

# Can these dry bones live?

## Using the records of death to extend your research

### Introduction

The title of this talk is taken from Ezekiel 27 iii and the 1855 painting "The doubt: Can these dry bones live?" by Henry Alexander Bowler. Although the question was posed in a religious context, it is valid to ask whether the dead can live again through the records left at the time of their death. This talk will discuss the records which are generated by a person's death and how these may be used to look for new lines of research. The talk will centre on graveyard memorials and newspaper death notices but will also touch upon death certificates, wills, burial registers and other resources. Questions such as "When and where did (s)he die?" and "Where was (s)he buried?" will be discussed.

### Overview

When a person died before the start of civil registration in 1837, the only record which can be guaranteed to exist which marks their passing is an entry in a burial register. From 1837 onwards this is supplemented by a death certificate. Neither is a particularly abundant source of information in itself, although each may contain some clues to help take your research forward. Whether there are other records relating to the deceased is dependent in no small part to how prosperous, or otherwise, they were. Families would, where they could afford it, mark the burial with a memorial. Increasingly, from the middle of the 19th century, the death might be announced in a newspaper. Perhaps a will was left, even if the deceased was not a wealthy person. Their passing might also be recorded by religious or commercial organisations with which they were connected. All of these can be of value in developing a fuller picture of our ancestors.

Many of the useful resources for such research are now either online as scanned images or at least as searchable indexes and/or transcripts.

### When and where did (s)he die?

One of the maxims of Cecil Humphery-Smith, the principal of the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies, is "Kill off your ancestors!" His advice is wise (though not to be taken literally!); not until you have closed the book on the individual can you really say you have researched their lives. The problem is, of course, pinning down their death.

Assuming you do not have a date of death from a source such as a family bible, the obvious starting point, for a death after 1837, is to look for it in the indexes to civil registration, a process which will already have been described in some detail in an earlier talk. If you are looking for someone with a very distinctive name, this may stand out, even if you have little idea of when the death actually occurred. For more commonplace names you will need to narrow down the period to be searched. Some ideas which might help are:

- **Census:** what is the last census year in which they appear? When does their wife begin to be listed as "widow"?
- **Civil Registration:** look for the marriages of the person's children. Is their father annotated as "deceased"?
- **Burial Registers:** You may find your ancestor's burial in an online burial index.
- **Wills:** The indexes (from 1858) include date of death and often enough information to identify the individual.

- **Memorials:** Online indexes of memorials may produce a reference in which the person you are looking for is recognisable.
- **Newspapers:** Online databases may produce a reference to a death notice in which the person you are looking for is recognisable.
- **Trade directories, rate books and electoral registers:** The disappearance of the person's name from the listings may indicate that they have died.
- **Family papers:** Family bible, cemetery receipts, anniversary books.

### **What was the cause of death?**

For deaths registered under civil registration since 1837 the death certificate will provide some information on cause of death. When dealing with deaths during the 19th and early 20th century understanding of many diseases was limited and you will find that in many cases the recorded cause is unhelpful and may describe the symptoms rather than a specific disease or disorder. For example 'decline', in an old person may simply signify the accumulation of a variety of disorders due to age, while in a younger person it might indicate some form of cancer or other disease which did not manifest any specific indications. There may also be unfamiliar terms such as 'phthisis', generally meaning tuberculosis or 'dropsy', the morbid retention of water in the cells due to possibly a kidney complaint. There are several web sites which can assist in understanding some of the terms used.

Before 1837 you will be lucky to discover the cause of death unless it was the result of an accident or assault and reported in a newspaper. It is occasionally recorded in parish burial registers and for a period in the 18th century was recorded in the Sexton's books of Manchester Collegiate Church (Cathedral).

It is possible that you may be able to detect patterns of genetically transmitted conditions, particularly in more recent deaths where a more precise cause is recorded.

### **Where can a death certificate take my research?**

In many, probably the majority of cases, a death certificate may tell you little that you had not discovered before; indeed, there are those who (unwisely!) fail to obtain death certificates for this very reason. There are circumstances in which the certificate can lead you to new lines of research:

- **Place of Death:** Was the address where they were living or was it the home of a family member? Was it perhaps a workhouse or other institution? If the latter, are there records for the period?
- **Cause of Death:** Was the cause an accident or result of an assault? If so, an inquest is likely and the date should be shown. Although Coroners' records are unlikely to survive, a newspaper account of the incident or inquest may provide more details.
- **Date of Death:** Was there an inordinate delay before the death was registered? Why might this be?
- **Informant:** Is this someone known to you? If not, who were they? Might they be related?

### **Where was the person buried?**

This is one of the most frequent questions asked by researchers. By now you will know that the answer is not on the death certificate. This does not mean that the Registrar did not know – a form is returned to the Registrar following burial to confirm the date and place of disposal. However, this information is not open to the public and the form is generally destroyed after about 10 years.

