



Trail

Last exit to Brookwood

Journey by train to
the City of the Dead...

Time: 4 hours

Distance: 1 mile at either end

Landscape: rural

Victorian London was a filthy place. It wasn't just the stinking River Thames, the festering open drains and the overcrowded slums. There were also too many corpses.

Parish churchyards weren't big enough to cope. Graves were regularly disturbed to make space for new coffins, bones were scattered or sold, fresh burials were placed in shallow pits with just a thin layer of soil. It was a gruesome danger to public health.

One of the most radical solutions was a Necropolis - a City of the Dead so vast it would never run out of space, serviced by its very own railway line out of London. Sounds bizarre - but it's all true.

Dare you take the trail to the end of the line?

Location:

Lambeth (London) and
Brookwood Cemetery (Surrey)

Start:

121 Westminster Bridge Road,
near Lambeth North station

Finish:

Brookwood Cemetery, Woking GU22 0QZ

Grid reference:

TQ 31054 79481

Keep an eye out for:

Amongst others, Brookwood is the final resting place of writer Rebecca West and painter John Singer Sargent

Directions



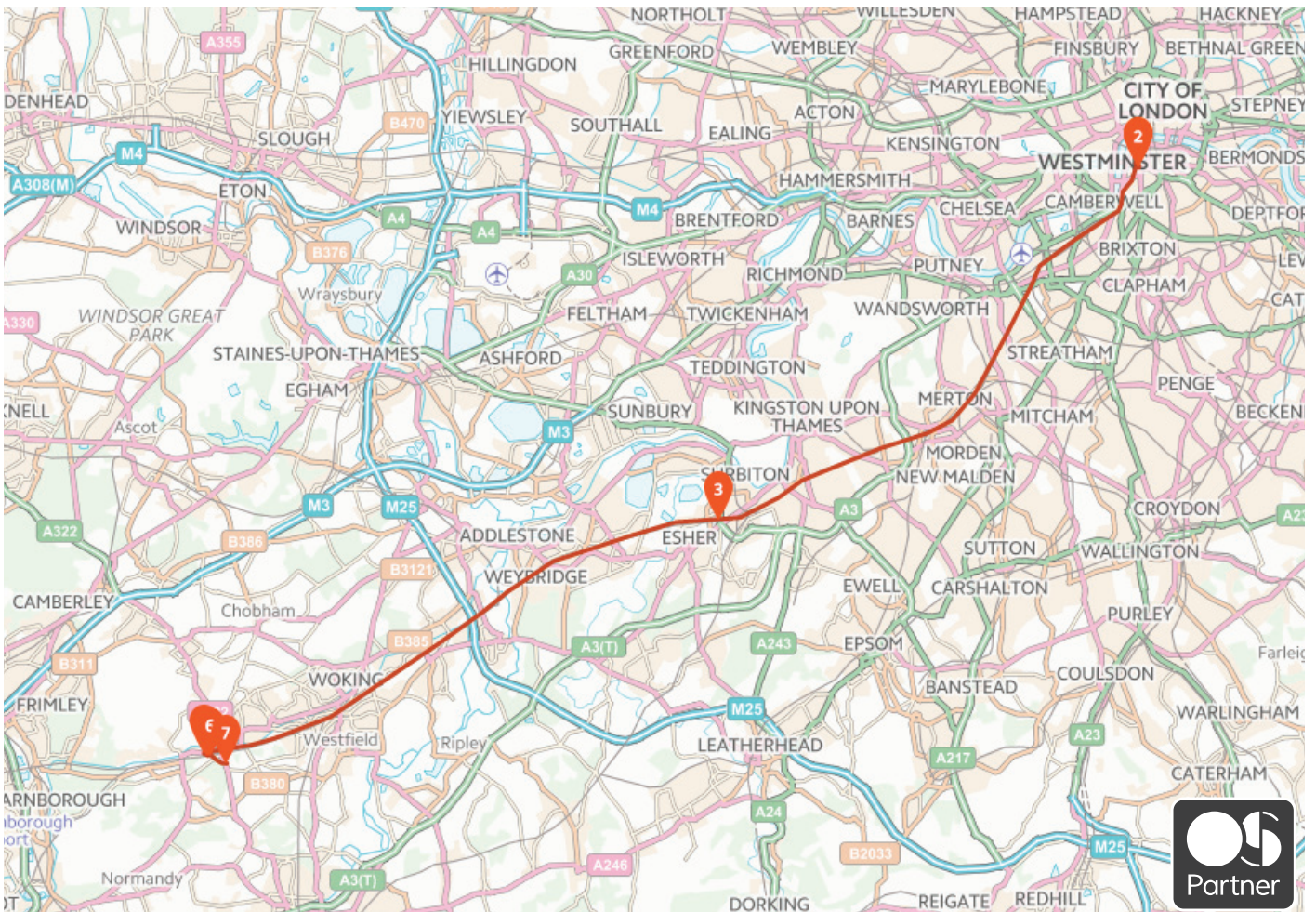
The trail begins in central London, near to Waterloo railway station. To complete it you will need to take a train from Waterloo to Brookwood in Surrey. Direct services take around 45 minutes or change at Woking (which reduces the journey time to 35 minutes).



