



Carved in Stone

Understanding Graveyard Memorials

Graveyard memorials become increasingly common from the beginning of the eighteenth century and common for all but the poorest members of society from the beginning of the nineteenth. But don't assume that because your ancestor was poor they would not be remembered on a memorial. Some people of modest means subscribed to burial clubs, which would pay for a headstone. Some might be buried in the grave, or remembered on the headstone of a more prosperous family member. Some might have had a memorial placed on their unmarked grave many years after their burial by children or grandchildren who had become more prosperous.

How to find a Memorial

Before you can find out whether there is a memorial, you will need to know where they were buried (of from 1883 onwards, cremated). This can be difficult. The burial place may be found:

- In the memories of other family members
- In cemetery or undertaker receipts among family papers
- In newspaper death announcements or obituaries
- In online burial indexes
- In online memorial databases (these are often very incomplete)

Once you have found the burial place, the next problem is to find the grave and any memorial which might have been placed there. In municipal cemeteries, the grave location should be recorded in the burial register. Municipal cemeteries are usually divided into sections (often identified by a letter) and by a grave plot within the section (usually by a number). In the best of cemeteries there will be markers against each row of graves indicating the plot numbers in the row. In others the numbering may not be apparent at all and you may have to look at every memorial in the section. In churchyards, the arrangement of the grave plots is usually far from obvious. It can be worth speaking to the minister or others who may have knowledge of the graveyard and its occupants.

You may be disappointed:

- There may have been no memorial. This will be the case if the burial was in a 'common' grave.
- The memorial may have been removed either because of damage, to 'tidy' the graveyard or, more recently, because of safety concerns.
- The memorial may have eroded to illegibility or been vandalised or fallen face down.

If you believe that there might once have been a memorial, you should look into whether anyone has in the past copied the memorials. You may find the memorial was transcribed before it was lost.

What will the Memorial tell me?

As a minimum, a memorial will record the name of the deceased, the year of death and their age. Commonly you will find the full date of their death and sometimes their date of birth. Less frequently you may find an indication of where they lived, particularly if this was a town or village remote from the graveyard. Very occasionally you will find information relating to the cause of their death – 'drowned', 'accidentally killed' or 'a more detailed description. Similarly you will occasionally find reference to their occupation or a prominent public role.

You will frequently find the names of other family members, spouse, parents, children or more distant relations.

The presence of a name on a memorial does not necessarily mean that the person named is buried in the grave. 'Here lies..' is a clear indication of burial, but "In memory of.." is less certain and should be confirmed with the burial register. Sometimes it is clear that the person named was buried (or cremated) elsewhere, sometimes overseas.

What's Special about Manchester?

Those researching ancestors who were buried in and around Manchester are both unfortunate and fortunate. Unfortunate in that the memorials have been removed from virtually all of the old churchyards and two of the three private cemeteries (Ardwick and Rusholme Road), but fortunate that much was recorded before removal. There are also extensive online burial and memorial indexes.

- The burial registers for the Manchester municipal cemeteries have been indexed and made available online (fees apply) through the Manchester Burials web site burialrecords.manchester.gov.uk and those for Oldham on the Oldham Burials web site adt.oldham.gov.uk/BacasWeb/
- The burial registers for the municipal cemeteries of Trafford, Salford and Bolton are available on the commercial deceasedonline.com web site.
- The burial registers for many Church of England graveyards in the Manchester Diocese are available on the ancestry.com web site and the burial registers and memorials for the Ardwick and Rusholme Road private cemeteries on the findmypast.co.uk web site
- MLFHS has compiled an extensive database of memorials in and around Manchester from transcripts dating back to the early 19th century. This includes virtually all of the old central Manchester graveyards.
- MLFHS has also created an extensive index of the burial registers for churches in Manchester, Bolton and Oldham (part of 'The Great Database' in the member area of the society web site.
- There is a project in hand to transcribe the memorials at Manchester General Cemetery, though the transcriptions have not yet been made available to the public. See mgctp.com

While the above provides an outline of how to find and use graveyard memorials, the process is (or can be) considerably more complicated. The notes below explain the system in more detail and discuss search techniques and some of the problems which you may encounter.

Looking More Closely at Graveyard Memorials

Introduction

It is rare to find a memorial to a deceased person dated much before 1600. Those which survive will usually relate to more wealthy people and will most often be found inside a church rather than in a churchyard (where the ravages of time are likely in any event have obliterated such early inscriptions). This is not to say that the graves of the poor were not marked. Many, after the burial, would have been marked with a carved or painted wooden board but this would have perished within a relatively short time leaving the grave unmarked. The establishment of permanent memorials increased steadily until by the Victorian period, even many of the poorer members of society were memorialised in some form. This trend increased into the 20th century but with the increasing popularity of cremation, there has been something of a reduction in the use of permanent memorials.

