

BATH AND WELLS DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

CHURCHYARDS: THEIR CARE, REORDERING AND RECORDING

This memorandum is not concerned with modern memorials (which are covered by the Churchyard Rules) but with the appropriate care and proper maintenance of the churchyard as a whole. The DAC is directly concerned with both artistic and historical aspects of the churchyard, both as a frame and background for the church, and as an important archive of historical facts about parishioners. The positive artistic merit of many monuments and carved gravestones adds a third major factor.

It is a sad fact that, for nearly a century, there has been a steadily growing tendency to clear churchyards, wholly or in part, of their monuments and stones. This process reduces the surroundings of the church to a mere lawn, which is easy to keep mown, but has rejected the traditional association between the parochial place of worship and the mortal remains of many generations of parishioners. The loss of beauty and of continuity, in this respect, has been tragic. The DAC cannot too strongly urge parishes to do everything possible to maintain the traditional feeling of the churchyard as the setting for the church itself.

This does not mean that improvements cannot be effected. In the first place, the best modern methods of grass-cutting should be employed, including the use of trimmers for dealing with awkward areas not easily reached by a mowing machine. Secondly, and especially where there is a local tradition of such use, consideration should be given to the folding of sheep in the churchyard, different areas being folded in rotation with easily moveable hurdles or wire-netting. This widespread ancient practice is being revived in some dioceses and has much to recommend it.

In any case where a general reordering of the churchyard is proposed, a plan of all monuments and stones, correctly to scale, should be prepared; this should be provided with a full copy of all the inscriptions, numbered to correspond with the plan. This record has to be deposited for permanent preservation in the Diocesan Record Office, and no application for reordering can be considered until a satisfactory plan and record has been submitted. Experience shows that difficulty is often found in reading the inscriptions on the older and more weathered memorials, and it is often essential to enlist the help of experts such as members of those family history societies which cover the diocese (the Bristol and Avon FHS and the Somerset and Dorset FHS). Essential facts no longer legible can often be supplied by careful comparison with the registers. The easiest way to read difficult and sometimes seemingly illegible inscriptions is at night, with the aid of a torch; this normally eliminates any need to clean the stone. Alternatively the use of a mirror (the larger the better) on a sunny day, angled to cast light across the stone, makes the reading of inscriptions very simple. Neither of these methods harms the stones. Very cautious cleaning with a brush (bristle brushes only: wire brushes must **never** be used) should be regarded as a last resort. It is of particular importance that all inscriptions dating from before about 1850

should be recorded carefully, as these in almost all cases provide a source of information not otherwise collected (eg actual date of death) before Civil Registration began in 1837, and indeed poorly recorded for some years thereafter.

It is suggested that proposals for reordering, subject to the previous provision of the plan and record, should consist only of:

- Removal of mere fragments or broken and illegible stones no longer of any artistic interest. However it should be borne in mind that such stones still act as grave markers, and they may be protecting other stones. Ideally only those illegible stones which are potentially dangerous should be removed.
- Removal of **uninscribed** kerbstones around graves, where an inscribed memorial is to remain in position
- The resiting (using a concrete foundation only where necessary) of old leaning stones which constitute an obstruction or danger. It is important that the position from which they are temporarily removed should be carefully marked, and that they be re-erected as nearly in their original position as possible.
- The levelling of turfed mounds. The positions of such mounds should be marked (eg by a broken or dotted line) on the plan, before levelling.

For the sake of completeness of record, and the convenience of future enquirers, it is recommended that a record of all the inscribed memorials inside the church should be made at the same time, and prefixed to the recorded inscriptions from the churchyard – it is best to number these separately to allow for future additions.

Assistance in compiling an inventory of churchyard monuments may be obtained from the following publications:-

- “How to record Graveyards” by Jeremy Jones, published by the Council for British Archaeology
- “Monuments and their Inscriptions: a practical guide” by H Leslie White, published by the Society of Genealogists
- “Notes on the Reordering of Memorial Inscriptions” by J L Rayment, published by the Federation of Family History Societies
- “The Churchyards Handbook” issued by the CCC and available from Church House Bookshop – 4th edition published May 2001
- “English Churchyard Memorials” by Frederick Burgess (SPCK 1963)
- “Churchyards” by Pamela Burgess

Members of the Society of Genealogists , the Federation of Family History Societies and members of the local history societies (whose names and addresses area available from the British Association for Local History) are often able to assist parishes with the compilation of descriptive lists of churchyard memorials.

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