

2. History, Folklore and Traditions



This sheet considers the history of burial grounds and the traditions and folklore associated with churchyards. This information can be useful to inspire interpretation, events and activities.

HISTORY

Britain contains many burial sites which chart the passing centuries, from Neolithic long barrows to new cemeteries and green burial sites.

We do not know the origin of churchyards in Britain but it is likely that some of our churchyards pre-date the church building.

In some cases churches and Christian burial grounds either replaced or were attached to existing pagan sites. It was Pope Gregory the Great (590AD) who recommended churchyards as burial places, so that worshippers walked past graves and remembered the dead in their prayers.

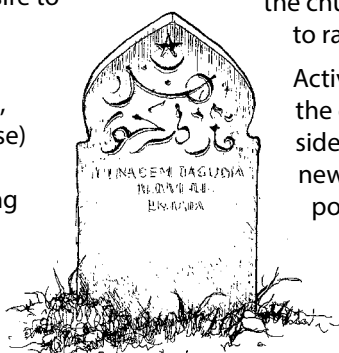
Churchyards were first consecrated for burial after Cuthbert, Archbishop of Canterbury obtained permission from the Pope in 752.

Cemeteries can give an interesting insight into the history of immigration in Britain. Large cemeteries often contain areas dedicated to a particular nationality or faith such as Russian, Serbian or Greek Orthodox. There are also burial grounds specific to faiths including Jewish and Muslim cemeteries.

The area of one acre around a church for burial was laid down in 943 by the Welsh king Hywel Dda. By the 10th century the area of 'God's Acre' was being marked by wooden crosses in churchyard corners.

Mechanisation of agriculture and the Industrial Revolution saw a migration of people from the countryside to rapidly expanding towns and cities. Cemeteries arose from the resulting overcrowding of urban churchyards and the Victorian desire to create gardens of remembrance.

The last few decades have seen the establishment of green burial grounds and, more recently, of 'QR' codes (Quick Response) giving digital information about the deceased. Burial grounds make a fascinating subject for studying history and social change.



FOLKLORE AND TRADITIONS

When we look at a burial site today what comes to mind? If we see only a group of tombstones, then we are missing much that these special places can tell us. Now relatively undisturbed and peaceful, they were once places for community activity; where the sacred and the secular met.

Much is known about our historic church and chapel yards:

- Yew groves and trees were sacred places to ancient Britons and some of the very old yew trees found in churchyards are known to be older than Christianity in Britain.
- There are records of Saxon Moots or parliaments being held in churchyards as well as markets, meetings and outdoor religious gatherings.
- On old church buildings you'll often find deep grooves scratched in the stonework. These are where the local men sharpened their arrow points during compulsory archery practice at butts set up in the churchyard.
- Miracle plays and sacred dramas in which clergy took part were once performed in churchyards and Morris dancers took part in ritual dancing relating to pagan fertility cults.
- Games such as quoits, ninepins, and wrestling took place in churchyards, and church or chapel walls were used to play fives. Even cockfighting occurred in the shadow of the church or chapel.

Some of the clergy were not too keen on boisterous sports which encouraged gambling, but King James the First had decreed in 1619 that 'traditional churchyard games' were to be encouraged, providing they were held 'in due and convenient time, and without implement or let of Divine Service'.

Beer festivals are not a new idea; the 'church ales' were feasts of eating, drinking and merrymaking held in the churchyard and organised by churchwardens to raise funds.

Activities took place on the north side of the church although the sunnier southern side might seem more favourable. When a new church was built it would have been positioned to the north of any existing High Cross, so that it would not cast a shadow upon it. The north side of the churchyard, behind the church and

BURIAL GROUNDS THROUGH TIME

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away from the High Cross, became the place where gatherings happened and games were played leaving the southern part as the place of burial. In the past people buried on the north side would be those seen as less worthy such as criminals.

There are many old customs and superstitions concerning churchyards, particularly after darkness has fallen. The young girl strewing grain along the churchyard path at midnight, whom did she hope to see when she turned around?

Why did people creep into the church porch on All Hallows Eve? What voice were they listening for beyond the tightly shut door?

The intriguing folklore associated with burial customs harking back to pagan roots is extensive. This ancient worship of nature continued much longer in country parishes, notably in the Celtic west of Britain.



Early Purple Orchid

Folklore and uses of plants common in burial grounds

Because burial ground grassland is often very old, the flowers found have been present for centuries and there are old names, uses and tales associated with them. Look out for some of these plants.

Snowdrops	Candlemas Bells, February Fairmaids, Mary's Tapers. Candlemas is 2nd February.
Primrose	Prima Rosa – first flower, picked by children to give to parents and used to decorate churches. Primrose Day is 19th April.
Cowslip	Keys of Heaven or St. Peter's Keys. Cowslips were strewn in front of brides, worn in May Day headdresses and used for wine making.
Germander Speedwell	Angel's Eyes, God's Eyes and Eve's Tears – due to the blue of the flowers. Leaves were used for making tea.
Pignut	The tubers are eaten either raw or stewed with meat and taste like young hazelnuts.
Lady's Bedstraw	The name is unchanged and refers to the Virgin Mary. When dried it smells sweet and was stuffed in straw mattresses and strewn on floors.
Greater Stitchwort	Easter Bell or Sunday Whites (in Devon).
Meadow Cranesbill	Grace of God.
Elder	God's Stinking Tree – Elder wood was believed to have been used to make the cross.
Early Purple Orchid	Cain and Abel or Adam and Eve. Tubers were ground to flour and used in a milky drink called Saloop or Saleps.
Comfrey and Lungwort	Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – due to the different colours found on one plant.
Centaury and Solomon's Seal	Jacob's Ladder or Ladder to Heaven

Many churchyards have their own particular tales, entertaining now, but once treated very seriously, and all these are just another part of the treasures contained in our ancient churchyards and burial sites.

Useful contacts

Caring for God's Acre, www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

Local History Societies, www.local-history.co.uk/Groups

National Federation of Cemetery Friends, www.cemeteryfriends.org.uk

Useful reading

Flora Britannica – Richard Mabey, Chatto & Windus

God's Acre: The Flowers and Animals of the Parish Churchyard –
Francesca Greenoak, WI publication

The Cemetery Research Group – www.york.ac.uk/chp/crg/index.htm



Lady's Bedstraw