

## **THE SEARCH FOR ANTHONY NORRIS GROVES**

Dave Napier

Arnos Vale Cemetery extends over forty-five acres between the Bath Road and Wells Road in the suburbs of south-east Bristol, England. Visitors often comment on the name asking, "Shouldn't there be an apostrophe in there, shouldn't it be Arno's?" Well perhaps there should but in Bristol I can tell you it is definitely writ without! The name appears to originate from a family with the surname 'Arno' who were certainly still living in the area in the eighteenth century.

The cemetery was set up in the 1830s, like many other cemeteries (for example Highgate and Kensal Green in London) to relieve the intolerable burial conditions resulting in part from massive increases in urban populations following the industrial revolution. Unusually, Arnos Vale Cemetery remained a private business until it was taken over by Bristol City Council by way of a compulsory purchase in 2003. By the late twentieth century there was no more room for burials and the business relied increasingly upon its crematorium for income.

Financial difficulties resulted in a long period of neglect and the once attractive flower beds, neat paths and well-tended graves became a wilderness. Over the years, many of the graves disappeared beneath a shroud of ivy and dense bramble. Now after twenty-five years of neglect, even the tallest obelisks on the amphitheatre slopes of the cemetery are dwarfed by hundreds of self-seeded ash and sycamore trees thriving in the fertile soil!

Bankruptcy led to a new 'owner' with plans to develop part of the site for housing in the late 1980s. This threat served as wake-up call to the people of Bristol who knew the cemetery as their own but mostly only ventured through the Cemetery gates to attend a funeral. The Friends of Arnos Vale Cemetery (then known as The Association for the Preservation of Arnos Vale Cemetery) began a long campaign to stop the proposed removal of graves and housing development on the site. Following the compulsory purchase order in 2003 the

management of the cemetery was delegated to the Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust by Bristol City Council. In late 2004 we were delighted to learn that our bid for a National Lottery grant of £4.8M was successful and a major restoration programme will began early this year. Many 'Friends' work regularly at the cemetery, clearing areas of bramble and scrub and we also raise funds and awareness by organising and conducting 'heritage tours' at the cemetery.



Arnos Vale Nonconformist mortuary chapel

The cemetery has an Anglican chapel designed in a decorative Roman Italianate style and a fine Nonconformist chapel in the Ionic style. In 1929, this building was converted for use as a crematorium. We have no information or pictures of how it was furnished inside but the outside remains as elegant as ever.

One of some 300,000 souls remembered at Arnos Vale is George Müller who built the Orphanage at Ashley Down in Bristol. Most of our visitors are local Bristol people and you can see the look of recognition in their eyes as we approach his last resting place and they see the name on the grey granite stone which was replaced over his grave by the Müller Foundation some years ago. I enjoy adding a touch of humour when telling the story to visitors (who are less

familiar with it than readers of this review) how Müller prayed for £1000 with which to set up his orphanage. His diary tells us that his first donation was 1/- (5p) which came into his hands in December 1835 but after only five months he had both the funds and the helpers so that his first house opened up at No.6 Wilson Street, in the St Paul's area of Bristol. Not surprisingly with thirty girls under one roof there were complaints from neighbours about the noise! However, by December he had opened up another orphanage for infants at No.1 Wilson Street and by October 1837 he had a third house—this time for boys. He kept praying and by 1847 he had received the amazing sum of £9000 (which enabled him to buy the Ashley Down site where he built a home for 300 children) ....it is not recorded how much of this was donated by his neighbours in Wilson Street!



Anthony Norris Groves's tombstone

About two years ago I was searching through the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* looking for people who may have been buried at Arnos Vale, in order to develop the tour content, when I came across the biography of Anthony Norris Groves the Missionary and a seminal figure in the formation of the Plymouth Brethren. I guessed that he might be buried in roughly the same area as his brother-in-law George Müller, but an initial search produced nothing. Indeed, one particular area lower down the slope and to the rear of the Nonconformist chapel was completely covered in dense undergrowth and impossible to enter. Work was to start on the restoration of the Nonconformist chapel in a few months time and in preparation for that a group of us began to clear around the rear of the chapel to provide access for the erection of scaffolding. We get

problems with vandalism from time to time and a building with scaffolding is rather vulnerable so we decided to carry on clearing the rogue vegetation further up the slope to improve visibility at the rear of the building as a security measure. This gave me a fortuitous opportunity to explore the newly uncovered graves many of which were clearly from the 1850s/60s. It was not too long before I saw the much faded words 'Norris Groves' on one grey mossy tombstone.

Further examination indicated that the visible inscription related to his second wife:

HARRIET [WIFE] OF ANTHONY NORRIS GROVES  
[WHO] FELL ASLEEP AT WESTON SUPER MARE  
[????]UARY 12<sup>TH</sup> 1873 AGED 65

The quotation reads:

THY WORDS WERE FOUND AND I [DID E]AT  
THEM AND THY WORD WAS UNTO ME THE JOY  
AND REJOICING OF MINE HEART : FOR I AM  
CALLED BY THY NAME O LORD GOD OF HOSTS.  
JER.XV.16.

Unfortunately almost Norris Groves's entire inscription has been eroded. However in the bottom right hand corner I spotted 'REV 1 – 5, 6'. These verses read:

Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his blood,  
and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him  
be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen

On one of the smaller faces of the stone is another partial inscription: 'Faithful Hanna[h] who was b[orn] [c.1810] and died on the [1865] aged 5? Years'. Hannah, which is an anglicized form of 'Harnie', was a devoted servant who joined the family when they were engaged in missionary work in Baghdad in Persia and her wish to be buried with her 'master' was granted.

Elsewhere in the cemetery we have also found the grave of George Müller's son-in-law, James Wright, who followed him as Director of the Orphanages.

For the time being, access to the rediscovered grave of Norris Groves is restricted by the restoration work and obscured by this

year's growth of vegetation but I would be delighted to guide interested visitors: contact details, and details of our 'heritage' tours, are to be found on the 'Friends' website: [www.arnosvalefriends.org.uk](http://www.arnosvalefriends.org.uk).



Anthony Norris Groves' tombstone, close-up

