

# **BURIALS IN THE WARREN & PLUMSTEAD MARSHES**

William French was buried in unconsecrated ground on around 22-Aug-1810, aged just 27. We originally thought this would have been on Plumstead Marshes on the ridge near the Tripcock Trees close to the River Thames, but it now seems that this was later practice and in 1810 he would have been buried within the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich in the east part of the Warren. The cemeteries were visible as rows of hillocks with no defined boundaries. Bones were found during building work in 1859 and 1912.

William died on the Savage hospital ship having been taken ill on the Retribution

Half a century later, Mayhew and Binny's write of thee later burials as follows. The following transcription is from pages 199-200 and 223 to 225 of The Hulks at Woolwich in

## **THE CRIMINAL PRISONS OF LONDON AND SCENES OF PRISON LIFE**

**BY**  
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**WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS  
FROM PHOTOGRAPHS**

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### **Pages 199-200**

Indeed we were assured by one of the warders, who had served under the old hulk "regime," that he well remembers seeing the shirts of the prisoners, when hung out upon the rigging, so black with vermin that the linen positively appeared to have been sprinkled over with pepper; and that when the cholera broke out on board the convict vessels for the first time, the chaplain refused to bury the dead until there were several corpses aboard, so that the coffins were taken to the marshes by half a dozen at a time, and there interred at a given signal from the clergyman; his reverence remaining behind on the poop of the vessel, afraid to accompany the bodies, reading the burial-service at the distance of a mile from the grave, and letting fall a handkerchief, when he came to "ashes to ashes and dust to dust," as a sign that they were to lower the bodies.

The Convicts' Burial Ground. We turned away, and went farther over the marshes, the ground giving way under our feet; and presently we passed behind the butt, while the Minié balls were

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THE CONVICTS BURIAL-GROUND

whistling through the air, and that solitary man was marking the hits. We approached a low piece of ground-in no way marked off from the rest of the marsh - in no way distinguishable from any section of the dreary expanse, save that the long rank grass had been turned, in one place lately, and that there was an upset barrow lying not far off. Heavy, leaden clouds were rolling over head, and some heavy drops of rain pattered upon our faces as we stood there. We thought it was one of the dreariest spots we had ever seen.

"This," said the governor, "is the Convicts' Burial Ground !" We could just trace the rough outline of disturbed ground at our feet. Beyond this was a shed, where cattle found shelter in had weather; and to the right the land shelved up between the marsh and the river. There was not even a number over the graves; the last, and it was only a month old, was disappearing. In a few months, the rank grass will have closed over it, as over the story of its inmate. And it is, perhaps, well to leave the names of the unfortunate men, whose bones lie in the clay of this dreary marsh, unregistered and unknown. But the feeling with which we look upon its desolation is irrepressible. ... We followed the governor up the ridge that separates the marsh from the river, and walked on, back towards the arsenal. As we walked along we were told,

that under our feet dead men's bones lay closely packed; the ridge could no longer contain a



The "red dead nettle", "rubrum lamium" or "lamium purpureum".

body, and that was the reason why, during the last five or six years, the lower ground had been taken.

Then there is a legend - an old, old legend, that has passed down to the present time - about a little pale-blue flower, with its purple leaves - the "rubrum lamium"- which, it is said, grows only over the convict's grave-a flower, tender and unobtrusive as the kindness for which the legend gives it credit. Botanists, however, will of course ruthlessly destroy the local faith that has given this flower value; for they will tell you it is only a stunted form of the "red dead nettle."

We pass from the graves-meet a perambulating guard, who signals "All right !" by saluting and raising his hand-and then, recrossing the canal-bridge, where the convicts are stacking wood, and the click and ring of bricklayers' trowels are heard, relieved now and then by the reports of hit ordnance rifle-practice, we make our way towards the boat saluted by the "All rights" and salutes of the officers of other working parties that we pass by the way.