



# Heroic stories behind the headstones

By Jack Cheshier

*Islington and St Pancras Cemetery in East Finchley is huge. It is the largest in the UK in terms of burials with around one million people and, although technically two cemeteries combined, it is also the third largest in the country by land area at 190 acres.*

The cemetery was set up in 1854 to alleviate pressure on fit to bursting inner city burial grounds and over the years it has taken on the exhumations from other demolished or downsized churchyards.

There are lots of interesting people buried here including Henry Croft, the first 'pearly king', and pre-Raphaelite artist Ford Madox Brown. Three graves in particular caught my attention: those of three unsung heroes.

## 1. William French and the Highgate dog tragedy

On the sunny afternoon of 13 July 1896, William French, a 50-year-old stableman who lived just off Archway Road, set off with a couple of friends and his dog to Highgate Ponds. They started throwing sticks into the ponds for their dogs to fetch.

When William's dog had been in the water for a long time and appeared to be too exhausted to swim back to shore, William jumped into the pond, taking off his waistcoat

and hat but still wearing his heavy boots and trousers. "I can't see the poor little fellow drown," he was heard to say.

Before he could reach his dog it dipped under the water, reappeared further away and swam back to shore. William, however, was not so fortunate. He cried out: "I'm knocked!" and sank. A park constable was called for and it took roughly an hour to recover his body.

William was at first buried in a pauper's grave but, after the incident received a lot of press attention, money was raised to transfer him to a proper grave, with a suitable memorial. As the photo shows, the stone dog is still regularly adorned with colourful flowers and garlands.

The grave reads: "Sacred to the memory of William French, aged 50, who lost his life on July 13th 1896 while saving a dog from drowning in Highgate Ponds. This monument, erected in commemoration of his brave deed, was raised by public subscription, and was contributed to by all classes of lovers of dumb animals."



Faithful companion: A stone dog guards the headstone of William French.



Campaigner: Robert Morrell sought to open galleries on Sundays

## 2. Robert Morrell: The man who saved Sundays

Another curious grave I came across was that of Robert Morrell (1823-1912). What caught my eye was the lifelike and, to be frank, fairly creepy carved visage. The eyes seem to follow you...

There had been restrictions on Sunday activities for over a thousand years, but in the 17th century two schools of thought started to develop. One was that Sundays should be exclusively for religious observance and the other was that 'good works' could take place, including some recreational activities.

The rules were actually made stricter in 1780 with the Sunday Observance Act imposing fines on those who organised activities. In 1855 a bill was presented to Parliament to further restrict Sunday trading leading to three consecutive Sundays of demonstrations in Hyde Park. Karl Marx was present and thought the English revolution had begun!

One of the demonstrators was Robert Morrell. Robert was adamant that museums and notably the Crystal Palace, which had opened a few years earlier in 1851, should be open to the public on Sundays.

Clearly a man of action, he set up the National Sunday League to campaign for this.

Finally, in 1896, Parliament voted to open the national museums and galleries on Sunday afternoons. After years of campaigning, Robert Morrell had been vindicated.

## 3. Captain Alexander Bruce Kynoch: warhero

The third grave is a very moving one, that of Captain Alexander Bruce Kynoch (1896-1918). His headstone

states that he had fought at Gallipoli, Egypt and Macedonia and died in 1918 during the First World War. But what caught my eye was that his gravestone says he died in England and not in France or elsewhere.

On the night of 7 March 1918 Alexander, whose family came from North Finchley, took off in his plane from Stow Maries aerodrome in Maldon, Essex, to intercept a German bomber. A minute later his fellow pilot Captain Henry Clifford Stroud also took off from the same airfield.

In the darkness and in these very early days of aerial warfare, the two planes were not aware of each other's position. They collided and crashed into the fields at Dollymans Farm in Rochford, Essex. Both pilots were killed.

Alexander was just 22 years old. Very sadly he was not even due to fly that night but took over at the last moment from a colleague who was ill. If you ever visit Stow Maries aerodrome you will see a monument to the pilots who were killed in the First World War from the



Killed in action: Captain Alexander Kynoch, and his headstone

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airfield and Captain Kynoch's name is first on the list.

Islington and St Pancras Cemetery, High Road, N2, is open daily including weekends from 8.30am to 5pm. Jack Cheshier writes a London history blog and also runs regular guided group walking tours and private walking tours. Find out more at <https://livinglondonhistory.com>