



Spotter's Guide to Symbolism

Hunting for symbolism on memorials in your local burial ground can be a fun introduction to memorial recording.

If you would like to learn more about memorial recording visit our website:

<https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/resources/recording-memorials/>

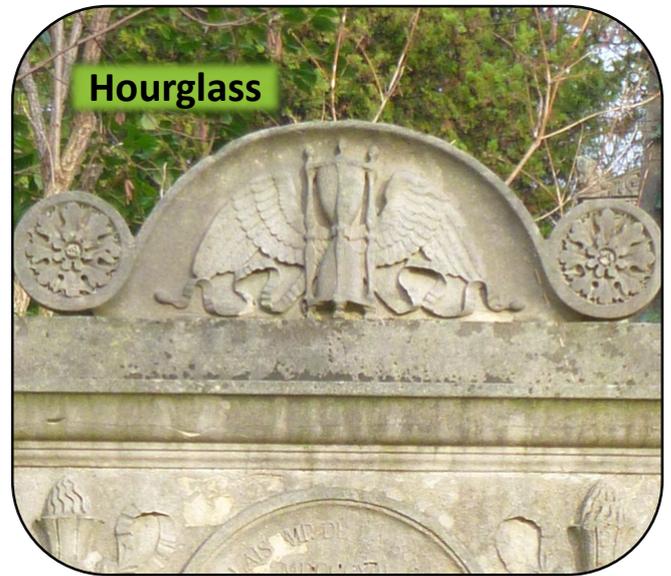
Mortality symbols

The earliest churchyard monuments, often use symbols associated with morality and *Memento Mori* (Remember you must die) which were designed to remind the living to remember they were mortal and prepare for their death and afterlife.



Skulls

Including winged skulls and skull and cross bones are symbols of death.



Hourglass

Also shown as a winged hourglass, both mean that time is fleeting and life is short.



Coffin or gravediggers tools

Reminders of mortality. Shrouds, scythes and figures of death are sometimes depicted too.



Torches

Often shown as burning pointing downwards this is a symbol of death & eternal life.

Romantic and Classical symbolism

These stark mortality symbols started to go out of fashion, replaced by a more romantic set of symbols where winged skulls gave way to cherubs, and inspiration was taken from Roman and Greek art for other symbolism.



Cherubs shown in full or as head and wings only represent spiritual resurrection.



The breaking of the column symbolises that life has been cut short



In the style of Classical funerary urns, often draped—the veil between life and death.



A symbol of victory over death like the laurel wreaths given to Generals and Olympians.



Obelisks symbolise the Sun God Ra but Egyptian styles were associated with tombs by Europeans.



Representation of grief, often depicted in Classical dress, may be comforted by an angel.

Religious and Sentimental symbolism

The Gothic revival popularised many Christian symbols which had been seen as 'Papish' since the Reformation. The Celtic revival, especially in Scotland and Ireland also influenced design. Sentimental symbols including the language of flowers were widespread in the 19th century.



IHS

Often carved with letters entwined, IHS are the first 3 letters of Jesus in Greek.



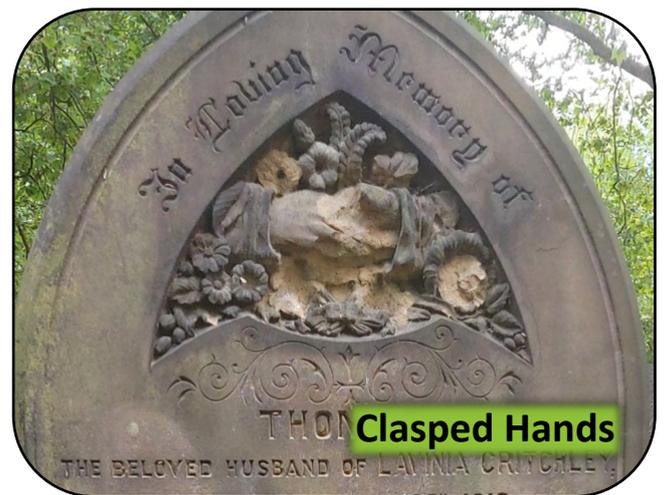
Celtic Cross

Celtic or ringed crosses are often adorned with Celtic knot tracery or other carvings.



Anchor

A symbol of Hope. Sailors sometimes have an anchor or ship (which can symbolise a journey).



Clasped Hands

Family ties or 'we shall meet again' A hand pointing up is the soul ascending.