Written by **Mary-Ann Ochota**,
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**Hidden Histories: A Spotter's Guide
to the British Landscape**

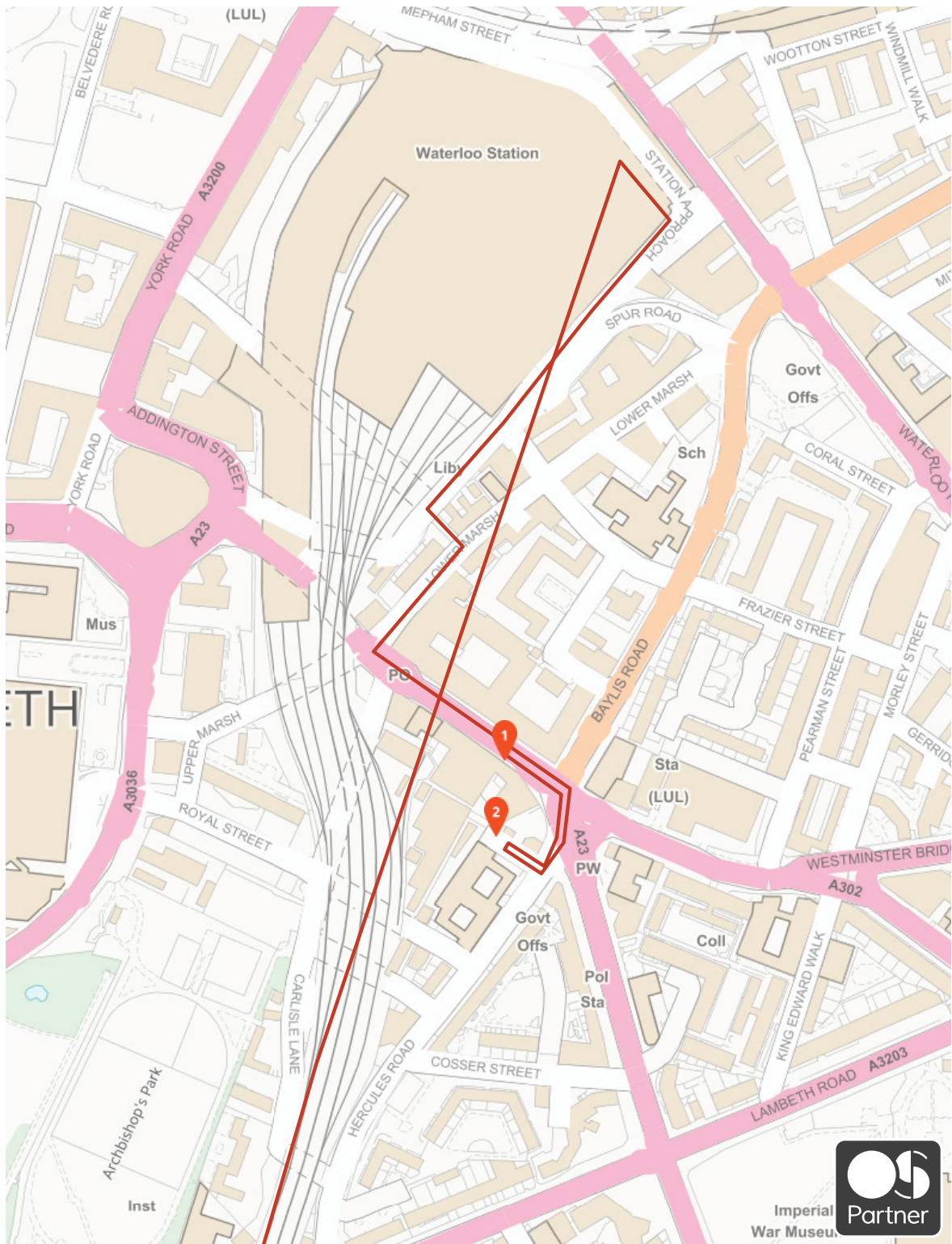


Route overview





London part of the route

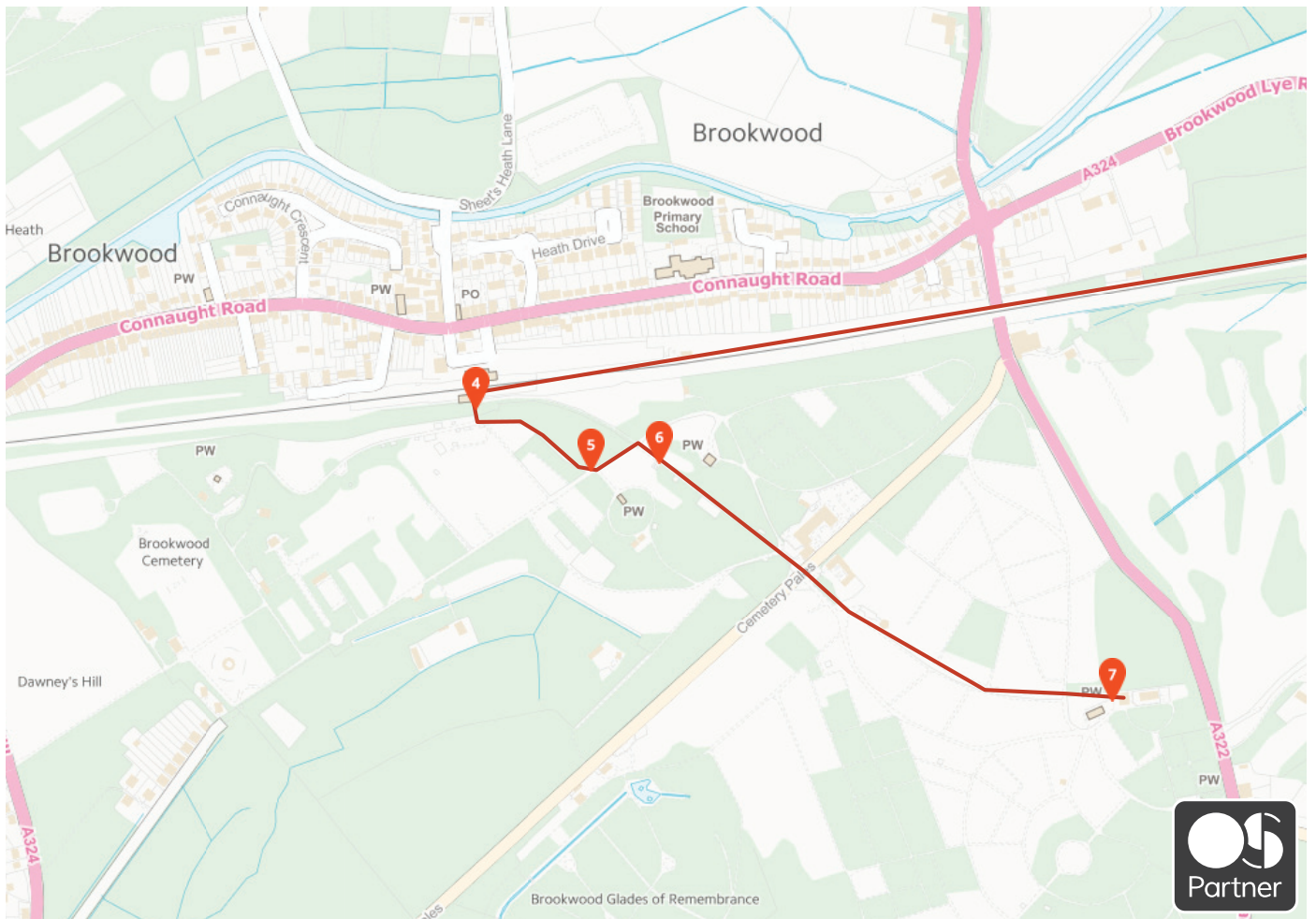


01 121 Westminster Bridge Road

02 Newnham Terrace



Surrey part of the route



- 04 Brookwood Cemetery branch line
- 05 Long Avenue, Brookwood Cemetery
- 06 Railway Avenue
- 07 St Edward the Martyr Monastery

01 121 Westminster Bridge Road

We start at a train station that most people don't even know exists. You can't go in to the station anymore, but the frontage of the building is still intact.

