

## The Everyday Heritage and Afterlives of Asylum Burial Grounds

Online workshop, Tuesday 27 October 2026 (Microsoft TEAMS and [Eventbrite sign-up](#))

Workshop Convenors: Alana Harris (King's College London) and Julie Rugg (University of York and Director of the Cemetery Research Group)



*The Stone Bench in the Asylum at Saint-Remy*, Vincent van Gogh, 1889

| 10:15-12:30 | SESSION 1                        | Researching Asylum Burial Grounds in the UK                                                    |
|-------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10:15-10:30 | Alana Harris & Julie Rugg        | Welcome and Introductory remarks                                                               |
| 10:30-11:00 | Claire Hilton                    | Exploring Asylum Cemeteries                                                                    |
| 11:00-11:30 | Sarah Dentith                    | Worcester Asylum Cemetery Burial Register                                                      |
| 11:30-12:00 | Colin Fenn                       | State of the Nation's Asylum Burial Grounds                                                    |
| 12:00-12:30 | Kevin McDonnell                  | Lessons from Friends of Horton Cemetery, Surrey                                                |
| 13:00-13:30 | SESSION 2                        | Sites as Testimony                                                                             |
| 13:00-13:30 | Sue Stewart                      | Littlemore Hospital, Oxford                                                                    |
| 13:30-14:00 | Katherine Dettwyler              | Delaware Hospital & New Castle County Almshouse                                                |
| 14:00-14:30 | Mindy Pitre & Madeleine Mant     | St. Lawrence County Poorhouse Cemetery in Canton, NY                                           |
| 14:30-15:00 | Maria Fiebrand & Hagen Markwardt | Asylum Burial Grounds in Saxony as Crime Scenes & Testimony to Nazi Murder of the Mentally Ill |

15:30-17:45

SESSION 3

Heritage

15:30-16:00

Cecilia Rodéhn

Psychiatric hospital and asylum cemeteries -  
– interred patients and cultural heritage

16:00-16:30

Hannah Walton

Haunted Ground: Asylum Burial Grounds, Working-Class  
Folklore and the Informal Archives of Institutional Death

16:30-17:00

Harriet Harriss

The Precarious Dead: Asylum Cemeteries and Climate  
Collapse

17:00-17:30

Alana Harris

Concluding discussion and next steps



*Weaving Together*, co-produced shroud for Mississippi State Asylum Burial Ground based on burial data and demographics (Emily Wicke, Asylum Hill Project, 2024)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swGIJOMClO>

## **Abstracts and Biographies**

### **(in presenter order)**

**Sarah Dentith**

#### **The Burial Register for Worcester County Pauper and Lunatic Asylum Cemetery (Powick Asylum)**

The County and City of Worcester joined together in 1852 to provide an asylum for pauper lunatics in response to the County Asylum Act. On 552 acres of land, the Powick Asylum was 5 miles from Worcester's Shire Hall. Its cemetery was consecrated in 1901 and used until 1947, and after the asylum closed in 1989 the cemetery became farmland.

This paper will examine the miraculously surviving Cemetery Burial Register for Powick Asylum. Rescued with the help of Frank Crompton who has researched the asylum for many years on behalf of the George Marshall Medical Museum, the register is now held at Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service. This unusually available document enables the tracing back of the life stories of individual patients in Worcestershire, especially in combination with patient case books, held both in the county archives and available digitally via [medicalmuseum.org](http://medicalmuseum.org).

Surviving annual reports will be used to reveal statistics of the number of 'discharged dead' patients at Powick Asylum buried at the Asylum Cemetery in comparison to the number claimed by families and buried elsewhere. Attitudes to the Asylum Cemetery will be considered with the use of local newspapers, recently digitised and made searchable online thanks to [newspapers.com](http://newspapers.com). Changes during the First World War will be discussed, based on a note in the Cemetery Burial Register to state patients began to be buried "two in a grave". A further note in the volume that some bodies were "transported to University of Birmingham", possibly for research, will also be examined.

The information from all of these documents, along with family research tools, will be used together to help reconstruct the stories of some of those who died at Powick Mental Hospital and were buried in the Powick Asylum Cemetery, as an opportunity to memorialise these individuals.

#### **Biography**

Sarah Dentith is an Archive Assistant at Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service. Her HLF bursary-funded research on patients at Powick Mental Hospital during the First World War, became her Masters independent study. She now delivers this research to groups as a volunteer for The George Marshall Medical Museum in Worcester.