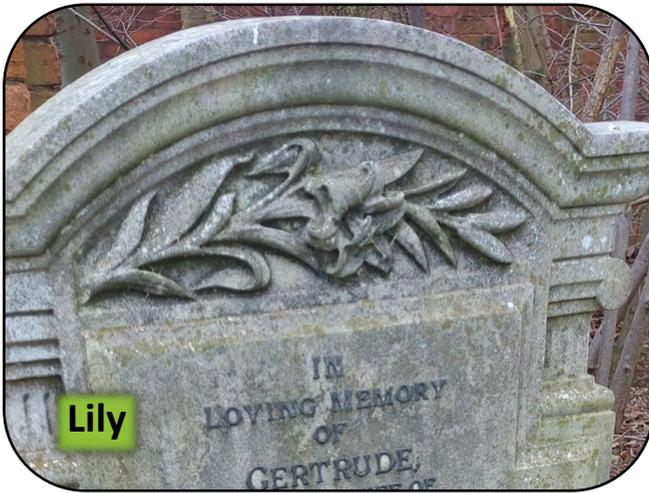
Angel

Agents of god, often pointing to heaven or carrying a trumpet. Statues without wings are often Hope (with anchor) or Faith (with Cross).

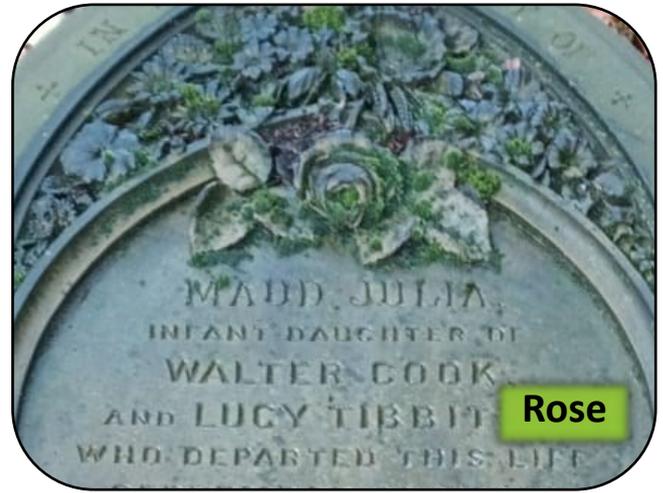


Dove

A symbol of peace, usually carved with an olive branch. Lambs of God also common.



Associated with the Virgin Mary and purity, Lillies are also a symbol of mourning.



Roses are the symbol of love in the Language of the flowers.



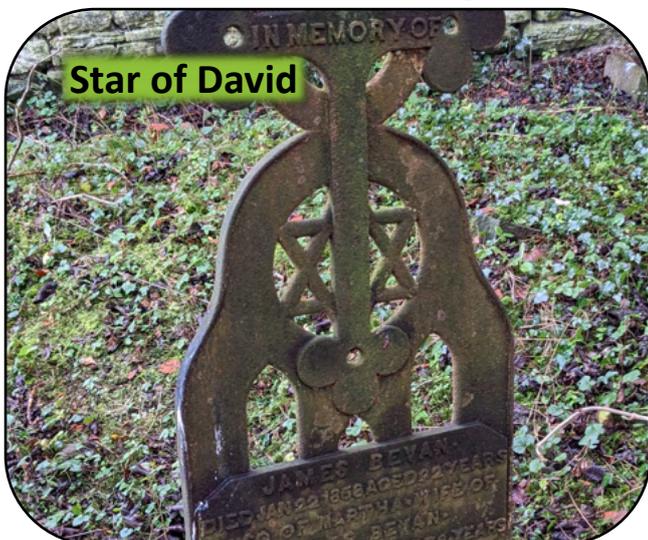
The ties that bind, loyalty and friendship. Three pointed leaves can also mean Holy Trinity.



A symbol of the Passion of Christ. The flowers are said to look like the Crown of Thorns.

Non-Christian symbolism

The oldest surviving Jewish burial ground in the UK is in London and opened in 1657. The oldest Muslim cemetery is in Woking and opened in 1884. Hindus and Sikhs practice cremation, but rarely burials may be found before cremation was legalised in 1884.



This Jewish symbol has been popular on gravestones since the 1930s. Earlier popular symbols include menorah on women's graves.



Muslim gravestones often have carvings of Arabic calligraphy, sometimes the Crescent and Star symbol of Islam is used too.