EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
For the community, by the community. A not-for-profit service

12th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

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500 patients buried in Epsom’s asylum cemetery no longer forgotten

11 May 2026



A team of researchers volunteering for the local charity The Friends of Horton Cemetery have reached a milestone in their quest to write the histories of 9000 patients buried in the abandoned privately owned Horton Cemetery. The cemetery, reputed to be the largest asylum cemetery in Europe, is situated at the junction of Hook Road and Horton Lane. The story of Marjorie is the 500th published on the charity’s website

A discarded headstone rescued from a skip more than forty years ago led researchers to uncover the poignant story of a young woman buried at Horton Cemetery — and reconnect her memory with living family members.

Before the cemetery was sold by the NHS in 983 to a property speculator, notices appeared in the local press informing relatives that they could reclaim the headstones of loved ones buried there. Families were warned that any memorials left behind would be destroyed.

At the time, an electrical engineer working on a project within the former Epsom hospital cluster discovered one such stone which had been thrown into a skip. Appalled at what he later described as a “blatant disregard” for somebody’s final resting place, he rescued the memorial and took it home for safekeeping.

Today, the headstone remains carefully preserved, with the hope that one day it may be returned to the cemetery where it was originally intended to stand in perpetuity.

The inscription reads simply:

Marjorie Young
14th September 1948
Aged 27 years
R.I.P.

As researchers from the Friends of Horton Cemetery began investigating Marjorie’s life, they were astonished to discover that a relative was still alive and able to shed light on her tragic story.

The relative, whose mother was Marjorie’s first cousin, said: “Your message is a welcome bolt from the blue. I can’t believe that after all these years somebody is interested in Marjorie. I didn’t know her but my mother so often talked about her. My mother died in 2015 but she still had nightmares about the life Marjorie led.”

His words underline one of the central aims of the Friends of Horton Cemetery — ensuring that those buried in the former asylum cemetery are not forgotten.

Research into burial records revealed another heartbreaking detail. The cemetery register records that Marjorie was buried in grave 2892b alongside a “stillborn female child”. Marjorie was buried with a stillborn child who researchers believe belonged to an unknown patient.

Such practices were sadly not uncommon. Before changes introduced during the 1980s, hospitals frequently arranged the burial of stillborn babies with little or no consultation with grieving parents. Often, infants were buried in existing graves within institutional cemeteries.

A Family Marked by Tragedy

Marjorie’s father, Charles Young, was born in 1894 to Harry Young and Ellen Fanny Young, née Chesterman. According to family recollections, Ellen gave birth to as many as 23 children, though only a handful survived infancy.

The family experienced repeated tragedy. In 1905, Charles’s younger sister Minnie died after suffering an epileptic seizure during the night. An inquest heard that Minnie sometimes endured as many as thirteen fits a day. Researchers later discovered that Marjorie herself also suffered from epilepsy.

Charles married Ethel Mary Davis at St Augustine’s Church in 1920.

A Childhood of Fear and Isolation

Born on 10 June 1921, Marjorie was an only child. Family testimony has painted a troubling picture of her upbringing. Her cousin recalled stories passed down by his mother: “Marjorie was very clever and wanted to study. She was an only child

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ISSN 2753-2771

so welcomed the company of my mother. As time went on it became clear to my mother that Marjorie was terrified, the reason being that her parents went out every night and left her alone in the dark. Neighbours talked of Marjorie standing at the window looking out in the dark.

“Eventually poor Marjorie had a breakdown and was admitted to hospital and my mother never saw her again.”

Public records relating to Marjorie are scarce. In the 1939 Register, compiled at the outbreak of the Second World War, she was living in Lambeth and working as a civil servant for His Majesty’s Office of Works, the government department responsible for public buildings.

The next surviving record appears nine years later.

On 14 September 1948, Marjorie died at Long Grove Hospital aged just 27. Her death certificate records broncho-pneumonia and exhaustion caused by epilepsy. She was buried at Horton Cemetery on 21 September 1948.

Someone Cared Enough to Remember

Researchers believe one detail about Marjorie’s story is especially important. She had a headstone.

At Horton Cemetery, where thousands were buried in unmarked graves, memorial stones were rare. Someone cared enough to arrange and pay for a marker. Someone completed the paperwork and ensured her resting place was acknowledged. It is also possible that family members attended her funeral.

For her surviving relative, the rediscovery of the headstone has brought comfort. “It is wonderful to hear that her gravestone survives and that has led to her being your 500th story. If only I could tell my mother. She would have been so pleased to know that somebody still cares about Marjorie.

“I think you’ve done a wonderful job and somehow righted some of the wrongs.”

Today, the rescued headstone stands not only for Marjorie Young, but symbolically for the estimated 9,000 forgotten souls buried within Horton Cemetery.

Perhaps one day it will stand there once again.

More research stories can be found on the Horton Cemetery website at Horton Cemetery

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The Friends of Horton Cemetery seek to restore the cemetery to community ownership. The case for a compulsory purchase order was blocked by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council. The charity now pins its hopes on a fresh approach from the East Surrey Unitary Council. The charity has the support of Epsom and Ewell’s MP Helen Maguire, who is engaging with the Ministry of Justice on the issue.

Theresa Keneflick-Conway

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