

**Edinburgh**

Survey of Gardens and Designed Landscapes

**215 Mortonhall Crematorium and Cemetery**

**Consultants**

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# 215 - Mortonhall Crematorium



## Key

- |  |                     |   |                          |
|--|---------------------|---|--------------------------|
|  | Site boundary       |  | Essential setting        |
|  | Ruined buildings    |  | Site of former house     |
|  | Principal buildings |  | Main drive               |
|  | Gardens             |  | Principal views or vista |
|  | Water               |  | Panoramic View           |
|  | Woodlands           |  | Walled Garden            |
|  | Parkland            |   |                          |

**EDINBURGH**  
THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

## SURVEY OF GARDENS AND DESIGNED LANDSCAPES

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Associates with  
Christopher Dingwall

## 215 Mortonhall Crematorium and Cemetery

Parish Liberton, later Edinburgh

NGR NT 2692 6831 Crematorium  
NT 2670 6832 Cemetery

Owner City of Edinburgh Council

Designations

Listing Crematorium with remembrance chapel, waiting room, lodge houses and screen walls A

Area of Great Landscape Value

Tree Preservation Orders

Local Nature Conservation Site

### REASONS FOR INCLUSION

A small wooded site that was formerly part of Mortonhall estate and the site of a gate-lodge, that is now the setting of Sir Basil Spence's iconic 1960s crematorium buildings and designed landscape, with the cemetery located in the west part.

### LOCATION, SETTING AND EXTENT

Mortonhall Crematorium is situated on the west of the A701, Howdenhall Road; Frogston Road (B701) runs a short distance to the south. The site runs east-west to join the parkland of Mortonhall (214) and is bounded by later-20th century housing to the north (Alnwickhill) and south (Mortonhall). The small Stenhouse burn runs eastwards near the north edge of the site. Site area 11.3ha.

### MAIN PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

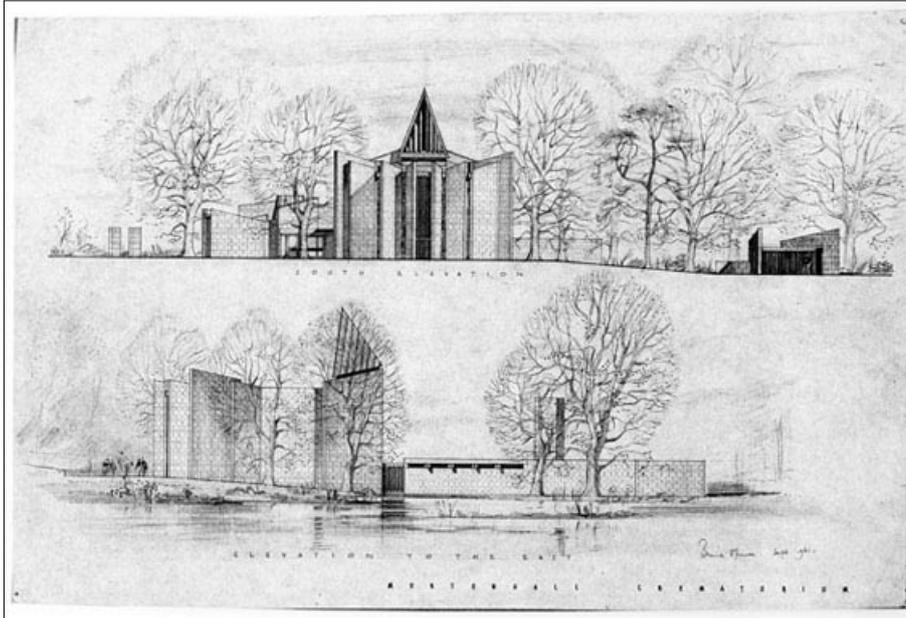
18th and 19th centuries; 1960s.