Where a person was buried is governed by four main factors:

- **Wealth:** The wealthier the deceased, the more options were open since some burial grounds did not offer low-cost burial.
- **Location:** Where did they die? What was the nearest burial ground? How likely is it that their body would be transported elsewhere for burial?
- **Availability:** Which burial grounds were open at the time of their death? This is discussed further below.
- **Religion:** What was their faith? Jews and Catholics were by choice buried in cemeteries dedicated to their faith. Protestant dissenters' chapels often had their own burial ground. Cremation was prohibited for Catholics until 1963 and remains relatively uncommon.

Perhaps the most fundamental of these was wealth. If the deceased came from a poor family then they might be buried "by the parish" and there would be little choice of resting place.

In trying to locate the burial place, the above factors should be examined in the light of what you know about the person. This will produce a list of possible burial places which you can explore in some form of priority order.

Availability is an important filter. Up to about 1650 all burial grounds were Anglican churchyards but increasingly protestant dissenters opened their own burial grounds. From 1820 a number of private cemeteries opened. In the mid-1850s most of the urban churchyards were closed or severely limited by the Burial Acts and from this time municipal cemeteries began to appear and increasingly took over the majority of burials. Finally from 1885 (1893 in Manchester) crematoria were opened. The popularity of cremations increased, particularly after WW2, until by the mid-1960s cremation overtook burial in popularity.

The record of where a person was buried (or cremated) is the burial/crematorium register. Fortunately, an increasing number of these are becoming available online, so much searching through archive copies may be avoided. For the Manchester area, the following online registers can be searched:

- **Ancestry:** Many Anglican and non-conformist burial registers are indexed. Not all are necessarily included and not all necessarily are complete. It does not appear possible to obtain a listing of the burial grounds included.
- **Findmypast:** Registers for Rusholme Road and Ardwick private cemeteries, Cheetham Hill Wesleyan cemetery and Withington Workhouse cemetery. There are also burial registers for a number of Anglican churchyards, but it does not appear to be possible to obtain a listing of those included.
- **Deceased Online:** Although no Manchester or Salford registers are included, the site does include the crematoria and cemeteries in Trafford and Bolton Metropolitan Boroughs. Many Mancunians were buried in the Stretford and Sale, Brooklands cemeteries.
- **Manchester Burials:** Includes the registers for Philips Park, Southern Cemetery, Gorton Cemetery, Blackley Cemetery and Blackley Crematorium.
- **MLFHS Burial Index:** In the member area of the society web site. Contains transcribed indexes for many burial grounds in Manchester and Oldham.
- **Family Search:** Some Anglican Bishop's Transcripts but no listing available. Oldham Cemetery Registers.

**Note:** It should be noted that the registers Manchester Crematorium were destroyed in December 1940. Transcripts of memorial plaques and newspaper obituaries 1893-1940 can be found in the member area of the MLFHS web site. These represent, however, only about 50% of the total number of cremations known to have taken place.

If the above searches prove unsuccessful, for deaths from the mid-1800s onwards a search of newspapers for a death notice or obituary is worthwhile. It is common for the burial place to be included in these. Several local titles are available online on the British Newspaper Archive web site and the Manchester Guardian and Times in the Manchester Online Library.

If the deceased left a will, occasionally they specified where they were to be buried or expressed a wish to be cremated. This possibility should not be overlooked. There may also be cemetery receipts among family papers. Who in the family might hold such items? Even if there is nothing related to the individual, there may be something to indicate which cemetery had been chosen for other family burials.

### **The Burial Register**

The information in most burial registers is not extensive and generally is limited to the name, age and date of burial (and possibly of death) of the deceased. For children, parents are often named. Registers for private and municipal cemeteries will usually record the grave number which, if the cemetery still exists, allows you to locate the grave. Private and municipal cemeteries also usually maintain 'grave books' which record for each grave who was buried there and the date of burial. Churchyards seldom keep such records.

### **The Undertaker's Records**

Very few of these appear to have been deposited in public archives, but the registers for R. Pepperdine and T. Broome of Manchester are deposited in Manchester Central Library and have been scanned and indeed by MLFHS. They can be found in the Miscellaneous database in the member area of the web site. These registers provide dates and places of burial and information to indicate the nature of the funeral and its cost.

### **Graveyard Memorials**

Having discovered the burial place, what might you find there? The hope will be a memorial providing more information. But first, a word about graves.

Graves fall into three basic categories:

- **Private Graves:** These are purchased from the graveyard owner and used for the burial of family members. A private grave will usually have (or have had) a memorial stone, though in most graveyards this was not mandatory.
- **Common Graves:** Often misnamed as 'pauper' graves, these are graves in which several bodies of unrelated people are interred, the only common factor being that they died around the same time. Common graves were the least expensive graves. A pauper grave is a common grave which was paid for by the parish or (later) local authority. There is no memorial stone.
- **Inscription Graves:** These are the same as common graves except that there is a headstone on which the name, age and date of death are recorded for each of those it contains. They are sometimes called 'Guinea' graves, reflecting the fee payable (a common grave might at this time cost 5 shillings (25p)).

It is clear from the above that only if the burial was in a private or inscription grave will there (possibly) be a memorial.