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**Claire Hilton**

#### **'So you want to explore Asylum Cemeteries?'**

Asylums and mental hospitals were "total institutions", providing for patients' every need. Almost self-sufficient, their facilities included farms, light industry, and gas and sewage works. Many had an on-site cemetery, sometimes with a mortuary and chapel close by.

Visiting former asylum cemeteries can be profoundly moving, providing stimuli for further studies, such as about: individual patient and staff life stories, burials of religious minority group patients, and how we remember the dead today.

This talk, based on visiting 25-30 asylum cemeteries, focusses on the practicalities and emotions of finding and visiting them.

### **Biography**

Claire Hilton, formerly an NHS consultant psychiatrist, has a PhD in history (KCL, 2014). Currently she is honorary archivist at the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Her most recent monograph is [\*Petty Tyranny and Soulless Discipline? Patients, Policy and Practice in Public Mental Hospitals in England, 1918–1930\*](#) (UCL Press, open access, 2025).

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### **Colin Fenn**

#### **The state of the nation's Asylum Burial Grounds**

Over the last two centuries nearly 200 asylums or mental hospitals were in operation across the British Isles, until advances in medicine and ultimately the introduction of “care in the community” saw almost all of them close. Most hospitals were in remote locations in the countryside and many had their own on-site burial ground for patients (and sometimes residential staff) who died on the premises and who were not claimed by their families for private burial elsewhere.

Most mental hospitals were transferred to the NHS, which later sold them for redevelopment after closure. Likewise their burial grounds were closed, leaving a silent legacy in remote and forgotten fields across every county. A number of these cemeteries have found themselves recast as memorial gardens, while others have received unwelcome attention as potential “brownfield” sites ripe for profitable redevelopment. Some sites have found themselves in new benign ownership, while others have been abandoned, vandalised or deliberately cleared of all visible traces or allowed to become thickly overgrown. Community activists appear to be important if they are to survive more or less intact. A number of Friends groups have been created to manage and preserve them; others to contest developers’ plans, even taking the new owners to court where necessary.

This presentation will summarise my current research into the summary status of each and every site, including statistics and trends, and note some of the issues encountered. Collecting comprehensive status information for these sites has mostly taken the form of a desk study, augmented by surveys from local contacts in Friends groups around the country. It is hoped that that by gaining an overview of the scale and variety of situations that this information can be used to inform and influence future policy makers and highlight where community action is required.

### **Biography**

Colin Fenn BSc(Eng) MA is vice-chair of the National Federation of Cemetery Friends and a trustee at Caring for Gods Acre, charities focussed on the protection, development and appreciation of burial grounds. He is currently supporting several Friends’ campaigns to protect their local hospital burial sites from unwanted development.

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### **Kevin McDonnell**

#### **Lessons from Friends of Horton Cemetery, Surrey**

In various places in the UK, community projects staffed by volunteers are bringing public attention to some of these abandoned asylum burial grounds. One of these project approaches is to use archive, government and various other records and volunteers with genealogical skills of varying degrees to research, write and publish the stories of these HAVE NOTS casualties. The project I founded, a charity named “The Friends of Horton

Cemetery”, is researching around 9,000 mental health patients who came from the five County Asylums that functioned in Epsom for about 100 years.

This presentation outlines lessons from this project founded in 2020, and methods and infrastructure which could support a National County Asylum Cemetery Research Agenda

### **Biography**

Following a career in IT, Kevin McDonnell volunteered in a digitisation project with Sutton Archives. His interest in local history and tireless community work led to the establishment of the Friends of Horton Cemetery Charity in 2020 with its team of community researchers. They have published over 500 life stories to date and the project has been shortlisted for a ‘Find-My-Past ‘Everyday Heroes’ National Award’.

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### **Sue Stewart**

#### **The burial ground at Littlemore Hospital, Oxford**

Littlemore Hospital opened in 1846 as the Oxford City and County Asylum. The Grade II listed buildings were sold to developers in 1996. For a period at the end of World War I the facility was used to treat shell shock victims. The buildings were converted into private housing, first occupied in 2000 and now called St George’s Park. A neighbouring area of the former hospital grounds was sold to a housing association and also developed into housing.

Both sites included a portion of the hospital burial ground and in both cases the area was excluded from development. Local feeling opposed building on the site. Two plaques commemorate the approximately 1,750 patients interred there and the staff who cared for them. The last burial took place in 1953. No hospital staff or shell shock victims were buried there.

