

BANGKOK'S PROTESTANT CEMETERY

Bangkok's Protestant cemetery dates from 1853 and is still in use today. The one-hectare plot lies in a peaceful location on the river, not far from the city centre. Some 1,800 burials have taken place here and a visit provides a fascinating insight into the presence here of many foreign nationalities over the past century and a half. The cemetery, although open to visitors, is very private and is not promoted in any way as a tourist attraction or curiosity. In its history, the cemetery has been closely associated with the British Consulate and the Anglican church of Bangkok and it is currently administered through a committee linked to both of these.



The cemetery's long plot running down to the river. The river lies immediately beyond the small roofed chapel at the end of the walkway; the tall buildings are all on the other side of the river.

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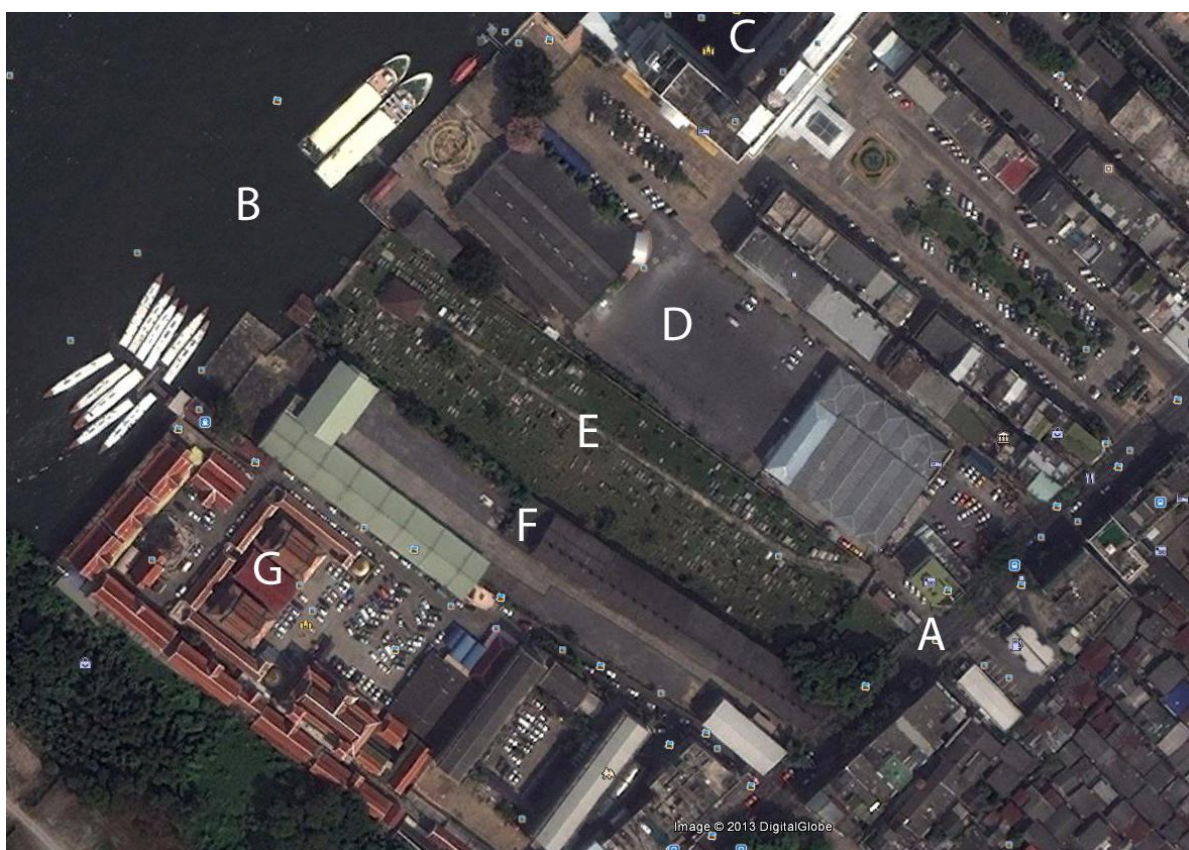
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Location

The cemetery lies in a long, narrow plot of around 200m x 50m (equal to 1 hectare or 2.5 acres) running between New Road and the Chao Phraya river, 1.7 km downstream from the Taksin Bridge, a major transportation hub in central Bangkok. The cemetery is sandwiched between other properties: on one side an old industrial building and a large Buddhist wat (monastery), on the other side a large tourist hotel (Ramada Menam) and a 70-storey condominium complex under development. The condominium (completion due in 2016) will eventually rise behind the cemetery wall seen on the right in the first photo.

