

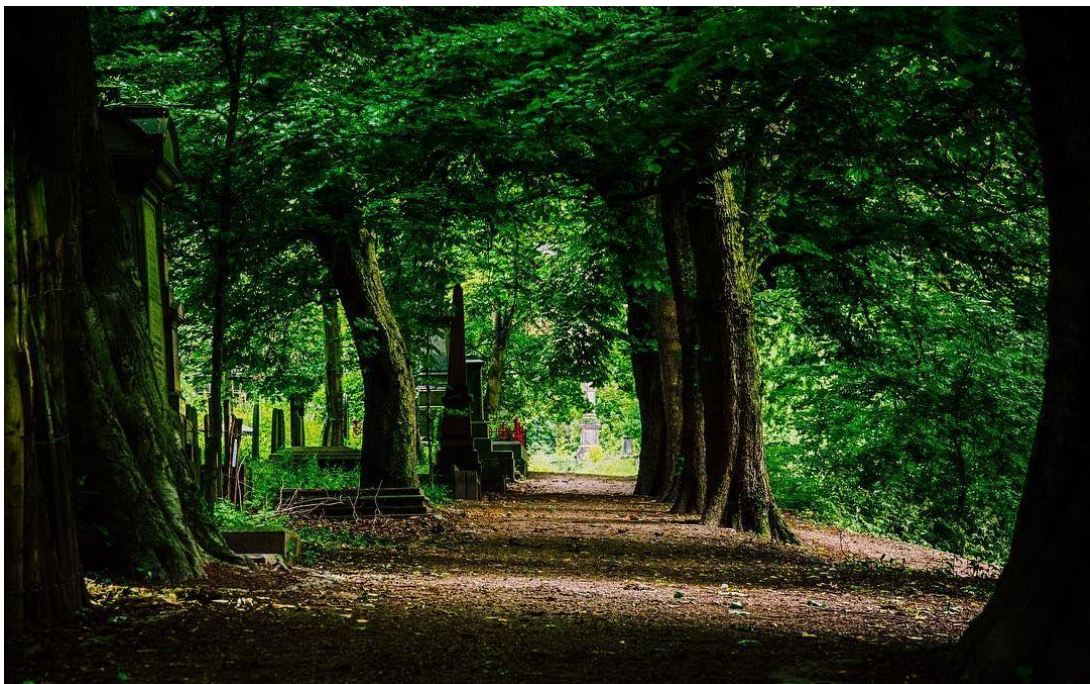


Sheffield
General
Cemetery
Trust

The use of holly by Robert Marnock at Sheffield General Cemetery: its beauty and symbolism

The landscape at Sheffield General Cemetery was designed as a garden cemetery by Robert Marnock, who had previously won a competition to design the Botanical Gardens. Robert Marnock (1800–1889) was one of England's most outstanding horticulturalists and an advocate of the fashionable and innovative gardenesque style conceived by John Claudius Loudon (1783–1843). A key feature of the gardenesque style was to display the beauty of trees, shrubs and other plants individually, positioned in such a way that their form was accentuated.

Many fine tree specimens were planted in the cemetery at the time of its conception and in the years following. The striking weeping ash which frame the Samuel Worth Chapel, the many lime trees, and the exotically beautiful oriental planes, are all a feature of his planting. The location of each tree being very carefully selected. The Cemetery's weeping ash are showing signs of ash dieback.



View along Sandford Walk *Source: SGCT*

Extracts from the Cemetery Company Minutes tell us something of the development and implementation of the planting of the Cemetery grounds from its earliest years:

3 FEBRUARY 1837

'Mr Marnock to be requested to fence the Lime Trees on the Entrance Road, with a rough paling around each tree.'

28 AUGUST 1837

'Thanks of the Board be presented to Mr Robert Marnock for his services in inspecting the laying out and planting of the Cemetery, and that he be requested to accept a donation of £5 as an acknowledgement thereof.'

Robert Marnock's design

Robert Marnock's design for the Cemetery was intended to mature with time and as with many of the great garden designers he would never live to see the full maturity of the trees he selected. But even in the early days the landscape design was considered exceptional.

From the Report of the Directors of the Cemetery Company 1846:

'The Grounds, it is almost needless to remark, increase annually in their attractive features, as if art and nature were vying with each other for ascendancy.'