The facility, now Littlemore Mental Health Centre, relocated across the road. Many of the patients are in open wards and supported housing, and are to some extent seen as part of the community.

Now the Ellison Institute of Technology [eit.org](http://eit.org) has bought another part of the former hospital and has purchased a lease of the burial ground from St George’s Park. The graves are protected and archaeological surveys have recently been conducted. When work is complete the area will be restored as a memorial garden.

This talk will look at the long history of burial at Littlemore Hospital from the legislation of the 1840s and will examine current attitudes to the burial site and to the patients who now use the mental health centre.

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### **Katherine A. Dettwyler**

#### **Cemeteries of the Delaware State Hospital and the New Castle County Almshouse**

The Delaware State Hospital opened in 1884 and provided services to state residents who had a mental illness or other incapacitating condition that limited their ability to care for themselves, and whose family would or could not care for them. Patients included

people with depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, developmental disabilities, dementia, syphilis, epilepsy, and traumatic brain injuries. Unclaimed bodies from the hospital were buried under numbered granite markers in a cemetery behind the hospital. The last interment occurred in 1983, for a total of 778 burials. The cemetery was forgotten, neglected, and eventually overrun by vegetation. Since 2013, a team led by Dr. Faith Kuehn has cleared the cemetery, identified the dead, built a memorial wall, and entered information into [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com). Genealogical and archival research into some of the dead was included in a book about the hospital, “Remembering Farnhurst: Stories from the Delaware State Hospital, 1894-1920,” published in 2019.

The New Castle County Almshouse/Hospital also opened in 1884, with its own cemetery behind the building. The cemetery operated from 1885 to 1933 and also served as the “Potter’s Field” for New Castle County during those years. It received people who died at the almshouse as well as those who were executed, victims of murder and suicide, unidentified bodies, and many, many babies. People were buried under numbered granite markers, often more than one to a grave. The cemetery was forgotten and mostly covered by a freeway in the 1960s, leaving only 102 markers visible in the woods. Since 2019, over 3,000 individuals have been identified, and their information entered into [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com). Genealogical and archival research into their lives reveal fascinating insights into local history, and their stories will form the basis of another book, coming in 2027. Efforts are underway to obtain military headstones for the veterans.

### **Biography**

Katherine A. Dettwyler earned a Ph.D. in Anthropology (1985) from Indiana University, Bloomington. She is an expert on breastfeeding, weaning, and child health, and is best known for her book “Dancing Skeletons” about Mali, West Africa. In retirement, she has conducted extensive research on two asylum cemeteries in Delaware.

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### **Mindy C. Pitre and Madeleine Mant**

#### **From Admission to Burial: Preserving the Lives and Deaths of Residents of the St. Lawrence County Poorhouse Cemetery in Canton, NY**

Bone was discovered on the bank of the Grasse River at the St. Lawrence County Poorhouse Cemetery (c. 1869–1976) in Canton, New York. Although later determined to be non-human, the discovery initiated archaeological mitigation to avoid the erosion of graves by the river and reduce the risk of future exposure of human remains. The subsequent project involved academics, community partners, and various government agencies to map the cemetery using non-destructive geophysical techniques, determine the extent of any grave loss, and identify and relocate graves. While only 129 simple headstones remain, archaeological survey, rescue excavation, and historical documents revealed that over 621 individuals were buried in the cemetery. These people lived and worked in the St. Lawrence County Poorhouse; however, they were only a fraction of the population associated with the institution. Admissions records document almost 2500 “inmates” in the home between 1870 and 1920. These documents were transcribed and analysed revealing details concerning inmate sex, age, race, nationality, marital status, social habits, cause(s) of dependence, ability to labour, and probable destiny. Women were typically admitted at a younger age (18–30 years), usually due to a diagnosis of insanity or abandonment by their family. Men were more often admitted over the age of 30 years, usually as a result of an inability to work due to sickness, mobility

loss, and traumatic injuries. Together, the archaeological and archival data provide a biocultural perspective on the experiences of poorhouse residents and those buried in the cemetery and illuminate the effects of chronic marginalizing pressures in the 19th and 20th centuries in rural upstate NY.

**Biography:**

Mindy C. Pitre (St. Lawrence University), Madeleine Mant (University of Toronto Mississauga), and Maya Larrondo (University of Toronto Mississauga) are anthropologists whose collaborative research uses bioarchaeological and historical evidence to reconstruct the lived experiences of marginalized individuals and communities in the past.

