



# How I found the stories behind the headstones

Stuck at home during the lockdowns, former BBC news correspondent Valerie Jones discovered there were still stories to be found on her daily walks.

**Stuck at home, nowhere to go, and only one hour's exercise outside a day. Coldfall Wood was close at hand, but soon its charm began to pall. A tree was just a tree, a squirrel a squirrel. Until I found a gap in the fence.**

As I squeezed between the metal bars I entered a kind of lost world. A corner of the Islington and St Pancras cemetery, forgotten and neglected, the Victorian gravestones overgrown with weeds and ivy. The remnants of fine monuments poked above the greenery, family gravestones were starting to sink and tilt. It could have been the set for a Victorian gothic film.

As I wandered round, one gravestone caught my eye. In brown marble with a carved head in a medallion, it commemorated an actor who'd drowned in a terrible sea disaster. I knew nothing of this, but looked him up on the internet when I got home.

Edward William Elton had been a moderately well-known actor in his day. He'd worked with the noted Charles Macready company for a while and, through this, was known by Charles Dickens. After a month's engagement at a theatre in Edinburgh in 1843, he'd taken the paddle steamer, The Pegasus, from Leith to Hull on his journey home.

But the paddle steamer struck rocks near Holy Island. Of the 57 passengers and crew on board, only six survived. At a meeting to organise benefit theatre performances to raise

money for Elton's children, Charles Dickens took the chair. And he kept in touch with the children for several years.

Now I was hooked. What other gems were hidden in the undergrowth? On future walks I took a notebook and pencil with me, trying to spot something written on a gravestone or a carving that might suggest a story to be investigated.

Like the man who'd been a missionary in Madagascar for 33 years. His photo was on the internet. There was the son of a woodcutter, born in 1835, who became a singing teacher at the Stockwell orphanage; the biologist and mushroom expert, born in 1825, who wrote a book on hallucinogenic plants, which you can still buy; the feminist poet and essayist who'd known Karl Marx in her childhood.

On my walks I wrote down many names. Some of the searches led nowhere. And, aware that not everything on the internet is accurate, I followed the principles of my working life as a BBC national news correspondent: always find two independent sources. But I learnt a lot of the social history of Victorian and Edwardian times, of ordinary people who did well in their lives, of charities and trade guilds that filled the gap before the welfare state.

And I learnt something else. When it's our time to go, as it must be one day, have something written on your memorial stone that says who you are. Not just a loving mother or friend,

but what you did in your life. Then, in the future, someone like me will wander past and say, "That looks interesting, I'll see if I can find out more."

By the way, the gap in the

fence alongside Coldfall Wood has since been closed by the cemetery. Undaunted, I now use the main entrance on East Finchley High Road.



Stories to tell: Valerie Jones makes notes at a headstone in Islington and St Pancras Cemetery.

Photo Mike Coles

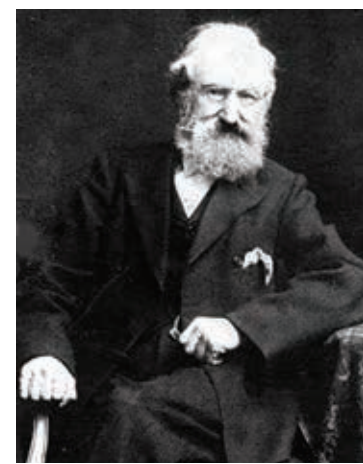
## Lives well lived

**Here are three of Valerie's favourite biographies discovered on her walks around Islington and St Pancras Cemetery.**

**Percival Green Spencer, 1864-1913**, was a pioneering balloonist and parachutist. The third generation of a balloonist family, he made more than a thousand ascents, over land and sea, and in the 1890s went on a world tour with his brother, demonstrating his skills in India, Singapore, Egypt and Japan. His special trick was to go up in a balloon and descend by parachute. But in Calcutta things went wrong. A crowd of a quarter of a million people had gathered to watch him, including the Viceroy of India and several Indian

carrying his obituary.

He actually died years later at his home in Highbury, at the comparatively young age of 48. A stone balloon used to stand on top of his tombstone. Does anyone know what happened to it?



Botanist: Mordecai Cubitt Cooke

**Mordecai Cubitt Cooke 1825-1914**, was a botanist and mycologist (expert in fungi). His tombstone has a carving of mushrooms on it. Born in Norfolk, he received little formal education but living in the countryside, he developed a love of nature. He eventually got a job as a natural history teacher at a school in Lambeth, and then as curator of the botany collection at the India Office. When that moved to Kew, he went too and ended his career at the Royal Botanic Gardens there.

He founded a society of Amateur Botanists and wrote many books and articles for adults and children, on such things as fungi, mildew and what to find in ponds. In his 70s he was given the Victoria medal of honour by the Royal Horticultural Society. One of his books, *The Seven Sisters of Sleep*, a survey of mind-altering

drugs, was said to have influenced Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* books, and is still available on the internet.

**Mathilde Blind, 1841 -1896** was a writer and a feminist. Born in Germany, she came to London with her family as political exiles. A rebellious child, she was expelled by her school, the Ladies Institute in St John's Wood, for her free thinking and barred from attending lectures at Zurich University, because she was a woman. She studied philosophy and political thinking herself, influenced by other exiled revolutionaries who frequented her parents' home, including Karl Marx.

She was a leading feminist and member of London's literary bohemia, writing a much debated poem, *The Ascent of Man*, as a feminist response to the Darwinian theory of evolution. She also wrote the first biography of the novelist George Eliot (Mary Ann



Feminist: Mathilde Blind

Evans). Ms Blind had a long standing friendship with the Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown, who is buried nearby.

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Aeronaut: The headstone of Percival Spencer

princes, when he lost control of the balloon and drifted 40 miles before landing in the middle of nowhere. By the time he got back to Calcutta, three days later, the newspapers, assuming he must have been killed, were