### HISTORY OF LANDSCAPE DEVELOPMENT

The east half of the site that is now occupied by Mortonhall crematorium and cemetery has been heavily wooded for at least 150 years, with the west portion being more open. The Corporation of Edinburgh purchased 20 acres of land from Mortonhall estate in 1958, which was the easterly portion of the estate, for the express purpose of providing the city with space to cremate and to bury its dead (RCAHMS on SCRAN). The cemetery occupies 5.01ha and was opened in 1960 (Keir 440); before it came into use the site was regraded. The crematorium followed in 1967 and comprises the main building group of two



*Mortonhall Crematorium,  
Pentland chapel (left) and  
main chapel*



*Drawing of south and east elevations, Spence, Glover and Ferguson 1961*

chapels, crematorium, Chapel of Remembrance, waiting room, entrance and lodges, and monumental cross. Building and other work took from 1964-7.

When architect Sir Basil Spence (1907-76), as Spence, Glover and Ferguson, was approached by Edinburgh City Council to design a new crematorium, he saw that this site was worthy of the best of designs. Though the site is suburban, it is reminiscent of the rural setting adopted by Asplund in Stockholm and the freestanding cross on the hill also mirrors Asplund's work. The mature woodland gave the site maturity within which Spence set confidently modern buildings, described as 'calmly expressionist' in style (Grainger 246), following his success at Coventry cathedral. Spence's orientation of the main chapel makes the most of natural light and his use of simple coloured glass, through which the light is filtered, means that except on the dullest of days, the plain interior is subtly and calmingly infused with a gentle glow. The catafalque itself is bathed in light from above. The whole complex being like an 'elegiac arboreal island amid suburbia' (McKean 200), with access along 650 metres of the old East Drive to Mortonhall House (MS 2329/5CT/43/1/89).

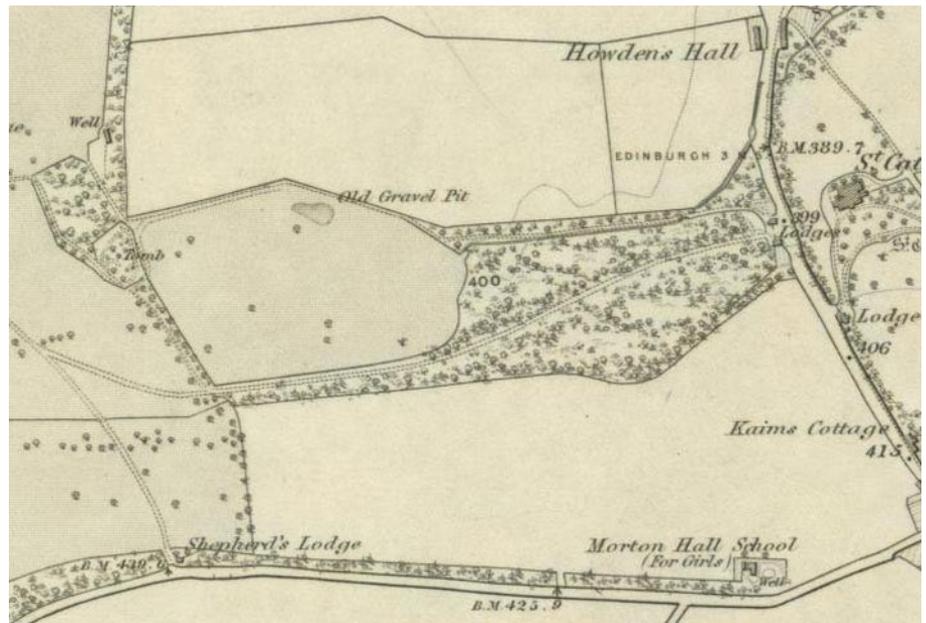
Like all building projects, this one had its problems. Apart for any building issues, there was contention about the trees at Mortonhall. On 7 September 1964 Spence wrote to AT Harrison, Superintendent of Parks that he was

'... distressed to hear that all the trees had to be swept away because of disease, specially as I was commissioned to do this job respecting the position of the beeches – which were carefully marked by the city architect – and the design and the shape of the building was the result of this exercise ... Nevertheless I am delighted to hear from Mr Glover that you are now planting mature trees in the exact position and future generations will not know of this saga. I need hardly say that the timing of these trees is important as the scheme will look a bit of a nonsense without them, and the purpose of this letter is to entreat you to move them so that they become established before the crematorium comes into commission and so that the publicity accorded to it should be favourable.' (MS 2329/5CT/43/1/14).