Marnock admired evergreens for their aesthetic value and used them extensively in his designs. Today Sheffield General Cemetery has many fine mature hollies. The Cemetery Company Minutes mentions several investments in planting in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The first of these investments in planting was by Fisher Holmes and Company who later became Fisher Son & Sibray also known as the Handsworth Nursery. This company were highly regarded nurserymen based in Handsworth and were paid to improve the grounds in 1935. Fisher Son & Sibray were particularly noted for their hollies. 'Wilsonii', and 'Hendersonii' are two varieties raised at the Handsworth Nursery. The Cemetery Company minutes gives us some insight into dates when planting was undertaken but any planting records or purchase orders have long since disappeared.

4 FEBRUARY 1850

'As much of the New Cemetery Ground as lies above the middle walk be planted and laid out according to the plan submitted by Mr Marnock.'

28 FEBRUARY 1850

'Tenders from Fisher Godwin and from Fisher Holmes and Company for the supply of shrubs and planting. Former for £25 and containing number of each kind; latter £40 and unspecified.'

14 MARCH 1850

'Mr Edwin Unwin reported that Fisher Holmes and Company had been engaged to plant 1,851 shrubs as per list for the amount of their tender £40. And that Fisher Goodwin proposed to plant the same number for £38 10s. Whereupon it was resolved that Mr Law, the Curator of the Botanical Gardens, be requested to give his opinion on the planting of the grounds and be paid one guinea for his advice. Ed (Mr John Law succeeded Robert Marnock as the curator of the Botanical Gardens.)'

2 NOVEMBER 1866

'Resolved that Mr Booth get a few plants and evergreens for the grounds.'

1 SEPTEMBER 1935

Resolved that estimate (£79) of Fisher Son & Sibray for improving the layout of the grounds be adopted (for the centenary).'

It is believed that many of the mature hollies at Sheffield General Cemetery originate from the 1935 planting as they are estimated to be around 100 years old. But it is possible that some were planted earlier.'

The Sheffield Botanical Gardens historical records also record hollies purchased from Fisher Son and Sibray.

'To the right is a fine holly, Ilex x altaclerensis 'Balearica'. This is one of many scattered around the Gardens. Between the 18th and middle of the 20th century there was a prestigious nursery, Fisher, Son & Sibray at Handsworth, Sheffield. At its height it employed up to 200 men and boys on 150 acres. It closed in 1960 but it leaves a great legacy of the hollies in Sheffield Botanical Gardens and also the Holly Walk at Kew.'

The smaller hollies

Some of our smaller hollies were planted much more recently, including the Ilex aquifolium Marnockii named after Robert Marnock. These trees are long away from maturity but will be admired in years to come.

Ilex or holly is a genus of over 570 species of flowering plants in the family *Aquifoliaceae*. Holly is a pioneer species meaning it will be one of the first tree species to grow in newly cleared areas. We have a lot of holly in the Cemetery that will have grown in this way, but also many that were planted at entrances, path junctions and on the curve of a path which would indicate they were planted in the gardenesque style of Marnock's original plan.

'Weeping' forms of trees, such as holly and ash, symbolised mourning and loss for the Victorians. This is the reason Sheffield General Cemetery has so many beautiful weeping trees including two mature female weeping holly. One of these 'weeps' over the grave of Samuel Worth's grave who designed the Nonconformist Chapel. We do not know if this position was deliberately selected.

The name holly is probably a corruption of 'holy', and the tree has strong links to Christmas celebrations. In the past, it was thought to bring misfortune on any person cutting holly down. As a result, many holly trees were spared from the woodman's axe. Holly is seen to symbolise eternal life. The superstition is probably linked to beliefs that with its evergreen leaves and red berries, it had the power to bestow immortality and ward off evil.

Holly is a dioecious species – plants being either male or female. Female hollies bear fruit (berries). These can be many colours, not just red, the Cemetery has a fine specimen with creamy yellow berries. The botanical names of holly give us clues about their form for example *Ilex aquifolium* 'Argentea Marginata Pendula' has a variegated leaf (Marginata), with a silver edge (Argentea) and is weeping (Pendula). Some names can be misleading however; *Ilex x altaclerensis* 'Golden King' is female/variegated and *Ilex x altaclerensis* 'Golden Queen' is male/variegated. Where the name has a double 'ii' or another suffix, this means it is named after someone significant in the plants development, for example *Marnockii* named after Robert Marnock.

The [Celebrating Marnock trail](#) includes the hollies and evergreens of Sheffield General Cemetery (the identification of the species is a work in progress, and some may be inaccurate).