

Rambling and Writing in Rectory Lane Cemetery

by

Linda Dawe, creative writing tutor

In August 2018 I had the pleasure of running a couple of *Rambling & Writing* sessions in Rectory Lane Cemetery. Kate Campbell, Community Engagement Officer, led us on a guided walk – and also provided her delicious chocolate tombstone biscuits! The joy of being outdoors in these surroundings, so full of nature and history, lent inspiration to our writing. I would like to share with you some of the ideas drawn from these sessions.



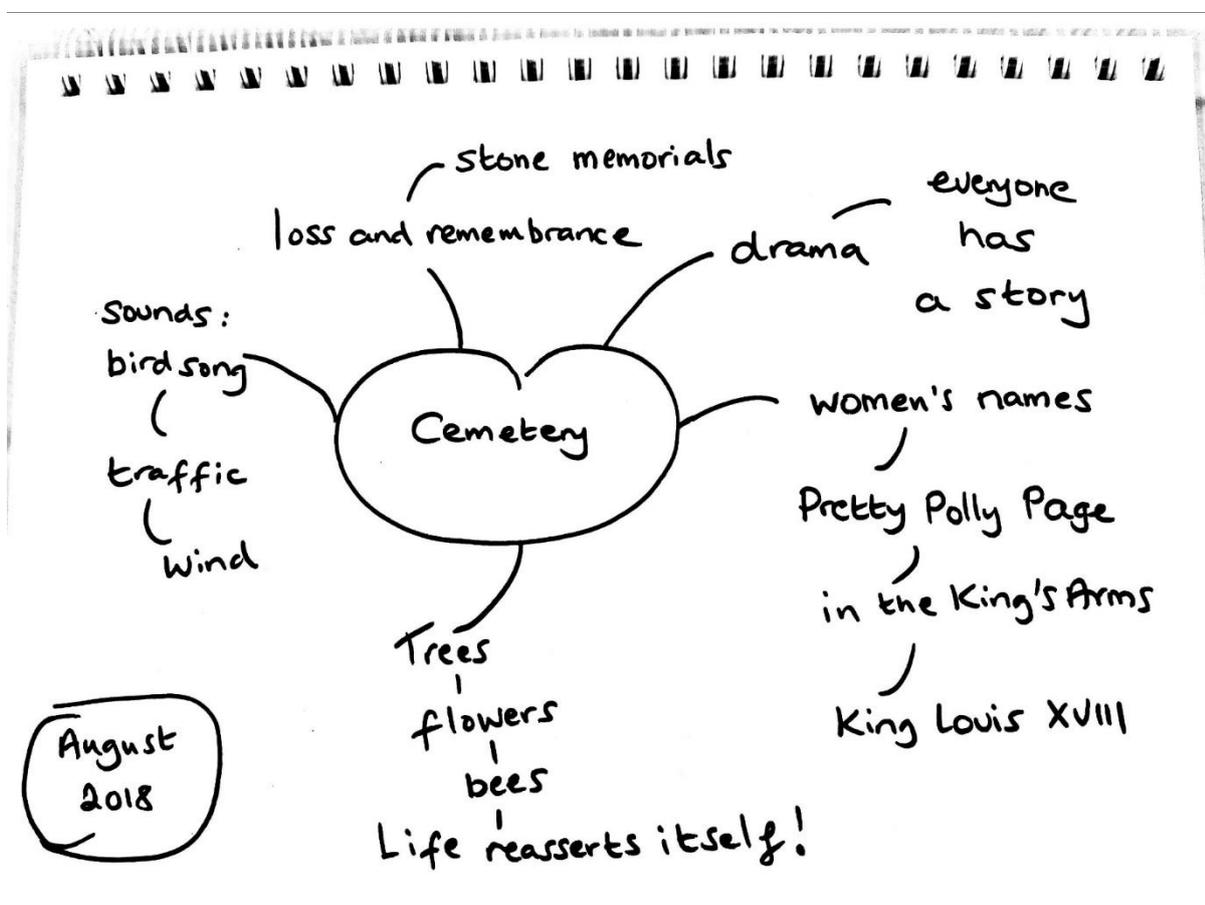
We may indeed not always be lucky enough to enjoy a stroll through the Cemetery, but Lockdown has certainly shown us the value of a daily walk – and any walk, even along a familiar street, can spark off a bit of scribbling if you employ some of the writer's tools of the trade such as observation and imagination. (See the **10 Minute Wonders** worksheet at the end of this article that use these tools.)