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**Maria Fiebrandt and Hagen Markwardt**

**Asylum Burial Grounds in Saxony as Crime Scenes and Testimony to the Nazi Murders of the Mentally Ill**

Under National Socialism, psychiatric institutions increasingly became places of persecution and extermination for people with mental illnesses. Accordingly, the character of the institutional cemeteries also changed. After many decades of being forgotten, some of these cemeteries have become memorials and places of remembrance for the victims of the Nazi killings of the mentally ill, and they challenge us to engage critically with the history of psychiatry. The lecture aims to examine these functional transformations of institution cemeteries resulting from the murders of patients, using two examples from Saxony: Pirna-Sonnenstein and Großschweidnitz.

The first state-run psychiatric institution in the German Reich was established at Pirna-Sonnenstein in 1811. It was closed at the outbreak of the Second World War. From June 1940, parts of the complex housed one of the six killing centers used for the centrally organized murder of the sick—known as "Aktion T4"—which marked the first instance of systematic, industrial-scale mass murder committed by the National Socialists. Within 15 months, nearly 15,000 people were murdered there in a gas chamber, and their bodies were subsequently cremated in the crematorium. The urns were sent to various cemeteries. To conceal the murders, it was essential to create the appearance of a normal burial of the victims. In reality, some of the human ashes were dumped on the hillside behind the killing building. The remains of the victims still rest there today, and the site is now permanently protected as a war cemetery.

Even when construction began on the Großschweidnitz psychiatric hospital, which opened in 1902, a dedicated institutional cemetery with a mortuary was established. During the Nazi 'euthanasia' programme, more than 3,500 psychiatric patients murdered in Großschweidnitz were laid to rest there.

They had been murdered through drug overdoses, neglect and malnutrition because they were regarded as 'useless' and inferior. In this context, the cemetery also served to conceal the murders. It was intended to convey a sense of normality to relatives, for example through gravestones. These were produced until at least 1943. More than 130 have survived to this day by chance. They have been on display in a lapidarium since 2026. The cemetery grounds are now a war graves site and an important part of the Großschweidnitz Memorial.

## **Biographies**

Maria Fiebrandt, Dr. phil.

Historian, Studied at Dresden University of Technology, PhD thesis on the integration of ethnic German resettlers into the Nazi eugenics policy, 1939–1945; member of staff at the Federal Archives/Stasi Records Archive; since 2023 research assistant at the Großschweidnitz Memorial; Publications on Nazi population policy, Nazi 'euthanasia' in Germany and the occupied territories (Poland) and the GDR's policy on remembrance

Hagen Markwardt, M.A.

Historian, Studied at Dresden University of Technology; research assistant at Dresden University of Technology (Chair of Contemporary History); since 2014 research assistant at the Pirna-Sonnenstein Memorial; publications on psychiatry during the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era, especially Nazi 'euthanasia' and the Shoah

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## **Cecilia Rodéhn**

### **Psychiatric hospital and asylum cemeteries – interred patients and cultural heritage**

Since the late 1980s, the world has witnessed a process of deinstitutionalization and the closure of psychiatric hospitals, transforming them into post-asylum landscapes. During the urban development of these landscapes, the cultural heritage of psychiatric hospitals has been largely recognized and particularly so the cemeteries belonging to the former institution. The cemeteries, once located in secluded areas, are now situated in spaces functioning as residential areas, school campuses, business parks and hotels.

Many scholars argue that cemeteries are forgotten, that there is a lack of management and conservation of the sites, and that they are even destroyed, and, moreover, that the places are shaped by an absence of memory. In this talk I will discuss psychiatric hospital and asylum cemeteries from a transnational perspective and focus on how interred patients are considered as remembered and forgotten.

However, I will focus predominantly on 15 cemeteries situated at 14 former Swedish psychiatric hospital and asylums. I explore if, and how, patients at cemeteries are commemorated, how the interred are constructed into grievable subjects and what this positionality entails for the understanding of the cemetery as cultural heritage. I approach the cemeteries from the methodological position of Mad Studies, which entails foregrounding people experiencing mental ill-health or madness in the analysis of the cemeteries and exposing the workings of sanism as a norm in cultural heritage processes.

## **Biography**

Cecilia Rodéhn is an associate professor of Conservation (Uppsala University), holds a PhD in Museum Studies (University of KwaZulu-Natal) and works as a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Gender Research (Uppsala University). Her research interest focuses on cultural heritage processes during urban development of former psychiatric hospitals and the remembrance of patients. She is also interested in developing mad studies as a methodology for heritage studies.