The site is light and airy and quite peaceful, as befits a cemetery. The new development to the right will massively overlook the cemetery, a point likely to put off Asian buyers and which was skilfully avoided in the developer's sales literature. However, the new building will not place the cemetery in shadow as it will rise on the north side of the cemetery.



Google Earth satellite view, showing:

- A – New Road (Thanon Charoen Krung), B – River, C – Ramada Hotel,
- D – site of new condominium tower, E – cemetery, F – industrial buildings,
- G – Wat Rajsingorn Buddhist monastery (the red roofs).

The cemetery entrance is in New Road, a few metres down a short alley (New Road, Soi 72/5), through a metal gate set in the cemetery's 2-metre high boundary wall. There is no external signage at all and the cemetery is invisible from the street and alley until you pass through the metal gate.



The cemetery entrance from New Road



Looking over the cemetery wall at the river end of the plot

History

The land for the cemetery (as well as separate land for an English church later on) was given to Bangkok's Protestant community by Siam's King Mongkut in 1853, in response to requests made to him from the growing Protestant Community supported by the British Consulate.

The 1850s saw the rapid reopening of Siam (as it was called up to 1939) to the rest of the world, following a period of around a century (essentially the 1700s) when Siam had closed itself off, followed then by several decades of European wars and other troubles which distracted the European powers. Siam's King Mongkut, who came to the throne in 1851, was a very pro-Western and pro-British pragmatist, the first Asian king to be fluent in English, and he sensed that the time was then right to accelerate the drive to normalise relations with Western nations and to welcome foreigners into the country. Bangkok had by then become established as Siam's new capital and the foreign population of Bangkok and foreign trade grew rapidly in the 1850s and onwards as a direct result of King Mongkut's initiatives, which were maintained by his successors. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 provided a further boost to European and Atlantic trade with South East Asia and to the growth of the foreign community in Bangkok. The Siamese royal family and political establishment also refreshed their earlier leanings towards Britain. The Siamese monarchy's very positive and open approach to foreigners and foreign trade during this period and its inclination to accommodate the wishes and interests of foreign powers, rather than resist, was one factor which contributed to Siam's success in avoiding being colonised by Britain or another European power – a fate suffered by every other country in South East Asia.

The earlier history of the foreign population in Siam is pertinent. European merchants had started trading with Siam around 1510. The main place of trade was Ayutthya, the capital at that time, located on the Chao Phrya river but some 70 km upstream from where Bangkok now stands. Bangkok did not exist at that time. Portuguese traders, followed by French traders, were the principal players. Several Roman Catholic churches and a cemetery were established early on in Ayutthya to serve the foreign merchant communities resident there. Ayutthya was destroyed in 1767 but the Catholic church and cemetery remains can still be seen today.

The British did not appear actively in Siam until 150 years further on in 1660, following the establishment of the East India Company and the development of the British presence in India. The British and the East India Company, however, failed to make serious progress in establishing business in Siam in the face of the entrenched presence of the Portuguese and French traders. The British did, however, succeed in developing a strong political relationship with the Siamese Court and Britain became a favoured source for the foreign experts needed by the Siamese Court in developing the country. This largely came to an end in 1690 when Siam adopted its inward-looking strategy, which effectively took a century and a half to dismantle and for Anglo-Siamese governmental relations to be rebuilt.

The riverside plot of land granted by the King for the Protestant cemetery in 1853 was some distance (some 4 km downstream) away from the Bangkok city centre of the time – possibly a result of a deliberate decision to separate it somewhat from the city in view of infection risks etc. At that time it was probably an isolated plot and accessible only by boat – in fact the normal means of transport for much of the city at that time. The present road on which the cemetery lies was not constructed and paved until the 1860s, being in fact the first road in Bangkok to be paved, linking the government area much further up the river with the Chinese commercial district and the growing European area south of it where most of the embassies, consulates, hotels and European businesses were located.

