

High Victorian Gothic

Gigi Williams FRPS and Robin Williams FRPS

We recently photographed Highgate Cemetery in London – a strange location you might think! In fact it is at once mysterious and macabre, but also a true slice of Victorian history. Many visit to find the graves of celebrities, but we visited because of its intrinsic dark beauty. We photographed in colour, monochrome and infrared.

In the early 1800s London had a population of just one million people. In the following decades the population increased rapidly and the number of deaths along with it. Inner city graveyards were full to capacity despite the practice of digging up previous occupants and stacking their bones on the edges of graveyards, or in crypts underneath the churches. London was facing a major public health crisis. Burial grounds were crammed in between shops, houses and taverns — wherever there was space. Quicklime was often thrown over the body to help speed decomposition, so that within a few months the grave could be used again.

Parliament passed legislation to create seven new cemeteries in the countryside around the capital. Amongst these was Highgate, opened in 1839. Its building and management were carried out by the London Cemetery Company. David Ramsey, renowned garden designer and landscape architect was commissioned to create state of the art gardens which would be characterised by stunning scenery, contemporary architecture and beautiful statuary. It was this combination that was to make Highgate the capital's principal cemetery. Everyone who was anybody wanted to be buried here (cremation was not popular in Britain until after the First World War).



All images by
Gigi Williams FRPS and Robin Williams FRPS



The Victorians were obsessed by everything Gothic. In a time of great change people (especially the well-to-do) felt a deep need for a return to an earlier, simpler time, to an established and recognisable order. Highgate's Neo-Gothic architecture was an expression of this.

Two chapels, one for the Church of England members and the other for 'Dissenters' (non-Church of England), were housed within one building, built in the Tudor Gothic style, topped with wooden turrets and a central bell tower. The archway beneath the bell-tower gives an imposing entry to the Cemetery.

Within twenty years Highgate became the capital's most fashionable cemetery. Occupants include Rossetti, George Elliot, Karl Marx, Michael Faraday and thousands of other famous Londoners. In 1854 the London Cemetery Company was so profitable that the cemetery was extended by a further twenty acres on the other side of its Swain's Lane site. This new East Cemetery was opened in 1856.

By the turn of the century, the desire for elaborate funerals was waning and families began to choose less ostentatious memorials. At the outbreak of the First World War, most of the cemetery's forty or so gardeners and groundsmen were called up to fight. Highgate Cemetery was passing into a long terminal decline. The London Cemetery Company was finally declared bankrupt in 1960. Throughout the 1960s the cemetery was officially closed but vandals, 'spiritualists' (and fashion photographers) entered the burial grounds which were by now totally overgrown.

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In 1975 The Friends of Highgate Cemetery was formed with the aim of conserving the cemetery. Work began on clearing the overgrown landscape and repairing some of the monuments to make the burial ground once again safely accessible to the public. Over seventy monuments have now been listed by English Heritage as Grade 1. Both sides of the cemetery have been re-opened for occasional burials – including that of George Michael, Douglas Adams and ex-KGB spy Alexander Litvinenko.



We can highly recommend a visit. The east side is open to all (this is where Karl Marx is buried) but the really interesting dilapidated Gothic side is open by pre-booked guided tour.

For more of our images from Highgate please see:



[https://www.robinwilliamsphotography.com/gothic graves](https://www.robinwilliamsphotography.com/gothic%20graves)
Also see <https://highgatecemetery.org/about/history>

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