

Every gravestone tells a story from the past

SOCIAL HISTORY: Doncaster's Hyde Park cemetery is a monument to the class divide of Victorian times as **Phil Penfold** discovers.

THOMAS Jefferson may have said that "all men are created equal", but the philosophy of America's Declaration of Independence never troubled the Victorian authorities who ran the Hyde Park Cemetery in Doncaster.

Even in death, the occupants had to know their place in the social pecking order. Hyde Park was one of the first of Britain's municipal cemeteries and when it opened on January 1, 1856 it was divided into three distinct areas. The wealthy and upper classes, the middle class, and the workers of the lower social orders.

South Yorkshire historian, writer and chairman of the Friends of Hyde Park Cemetery, Richard Bell, turns and points to the area around the double chapels (one for the Church of England worshippers, and the other for the Dissenting community) explaining those with brass were buried at the top of the hill, them as had a little less disposable income halfway down and the hoi polloi at the bottom. Worse still, there was a sizeable area in

which the paupers were buried, without any marker at all. The Friends have left the workhouse plots as a wildlife sanctuary. "There are many, many thousands buried there," says Richard quietly. "No-one really knows the number, and no-one ever will - 4,000 or 5,000 in all is a reasonable estimate."

Just how much the class divide extended is obvious, when you contrast two tombs, several hundred yards apart.

One is that of teenager John W Proctor, who had a hideous end to his short life. Aged 19, John fell into a vat of boiling water. He died on October 17, 1877.

The other side of the class divide? Try the rather imposing tomb of former Doncaster mayor Sir Isaac Morley, who died two years after poor John. He was 78, and is one of only two titles in the entire cemetery, and the only one to have the word "Sir" in the inscription.

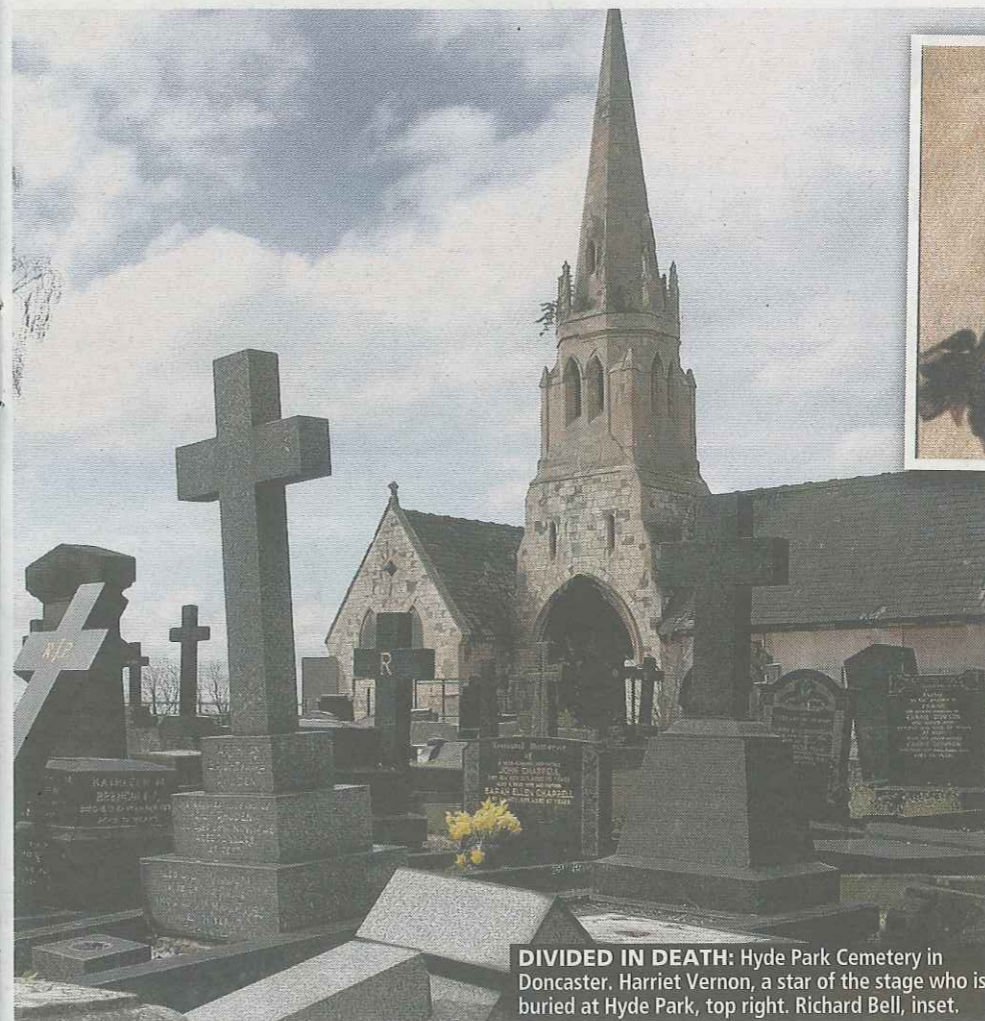
"This is a biography of a century and a half of Doncaster's social history," says Richard.

"There are no new graves being opened for burials today, but if a family has a link to one particular plot, and they chose to



bury a deceased loved one in it, that is entirely up to them, and it does happen.

"At one time there was a lot of anti-social behaviour, drinking, drug-taking, you name it, but the Friends have done a lot of work on the place and now flowers are being put on some of the graves, and litter is going into the bins."



DIVIDED IN DEATH: Hyde Park Cemetery in Doncaster. Harriet Vernon, a star of the stage who is buried at Hyde Park, top right. Richard Bell, inset.

One of the most intriguing graves - and one with a brand new headstone - is that of Harriet Vernon, the music hall artist.

Vernon, who died in Doncaster's Royal Infirmary in July, 1923, had what you might call a "colourful" life. Born Harriet Whitehouse in London in 1858, she married a chap called William Thomas

Gillett when she had just turned 16. She and William had three children before she decided to up sticks and follow a life on the stage. The youngsters were brought up by their grandmother. Harriet re-married, left her second husband, and, when she died, claimed to be a "spinster" on her death certificate.



She appeared as Robin Hood in *Babes in the Wood* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in 1888, alongside one of the music hall's greatest stars, Dan Leno, and went on to tour the world.

The first two burials in Hyde Park happened on January 2, 1856 - Mary Ellis and her little granddaughter, Mary Ann. There are monuments to the Tuby family - still prominent Doncaster showmen and you can discover the last resting place of Patrick Stirling, locomotive engineer and designer, as well as that of William Henry Pickering, chief inspector of mines, killed in the Cadeby Colliery disaster of 1912. He had been invited to lunch with George V and Queen Mary, at Wentworth Woodhouse, but when the first pit explosion occurred, decided to lead the rescue party. He was killed in the second explosion.

The Friends of Hyde Park Cemetery have organised a walk on Wednesday, October 31, from 6.30pm, where many of the characters buried there will be "brought back to life" by Friends members, who will recount stories of their colourful lives. Visit www.fohpc.org.uk