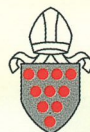




Churchyard Memorials

A Guide for the Bereaved



 THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
DIOCESE OF
WORCESTER

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Introduction

Coming to terms with the death of someone you loved or for whom you were responsible is inevitably painful and difficult.

And for those who were closest to the person who died, there are also numerous practical tasks to be attended to, many of which are not at all straightforward. The business of choosing how the body should be dealt with (by burial or cremation), selecting a place in which to bury the body or the ashes, and in due course deciding what headstone to put up and what it should say – all this, too, can be a source of anxiety and distress. But it can be part of that process of coming to terms with it all, of saying good-bye and moving forward.

Once the body or ashes have been buried, you will sooner or later have to choose a headstone or other memorial of some kind. This too is not an easy matter – not least because it can re-open old wounds – but it is important to get it right. This booklet aims to explain what needs to be done, and how you can go about achieving a memorial that will be a fitting tribute to someone who has died. Take time to read it carefully, and remember:

Most decisions can and should be delayed until you feel ready to make them; a decision made in a hurry may be regretted later.

At any stage, if in doubt, consult the Vicar of the church concerned – he or she will be only too willing to talk it all through with you.

(Note: for simplicity, this Guide refers to “the Vicar”; but in some cases the relevant person may be called the Rector or the Priest-in-Charge. Where a parish is currently without a Vicar, or where the Vicar is ill or away, you should contact the Churchwardens or the Rural Dean.)

The headstone

Churchyards are, usually, full of character. But, like people, they are all different. Just as a memorial that might be entirely suitable for one person would be altogether wrong for someone else, so a headstone that is appropriate for one churchyard may be unsuitable for another. And the same is true in some cases as between different parts of the same churchyard. So the first principle is that

A memorial should respect its surroundings

A memorial should thus be in harmony with those round about, and with the churchyard as a whole; and the appearance of the churchyard should harmonise with that of the surrounding village or town. This does not mean that there has to be strict uniformity. Indeed, some churchyards are, rightly, criticised for being too uniform – which leads to them being bland and dull. But a memorial should not stick out like a sore thumb. The reason for this is that the churchyard will last for many years to come; and its character depends on that of all the memorials within it. No one of those should spoil that general appearance.

In practice, this will mean that the choice of stone for a memorial, and its size, thickness, shape, and general design, should only be finalised after looking carefully at the churchyard as a whole, and in particular at the part of it containing the grave under consideration. Memorials that are much darker, lighter, taller, or smaller than those nearby, or which are of a completely different stone, are unlikely to fit in harmoniously. Nor are those which are in the form of a book, or an angel, or some other sculpture – unless there are many others of a similar character in the immediate vicinity.

In the case of a cremation, there will usually be a number of similar memorials in the churchyard in question, and they will provide a guide as to what is likely to be appropriate. Normally the memorial stone will be of a standard size; and will not cover more than one plot.

Experience suggests that stones used in buildings nearby or traditional in the local area, or stones closely similar to them in colour and texture, are usually much more appropriate. Black stones, on the other hand, and most marbles and granites, and stones with a highly polished surface, are less likely to be suitable in most contexts; and memorials of synthetic stone or plastic are almost never likely to be.

The Vicar is only allowed to approve monuments which comply with the relevant guidelines. These will be either guidelines applying specifically to the churchyard concerned or, if there are no such specific ones, the general guidelines applying throughout the Diocese of Worcester. The Vicar (or someone in the parish to whom he or she has delegated this task) will be aware of the relevant Guidelines and, just as important, he or she will be familiar with the churchyard, and with the monuments in it; and able to guide you as to what would or would not be suitable in your particular case.

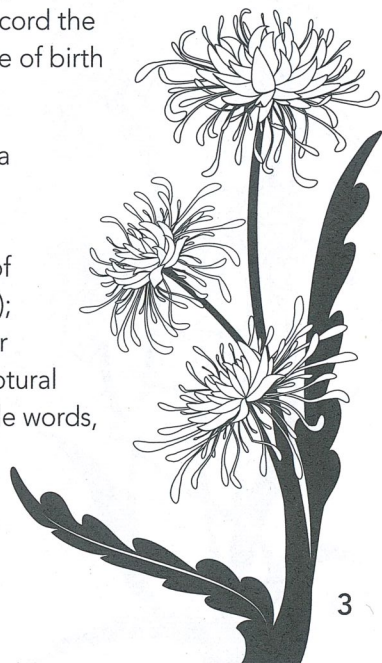
Inscriptions

Often the most difficult decision is what to put on the headstone. It is important not to rush into this; what seems suitable just after the funeral may seem less so after a little time has passed. Here the only guiding principle is that