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**Hannah Walton**

## **Haunted Ground: Asylum Burial Grounds, Working-Class Folklore and the Informal Archives of Institutional Death**

This paper examines asylum burial grounds in Britain and Ireland, with particular attention to England, as sites where working-class memory, folklore and institutional death converge. These burial grounds are often materially present but socially obscured: attached to institutions whose histories have been shaped by secrecy, stigma, silence and uneven archival record. I argue that they should be understood not only as neglected funerary landscapes, but as folklorised working-class heritage: places where supernatural narrative, oral memory and local unease preserve traces of institutional harm that official archives and authorised heritage discourses have often failed to hold (Smith, 2006; Rodéhn, 2022).

Taking an interdisciplinary approach across folklore studies, heritage studies, death studies and working-class history, the paper asks how asylum burial grounds become “haunted” in cultural memory. It does not treat haunting as spectacle. Instead, following critiques of psychiatric hospitals being transformed into ghost-tour entertainment (Mack and Reaume, 2021), it considers what ghost stories, local legends, place-names, family anecdotes and community rumours might reveal about the afterlives of poverty, confinement, social stigma and exclusion. Folklore is read here as an informal archive: a means through which communities transmit warning, social knowledge and unresolved memory when formal commemoration is absent or inadequate (Dégh, 2001; Carter, 2017).

The paper also considers the methodological value of combining oral history, genealogical research, burial records and community heritage practice to recover the names, relationships and social worlds of those buried in asylum grounds. In the context of the Law Commission’s Burial and Cremation: Final Report (2026), and renewed debate around the maintenance, reuse and development of disused cemeteries, these sites raise urgent ethical questions about who is protected in death, who is named, and whose stories are recognised within heritage policy. By reframing asylum burial grounds as sites of working-class folklore and vernacular memorialisation, the paper contributes to debates on memorialisation activism, inclusive heritage and the politics of remembering marginalised dead within England’s institutional landscapes.

### **Biography**

Hannah Walton is an emerging researcher working across folklore, cultural heritage and working-class history in England. Her interests centre on how working-class communities use supernatural rumour, oral history and informal storytelling to transmit memory, warning and social knowledge, with wider attention to haunted housing, classed landscapes and everyday informal archives.

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## **The Precarious Dead: Asylum Cemeteries and Climate Collapse**

**Dr. Harriet Harriss**

This presentation examines what happens when burial grounds already subject to historical erasure become vulnerable to environmental disappearance. It starts from a gap in current research: while the afterlives, recovery and memorialisation of Britain’s

asylum burial grounds are receiving renewed attention, their exposure to climate collapse remains largely unexamined.

The presentation offers an exploratory methodology for mapping British asylum burial grounds against contemporary and projected flood, coastal-change and environmental-risk data. Taking St Audry's—the former Suffolk County Asylum—as a pilot study, it brings historic maps and burial records into conversation with climate-risk mapping. Rather than presuming these sites to be endangered, the research asks which are becoming vulnerable, how that vulnerability might be measured, and what climate projections reveal about the future of burial landscapes conceived around an assumption of permanence.

I place this emerging atlas in conversation with my ongoing research into Hart Island, New York City's public burial ground, home to a former women's asylum, where more than 1—million people have been interred. Its island geography makes environmental precarity particularly visible, but also raises a broader spatial question shared with the British sites: what happens when landscapes designated to contain and separate the dead themselves become unstable?

Bringing these geographies together allows climate collapse to be understood not simply as an external threat to heritage, but as something that exposes the temporal limits of burial itself. Cemeteries promise a particular relationship between body, ground and duration; rising water, erosion and increasingly volatile landscapes unsettle that promise. For asylum burial grounds, environmental precarity also compounds an older history of institutional erasure, introducing the possibility that those already rendered peripheral or invisible might now disappear materially. Mapping climate vulnerability therefore becomes a means of anticipating loss and asking what forms of responsibility emerge when the ground can no longer be assumed to hold: what requires intervention, documentation or remembrance, and ultimately what—and who—is at risk of being lost again.

### **Biography**

[Dr Harriet Harriss](#) is an architect; an MS Historic Preservation Professor at Pratt Institute New York, and a qualified Death Doula. Her research examines architecture through questions of death, dying, ecological and social justice. She is co-editor of a forthcoming book entitled *Death & Dying Architectures* and also teaches an award-winning all-institute, interdisciplinary graduate class on the same topic.