

4. Social History of Burial Grounds



This sheet gives an introduction to social history and ways to investigate the social history of your local burial ground.

Graves contain a reminder of past lives, and are invaluable tools for genealogists. Burial grounds also have their own biographies, and their social history can reveal a fascinating insight into the way our ancestors made decisions on how to provide space for the dead.

SOCIAL HISTORY

Definitions are important! Churchyards and cemeteries fall under completely different legislation, and this difference is a reflection of the very real tensions that have existed over the last three centuries over the ownership and control of burial space.

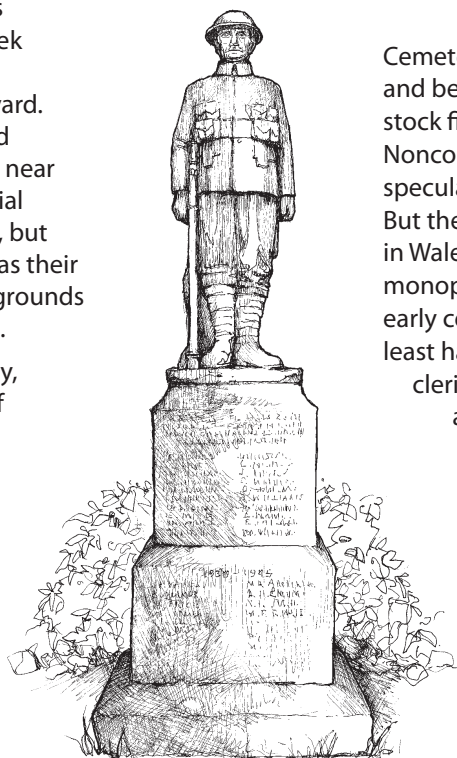
The consecration of land around a church took place routinely from around the tenth century. After the Reformation, The Church of England and Church in Wales, as a Protestant church, did not believe that burial in consecrated ground was necessary to the ultimate destiny of the soul. But consecrating space was still a way of 'dedicating' that space to God, and placing that ground under Church ownership and control.

From the sixteenth century, Dissenters from the Church of England – for example, Quakers, Baptists and Independents or Congregationalists – began to seek alternatives to burial in a Church of England or Church in Wales churchyard. These denominations often founded their own burial grounds, around or near to their chapels. Nonconformist burial grounds could be very large indeed, but are now often at risk of destruction as their ownership becomes moot and the grounds are threatened with redevelopment.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the political and economic power of Nonconformists was increasing rapidly. During the course of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, battles between Church and Chapel were being fought on innumerable fronts. The battle over control of burial space was perhaps their most spectacular tussle, and was argued out in towns and villages throughout England and Wales.

Some historical legalities

One key fact about burial in England and Wales is surprising: no-one has responsibility to provide burial space. The law is and always has been 'permissive', and in the past has relied on each parish vestry to decide for itself how best to provide space for the dead. Communities could continue to use their parish churchyard, but during the eighteen and nineteenth centuries the amount of space available was often overtaken by rapid growth in urban populations.

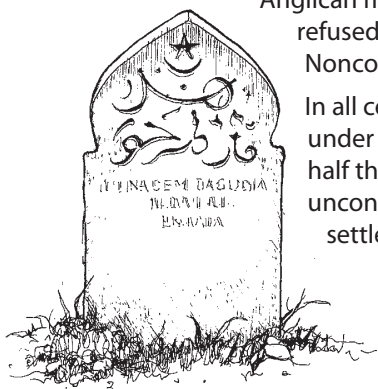


Cemeteries were ostensibly an alternative, and between 1820 and 1850 joint-stock finance provided a method for Nonconformists, town councils – and speculators! – to invest in cemetery space. But the Church of England and Church in Wales did not necessarily lose its near-monopoly of burial space. In many of the early cemeteries, the Bishop consecrated at least half the site and in doing so established clerical compensation for lost burial fee and legal oversight. This is why many cemeteries need 'faculty' or Church planning permission for actions in consecrated sections.