Mr Harrison's response 6 October 1964 was

'I must take this early opportunity to assure you that any trees which were condemned by the Parks Department would definitely have been a danger to the building and the general public had they been allowed to remain ... You will appreciate that with the erection of the crematorium in any woodland renders the remaining trees very much more liable to storm

Ordnance Survey 6" map  
c1882



damage and this has already been evidenced in the fact that 3 perfectly sound trees were blown down during the past month. You may also recollect that, in the early stages of planning, I mentioned at a meeting in the city chambers that a mature beech tree, approximately 200 years old, had broken off more than 12-15 feet from the ground after our first meeting on the site. There is also plenty of evidence in the vicinity that the older beech are past maturity. Regarding the planting of semi-mature trees, I do not see that any problem could arise provided the exact positions referred to are clear of roadways and services.

I am not aware, however, of any semi-mature beech trees having been transplanted successfully, and although we would be quite prepared to experiment with beech trees if you expressly desire this, we would strongly recommend the planting of such semi-mature trees as have been successfully transplanted i.e. sycamore and silver birch.

While writing I would like to again assure you and Mr Glover of the co-operation of the Parks Department in all matters relating to the new crematorium at Mortonhall. (MS 2329/5CT/43/1/20-21).



Mortonhall Crematorium main  
chapel c1966

While acknowledgements about Mortonhall include that the site was 'designed in association with the city architect Alexander Steele for the City of Edinburgh', this association was not without its problems. Spence was desperately trying to get away from the municipal approach that bedevilled projects for local government, and while Mortonhall eventually 'broke away from the local authority blueprint' (Grainger 218), Mr Steele's attitude did not make the job any easier.

On 1 September 1966, Spence wrote to Hardie Glover '... it only remains for you to persuade the authorities to enlarge the lake ...' although there is no lake in the completed scheme.

By the end of 2005, Mortonhall was reaching its full capacity, with just 300 plots remaining. It was estimated that Mortonhall cemetery would be full by January 2007. The Council are in the process of providing a new cemetery which will serve the City for the next 50 years, located at Bridgend Farm, Old Dalkeith Road, covering approximately 15 acres and providing over 5000 new graves.

### Maps and Graphic Evidence

Mid 19th century OS maps show a broad belt of parkland and woodland linking Mortonhall's parkland with the Edinburgh-Penicuik road and providing the setting for a sweeping east drive, terminated by twin gate lodges at the road. An old gravel pit is shown in the parkland in the west part.



*Main chapel with Chapel of Remembrance and cross in background*

Spence, Glover and Ferguson's drawings in the Sir Basil Spence archive at RCAHMS would need to be viewed for a detailed understanding of the plans for Mortonhall crematorium, but have not seen for this entry.

## COMPONENTS OF THE DESIGNED LANDSCAPE

### Architectural Features

The crematorium comprises several buildings and features dispersed through the wooded landscape either side of a main drive along the original route of the Mortonhall east drive. All the buildings are unified in their style and in the use of white concrete (calcined flint aggregate) blocks in three sizes – of consistent width but different depths giving a distinctive bonding pattern. The drive also serves the cemetery in the west part of the site.

### Main entrance screen wall and lodges

Long screen walls in concrete blockwork either side of entrance drive, with lettering and armorial in bronze, with large timber gates set back some distance. Two single storey flat-roofed lodge houses behind the walls.

### Main Chapel, Pentland Chapel, crematorium and offices

Main chapel comprising tall fins in unevenly coursed white concrete blocks separated by narrow full-height strips of stained glass, topped by a spire-like light-catcher, entered by a simple timber porte cochere. The smaller Pentland chapel forms part of the building group on the north and is half the height of the main chapel and similarly planned with wall-heads rising to a central zinc-clad drum. A single storey flat-roofed crematorium and offices component adjoins.



*Main entrance screen wall and lodge (behind) on south of entrance*



*Waiting Room and toilets*

*Cross and hill*



### Chapel of Remembrance

Small chapel comprising two wing walls in white concrete blockwork with glazed screens between, with a low flat roof, focused on the cross on the hill.