The road, properly called Thanon (road) Charoen Krung (prosperous city), received its informal name of 'New Road' from the European community when it became properly paved and the informal name has persisted until today. So the site was perhaps a logical one, safely separated from the main population of the city but within reach of the foreigners' quarter just upstream. 19th and early 20th century visitors to Bangkok will probably all have passed the cemetery on their ships on their way up river to anchor opposite Bangkok's main hotels, embassies and commercial premises of that time

King Mongkut, after providing the land for the Protestant cemetery in 1853, also provided land for a Protestant church on another riverside plot in 1861. A Protestant Union Chapel was established (known informally as the English Church) and the first ministers were American missionaries. The Church was subsequently allowed to sell this land and to relocate (in 1904) to a new plot, again given by the King of the time, further inland and closer to some of the new business areas.

Administration



The signboard immediately inside the entrance

The text on the cemetery signboard reads:

Bangkok Protestant Cemetery

This cemetery is administered by the Protestant Cemetery Committee and is maintained entirely by voluntary contributions

Enquiries to:

H.M. Consul,
The British Embassy,
Wireless Road

The Vicar,
Christ Church,
11 Convent Road.

As noted on the sign, the cemetery is overseen by a committee (formed in 1907) which has links into the Anglican church (Christ Church) in Bangkok and the British Consulate in Bangkok, which serve as the committee's official contact points. The cemetery, although physically and administratively separate from the church itself, is nevertheless closely associated with the church, which conducts burials in the cemetery and maintains the register of burials. The title deeds of the cemetery land are in safekeeping at the British Consulate. For most of its existence the Anglican church in Bangkok was in fact 'under the wing' of the British Consulate and it was only in 1963 that Christ Church formally became a regular parish within the Anglican province of SE Asia and its Diocese of Singapore.

A caretaker lives on site and the grass and vegetation is kept regularly under control. The overall impression is of a fairly well done job, given that everything is dependent on voluntary contributions. The main vehicle gate is often closed but pedestrian access is maintained through a small pedestrian gate within the larger gate. There does not appear to be a problem with squatters, drug traffickers or the like – probably because of the caretaker's presence and because the Committee has access to enough leverage to secure solutions, if needed.

The current cost of a burial plot, one or two of which have been reserved, is 4,000 Thai Baht (400 Malaysian Ringgit). This is purely a plot reservation and usage fee and does not include any services or work required for an actual burial.

Records

In addition to the burial records maintained by the local Anglican Church, Christ Church Bangkok, there has been extensive analysis and documentation of the graves currently visible and identifiable. This research, detailing some 998 identified current graves, has been uploaded to and is easily accessed on the Web site of Findagrave.com. Logging in to the following link <http://www.findagrave.com/cgibin/fg.cgi?page=cr&CRid=2177784&CScn=Bangkok+Protestant+Cemetery&CScntry=253&> takes the viewer directly to all the 998 names documented in Bangkok, with brief details of each grave, dates and photos of most of them.

Visitors

The cemetery receives few visitors – except for those personally caring for graves, as demonstrated by the flowers and plants seen on graves here and there. It is definitely not on the tourist agenda for Bangkok and is scarcely mentioned in any of the visitor literature or guide books.

Inside the cemetery there is no posted information about the cemetery's history or signposting of the most famous graves. Outside there is no notice or sign visible from New Road nor outside the cemetery entrance. The wall and metal gate make the interior invisible from outside – unless the gate is wide open. You have to know exactly where the cemetery is in order to find it.

It is nevertheless very accessible by public transport from the centre of Bangkok. Buses run along New Road every few minutes and there is a stop outside the cemetery. Taxis are also freely available on this street. From the Skytrain connection at Taksin Bridge, less than 2 km away, Chao Phraya Express boats run to the pier at the monastery next door. The hotel is a useful stop for refreshments before or after a visit.

