



Handbook for the Bereaved

Churchyards

Churchyards are a part of our national history. They matter to many people, especially those whose loved ones' remains rest there. But they are also important to parishioners, historians, archaeologists, ecologists, visitors and many others.

Churchyards are consecrated ground; they are set aside for burials; and they are places for quiet contemplation and remembrance.

This handbook is supplemented by the "Guidance for the Bereaved".

The "Minister"

In this handbook there are many references to the "Minister", so it is important to know who that means. It means the incumbent of the benefice (or parish) in which the burial ground is situated (i.e. the Rector, Team Rector, Vicar or priest in charge or a curate licensed to be in charge of the parish). If there isn't one (because the post is vacant, for example), the rural or area dean of the deanery in which the parish is situated is treated as the Minister. In doubt, ask the Diocesan Registry, contact details below.

Churchwardens and/or members of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) may be able to tell you who the Minister is, but they cannot make the decisions set out in this handbook.

Right to be buried in a churchyard

Not everyone can be buried in a churchyard. Anyone who lives or dies within the parish boundary or whose name is on the electoral roll of the parish church does have a right to be buried in the churchyard if there is still space. Otherwise, the consent of the minister of the church and the PCC will be needed, and they will usually be looking for a significant connection between the person and the parish before giving their consent.

It is for the minister to decide whereabouts in the churchyard any given burial shall take place. It is important to understand that a minister of a church can give no promise or assurance to anyone that at some point in the future they will allow or arrange for their burial to take place in the churchyard at all or in any particular place in the churchyard.

It is possible to apply for a faculty to reserve a grave space in some churchyards but not in every churchyard. The only person who can grant a faculty for that is the Diocesan Chancellor (the ecclesiastical Judge who presides over the Consistory Court). The Chancellor is unlikely to grant such a faculty if the churchyard is on the point of being full, with no parts being capable of allowing reburial. This is because it is not thought right to deprive parishioners, present or future, of their right of being buried there. The Chancellor, considering such an application will want to know what the attitude of the Minister and the PCC is about that and whether they support the application.

It is also important that anyone considering burial in a churchyard understands that once human remains have been interred in a churchyard it is very rare for the exhumation and relocation of those remains elsewhere to be allowed. Only in exceptional circumstances would that be permitted. The Christian expectation is that once a body has been interred it will rest in peace awaiting the final resurrection of the dead. Anyone who thinks that they might wish at some time in the future to move the remains to some other location may be better looking for burial in the unconsecrated part of the local cemetery, where the rules about exhumation are less strict.

Although neither burial, the installation of a memorial, nor the reservation of a grave space give any rights of ownership over the ground in question, the memorial remains the property of the person who commissioned it, and after their death belongs to the "heir-at-law" of the person commemorated. This person is responsible for maintaining the monument in good order. Where this does not occur the PCC may choose to take steps to ensure safety in the churchyard, but must have permission from the Chancellor for any permanent changes.

Churchyard Memorial Regulations

To help protect the special character of our churchyards, as opposed to local cemeteries, the Diocesan Churchyard Memorial Regulations ("the Regulations") give guidance about the memorials that can be introduced into our churchyards. As stated above the family of the deceased do not own the land in which a body is buried (the grave), or the plot in which cremated remains are buried; the land remains part of the churchyard.

Our churchyards need maintenance and are often cared for by volunteers, so graves must be flat and kept clear of obstructions so that the grass can easily be cut. This means that graves may not be marked out by chippings, kerbs, chains, railings, fences or anything similar. Even though historically such items were permitted they no longer can be for these practical reasons.

Coffin burials may be marked with upright headstones. Care must be taken to see that all new headstones fit into their surroundings. That is why native natural stone is preferred, and why polished granite or marble and artificial materials are not permitted (the detailed Regulations have full details of what are acceptable materials and finishes).

The nature of the churchyard also means that the inscription on a memorial must be one that is appropriate for a churchyard setting. Traditionally it has been said that any inscription should "honour the dead, comfort the living and inform posterity". To achieve that objective, the Regulations say that the inscription must be "factually accurate, not offensive, and not inconsistent with Christian doctrine".

If an inscription is not in English, the inclusion of an English translation on the face of the monument is encouraged and a translation will have to be provided for keeping with the parish records in any event.

It will also be important to have in mind that if it is likely that there will be a further burial in the same grave in the future then sufficient space is left on the headstone for an additional inscription to be added. The name of the person buried should appear only once on a memorial.

