

Dissenters Cemetery Howard Road, Plymstock – A possible site to establish a small Arboretum

Background

The Dissenters burial ground is located on the corner of Pleasure Hill Close and Howard Road Plymstock.

The site was purchased by trustees in 1852 for the purposes of interment of protestant dissenters. The last trustee passed away in 1958 and there is no record of any further trustees being appointed.

In 1980 solicitors acting for the descendant of the last trustee approached the city council suggesting that as no-one was accepting responsibility for the site that the council may wish to do so.

It is thought that 23 burials have taken place on the site between 1873 and 1912. It is not known how many graves this number represents as a number of burials have taken place in a number of graves.

In 1986 Chief Executive and Town Clerks dept reported to the Public Services Committee regarding the ownership of the land. It was resolved that:-

- The committee authorise the acquisition of the Dissenters burial ground by taking possession of the ground.
- Possession of the ground be established by padlocking the gates to the cemetery and placing a notice on the gate declaring the ground to be the property of the city council
- Costs of repairing the ground be met by capital programme 1987/88 and future maintenance costs be budgeted as a revenue item from 1987/88 and future years.

Preliminary investigation to establish whether all of these recommendations were implemented found that: -

- Possession of the ground was established by padlocking the gates to the cemetery and placing a notice on the gate declaring the ground to be the property of the city council.
- Essential repairs to the site and to one of the boundary walls were undertaken and maintenance of the site has been carried out by Bereavement Service since 1986

Maintenance Costs

The Bereavement Service has maintained the site since 1986. Maintenance is kept to a minimum required to meet the Council's obligations. The current estimated costs of maintenance are £2000 annually. The council are responsible for keeping the site in a safe condition and keeping its "walls and fences in good repair" (section 215 of the local government act 1972).

Maintenance of the walls etc has to be met from the existing revenue budget for upkeep of grounds.

Future use of the site as a cemetery

There is unlikely to be any demand for use of the site as a burial ground in the future, the last burial took place in 1912.

The site could be left as a public open space, or as was suggested in 1986 left as a natural habitat for wildlife and a wild flower meadow.

Further investigation is required to ascertain if the original trustees placed any restrictions on the use of the land.

Feasibility Study

The latest proposal that has been made via the Lord Mayors office is to investigate the possibility of establishing a small arboretum, similar to another privately owned site in Plympton St Maurice. This would require a feasibility study to:-

- Survey the site to ascertain the actual location of the graves on site in order to plant the trees in areas where the root systems would not affect the graves.
- Identify how many and what types of trees could be planted there and the cost involved
- Specify a maintenance schedule for the trees and re-specify the current maintenance schedule for the grounds and cost the additional work.
- Assess any other issues that may increase the Authorities costs.

A site inspection has been undertaken by Bereavement Service staff and a Tree Officer from Parks Services. In order to establish a small arboretum initial observations are that the site would require: -

- Improvements to the existing entrance or to establish a new entrance that would meet current Health & Safety requirements
- Careful planting of any trees as there is a power cable and telephone lines running across the eastern side of the site thus restricting the height of any trees that may be planted – this will limit any planting of large trees to the western end of the site.
- Clearance of some areas of existing shrubs and the felling of 2 trees

- Some landscaping work to ensure safe access to the grounds should the site be open at times to the public.

Changes to the use of this site have previously generated a public debate and wide public interest. Records appear to show promises were made at that time that the public would be consulted prior to any decisions on the future use of this site. The cost of this consultation would have to be funded.

The cost of the works required cannot be determined until the feasibility study is complete but this would include officer time in:-

- Research of title to the land and identify any covenants.
- Site survey
- Landscape design and tree specification.
- Procurement of the trees
- Planting of the trees
- Remediation of the site

The cost of procuring the trees is difficult to estimate until it is known how many could be planted. Specimen trees of a well established height would cost somewhere in the region of £150 - £200 per tree. The additional ongoing maintenance cost cannot be finalised but is estimated to be £1000 a year.

Financial Implications

The costs of the above can not be met from existing budgets, one possible source of funding could be the Area Committee environmental project fund.

Other Considerations

- Consideration needs to be given to the effect on the community if the site were to be made more accessible and attractive for public use. i.e. if seating area were to be provided and the grounds landscaped and maintained to a higher standard this may give encouragement to use by youths who could indulge in anti social behaviour in the evenings and at week ends.
- Increase in current maintenance costs
- The land has a future asset value to the council that may be reduced by the proposed use.

Dissenters Cemetery, Howard Road Plymstock

