graves – and some tree work to deal with fallen or dangerous branches – the responsibility for the care of the graves themselves now rests with the Grave Owners.

Unfortunately, the record of Grave Owners held by Bereavement Services is not up to date and many older graves no longer have a living Grave Owner or a Grave Owner that lives nearby to be able to tend to the grave. So, if a headstone falls over or a grave becomes overgrown with brambles and lost from view it is often difficult to track down who should sort it out.

Friends of Ilkley Cemetery originally used to meet monthly to attend to the Memorial Avenue, keeping the gravestones clear of weeds, leaves and moss, as well as litter picking and planting spring bulbs more widely in the Cemetery. But some of us could see that there was a much greater need for us to spend time tidying many of the graves across the Cemetery that had become overgrown and some which had become completely lost in the undergrowth. After

discussions with the Bereavement Service we got permission to attend other graves to tidy and cut back brambles and saplings. More recently we have also increased our attendance in the Cemetery from monthly to weekly and we aim to meet throughout the year.

Before and After



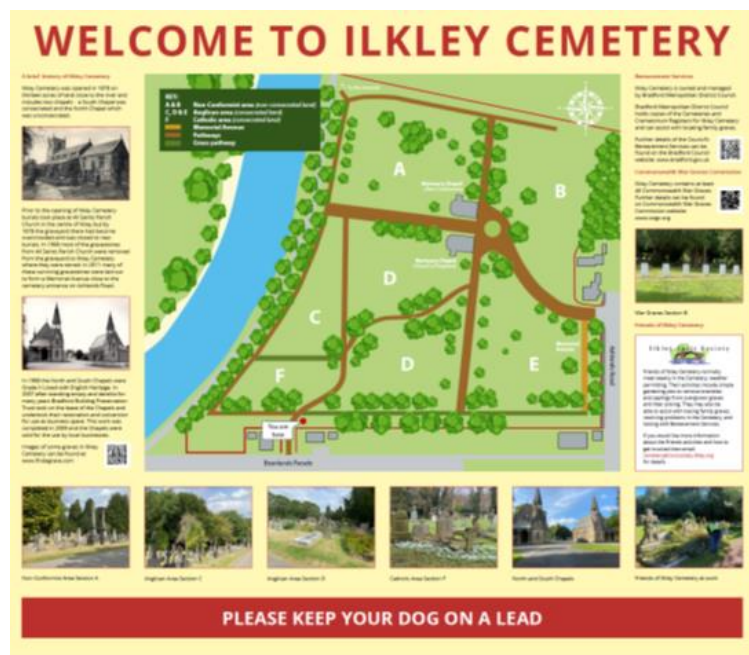
4. Memorial Avenue Noticeboard

A noticeboard providing information regarding the history of Ilkley Cemetery and the headstones which make up the Memorial Avenue was produced and erected in September 2021. Unfortunately, in October 2025 the Memorial Avenue Noticeboard was knocked off its feet during the felling of a nearby tree. It was repaired and restored to its original position in March 2026.



5. Beanlands Parade Noticeboard

A further noticeboard providing information about Ilkley Cemetery was produced and erected close to the Beanlands Parade entrance in in 2022.



6. Tree Trail

Sue and Neil Stevens have produced several guides to trees growing in various parts of Ilkley. The Friends of Ilkley Cemetery invited them to come and look at the trees in the Cemetery as we felt there were likely to be some old, unusual and important examples growing there given the age of the Cemetery. They kindly agreed to put together a tree trail for the Cemetery and pamphlet in July 2024 which the Friends of Ilkley Cemetery were happy to fund and make available to the public free of charge via the Visitor Information Centre and Grove Book Shop. Details can also be viewed online via the tree trails website <https://ilkleytrees.org.uk/treerails/>

In December 2022 we arranged for a Rowan tree to be planted at the turning circle close to the Chapels replacing a Monkey Puzzle tree which had failed to thrive there over many years.