Sometimes people wish to have a motif engraved on the memorial, like a small plain cross or a single floral symbol, or that depicts the life and interests of the deceased. These will usually be allowed provided that it is appropriate in a churchyard setting and modest in size. Usually such motifs will not be allowed to be in colour. Insignia (such as those associated with regiments and even football clubs) are very often copyrighted in which case their use would require the consent of the body they represent.

A photograph of, or image of, the deceased will not be permitted.

Making an application

Anyone wanting to take forward the possibility of having their loved one's remains laid to rest in a churchyard, should arrange to meet and discuss this with the minister of the church concerned. It will be important that before doing so they should have read this handbook and satisfied themselves that they are content with the necessary restrictions that come with a churchyard burial.

These restrictions are fully described in the Diocesan Churchyard Regulations which can be accessed at :-

<https://www.lichfield.anglican.org/about-us/registry/guidance-on-churches-and-churchyards/>

Six months needs to be allowed after the burial before a memorial can be installed to allow the ground to settle, but the application can be made before that period expires. (That period does not apply to plaques/tablets marking a cremation plot where just the name and dates of the deceased are recorded, if such tablets are permitted in the Churchyard).

One of the matters to discuss will be what type of memorial is to be erected at the site of burial. Because it is a public space and because the family do not own the plot of land in which their loved one is buried there are restrictions about the type of memorial that can be erected.

The minister is able to give permission for a memorial to be installed that meets all the requirements of the diocesan Churchyard Memorial Regulations as to size, shape, type of material and the actual inscription and any engraving that is to be on the face of the memorial.

A standard Application Form is available online at the website stated above. Alternatively, a hard copy of the form can be obtained from the parish.

The form asks for details about the applicant and their relationship to the deceased. It also asks a number of questions about what consultations about the proposal there have been with other close relatives of the deceased and what the views of other members of the family are. The minister considering the application needs to know about these things as there have been occasions in the past where family disagreements about memorials have surfaced very late in the day, to the upset of all concerned. When the form has been completed and signed by the applicant and by the memorial mason (who has a significant part of the form to complete themselves including providing a scale drawing of the proposed memorial and the inscription) it should be provided to the minister. Ideally this will be done online or by email, but if that is not possible a hard copy should be provided to the minister.

Memorial Masons

All memorials must be installed by a fully qualified and registered memorial mason. That is because in addition to the Churchyard Memorial Regulations there are other national legal requirements about the installation of memorials in burial grounds. In particular there is *BS 8415:2018 Memorials within burial grounds and memorial sites – Specification*. Registered memorial masons are familiar with these requirements and will ensure that everything is done correctly.

Registered monumental masons will also be able to assist in completing the application form and advising about the types of stone, designs, dimensions and other details necessary to comply with the Regulations.

In addition to items such as kerbs, railings, chippings not being allowed, some other things such as toys, balloons, windmills, candles, lights, and plastic flowers are not allowed either. Cut flowers and wreaths may however be left on the grave, so long as any cellophane or similar wrapping has been removed.

Please be aware that the Churchwardens, or someone acting for the PCC, may remove permitted items after a limited period of time, for example, if flowers have died.

If such items are introduced without a faculty having been granted to allow them then they will be removed by or on behalf of the minister. That may involve an application to the court and the person who has introduced the items unlawfully will not only be required to pay for the cost of their removal, but also the court costs involved.

The minister's decision

(a) Where the application complies (or almost complies) with the regulations

If when the minister receives the application they are satisfied that it complies with all the Regulations as to type, shape, size, and they are satisfied with the inscription, then they can authorise the introduction of the memorial. However, they are not bound to do so. For example, although its dimensions do not exceed the maximum sizes the minister may feel that it would look out of place with all the other memorials in the churchyard because they are of a much smaller size and so they feel this one would not fit in well. Or the minister may be aware of other issues that make them uncomfortable about allowing what is proposed.

If the application almost complies with the Regulations, but not quite, then if the minister would otherwise be happy for it to be introduced into the churchyard, the minister can ask the chancellor to say that although it is "not quite compliant" it can be dealt with as if it complied with the Regulations. Examples of such cases would be where the shape is slightly different from the standard range, because it has 'shoulders'; or the dimensions are very marginally outside the maximum or minimum dimensions. If the Chancellor says it can be treated as if it were compliant then the minister can give permission for the installation.