It's a grand building – red bricks, fine stonework and a large archway at street level. Peer in through the archway and you'll spot elegant Victorian tilework on the walls, and a pair of handsome lamps flanking a door to the left. Look up at the front of the building, and you'll see a plain band of stone just below the four pillars at first-floor height. Behind that new strip of stone are two words, now hidden from sight: LONDON NECROPOLIS.

You're standing in front of the grand solution to the 'corpse crisis'. This is the First Class entrance for mourners accessing the London Necropolis Railway.

This railway company was created exclusively to transport corpses (and grieving loved ones) out to a cemetery in Surrey large enough to give a decent burial to all of London's dead, without ever running out of space. More than 200,000 bodies began their journey to the 'largest and most beautiful' cemetery in Great Britain from this very spot.

Directions

Walk down Westminster Bridge Road towards Lambeth North underground station, turn right and right again into Hercules Road. Turn first right into a small dead-end lane called Newnham Terrace. Walk to the very end of the lane and look up.

02 Newnham Terrace

Down this unassuming dead-end street is an overlooked part of London's history...

Amongst the signage of modern businesses, look out for the large, white-painted, cast-iron pillars. They are supporting a level above your head. This upper level was the platform from which coffins and mourners were loaded on to the Necropolis Railway trains. The street level, where you're standing, was once home to waiting rooms for grieving families and railway storage yards.

The first funeral train ran on 13th November 1854, and continued to run for nearly 90 years until the station was bombed on 17th April 1941 during World War Two. After the war, the Necropolis Railway was never repaired, leaving this section stranded above the street, mostly forgotten.

Although the Necropolis Railway had its own station entrance (at 121 Westminster Bridge Road), the funeral trains would then join the regular London-Woking mainline at a junction just outside Waterloo station. That's where our journey continues.

Directions

Walk back up Westminster Bridge Road, cross the road at the pedestrian crossing just before the bridge. Head on to Lower Marsh in front of you, and take the first left up Leake Street. At the top of the ramp turn right on to Station Approach and head into Waterloo station.

Buy a ticket to Brookwood. The trains are frequent and the journey takes around 40 minutes.

03 On the train

Today's modern commuter trains run along the same line as the Necropolis trains did. Imagine what it might have been like for the groups of mourners who escorted their loved ones on their final journey. Brookwood is more than 25 miles (40 kilometres) from central London, and for the poorer people living in the large, sprawling, dirty metropolis of the 1800s, this may have been one of the few times they were able to head into the countryside.

Some people opposed the Necropolis railway scheme. They thought that the noise and speed of the railway was incompatible with a solemn funeral occasion and that it would be upsetting for upper-class mourners to share a train with paupers and less respectable folk heading out to bury their dead. There was also concern that piles of bodies loaded on trains might cause additional public health risks.

Advocates of the scheme thought that the railway journey might help mourners come to terms with the death of a loved one, and that they'd find solace in the green landscapes they passed through en route. Careful management of the trains would mean that different 'types' of people – both living and dead – would be kept appropriately separate. Victorian Britain was a very hierarchical society.

Directions

Get off the train at Brookwood, and take the exit that leads directly into the cemetery.

04 Brookwood Cemetery branch line

On the right of the footpath just outside the station building, see if you can spot a short stretch of railway track behind a mesh fence.

It commemorates the old Brookwood Cemetery branch line, which ran from the mainline station (where you just got off) to two stations within the cemetery. The funeral trains from Waterloo would first stop at Brookwood, then be shunted backwards to reach the cemetery stations – the North Station for Non-Conformists, the South Station for Anglicans.

Non-Conformists were those who did not belong to the established church including Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Quakers.

Directions

At the path junction just beyond the gates, turn left and follow the curving path. At the crossroads, look right along Long Avenue and take a moment to admire the line of Giant Sequoia trees.

05 Long Avenue, Brookwood Cemetery

"An area of ground so distant as to be beyond any possible future extension of the Capital...a last home and bed of rest where the ashes of the high and low, the mighty and the weak, the learned and the ignorant, the wicked and the good, the idle and the industrious, in one vast co-mingled heap may repose together."

- Sir Richard Broun, originator of the London Necropolis Railway

The plan was to make Brookwood feel like a place of perpetual life, so evergreen plants were selected, including the giant sequoia and redwood trees, rhododendron, azalea and magnolia. When it was first opened to the public in 1854, Brookwood was the largest cemetery in the world, with space to accommodate 5.8 million individual graves in a single layer, and ultimately upwards of 28 million people including family graves and pauper graves.