Burial and Cremation

Until the end of the 18th century, the vast majority of people would have been buried in a churchyard. Each parish church, and most of their chapelries, would have had its own burial ground. There would also have been many nonconformist burial grounds. A small number of private burial grounds had also been established such as Bunhill Fields in London and an increasing number of these began to appear in the early years of the 19th century (Rosary Road, Norwich, 1819; Rusholme Road, Manchester, 1820; Liverpool Necropolis, 1825). The urbanisation of the population during this period placed demands upon parish burial grounds in cities which they were unable to accommodate and many became squalid and unsanitary. Legislation in 1851 banned burials in London city churchyards (and interments in church vaults) and made provision for local authorities to establish out-of-town municipal burial grounds. The act was extended to the rest of the country in 1853. It is from this period that many of the municipal cemeteries date. Graves are generally "permanent" that is to say that once buried, remains are not subsequently removed to charnel houses (as is the practice in some continental countries) though they may be removed and re-buried elsewhere to permit works such as road widening. There is no requirement to establish a memorial and the decision depends on the wishes and financial means of the family. In private cemeteries, it is probable that the majority of graves had a memorial. In municipal cemeteries it is less certain.

The first "official" cremation was carried out at Woking in 1885 but cremation achieved only a limited following until World War 2 after which it rapidly gained popularity until it overtook burial in 1968. Many cremated remains were walled-up in niches (or sometimes buried) at the crematorium and a memorial placed on the plaque closing the niche (or on a conventional "headstone"). More recently it has become the practice to commemorate the deceased by planting a rose bush with a small (and one suspects transient) marker. Even where a niche is used, it is now the practice to lease the niche for 10 or 20 years rather than sell it for permanent occupation. Many people choose to scatter the ashes at some favourite place of the deceased and to leave no memorial permanent or otherwise.

Finding the Body - and the Records

The greatest problem with memorials is locating the place of disposal (the term burial will be used hereafter though the notes apply equally to cremation). There is no publicly available official record of where people were buried. Although they issue a death certificate, this does not record the burial place. Registrars do keep receipts from undertakers recording details of disposal of the body but these are not retained indefinitely and are not open to the public. You therefore need to use other sources such as:

- Family oral record or documents (such as undertakers/cemetery receipts)
- Memorial cards (very popular during the Victorian period)
- Newspaper announcements (few before the 19th century) or obituaries
- Wills may specify where the testator is to be buried
- Local knowledge - what burial places were available in the area?

Our first assumption is often that the body would be buried close to the place where the person died and this will often be the case. It was not uncommon, however, for the body to be taken for burial at some place with family connections - possibly where the person was born or from which the family originally came. It is possible also that the family owned the rights to burial in a grave in a private cemetery and chose to bury the person there rather than close to where they lived, even if this meant a lengthy journey. One must also not overlook fashion. Some cemeteries held an appeal which drew business from many miles away. Brooklands (municipal) Cemetery in Sale (Cheshire) contains memorials to large numbers of people who lived in suburbs of Manchester (Lancashire) and whose bodies would have been taken past the gates of at least one other municipal cemetery on their final journey.

If you cannot identify the burial place with certainty, you will have to check each of the possible burial places. In cities from the early 1800s, it is increasingly likely that the burial will be in a private cemetery rather than a churchyard and from about 1850 in a municipal cemetery. For churchyard burials, the burial registers will usually be found either at the church or more likely in a local record office. For municipal cemeteries and crematoria, most of the registers will be held by the municipal authority who will search for a specific entry. There may be a charge for this service and usually you will be expected to know the date of death. The registers may not be at the cemetery to which they relate. You may have to telephone around to find the ones you want. Some, for closed cemeteries, may be deposited in record offices. The records of private cemeteries, many of which are now closed, may be found in local record offices. Records of private crematoria which are still in operation will be held by the appropriate company. The Brooklands Cemetery example above points to the need to avoid treating administrative boundaries (such as counties) as brick walls.