There is very little shade in the cemetery, which lies in full sunlight for most of the day, so visitors need to come adequately prepared for the sun. The chapel at the river end does, however, provide cover from sun or rain, if needed. From time to time, unusually high water levels in the river lead to flooding in this area and the cemetery becomes waterlogged – although the central concrete walkway usually remains above water level. The last quarter of the year is probably the time most at risk of flooding, while the first and second quarters are potentially the driest.

The cemetery chapel of 1894, partly open to the air, was rebuilt in 1957 and behind it can be seen stored the antique wooden bier on which coffins are carried across to new graves.



The cemetery chapel at the end of the central walkway
(and the white marble Henry Alabaster memorial at right)



The antique wooden bier for transporting coffins, stored behind the chapel



The chapel's date plate



Just leaving the cemetery for the city centre: on the 1.6 km boat trip from one of the piers near the cemetery back to Taksin bridge (in centre background) and connection to the Skytrain.

The graves

The biggest surprise that greets the first-time visitor is the considerable number of Jewish graves in the cemetery, dating from earliest times until recently, particularly in the areas close to the cemetery entrance. So much for it being a Protestant cemetery! The one thing which this does demonstrate, however, is the liberal and open culture of the expatriate community in Bangkok, reinforced by a similar posture on the part of its Siamese and Thai hosts.

Jewish burials have been willingly accommodated within the Protestant cemetery since earliest times until 1997, when a small plot adjacent to (but separate from) the Protestant Cemetery, at the New Road end, was acquired by the Bangkok Jewish community as its own dedicated burial ground. In future all Jewish burials will take place in the new Jewish site and the way is open for existing Jewish burials to be relocated, upon request of the families concerned, from the Protestant cemetery to the adjacent new Jewish one. A handful of such transfers have already taken place. The Jewish cemetery is now in the small enclosed grassed area (with a large tree) at the New Road end of the Protestant Cemetery – see satellite photo on page 2. In the photo immediately after the satellite image, the entrance gate to the new Jewish cemetery can be seen immediately to the left of the open gate of the Protestant cemetery.

The second biggest surprise is the considerable number of different nationalities and origins represented among the burials. A quick initial glance soon identifies UK, Germany, Poland, USA, Canada, Netherlands, Denmark, among others, as well represented countries. Some nationals of these countries are shown as having in fact been born in Bangkok and living their whole life there. The perhaps surprising dominance of German (and German Jewish) graves here reflects the strong trading and commercial presence of Germany in SE Asia up to the time of the First World War.

Several seafarers' graves can be seen, but more prominent as a specific category are missionaries of various churches, including a number from North America.

The Jewish graves do tend to cluster nearer the entrance and away from the river and there is a section dominated by Thai-Chinese graves but there does not otherwise appear to be any obvious nationality-based ordering of the graves' layout.

Hard to miss are the many children's graves, reflecting the high toll of tropical diseases on children until relatively recently.