The original hopes for Brookwood as London's premier burial ground were never fully realised. Financial and political mismanagement meant the London Necropolis Company struggled from the beginning, and demand wasn't as high as forecast – investors hoped for 50,000 burials a year, yet only 235,000 people have been buried at Brookwood so far. Over the years, areas of the cemetery were neglected and have only recently been cleared and restored.

Do you think it gives the Necropolis a feel of rural serenity, or a spooky otherworldliness?

The Northern section of the cemetery was for Non-Conformist Christians as well as Jews, Catholics, Parsees and other specific groups of people. You'll find plots dedicated to actors (the cemetery was open on Sundays, which meant that actors could attend a funeral without missing a performance), the Oddfellows Friendly Society and the Parsee Zoroastrian burial ground.

Look out for Muslim burial areas, where cut flowers are forbidden and heaped earth is left uncovered above the grave (for many Muslims, erecting any structure over a grave is considered to be forbidden by God). Keep an eye out too for intricate Victorian and Edwardian Christian headstones depicting angels, Celtic patterned crosses and leaded lettering. Please bear in mind this is a place of reverence for many people, and move around the cemetery appropriately.

Directions

Turn left on to Long Avenue, then take the first right on to Railway Avenue. This path follows the route of the original branch train line that ran into the cemetery. Walk about 20 metres and stop at a large gold-domed mausoleum.

Opposite this tomb is a low brick wall, below the hedge. This is the surviving platform of the cemetery's North Station (the station building was demolished in the 1960s). Look carefully for the section where the wall dips slightly lower. This is where the hearse carriages would be positioned – the lower height of the platform made it easier for the coffins to be unloaded from the train.

Keep walking down Railway Avenue.

06 Grassy fields either side of Railway Avenue

As you walk through Brookwood, you'll notice how empty areas of it seem, compared to other cemeteries. This is due to two things – firstly, far fewer people were buried here than was initially planned, secondly, around two thirds of the burials at Brookwood are unmarked graves. These were 'Third Class' or pauper burials, paid for by the parishes of London. Each body was laid to rest in an individual grave, but the family were not entitled to erect any memorials.

If you look out across a seemingly empty part of the cemetery, but notice that it's quite uneven, it's likely that it has unmarked graves below, and is the resting place of thousands of poor Londoners. Look out too for patches of nettles – they grow on disturbed soil with high levels of decomposed organic material (like corpses).

Directions

Continue along Railway Avenue until you reach the public road Cemetery Pales. Cross carefully and continue into the other part of the cemetery. Take the left-hand path, heading south-east for around 500 metres, until you reach the St Edward Orthodox Monastery.

07 St Edward the Martyr Monastery

This is the church of St Edward the Martyr. St Edward was an Anglo-Saxon king of England who became king at the age of sixteen, but was murdered three years later. His remains were buried at Shaftesbury Abbey, Dorset in the eleventh century, and remained there until the 1930s when they were rediscovered during an archaeological dig. The site's owner insisted that his remains be recognised as holy relics, that a shrine be built, and the Saint's feast day celebrated. The Russian Orthodox Church honoured these terms, and the bones were enshrined here in 1984.

If the church door is locked, you can ring the bell and ask to visit. The walls are adorned with icons of saints, twinkling gold in the low light. You might be able to smell the incense that's burned during the daily services. This style of Christian worship is probably the most similar to the religious practices that would have been familiar to St Edward himself when he was alive. Nowadays, prayers in Bulgarian, Romanian, English, Greek, Ukrainian and Russian are incorporated into each service, reflecting the nationalities of the people who come here to worship.

Behind the church on the left-hand side are the remains of the South Station of the Necropolis Railway, which was originally used for Anglican burials and mourners. Please respect the request asking visitors not to go beyond the marked signs.

With modern cemeteries across Britain once again filling up, we face the challenge of what to do with the bodies. Councils still conduct 'public health funerals', the modern equivalent of a Parish Pauper's burial. Over 2,000 take place every year and this number is predicted to rise as more people die alone and in poverty.

Whilst Brookwood shines a light on Victorian attitudes to life, death and social class – it might also help us understand some of our contemporary attitudes too.

Directions

You've reached the end of the London Necropolis Trail, but do take time to explore other areas of Brookwood, including the Military Cemetery on the northern side. When you've finished exploring catch the train back to London, just like the mourners would have done, though hopefully in happier spirits!

 **Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**