The Burial Acts were established during a time of increasingly passionate protest on the access of Nonconformists to their own independent burial space. Political rivalries between denominations meant that

BURIAL GROUNDS THROUGH TIME

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Anglican ministers sometimes refused churchyard burial to Nonconformists.

In all cemeteries established under the Burial Acts at least half the land had to remain unconsecrated. But this did not settle matters in many rural areas, where there were insufficient numbers of ratepayers to afford a new cemetery. Passions continued to run high in many parishes,

and it was not until the Burial Law Amendment Act 1880 allowed that burial could not be refused to Nonconformists, and that ministers of other denominations could be permitted to take burial services in Anglican churchyards. Nevertheless, church and chapel arguments rumbled well into the twentieth century.

A rich seam of local history

The peculiarities of the law meant that during a time of huge urban and rural population change, communities as ratepayers were deciding for themselves how best to make arrangements where new burial space was required. This was also a time when fashions in commemoration meant that monuments were becoming increasingly elaborate, taking up even more space in churchyards that were already overcrowded.

Churchyard extensions were commonplace, made easier through a change of law in 1867 which meant that anyone donating an acre to the churchyard could keep a sixth of the extension for their own family burial. During the nineteenth century, burial in the church itself was banned for public health reasons, so the churchyard became a new location for aristocratic funerary elaboration.

INVESTIGATING SOCIAL HISTORY

You can use a variety of local historical documents to investigate the history of your burial site and create a biography:

Maps

- Old maps are a great source of information, particularly in establishing whether and when a churchyard extension took place.
- Look for the location of new cemeteries on old maps: where they, who owned the land, how much did it cost?

- Was the cemetery itself extended? When, and why? Were there arguments as to who would pay for it?

Vestry minutes

- Vestries kept formal minutes, and many are still available in record offices. Search the vestry minutes around the time of a churchyard extension. Chances are there was a burial sub-committee. Fairs and fetes were often held to pay for the new churchyard wall.
- The minutes might show arguments between ratepayers as to whether the churchyard should be extended, or a new cemetery established.

Burial board minutes

- Some minute books are remarkably detailed: there are instances of whole boards being disbanded because no-one could agree on the apportionment of land between Anglicans and Dissenters; minutes often show how decisions were made about what kind of monuments would be allowed, or the range of prices, or what terms might be agreed with the Poor Law Guardians on pauper burials.
- Other documents are often kept with minutes including plans and architectural drawings; letters between the burial board and the Home Office sometimes arguing about the legality of certain practices; and surveys of how other burial boards were deciding issues like allowing Saturday and Sunday burials.

Terriers

- Routinely included questions on the churchyard itself and on burial fees which could include itemisation of the cost of bell ringing, and itemised detail on monument erection fees and other charges.



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Burial registers

- Burials taking place under the Burial Law Amendment Act are marked as such in the register: look out for any comment the vicar might make in the margin.
- Count whether the number of burials was increasing prior to an extension being made: was it the number of burials or the elaboration of memorials that was the problem?

Local newspapers

- Reports on insanitary and overcrowded churchyards, consecration services, fractious burial board meetings, and on whether the churchyard should be closed all gained column inches.

London gazette

- Any churchyard closure had a formal notice in the London Gazette, searchable on-line. Check the burial records: did burials in your closed churchyard continued anyway? And what did people think about that?

By Dr. Julie Rugg



Useful websites

www.york.ac.uk/spsw/research/cemetery-research-group/about-cemeteries

www.thegazette.co.uk

Useful reading

Sylvia Barnard (1990) *To Prove I'm Not Forgotten: Living and Dying in a Victorian City, Manchester*: Manchester University Press

Chris Brooks (1989) *Mortal Remains: The History and Present State of the Victorian and Edwardian Cemetery, Exeter*: Wheaton

Julie Rugg (2013) *Churchyard and Cemetery, Tradition and Modernity in Rural North Yorkshire*, Manchester: Manchester University Press