*Chapel of Remembrance*

### Cross

Simple cross in concrete standing on a low hill at the west of crematorium site and visible from the two main buildings, copying the idea from Asplund's forest cemetery in Stockholm. Bright flowers added at the base of the cross detract from the simply composed lines of the hill curve and cross upright; these in turn attract mementos to be left there.

### Screen Walls

Screen walls in matching blockwork form gateways at two points in the approaches to the Pentland Chapel and Chapel of Remembrance.

### Waiting room and toilets

Large single storey flat-roofed building on south side of drive with stepped elevation on north giving discrete rooms with views of the main chapel. Over-large signs stating the building's use on the corner of roof edge detract from the recessive character of the building. Adjoining screen wall on the west encloses the service depot.

### Memorial Walkway

Paths on north of the Pentland chapel and extending eastwards beside the burn are lined with small marble memorials to the deceased, each with a circular recess for flowers. A simple and low-key way of having multiple memorials, but at odds with the style and intentions of the crematorium design; placing of plants in pots adds to the problems of managing dead and plastic flowers etc. At the east, the path and memorials ominously stop with the open and unadorned burnside woodland beyond.

*Screen walls, Chapel of  
Remembrance and cross*





### Cemetery, waiting room and toilet

Single storey building in riven stone and dark brown stained timber with veranda surrounded by pink concrete slabs – not part of the Sir Basil Spence design. Stands at the end of the view along the main drive and so is unnecessarily visible. Portacabin accommodation at the rear of the building is even more intrusive in this important view.

### Drives and Paths; Car park

#### Main Drive

Wide main drive in bitmac with whin kerbs with narrow concrete slab path of north side; double yellow-lined throughout crematorium area. Continues through cemetery; wide paths in cemetery similarly surfaced.

#### Paths

Paths used by hearses and mourners in the vicinity of the chapels are wide routes laid with light grey granite setts, laid concentrically around the main chapel and either across or with the line of movement elsewhere. A shallowly stepped ramp links with the waiting room.

Disabled people's cars are allowed close to the building entrance. This and the need to deter other drivers results in intrusive signs and traffic cones along the paths around the main building.

### Memorial Walkway



### Cemetery waiting room

*Cemetery general view, with  
Pentland Hills in background*



*Main car park and bollards*

### Car Park

A very large car park is located on the south of the drive, using most of the available space between the main entrance and chapel, on less than ideal land on the sloping south perimeter of the site. Masses of steel bollards are used to control cars near the entry point. Provision of sufficient car parking space and managing car use are major issues.

### Bridges

Simple timber-balustraded footbridges take footpaths over the burn in two locations.

### Cemetery

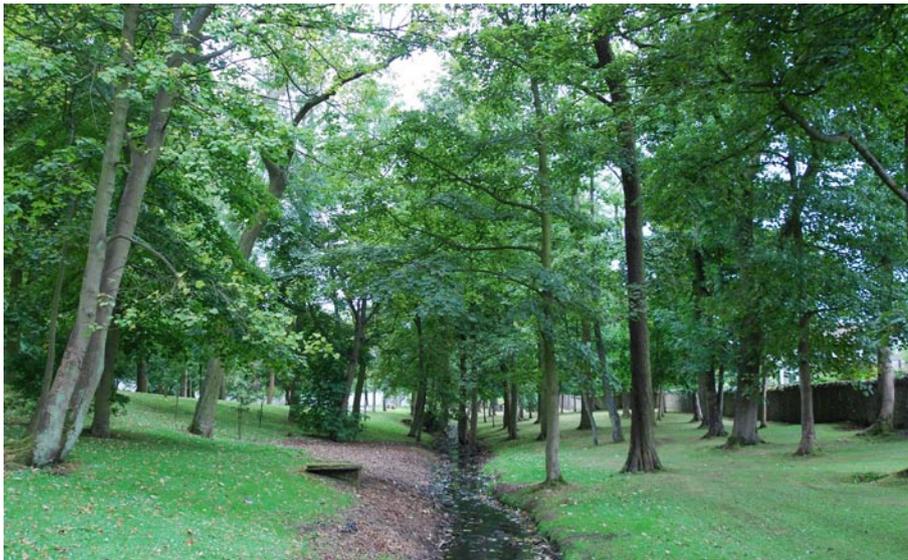
The cemetery layout is of simple granite or other stone memorials up to approx 600 x 450mm in size set at a batter on the ground in parallel rows, with matching flower containers in some cases. Planting is limited to a range of dwarf ornamental conifers and roses. The design intention for a simple unadorned and easy to maintain layout is frustrated by the addition of many kinds of little enclosing fences, gravel, lamps, angels, vases, pots and other types of mementos, particularly in more recently used areas. Older sections remain relatively free of these intrusive additions that quickly create an untidy and unattractive appearance. At the west end the cemetery, a memorial rose garden for the burial of babies is overwhelmed by edgings, toys, lanterns and other plastic mementos, despite signs and polices deterring the use.



