



## ***CHURCHYARD MEMORIALS: A GUIDE FOR THE BEREAVED***

Coming to terms with the death of a loved one is inevitably painful and difficult and we need to recognise this as completely normal. For those of us who were closest to the person who died, there are also numerous practical tasks to be attended to, many of which are not at all straightforward. The business of choosing how the body should be dealt with [by burial or cremation], selecting a place in which to bury the body or the ashes, and in due course deciding what headstone to put up and what it should say can also be a source of anxiety and distress. But it can be part of the process of coming to terms with it all, of saying good-bye and moving forward.

Once you have chosen burial or cremation, and the body or ashes have been buried, you will sooner or later have to choose a headstone or other memorial of some kind. This too is not an easy matter – not least because it can re-open old wounds – however it is important to get it right. These notes aim to explain what needs to be done, and how you can go about achieving a memorial which will be a fitting tribute to someone who has died. Take time to read it carefully, and remember these two principles:

- Most decisions can and should be delayed until you feel ready to make them; a decision made in a hurry may be regretted later.
- At any stage, if in doubt, please ask.

### ***The Headstone***

Churchyards are, usually, full of character. But, like people, they are all different. Just as a memorial that might be entirely suitable for one person would be altogether wrong for someone else, so a headstone that is appropriate for one churchyard may be unsuitable for another. The same is true in some cases between different parts of the same churchyard, thus, the first principle is that a memorial should respect its surroundings. A memorial should be in harmony with those round about and with the churchyard as a whole; and the appearance of the churchyard should harmonise with that of the surrounding village. This does not mean that there has to be strict uniformity. Indeed, some churchyards are, rightly, criticised for being too uniform – which leads to them being bland and dull. However, a memorial should not stick out like a sore thumb. The reason for this is that the churchyard will last for many years to come; and its

character depends on that of all the memorials within it. Not one of those should spoil that general appearance. In practice, this will mean that the choice of stone for a memorial; its size; thickness; shape and general design; should only be finalised after looking carefully at the churchyard as a whole and in particular at the part of it containing the grave under consideration. Memorials that are much darker; lighter; taller, or smaller than those nearby, or which are of a completely different stone, are unlikely to fit in harmoniously. Nor are those which are in the form of a book or an angel, or some other sculpture – unless there are many others of a similar character in the immediate vicinity. Experience suggests that stones used in buildings nearby or traditional to the local area; or stones closely similar to them in colour and texture; are usually much more appropriate. Black stones, on the other hand; most marbles and granites; stones with a highly polished surface; are less likely to be suitable in most contexts; and memorials of synthetic stone or plastic are almost never likely to be. The choice of lettering, too, needs to be made in the light of what has been used nearby – in some churchyards for example, gold lettering may be appropriate, but in most it will not; and plastic lettering will always be unsuitable. Photographs or portraits of the deceased are almost always inappropriate, as they would be totally out of character with an English churchyard. Consent to approve a monument will only be given to those which comply with the relevant guidelines which is why these notes have been drafted for your guidance. There may be local variations in each of our churchyards; they will therefore need to be consulted as appropriate.

### *Future Maintenance*

Our churchyards have to be maintained by the parish for centuries to come and this is often done by volunteers. This means that memorials should be designed to allow for that continuing maintenance to be as simple as possible, which is for everyone's benefit – you would not wish to find the churchyard full of untidy and unkempt graves when you return to visit the one you have introduced. So the second principle is that a memorial should not impose an unreasonable burden on future generations.

Thus, normally, graves should not contain kerbed surrounds, with or without railings or chains, as these may impede the cutting of the surrounding grass. This is also part of harmonising with others nearby; and in many cases may not apply, therefore, if there is a tradition of such graves, or other types of surrounds, in the immediate vicinity of the grave in question.

You need to consider carefully how you want to deal with flowers. Cut flowers are a traditional form of showing affection or respect for the departed; but dead flowers should be removed as soon as possible. [Volunteers do remove dead flowers on a regular basis]. Some types of headstone provide a place for a small vase or jar for flowers; this enables them to be kept in water and thus to last for longer, but they still die in due course; and an empty jar, or simply an unused space, looks worse than no flowers at all. Alternatively you might consider planting a few spring bulbs on the grave, in front of the headstone – although anything in the nature of a garden is not appropriate. Artificial flowers obviously last longer than natural ones, but seldom look 'real' and in due course they too decay and look tatty; they are also considered by many to be inappropriate in a churchyard, and are thus generally discouraged. If a headstone is erected above a grave, the ground should be levelled before it is put in place. In other cases, a grave may be levelled by those responsible for the maintenance of the churchyard at any time once 12 months have elapsed since the last burial in it.

## *Inscriptions*

Often the most difficult decision is what to put on the headstone. It is important not to rush into this; what seems suitable just after the funeral may seem less so after a little time has passed. Here the only guiding principle is that the inscription should be the most appropriate to the circumstances.

Thus, the first consideration is that the memorial should commemorate, accurately, the existence of the person who has died. It should therefore record either his or her full name or else the surname and the first name by which he or she was general known [for example, “Thomas Joseph Smith” or “Thomas Smith”]. It is perfectly appropriate to include as well any term of affection or widely-used nickname [“Dad” or “Tommy”], perhaps in brackets or smaller type. The memorial should also record the date of death and wherever possible either the date of birth or the age at death.

Secondly, a name on its own says little; and a memorial is possibly the only place to say something publically about the person who has died. It may be appropriate to record what she did [“Local Member of Parliament” or “Midwife in this village for forty years”]; or some feature of his character [“a much love grandfather”]. Some may wish to add scriptural text, or an extract from a poem, or some other suitable words, inspired by reflection on the life of the departed, however any inscription should be short and to the point; and should avoid the trite or overly sentimental,. Here, particularly, any decision should not be rushed.