7. Guided Walks

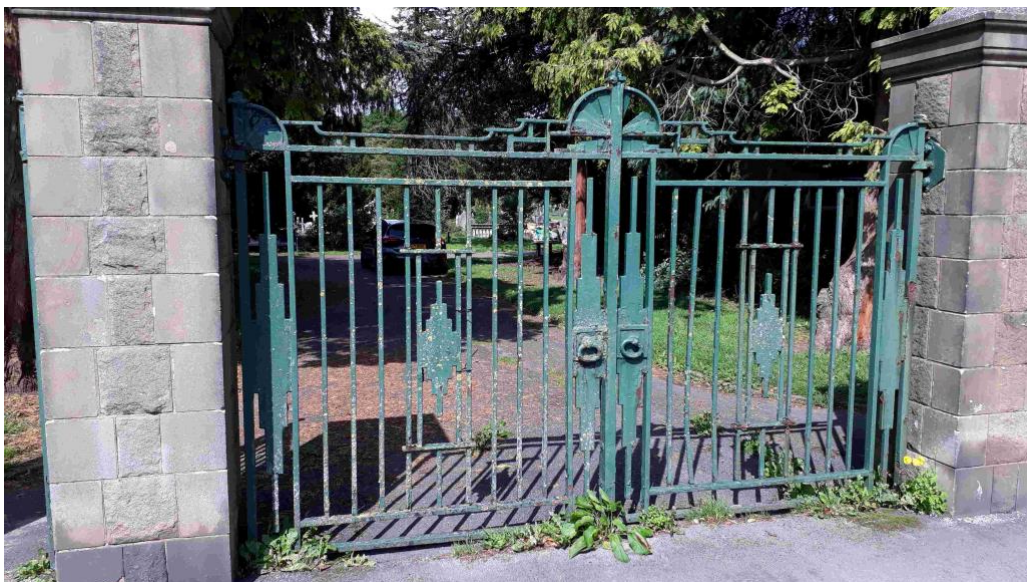
We have held some well attended guided walks in the Cemetery on a variety of themes, including most recently:

- In August 2023 a walk looking at the history of the Cemetery and some of the many interesting people remembered there.
- In August 2024 Denise Shillitoe introduced us to some of the owners, workers and patients of the Ben Rhydding Hydro who ended their days in the Cemetery.
- In September 2024 Sue Stevens led a walk around the Tree Trail of the Cemetery.
- In August 2025 Sue Stevens led a further walk around the Tree Trail of the Cemetery.
- The next walk is on 15th August 2026 when Denise Shillitoe will be leading a further guided walk in the Cemetery on the theme of the Hydros.

8. Beanlands Parade Entrance Gates

The Ilkley Parish Council paid for the gates at the Ashlands Road entrance to the Cemetery to be replaced in 2009.

We are not aware of any work having been undertaken on the Beanlands Parade Entrance Gates for many years. The paint is now peeling badly, a vehicle has dented some of the bars, and there are decorative pieces missing. Friends of Ilkley Cemetery have secured the agreement of Bradford Council Bereavement Services to approach local blacksmith, Tomas Bromley, to undertake repairs and restoration of the gates which will be funded from the Friends of Ilkley Cemetery restricted funds. The gates were removed from the site at the start of March 2026 and the work is expected to take six to eight weeks.



9. Liaison with Bradford Council Bereavement Services, Wardens, Police and Others

We liaise regularly with Bereavement Services to report any problems or issues. For example:

- Burst pipes and taps and blocked drains,
- Fallen branches or trees
- Wobbly headstones
- Access to Cemeteries and Crematorium Registers
- Complaints from members of the public

We have also had to liaise from time to time with local Wardens and Police when we had a spate of reports of thefts from graves, dog fouling, rubbish, and anti-social behaviour.

Amongst the graves in Ilkley Cemetery are 46 Commonwealth War Graves. These are inspected, cleaned and maintained by the CWGC. It is understood that the local Air Cadets will also be taking on some responsibility for this under the supervision of one of their officers who has received the necessary CWGC training.



10. Requests from the Public

We receive and try and help with requests from members of the public seeking advice with tracing relatives, friends and family graves via the website and in person when we are working in the Cemetery.

We are always happy to welcome new members to join Friends of Ilkley Cemetery. For further information regarding Friends of Ilkley Cemetery activities do go to the Ilkley Civic Society website: <https://civicsociety.ilkley.org/friends-of-ilkley-cemetery-activities.html>