*Memorial rose garden*

*Cemetery general view, more  
recent area*





*Woodland and burn in east of site*

## Gardens and Policy Planting

### Woodlands

The woodland belt that provides the setting for the crematorium comprises mature oak (dominant), beech, lime, sweet chestnut, sycamore and yew interspersed with younger planting of beech, weeping beech, birch, lime, Norway maple, purple sycamore, pines and other trees.

Several cedars have been planted in the vicinity of the main chapel.

### Garden planting

The bank between the main buildings and Memorial Walkway planted with ornamental conifers, hebes and other evergreen groundcovers.

Feet of signs, bases of new trees, and edges of a few groundcover beds planted with colourful bedding, which is totally at odds with the character of the designed landscape and emphasises features that are already intrusions.

### Landform

Subtle use of landform is an importance component of the building and landscape design in the vicinity of the chapel and at the cross. This 1960s landform reflects the pre-existing landform along the south edge of the site.

### Water Features

The Stenhouse burn flows through the site, emerging from a culvert under the west of the site at the start of the Memorial Walkway. The narrow slow-flowing burn is roughly edged with concrete blocks along its west part, with grass banks in the east.

### Views and Vistas

Views within the crematorium are limited by the mature trees. The hilltop cross is a focus for views in the composition. From open parts of the cemetery, views of the Pentland Hill are seen.

### Visual Intrusions

Many kinds of municipal additions intrude into the designed landscape: signs, bollards, bright bedding plants, portabins, and the Memorial Walkway itself.

## PUBLIC ACCESS

The site is freely open for public use and may receive a degree of casual use together with constant visiting by relatives and friends of the deceased who are buried or have ashes here.

*Intrusive signs emphasised by bright bedding plants*



*Landform on south boundary*

## FUTURE MANAGEMENT POTENTIAL

There is a clear need to conserve the character and details of the buildings and landscape created by Sir Basil Spence as an integrated design. This may be best done by a Conservation Management Plan. In addition to dealing with the problems of insensitive additions, such a plan would need to tackle the control of cars and limit their numbers on site, the management and extension of the memorial walkway, preserving the character of the woodland, deal with the width of the main drive, the problems associated with uncontrolled mementos in the cemetery and other issues.

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Overall

An important unified design of building and landscape from the 1960s by a significant British architect, although with unfortunate intrusive additions, that relies on an earlier landscape for its mature woodland setting.

### Work of Art

High

### Historical

Some

### Horticultural / Arboricultural / Sylvicultural

Little

### Architectural

Outstanding

### Scenic

Some

### Nature Conservation

Some

### Archaeological

None

### Recreational

Some

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### Sources – Primary

#### Maps

First edition Ordnance Survey (1852) NLS

Ordnance Survey 1877/1885 NLS

NLS National Library of Scotland [www.nls.uk](http://www.nls.uk)

SCRAN Scottish Cultural Resource Access Network [www.scran.ac.uk](http://www.scran.ac.uk)

Sir Basil Spence Mortonhall file – RCAHMS Acc no 2003/101 MS 2329/5CT/43/1/1-163

*BBC News Scotland* 12 November 2005 [www.bbc.co.uk/1/low/scotland](http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/low/scotland)

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City of Edinburgh, Tree preservation order TPO no 1 1954 Mortonhall Estate ie a tree survey of the site

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*Resurgam*, 10:3 1967 pp 48-50;

*Resurgam*, 5:2 (1992) pp8-9

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