As writers your tools of the trade are: **Observation, Memory, Imagination**, and a dash of **Empathy**. On your walk around the Cemetery you'll be drawing on your powers of Observation in particular. Your aim is to gain inspiration for some creative writing from this unique location – it may be the natural history, or the social history of the people remembered here that interests you, people such as pretty Polly Page, daughter of John Page who ran the Kings' Arms public house, and a favourite of exiled King Louis XVIII of France so they say. What's her story?

Or it might be the atmosphere of the cemetery, so tranquil yet so close to Berkhamsted high street, that sparks your imagination. Sounds of bird song contrasting with sounds of traffic below.

Notebooks – it's good to have notebooks of different sizes on the go to jot down your great or little ideas. Taking photos, making quick sketches is also great, then writing up impressions as soon as you can before you forget them. I have a new notebook with plain pages, so I can sketch or write as the mood takes me. You might start with a simple clustering exercise – write the word **Cemetery** in the centre then note down all the ideas that come to you around the page. Create a spidergram of quick notes.

Here's a page torn from my notebook with my rough spidergram.



As you take your walk you can jot down visual impression of shapes, textures of trees, stones etc, or manmade objects such as the tombs. You might take down some names and think: who were these people? What were their lives like? This might lead on to writing a piece of fiction, poetry, or some descriptive nature writing. It's up to you how you develop your ideas. A simple notebook and pen is a brilliant resource – so long as you can read your own handwriting! A younger generation will use a mobile phone – just be careful not to accidentally delete your material. It has been known to happen...

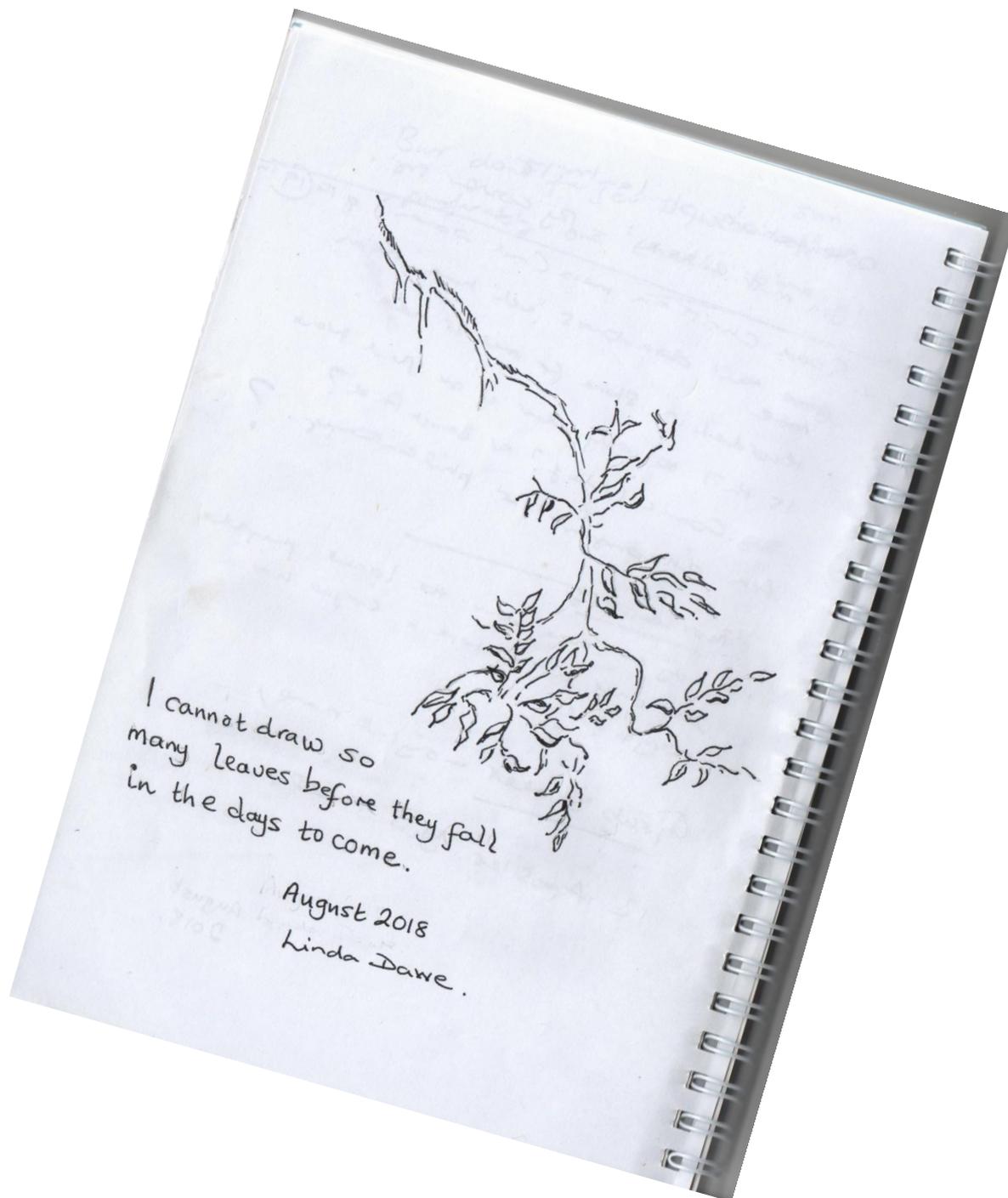
To end our sessions we read one of the most famous examples of rambling and writing – William Wordsworth's poem *Daffodils*. I am sure you will be familiar with it. But have you ever come across his sister Dorothy's account of that same country walk in her Diary? Perhaps you thought William *wandered lonely as a cloud*? Not so! His devoted sister Dorothy was right there along with him, making notes in her notebook, no doubt. If you care to compare his later poem with her entry for that day in April 1802 they are uncannily similar. This is how Dorothy describes her daffodils:

...some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them...

Whilst William tells us: *Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.*

Sounds familiar? However, it did take him two years to come up with his *Daffodils* as genius clearly can't be rushed! But the inspiration was the same, a gentle ramble through some beautiful spring countryside. And I hope that a stroll through Rectory Lane Cemetery with your own notebooks will prove equally fruitful.

Finally here is another page from my notebook of a sketch and haiku made on my walk around the Cemetery on an August day two years ago. I hope to return there before too long to sit in a pleasant green shade and scribble a few more lines. And possibly enjoy a few more of Kate's chocolate tombstone biscuits!



But sadly you cannot always go for a walk to get inspiration – don't worry, here are some ideas for you to get going. Just choose a topic and set a time limit – it concentrates the mind wonderfully. I call this exercise **10 Minute Wonders**. Just about long enough to write about 500 words or fill one side of A4.

10 Minute Wonders

Observation & Imagination

Write a short scene from **observation** – you could be in a supermarket, a Vet's waiting room, sitting in your car waiting to pick up the kids from school. *Anywhere*. You may not be able to jot it down at the time but try to write your observation as soon as possible.

Then write the same scene all over again – using your **imagination** to transform it, shaping it in whatever way you choose. Compare the two pieces.

Find a newspaper headline that intrigues you e.g.

Husband Who Landed Plane on His Wife Says He'll Quit Flying

Budgie Dies from Passive Smoking

Tube train delayed: vasectomy blamed

Or what about this genuine remark overheard in a supermarket checkout queue?

'He only went out to buy his wife a cucumber and never came home for six weeks...'

Now create a story or an article on that topic using your imagination.

Try writing a **Mini Story** – with a beginning, middle and end using 3 key words.

Take a newspaper and highlight 10 or 12 words that take your fancy e.g.

Sun financial difficulties prospects acting Romans

top notch flying love inspirational staggered chocolate

Now choose just *three* of those words and include them in your Mini Story.

(OK there's always some Smart Alec who includes every single word!)