The inscription should be the most appropriate in all the circumstances

The first consideration is thus that the memorial should commemorate, accurately, the existence of the person who has died. It should therefore record either his or her full name or else the surname and the first name by which he or she was generally known (for example, "Thomas Joseph Smith" or "Thomas Smith"). It is perfectly appropriate to include as well any term of affection or widely-used nickname ("Dad" or "Tommy"), perhaps in brackets or small type. The memorial should also record the date of death and, wherever possible, either the date of birth or the age at death.

Secondly, however, a name on its own says little; and a memorial is possibly the only place to say something publicly about the person who has died. It may be appropriate to record what she did ("Local Member of Parliament" or "midwife in this village for forty years"); or some feature of his character ("a much-loved father and grandfather"). And some may wish to add a scriptural text, or an extract from a poem, or some other suitable words, inspired by reflection on the life of the departed. But any inscription should be short and to the point; and should avoid the trite or overly sentimental. Here, particularly, any decision should not be rushed.



Thirdly, the choice of lettering – style and size – needs to be made in the light of what is used nearby – in some churchyards, for example, gold lettering may be appropriate, but in most it will not; and plastic lettering will always be unsuitable.

Fourth, artwork may be added, at the discretion of the mason – either traditional Christian symbols (such as the Cross), or other decorative items (such as flowers) or, where appropriate, some other device reflecting the life of the person who has died – examples might be a fishing rod in the case of a keen fisherman, or a much-loved toy in the case of a child. A portrait of the deceased may be appropriate, but only if it is in a form (such as a computer-generated engraving onto the stone, based on a photograph or a line drawing) that will not fade or become unsightly. Any engravings should generally be left uncoloured. A coloured plaque or a framed photograph affixed to the face of the stone would not be suitable.

A QR code will not be allowed, as it will be linked to a website that may contain unsuitable content (even if only in the future).

Once again, if in any doubt, the Vicar should be consulted – either to see whether what you have in mind would be suitable, or to make suggestions. Particular care will be needed in relation to the choice any visual image or other artwork; and the Vicar may wish to seek advice from the body known as the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the care of Churches (the DAC).



Future maintenance

Churchyards have to be maintained by the parish for centuries to come. This means that memorials should be designed to allow for that continuing maintenance to be as simple as possible, which is for everyone's benefit – you would not wish to find the churchyard full of untidy and unkempt graves when you return to visit the one you have introduced.

So the final principle is that

A memorial should not impose an unreasonable burden on future generations

Thus, normally, graves should not contain kerbed surrounds, with or without railings or chains, as these impede the cutting of the surrounding grass. This is also part of harmonising with others nearby; and it may not apply, therefore, if there is a tradition of such graves, or other types of surrounds, in the immediate vicinity of the grave in question. Here too, the relevant guidelines (see above) will set out what may be approved by the Vicar. And, again, the Vicar should be consulted for guidance on what is appropriate in your case.

You should also consider carefully how you want to deal with flowers. Cut flowers are a traditional form of showing affection or respect for the departed; but dead flowers should be removed as soon as possible. Some types of headstone provide a place for a small vase or jar for flowers; this enables them to be kept in water, and thus to last for longer, but they still die in due course; and an empty jar, or simply an unused space, looks worse than no flowers at all. Alternatively, you might wish to consider planting a few spring bulbs on the grave, in front of the headstone – although anything in the nature of a garden is not appropriate.

Artificial flowers obviously last longer than natural ones, but in due course they too decay and look tatty; they are also considered by many to be inappropriate in a churchyard, and are thus generally discouraged.

If a headstone is erected above a grave, the ground should be levelled before it is put in place. In other cases, once 12 months have elapsed since the latest burial in a grave, it may at any time be levelled by those responsible for the maintenance of the churchyard – although if at all possible the close relatives of those whose bodies are buried will be contacted first.

Procedure

Local stonemasons will be able to help with ideas for memorials, and will give you an estimate as to costs. They will usually have a range of standard memorials, and will probably be able to indicate where you can see an example of any particular pattern. However, you do not need to consider only “standard” designs – the person whose life you are commemorating was, after all, presumably not a “standard” person. An individually commissioned memorial will almost certainly cost more, but may be a more fitting tribute.

