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## Locals Outraged as Council Pushes Ahead With Housing Scheme on Site of Unexhumed Graves

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Plans to construct 20 luxury homes on a former paupers' burial site in Tunbridge Wells have triggered widespread anger, after it was revealed that most of the bodies remain unexhumed despite earlier council assurances.

The proposed development at Benhall Mill Road, within the grounds of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery, has become the centre of controversy after a Freedom of Information (FOI)

request confirmed only four of 15 graves were disturbed in 2020. The land, previously used for burying the poor and excluded, had been earmarked by the council for 16 houses and four flats. Residents say they were led to believe all human remains had been respectfully removed, a requirement set by the Ministry of Justice before construction could lawfully begin.

The graves of George Langridge, Maria Thomsett, George Cross, and George Payne were the only ones exhumed. Campaigners now fear that at least 11 individuals, including a baby named Frances Sarah Day, buried in 1873, are still interred beneath the site. The council had been instructed to remove all remains before development commenced, raising serious concerns about legal compliance and moral responsibility.

## Moral Outrage

Local residents have described the move as deeply disrespectful and immoral. Justin Quinn, a Friends of the Tunbridge Wells Cemetery member, said the council's actions have "insulted the intelligence of the local community," and that they were promised transparency and dignity for the deceased. Instead, they've been left feeling deceived.

Athanasios Sermbezis, 79, whose in-laws are buried nearby, echoed these concerns, describing the site as sacred ground. "We understand the need for housing, but not on top of people's graves," he said. "It's not just insensitive, it's wrong." Mr Sermbezis, a retired engineer originally from Greece, added that bones do not simply vanish with time, pointing to global efforts to honour historic burial grounds, regardless of age.

The land in question had been used in the 1800s for those deemed unsuitable for burial by the Church of England, including the poor and those who died by suicide. While the Diocese of Rochester has since stated the land is not consecrated, campaigners argue its historical and spiritual significance warrants protection under The Disused Burial Grounds (Amendment) Act 1981, which bars development unless all human remains are first removed.

A memorial plaque installed by the council lists the names of all 15 deceased, claiming their remains have been reinterred, but residents believe this gives a false impression that the process is complete. Elaine Lawrence, who has relatives in the cemetery, said: "This place is meant to be peaceful. Turning it into a building site is a disgrace."

The council's plans include three-bedroom houses, smaller flats, and 30 parking spaces, 20 of which would include electric vehicle charging. The site currently serves as a maintenance depot but lies within the active cemetery boundaries.

A council spokesperson stated that a specialist team had handled the exhumation with care, and that all actions were carried out with necessary permissions and in consultation with the Friends group. However, with over 30 formal objections already filed and fresh questions over the project's legality, the council may face mounting pressure to reconsider.