Burial Records

There are two types of written record which you may encounter. Firstly, there is the burial register. This will generally record burials in the order in which they take place. In church registers, registers seldom identify the location of the grave. In municipal registers the register will contain a record of the grave number which will allow the grave to be located (though you may require assistance in interpreting the numbering system used in a large municipal cemetery). There may also be a "grave book" (or "sexton's book"). This is normal practice for municipal cemeteries but if one ever existed for a churchyard it has often failed to survive. The grave book records the names (and possibly addresses) of those buried in the grave and the date of burial. If the plot was purchased, it will usually record the owner's name. The depth will also be recorded to assist the sexton when future burials are proposed. The grave book is valuable since it may contain names of people not recorded on the memorial.

Monuments and Inscriptions

The existence of a burial does not, of course, mean the existence of a memorial but if one survives it can provide invaluable genealogical information. Some of the possibilities include:

- Date of death (as opposed to burial)
- Date of birth (or possibly age at death - be aware "70th year" means aged 69)
- Residence - usually a town or district rather than a specific address
- Profession or military regiment/rank or ship name
- Relationship to others named on the memorial including in-laws
- Position in family (second son, youngest child etc.)
- Place of burial of other family members not interred in the grave
- Biographical information ("for many years sexton of this parish" etc.)
- Cause of death if by accident

The inscription may also have some eulogistic words about the deceased ("...who bore his illness with fortitude and faith in God"). While these may be accurate, one seldom sees an inscription reading "...who complained incessantly about the slightest inconvenience" and so should be treated with scepticism unless supported by other sources.

Finding Aids

You should explore the sources for burial registers and memorial inscriptions online described in 'What's special about Manchester?' above. These will in many cases produce the burial place and possibly a record of the memorial without further effort. If this does not produce a result, you may have to look to printed resources in record offices.

The difficulty of locating a memorial can be eased to a great extent by the use of indexes and transcriptions of memorial inscriptions. There is often difficulty, however, in determining whether the memorials of any particular burial ground have been recorded. Library catalogues may assist and local family history societies will usually have a good idea of what is available. The Society has published "A Guide to Manchester Burial Grounds"

which provides comprehensive details of all the city's old burial grounds and the location of their records. For Lancashire, the Lancashire Family History & Heraldry Society's publication "Lancashire Graveyards & Burial Grounds" lists the location of many indexes and transcripts. A similar publication for Yorkshire is "Recorded Monumental Inscriptions" from the North east Group of Family History Societies.

As with all transcripts, the possibility of error exists and if possible you should view the original to confirm the accuracy of what has been recorded. You should also note that any index/transcript is only complete up to the date of its compilation. Later memorials will not be included unless as a later supplement. It should also be noted that there is considerable value in older transcripts (such as those in the 19th century Owen Manuscripts in Manchester Archives) since the effects of weathering and vandalism may have subsequently obliterated inscriptions which were legible 50 years or more ago.

For the location of burials, there is currently no comprehensive index. Many church burial registers have been transcribed individually and this may reduce the work involved somewhat. It is difficult, however, if the person was buried many miles from where they lived or were last known to have lived. This is being addressed by the compilation of a National Burial Index under a project run by the Federation of Family History Societies. The third volume of this index was published on DVD in 2010. Coverage is, however very variable across the country depending on the level of volunteer effort available to the individual societies involved. There is considerable information for Yorkshire but nothing for Leicestershire or Cornwall.

Recording Memorial Inscriptions

You will at some stage wish to record a family memorial. The following notes may assist:

- Photograph the memorial if possible - take close ups of the inscription(s). A digital camera may allow you to confirm legibility and save the need to transcribe.
- If you transcribe the inscription, take care with accuracy and completeness. You may find abbreviations such as ILMO (In Loving Memory of), STTMO (Sacred to the Memory of) and TBWO (The Beloved Wife of) useful but avoid abbreviations which you might misinterpret later.
- A worn inscription may be more legible at a time of day when the light strikes it obliquely rather than full on.
- Do not interfere with the stone beyond the removal of undergrowth. Do not scrape off lichens.
- Beware of unstable headstones. a falling stone could kill or maim. Assess the stability before getting too close. Do not let children play on or around stones.
- If possible, speak to the attendant or minister. He may have local knowledge (i.e. location of other family graves).
- Read "Rayment's Notes on Recording Monumental Inscriptions" (FFHS 4th edition 1992) which although written for those involved in projects contains much good advice.

References

Rayment's Notes on Recording Monumental Inscriptions, FFHS, 1992

The Victorian Celebration of Death, James Stephens Curl, Sutton, 2000

English Churchyard Memorials, Hilary Lees, Tempus, 2000

A Guide to Manchester's Burial Grounds, MLFHS, 2005

Lancashire Graveyards and Burial Grounds, LFHHS

Amended 15 June 2020 - John Marsden