If you have not already chosen a stonemason, the funeral director who assisted you with the funeral arrangements may well be able to guide you towards local masons who supply standard memorials. Alternatively, a list of others who may be suitable for non-standard requirements may be obtained from: Memorials by Artists, Snape Priory, Saxmundham, Suffolk, IP17 1SA (tel. 01728-688934; www.memorialsbyartists.co.uk). Obtaining a memorial via the internet does not avoid the need to obtain consent, or to comply with these guidelines.

As has already been emphasised, do not rush this process; vicars will not normally entertain any application until at least six months after the burial, when the ground will have settled. Do not become totally committed to any particular idea until you have thought it through carefully, and discussed it with the Vicar; and do not actually commission any work until you have the Vicar's formal approval – as you would be placed in a very difficult position if approval was not given for a memorial that had already been completed.

Approval by the Vicar

You should seek approval for your chosen memorial by filling in the form at the back of this booklet, and giving or sending it to the Vicar. Or your chosen stonemason may do that for you. The form must be signed both by you and by the stonemason, and accompanied by the appropriate fee (the money raised in this way helps to pay for the maintenance of the churchyard, which after all will be the setting, in years to come, for the memorial you have chosen).

Once the Vicar has considered the application, **if the proposed memorial conforms with the relevant guidelines (see above), it will normally be approved without further ado.** Occasionally, it may be necessary for others to be consulted: for example, where a memorial is in some way out of the ordinary. This does not necessarily mean that it will not be approved, but the approval process may take a little longer.

Once a particular design has been approved, it must not be altered without further approval. If you do change your mind, you should fill in and submit a new application form for the revised proposal; but you will not need to send a second fee.

The procedure set out above also applies where an alteration is to be made to an existing memorial (for example, to add the name following a second burial).

Approval by the Chancellor

The Vicar will not be able to approve a proposed memorial (or the alteration of an existing one) if he or she considers that it does not comply with the relevant Guidelines, or that it is likely to be controversial for some reason, or that it is in any way inappropriate.

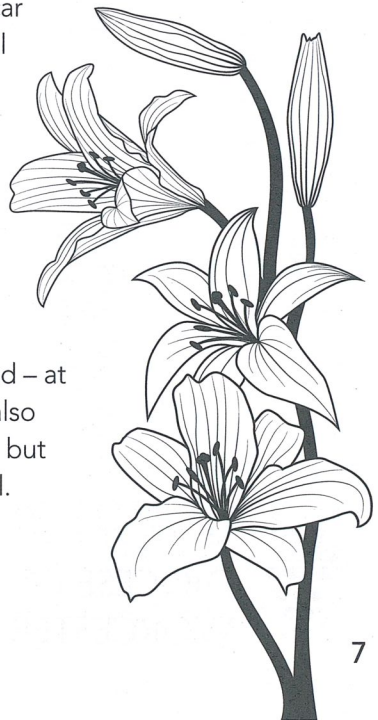
Instead, if the Vicar supports it in principle, he or she will forward the proposal to the Diocesan Registrar together with a letter of support – and will let you know that this has happened, and why. The proposal will then be considered by me, as the Chancellor of the Diocese; and I will either grant or refuse approval (known as a “faculty”).

If on the other hand the Vicar is unable to support the proposal for any reason, he or she will let you know, together with a brief statement of the reason why – and will refund the fee. You are then at liberty to apply for a faculty if you wish; the Vicar will give you the name and address of the Registrar, from whom you will be able to obtain the necessary application form. The Registrar will also be able to tell you what the current fee is, to be paid at the time of submitting the application; this covers the administrative costs involved, and is not refundable.

Alternatively, you may wish to discuss with the Vicar whether there is some alternative form of memorial that gives you what you are seeking but which also complies with the guidelines.

Unauthorised memorials

Finally, you should note that, if a memorial is erected without being approved either by the Vicar or by me, I am able to order it to be removed – at the expense of whoever erected it. This applies also where approval is given for a particular memorial, but a different one is erected without further approval.



Where to find out more

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, OR NEED ANY MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR VICAR, WHO WILL BE MORE THAN HAPPY TO TALK THROUGH WITH YOU ANY OF THE ISSUES RAISED IN THIS BOOKLET, OR ANYTHING ELSE THAT IS ON YOUR MIND AS YOU COME TO TERMS WITH YOUR BEREAVEMENT.

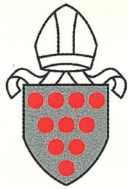
Dr Charles Mynors, Chancellor

1 May 2013



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