(b) Where the application complies with the regulations but the minister is not content with what is proposed:

As indicated above the minister may not be happy with the proposal even though it complies with the regulations. In those circumstances the minister will set out their concerns on the form and return it to the applicant. The applicant will then need to consider whether they may be able to amend their application in a way that will satisfy the minister's concerns e.g. by reducing the size of the memorial if that was the issue. On the other hand if such accommodation is not possible they will need to decide whether to apply for a faculty from the chancellor. For more details of that process see below.

(c) Where the application does not comply with the regulations.

In these circumstances the minister is not authorised to admit the memorial and will return the form to the applicant saying so. The applicant must then decide whether to change their proposal to one that does comply or whether they wish to apply (and the technical word for such an application is a "petition") for a faculty from the Diocesan Chancellor, following the process described below.

Timescales

It would be hoped that the minister in most cases will have given the applicant a response within 28 days of receiving the application. Of course there are reasons why that cannot always be done. Such reasons would include holidays, and the possible need for the Minister to consult others including the Chancellor. However, if after 28 days there has been no response it would not be unreasonable for the applicant to contact the minister and ask when they might expect to have a reply. In the absence of any satisfactory response then it is suggested that the applicant contact the archdeacon or the diocesan registrar who might be able to have a word about delay, and hopefully assist in bringing matters to a conclusion in relation to the minister's role in this process. It would be hoped that they would be able to ascertain the cause of any delay and to help bring the matter to a speedy conclusion.

Memorials outside the Regulations

If the minister has declined to grant permission for the memorial; or if the family want a memorial that does not comply with all the requirements they can in any event seek permission (by what is called a "faculty") from the Diocesan Chancellor (who is an ecclesiastical judge). The family can seek guidance from the diocesan registry at the link above as to whether what they wish for is likely to be allowed.

The chancellor does encourage well-conceived designs by skilled and imaginative crafts-persons. The Lettering Arts Trust (formerly known as Memorials by Artists) is able to help identify such crafts-persons. Their website is at

<https://www.letteringartstrust.org.uk/memorials>

Such faculties because they involve a number of professional people in the process do incur fees above the parish fees for burial and erecting a standard type of memorial. More details about that process are provided below.

Petitioning for a faculty

The application for a faculty requires the payment of statutory fees and the formal request by the applicant that their petition for a faculty should now be considered.

If the applicant wishes to proceed down the faculty route then they need to notify the Diocesan Registrar <https://www.lichfield.anglican.org/registry/>

The Archdeacon will help with some essential consultation prior to making the formal request for the faculty process to start.

Following discussions with the Archdeacon, the petitioner has decided to proceed down the faculty route, then they need to make a formal application through the Diocesan Registrar. The petitioner will also have to pay the statutory fees.

The original application form will be deemed to be the faculty petition by virtue of the Regulations.

The Diocesan Registry will consult with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (generally referred to as “the DAC”) regarding the Petition. Each diocese has such a body which consists of a number of people with specialist skills and experience who can advise the chancellor about the various issues that will need to be considered when deciding whether or not to grant a faculty. Such consultation is required by the Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2015, rule 4.1.(1).

The Faculty Jurisdiction Rules also require that public notice is given about the Petition. The Registrar will be able to assist with how that should be done in accordance with the Faculty Jurisdiction Rules, rule 6.

As this is now a formal legal process, it is possible for people to formally object to the proposal and to become parties to the case, although it is rare for people to take that step.

The Chancellor however will almost certainly want to know the views of the minister and the PCC.

When all these processes have been completed the Chancellor will consider all the material that has been submitted and make a decision as to whether or not to allow the proposed memorial to be admitted. If it is allowed it may be subject to conditions e.g. about the precise size of memorial that will be allowed or about the exact wording on the inscription plate.

Cremated remains

Cremated remains may also be buried in some churchyards. This is usually in area of the churchyard set aside for such burials. Again a memorial is often permitted, and again there are rules about the type of memorial – usually it is a flat stone measuring about 450mm by 400mm laid flush with ground surface and bearing an inscription. In some churchyards or areas in churchyards the only memorial of cremated remains permitted is having the deceased’s name recorded in the Book of Remembrance kept in the church or on a single memorial to all those interred in that area.

Scattering of cremated remains in churchyards is not permitted.

Dr Anthony Verduyn
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