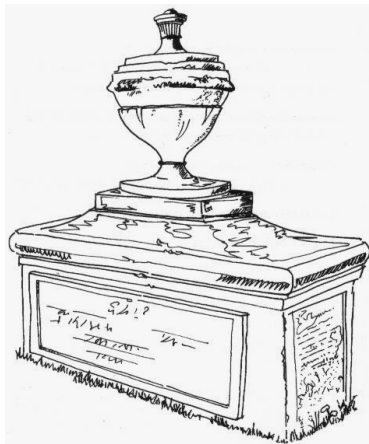


Churchyard Archaeology and History

Few places can be more evocative of the past than churchyards, but they can also contain real detailed evidence of past life, human and other.

In archaeological terms, a churchyard may contain buried evidence of earlier human use of the site generally; as some sites may have pre-Christian origins, such continuity of use may span many centuries. There may be buried remains of structures, paths, boundaries and other features which can throw light on the history and development of the church building itself. Historic burials can provide information about past funerary practices and human remains can reveal information about diet, disease and other aspects of human life.

Such information is usually inaccessible because of the difficulties of conducting archaeological excavations in living churchyards, but other types of evidence do not require ground disturbance. Churchyards often contain or are associated with visible earthworks, ranging from disused boundaries marking the former extent of the burial ground, to castle-mounds illustrating the close links between church and secular powers in the Middle Ages. The relationship between the church and its surroundings - in the urban plan, the village scene or the wider countryside - can throw light on the socioeconomic history of the area. Even the shape of the churchyard can be suggestive - a roughly circular plan is often thought to indicate a pre-or early Christian origin.



But archaeology is only part of the picture -

churchyards often contain important and attractive buildings and structures - and not just the church itself. Perimeter walls, lychgates, preaching crosses and sundials are interesting features in their own right, but they also illustrate changes in taste, fashion or technology in a very immediate and tangible way.

Gravestone and other memorials are particularly rich in history and display information on subjects ranging from the technology of stone quarrying and cutting to fashions in architecture and verse. Unlike the church building itself churchyards are rarely protected by Listing or Scheduling legislation and they suffer from pressures of natural decay, rampant vegetation and vandalism of all sorts. They need and deserve care and attention, not for their historic interest as such, but because that history helps to locate and secure us against the uncertainties of the new Millennium.

Management of Archaeological Features

Features such as stone preaching crosses, statues, sundials or unearthened sarcophagi in the churchyard, and gargoyles, sheila-na-gigs, or any unusual stone features on the church itself are all of special historical and archaeological interest. Care of all stonework is essentially as described in the Stonework section. Inspect regularly and keep free of ivy, other woody stems, saplings, or brambles. An item such as a preaching cross or ancient sarcophagus is relatively rare, so it is important to preserve the stonework as far as possible. When pieces crumble away with weathering, it may be possible to find fragments nearby and undertake restoration work if funds permit. Advice on restoration work can be provided by local church architects. The advice often given, should a feature be weathering quickly, is for it to be moved into the interior of the church if space permits (always seek permission and advice). Architects can also often be helpful in suggesting sources of funding.

Wooden artifacts such as crosses are sometimes ancient. Oak weathers well and may not need much attention for many years, but regular inspections should be made of wooden structures, especially lych-gates, to see if they are in need of repair or restoration.

Health and safety is also a consideration with

outdoor, wooden or stone structures. They should be regularly inspected to check that there is no potential source of injury possible.

Surveys

If your churchyard has unusual features, an archaeological survey without digging could be worthwhile. A survey may reveal previously unnoticed treasures, as often items may be half-buried in the ground and quite accessible. A survey would also provide information on former churchyard boundaries; the likelihood of other buildings previously existing nearby; the approximate age of each section of the churchyard and the approximate dating of one-off features, such as preaching crosses. A churchyard archaeological dig could take place if, for example, underground drainage work was essential. This is costly, however, and an alternative is to have a 'watching' brief for an archaeologist to observe any digging work in progress, but not participate other than writing a report on findings unearthed. This is likely to be grant-aided if done in conjunction with other grant-aided work.

The Law

As churchyards are historic sites, it is illegal to dig (other than grave-digging) without applying for permission from the Diocese, and no large scale digging work should take place without an Archaeologist in attendance. Also no item of churchyard stonework should be moved without similar permission being granted. Diocese offices usually have information and advice on archaeology of churches and churchyards. The local Archdeacon is the point of reference for all matters relating to the law in churchyards attached to Anglican buildings. Contact your local Council Archaeology Department or Church Offices for further advice

The Churchyards Handbook and *Recording and Analysing Gravestones* contain examples of monument/memorial recording forms should you wish to record your churchyard gravestones.

Publications

The Churchyards Handbook

P Burman and Very Rev H Stapleton FSA.

Church House Publishing

Recording and Analysing Graveyards H.
Mytum.

Practical Handbook in Archaeology IS
Council for British Archaeology

Contacts

The County Museum Services

County Archaeological Services

Institute of Field Archaeologists
University of Reading, 2 Barley Gate, PO Box 239, Reading RG6 7AU (register of archaeologists)

Council for the Care of Churches
Fielden House, Little College Street, London SWLP 3SH

Council for British Archaeology
Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York YO1 9WA

Local amateur History/Archaeological Societies

Church Architects

Secretary of your local Diocesan Advisory Committee DAC