

A Right Royal Christmas



At last, it came. It came in the week immediately before Christmas Day, 2010. It was sandwiched between greetings cards about the Nativity of the King of kings and a generous message from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (good news twice in one day!) And yes, it was a missive from The Queen's Most Excellent Majesty in Council at the Court at Buckingham Palace. Impressive!

A letter from the Court at Buckingham Palace, no less!!

In elegant language, the missive declared as follows:



In pursuance of the Order in Council made on 13th October 2010 these representations have been published and taken into consideration by a Committee of the Privy Council.

Accordingly, Her Majesty, in exercise of the powers conferred on Her by section 1 of the Burial Act 1853, is pleased, by and with the advice of Her Privy Council, to order that burials shall discontinue forthwith in the places listed above (one of which was the churchyard of my own parish, Holy Cross Church).

There are, I am pleased to say, creative exceptions to this decision. For example, we are still allowed to continue with the burial of cremated human remains in a dedicated area of the churchyard, and anyone with a title to be buried in a current grave may be so buried so long as any coffin is at least "one metre below the level of the surface of the ground adjoining the grave." No new graves may now be dug. In any case, there is no room for anymore.



The spires of Holy Cross New and Old Churches, photographed from the vantage point of Ravenor Park in Greenford.

It had been a long journey. With the frisson of a surprise and a wonderful Christmas present, suddenly, we arrived at our desired destination safe and sound. The net gain is that the practical and financial responsibility for maintenance of the churchyard will fall on the Local Authority, once they acknowledge that the process is completed. They will have received a copy of the Order in Council at the same time as I did, but I will write to the Chief Executive of our Borough and ask them to action the change in the next financial

year. The Parochial Church Council agreed to seek an Order in Council on 14th October, 2009, and on 13th November, 2009, I wrote to the Chief Executive of the Borough then advising him of our actions and intentions. Having given notice of our intentions, we hope that the Borough will now be fully co-operative about it. There were two periods of public consultation, one requiring a notice being published in the local newspaper.

Nobody objected.

This photograph shows part of an avenue of 39 Lime trees, planted in 1939 to mark the laying of the foundation stone of the New Church in that year. 70 years later, the trees are still flourishing and they need pollarding every two or so years. Pollarding these limes is a tough job but essential to their well-being and health.



We started the whole process in a state of indecision because we thought, hopefully not too full of pride, that our local volunteers would in fact keep the churchyard in a better condition than the Local Authority department, and especially any of their outsourced contractors. Given the latest news about major cuts to Local Authority budgets, perhaps 25%, our misgivings may seem more serious than ever! In the wider scheme of things, it is easy to see how churchyards might be pushed to the bottom of any priority list!

If things go badly wrong, I suppose our local volunteers can always put in a bid to take the contract and return to the same work at some time in the future, but this time, get paid for it! (Cloud-cuckoo land, I hear you say!)



The churchyard looking north towards the fine red-brick rectory in the background.

Now that the process is complete and irrevocable, I am not allowed second thoughts. However I do have qualms. It was good to feel that the Churchyard was our responsibility, and the public face of Holy Cross Church as people walked past the churches on the way to the station and other destinations. It was great to be praised for such a well-kept churchyard (although I personally did nothing to help the gardeners!) And yet, last year, when the Local Council made a blanket Tree Preservation Order on all trees in the churchyard, I felt instinctively that that was the end of the road. The churchyard

was no longer ours, it was under the control of faceless bureaucrats, people who might not even have ever visited the churchyard, or looked inside the church, or lived in or near the parish, but yet now had the last say about how it was to be cared for.

Despite my qualms, I know that this was the right decision and I am delighted that the process is complete.

The Churches looking in a westerly direction.



The other day, someone broke down our nice wooden boundary fence near the bus stop. Now, hand me the phone book please. I want to speak to the person at the Town Hall responsible for churchyards.

Neil Richardson