**Burial Ground Contribution to Annual Review 2020-2021**

The Burial Ground, with its adjoining chalk grassland meadow, is a valuable asset for Chesham Bois. It is offers formal and natural burials for both residents and those living outside the parish, in a stunning rural setting. It also provides a significant income stream for Chesham Bois Parish Council. The aims this year have been to continue the programme of improvements to the Burial Ground and its environment, to further improve the digital Burial records and mapping systems, and to increase awareness of residents and the wider community of the Burial Ground and its services. The year also saw the impact of Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic on the achievement of some of these aims.

The Council has continued improvements in the Burial Ground for the benefit of our mourning families, and for the wider community who have increasingly used the grounds for hiking, dog-walking and as a place of tranquillity to appreciate nature. The Council has approved a contractor for a new design for the entrance area to provide more seating, better definition to the edge of the car park and a more attractive initial impression. Full costings have been established and the scheme has been submitted to the Amersham Community Board for match funding before works start in Autumn 2021. The topiary in the Garden of Remembrance has suffered from box caterpillar, and in line with the results of the recent RHS trial, the Council has commissioned the replacement of these elements with *Taxus baccata ‘Repandens’*, which should offer more robust and easily maintained plants. Council has also developed plans for a more robust access drive to the top of the New Formal Burial Ground, as well as a plan to provide a new footpath to formalise access at the top of the Woodland Burial Ground. The Council has evaluated the need for ongoing repairs to the fabric of the Chapel, followed by redecoration, and appropriate contractors will be contacted.

 The rare grass chalkland meadow has been maintained, with support from the Chiltern Rangers and advice from the Bucks Wildlife officer, using a selective mowing programme to help preserve the distinctive mix of meadow plants. The Council has also worked with the Beautiful Burial Grounds organisation, to establish a wildflower identification event for the public in June 2021. Consideration has been given to promoting more sustainable approaches, including a request for Buckinghamshire Council to provide a green recycling bin for the use of those tending graves, as well as the establishment of a dedicated location for contractors to deposit grass-cuttings.

The Council has reviewed the effectiveness of the second year of the new Burial Ground marketing strategy to refine it to get best value for money. Monthly reports are made showing where people purchasing plots heard about the Burial Ground, and there is increasing evidence of the benefit of our improved online profile both through our website redesign and the ongoing development of the Burial Ground’s dedicated Facebook page. Improved links to the Association of Natural Burial Grounds is also resulting in increased enquiries for our Woodland Burial Ground for residents and non-residents alike, as well as regular positive testimonials from satisfied families; 100% rated it as “Good” or “Very Good”. The Council has also conducted its annual review of fees and charges, holding them unchanged this year, but noting the increasing proportion of non-resident purchases for future analysis. This analysis will consider the impact of the recent assessment by Buckinghamshire Council to levy business rates against the Burial Ground, which is likely to result in a material increase to the Burial Ground cost base.

Significant progress has been made in improving the digital record this year, which has been amended and fully updated and, together with the underlying paper record, has been fully audited. Initial searchable sections of the record have been made available to the public online. Further development work is now in hand to add inscriptions that were collected by the Chesham Bois One Place study, as well as photos of each memorial. This achievement represents considerable time commitment over the past year by the Clerk, supported by a local young volunteer. The Council is also working with contractors on developing a detailed digital map of the burial ground and making the appropriate changes to the administrative system software that links to it so that it can both support the Clerk and Sexton in managing the Burial Ground and streamline some of associated paperwork.

The Burial Ground held its third open day in September 2020 to coincide with the National Heritage Open Day scheme, albeit on a smaller scale than previous years to ensure appropriate social distancing. There was an information tent, staffed by the Clerk and a Councillor, so that visitors could check up family history, make any enquiries about reserving a plot, and view the plans and progress of the Woodland management plan in the adjoining wood. The Chapel was open for reflection and remembrance, and to view the Memorial Book. Also, in September, the Council was delighted to receive the Silver award for the second year running in the ICCM Cemetery of the Year Awards. This represents a significant achievement for the Burial Ground and the staff who support it.

The whole reporting period has been dominated by the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant impact on the availability of contractors and supplies. This has impacted the digital mapping of the Burial Ground, delayed improvements to the Burial Ground amenities and postponed again the Memorial safety training which had been booked for staff and some Councillors. It also resulted in the need for regular review as regulations changed of the Burial Ground administration systems and the physical environment to keep staff and visitors safe, whilst preserving access for internments, for those visiting family graves, and for those using the area as part of their daily exercise routine. It is a tribute to the Council’s dedicated team of staff and Councillors that the Burial Ground has remained open throughout this period and continued to support those who use it at this difficult time.

Jane Large
Chair, Burial Ground Management Working Group