Thirdly, artwork may be added, at the discretion of the mason – either traditional Christian symbols [such as the Cross], or other decorative items [such as flowers] or, where appropriate some other device reflecting the life of the person who has died – examples might be a fishing rod in the case of a keen fisherman, or a much loved toy in the case of a child.

## *Procedure*

Local stonemasons will be able to help with ideas for memorials and will give you an estimate as to costs. They will usually have a range of standard memorials and will probably be able to indicate where you can see an example of any particular pattern. However, do not consider only ‘standard’ designs – the person whose life you are commemorating was, after all, presumably not a ‘standard’ person. An individually commissioned memorial will almost certainly cost more, but may be a more fitting tribute.

If you have not already chose a stonemason, a current list of approved stonemasons regularly operating in this diocese may be obtained from the Secretary of the Diocesan Advisory Committee, The Old Palace, Deansway, Worcester WR1 2JE [tel: 01905 732809 email: jdentith@cofe-worcester.org.uk]. Alternatively, a list of others who may be suitable for your burial, then the ground will have settled.

Do not become totally committed to any particular idea until you have thought it through carefully, and discussed it further if you need to; and do not actually commission any work until you have received formal approval and the signed Application for Inclusion of a Memorial into a Churchyard, as you would be placed in a very difficult position if approval was not given for a memorial that had already been completed. [It is normal for signed consent to be returned to the stonemason who has assisted you in filling in the form].

### *Approval for the Gravestone*

You should seek approval for your chosen memorial by filling in the form, normally your chosen stonemason usually does this with you. The form must be signed both by you and by the stonemason, and accompanied by the appropriate fee [the money raised in this way helps to pay for the maintenance of the churchyard, which after all will be the setting, in years to come, for the memorial you have chosen].

Once consideration has been given to the application, if the proposed memorial conforms to the relevant guidelines above, it will normally be approved without further ado. Occasionally, it may be necessary for others to be consulted, for example, where a memorial is in some way out of the ordinary. This does not necessarily mean that it will not be approved, but the approval process may take a little longer.

Particular requirements may be obtained from Memorials by Artists, Snape Priory, Saxmundham, Suffolk IP17 1SA [tel: 01728 688934 [www.memorialsbyartists.co.uk](http://www.memorialsbyartists.co.uk)]

Do not rush this process; normally an application should not be made until at least six months after the burial, then the ground will have settled. Do not become totally committed to any particular idea until you have thought it through carefully, and discussed it further if you need to; and do not actually commission any work until you have received formal approval and the signed Application for Inclusion of a Memorial into a Churchyard, as you would be placed in a very difficult position if approval was not given for a memorial that had already been completed [It is normal for signed consent to be returned to the stonemason who has assisted you in filling in the form].

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Once a particular design has been approved it must not be altered without further approval. If you do change your mind, you should fill in and submit a new application form for the revised proposal, you will not need to send a second fee.

The procedure set out above also applies where an alteration is to be made to an existing memorial [for example to add the name following a second burial, for which there is a small fee].

### *Approval by the Chancellor*

In some cases, it will not be possible to approve a proposed memorial [or alteration of an existing one] if it is considered that it does not comply with the relevant guidelines, or that it is likely to be controversial for some reason, or that it is in any way inappropriate.

If it is supported in principle but it does not comply with the guidelines it will be forwarded to the Diocesan Register together with a letter of support. The PCC or Priest will let you know that this has happened and why. The proposal will then be considered by the PCC or Priest and the Chancellor of the Diocese and he will either grant or refuse approval [known as a faculty].

If on the other hand the PCC or Priest are unable to support the proposal for any reason we will let you know, together with a brief statement of the reason why and we will refund the fee. You are then at liberty to apply for a faculty from the Registrar if you wish, from whom you will be able to obtain the necessary application form. The Registrar will also be able to tell you what the current fee is, to be paid at the time of submitting the application; this covers the administrative costs involved and is not refundable.

It is hoped you will not have to go through this procedure as we hope you will have had the opportunity to discuss this and avoid any difficulty.

### *Burial of Ashes*

It may be your wish or the wish of the deceased that his or her ashes should be interred in the churchyard. At the internment of ashes they are generally poured directly into the ground not less than 100 mm [4 inches] below the surface and should not be scattered or strewn on the surface. If they are to be buried in a container, it should be made of perishable material, preferably wood.

Fresh unwrapped flowers may be laid at the place of internment to mark anniversaries, but should be removed after a short period, so as to keep up a suitable appearance of the area. [Volunteers will on a regular basis remove perished flowers and foliage].

Please consult the Priest or PCC if you would like a small plaque or stone over the ashes. Normally, provided that the design and size of the plaque or stone are in keeping with the surroundings it will be approved. However in some of our churchyards guidelines have been laid down which will need to be consulted. The fees are laid down by the Church of England. Your Stonemason or Funeral Director will help you complete the form for approval.

### *Unauthorised Memorials*

Finally, you should note that, if a memorial is erected without being approved either by the Priest, PCC or the Diocesan Chancellor, the Chancellor could order it to be removed – at the expense of whoever erected it. This applies also where approval is given for a particular memorial, but a different one is erected without further approval.

We realise how important this memorial will be to both you and your family so please do not hesitate to contact the Priest or PCC if you need any help.

May we please ask that you do not use glass containers for grave flowers, if they are hit by a strimmer they scatter broken glass across a large area, causing danger to animals and people alike?

Thank you.