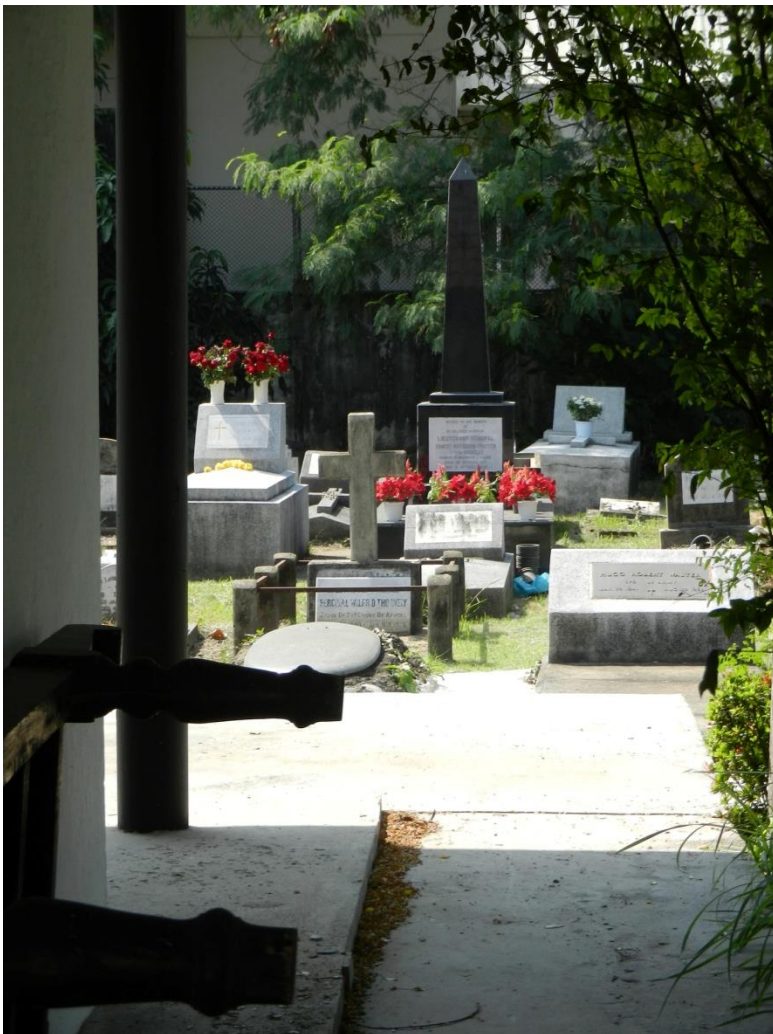
The cemetery dates from 1853, but some graves display death dates as early as 1840, suggesting that some burials may initially have been relocated here from elsewhere in Bangkok or other parts of Siam.

The memorials

The memorials, which range from the simplest gravestone to very elaborate mausoleum-type structures, document the golden period (mid 1800s to mid 1900s) of Thailand's relationships with Europe and North America. All imaginable styles appear to be represented, as can be seen from the images. Quite prominent are the traditional German styles including the broken pillars. Most prominent among all the memorials is a fine white marble edifice, seen in several of the images close to the chapel, built in 1884 by the King of the time in honour of Henry Alabaster, a prominent English adviser to the King in the mid-1800s.

Photogallery – cemetery and graves



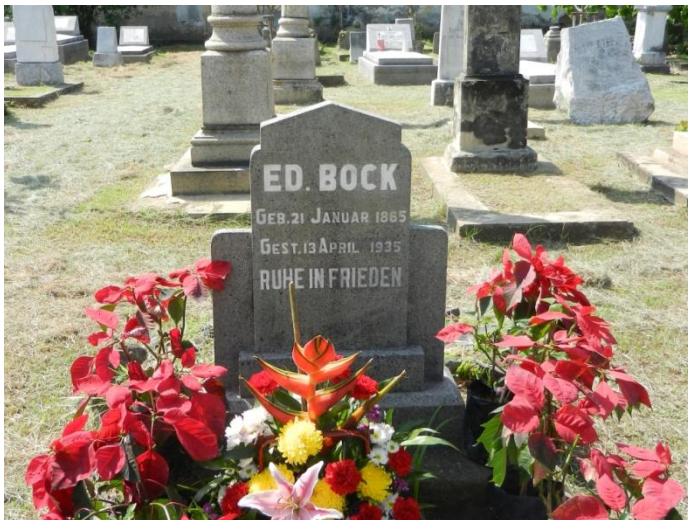




Photogallery – memorials



Graves (clockwise from top left) of: two Jews; a German (drowned) born in the German province of Pomerania; a Pole born in Warsaw; an American government minister born in Newfoundland.



Graves (clockwise from top left) of: a British man; a German – a ship's captain born in Schleswig, Germany; a consul of Italy born in Winterthur, Switzerland; another German.



Graves (clockwise from top left) of:
Danish-born wife of the physician of Siam's King (her husband endowed an English library in Bangkok in her memory which still operates today); the daughter-in-law of the famous Anna Leonowens (the wife of Anna's son Louis – himself a one-time resident with Anna and her husband in Penang, Malaysia); a British Royal Air Force technician.



Graves (from top) of: a London-born British man; a Dutch-born Canadian missionary.



Graves (from top) of: a US Army soldier; a Chinese woman.