However, if the burial was in a Manchester churchyard or in two out of the three of the private cemeteries (the exception being Manchester General Cemetery) any memorial will have long since disappeared. Only a handful of memorials have survived the clearances and 'landscaping' of the past century or more. We are therefore indebted to those (in particular the antiquary John Owen) who took the time to record the inscriptions on memorials before they were removed.

MLFHS has, as a major project, digitised approaching 150,000 memorial transcripts and indexed the 550,000 names which they contain. This represents, to the best of our knowledge, all of the known memorials within Manchester township as well as some further afield. The quality of the transcripts varies. Some are complete and verbatim transcripts, while others are simply abstracts taken at the time memorials were removed. They are, however, the best (and only) record of what was once there. You should bear in mind that just because a name appears on a memorial, that person is not necessarily buried in the grave. Nor should you assume that those buried in the grave are limited to those named on the memorial.

### **What can a memorial tell you?**

Even the simplest memorial will tell you the name of the deceased and the date of death. Most will also tell you the age of the deceased and possibly their birth date. In addition, you may, if fortunate, find:

- **Residence:** often the township or village where they lived, but occasionally the name of their house.
- **Relations:** The names, dates of death and ages of persons related including parents, spouse(s), children, grandchildren and in-laws. There may also be the names of persons not related who were buried in the grave, perhaps family friends.
- **Professions and Positions:** Ministers of religion and medical practitioners may be identified by Rev. or Dr. Sometimes a narrative will indicate a position "...for 50 years churchwarden...". The names of Justices of the Peace may be annotated "J.P."
- **Cause of Death:** This is unlikely for most medical conditions but references such as "accident" or "drowned" may indicate opportunities for further research. "Suddenly" possibly suggests a heart attack or stroke. "...after a long/short illness..." also helps us to develop a clearer picture.
- **Persons died/buried elsewhere:** It is not uncommon for memorials to include specific reference to someone who died or was buried elsewhere, possibly overseas. This points to the possibility of further records to be explored and may solve the mystery of someone who had disappeared without trace. It is particularly common to commemorate those killed on active service in WW1 on a family memorial.
- **Miscellaneous:** There may be details which point to events during their lifetime such as "...awarded the Humane Society's Medal for saving lives...", "...served through the Crimean War..." or "...he was a Native of Pen Bank in the County of Cardiganshire, South Wales...". Sometimes the helpful "cremated" will explain why a burial could not be found.

Memorials will frequently say "...the dearly beloved wife/husband of...". How genuine such sentiments may be must be a matter of judgement. It is quite possible that the phrase was for public consumption while the bereaved spouse was secretly relieved at the passing of an uncaring or unfaithful partner.

Similarly, not too much should be read into religious quotations. Remember that the inscription was written by a surviving family member and it may be their beliefs which are expressed rather than those of the deceased.

### **What problems/pitfalls should you be aware of?**

Remember that the only person who knew the correct details was the deceased himself/herself and so there may be errors. This is particularly the case with birthdates and ages. People who were born before 1837 did not have a birth certificate to refer to and may have been unsure of their own birth date.

An increasing problem is that memorials, though (literally) carved in stone, are not immune to the ravages of time and vandalism. If a memorial survives it may be difficult to read owing to 'spalling' or loss of lead lettering or the stone may have been pushed over and broken by vandals. This, if for no other reason, is a call for family historians to get involved in recording memorials before it is too late.

### **Funeral Ephemera**

In addition to official or 'formal' records of the death, there are items created by the family to commemorate the deceased. These include funeral cards and printed letters of thanks as well as such items as 'Stevengraph' bookmarks printed on silk or other fabric. More recently it has been the practice to print an 'order of service' for the funeral and this will often include a photograph of the deceased. If such ephemera survive, they will usually be found among family papers, though by their nature, they will often be retained by the wider circle of friends and family of the deceased rather than the immediate descendants. Such ephemera are not just of general interest but may carry useful information about the deceased and the funeral. Other sources you may find among family records are family bibles and "birthday" books, which may equally contain dates of death.

### **Newspaper Death Notices and Obituaries**

Although 'upper class' deaths were announced in publications such as the Gentleman's Magazine from the late 18th century onwards, the practice was not widespread until the latter half of the 19th century and became increasingly common. Death notices are published in both national and local newspapers and it is not uncommon to find the same announcement published in two or three different newspapers. If the deceased was a prominent person then it is possible that a more extensive obituary may be found. This will usually give an outline of their professional life and may include a list of the mourners at the funeral.

Before the publication of online newspapers, it was necessary to know the date of death before searching for notices. Now it is possible to search for a deceased's name in online indexes and view any notices which relate to the name. Given the limitations of the optical character recognition process used to search the newspaper content, this is not fool-proof, but because of the ease of searching, it is worth consideration.

- Newspaper death notices will provide some or all of the following details:
- Date and place of death (sometimes the home of another family member)
- Age and occupation
- Date and place of funeral
- Residential address
- Name of spouse, parent or other relative
- Cause of death, particularly if an accident

### **Other Sources for Obituaries**

It is not only the newspapers which carried obituaries. Some other sources worth considering include:

- School and University magazines
- Church and Parish magazines
- Professional Journals
- Company magazines and histories

John Marsden

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