



Churchyard and Graveyard Maintenance & Repairs Guidelines

Introduction

Churchyards and graveyards belonging to the Church of Ireland generally fall into two categories – lawn cemeteries and historic graveyards. Lawn cemeteries are typically laid out in rectangular sections with well-maintained manicured flat lawn-style grass, have sanitary services, car parking and are accessed by modern pathways leading to all sections. Typical age is between 100 – 200 years. A historic graveyard describes a graveyard or burial ground that predates the early 20th century and includes those from the 18th and 19th centuries and all graveyards and burial grounds pre-1700AD. It should be noted that graveyards dating from pre-1700AD are given statutory protection in the Republic of Ireland under the National Monuments Acts 1930-2014. In Northern Ireland, it is advisable to consult the various pieces of legislation governing the protection of heritage, such as the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act, 1979, for further details.

These guidelines are issued to aid parishes with the care of their churchyards and graveyards, with the General Guidelines section applying to all churchyards and graveyards irrespective of their age and the section on the Care for Historic Churchyards and Graveyards providing more specific information on various aspects of these types of property. The final section of Further Information provides links to more information and guidance that is available from external sources.

General Guidelines

Management

The management of graveyards and burial grounds vested in the Representative Church Body is governed by Chapter XII of the Constitution of the Church of Ireland. The chapter describes the rules and regulations concerning the management of burial grounds including fees, approval of the erection of headstones and their inscriptions, rights of burial and location of burial, but not the law governing burials. It does not cover such things as insurance, health & safety and other practical matters.

Health & Safety

Health & Safety in a churchyard or graveyard is of equal importance to that of other parish properties, such as the church or parish hall, for example, and should be included in the annual risk assessment/inspection that is carried out by the select vestry as part of their health & safety programme. It is also important to note that in the event of damage to a grave either through subsidence or other means, or if work is to be carried out on the graveyard that has the potential to expose graves, the Local Authority must be contacted as soon as possible for guidance due to public health issues.

Insurance

As with all properties, adequate insurance cover is essential. It is the responsibility of the select vestry to ensure the parish is appropriately insured and the best way to do this is to consult with their insurance broker. Typically insurance policies cover slips, trips and falls along with other public and employer liability matters and repairs other than those caused by normal wear and tear; but it is important to note that damage to churchyard and graveyard walls is not normally covered by insurance except in cases where the damage is as a direct result of subsidence or landslip that can be proven as a result of water or flood damage.

Maintenance & Repair Planning

When considering maintenance and repairs to churchyard and graveyards, there are three main areas to be aware of – a full and complete record of memorials, burials, other features and plants and of any changes that take place; maintenance and repair to keep the churchyard or graveyard safe and in good order; and finally, financial provision for the maintenance and repair. These will depend on a number of factors such as

resources, financial and human - the locality; the size of the parish; and the type and age of the churchyard or graveyard.

A prudent select vestry will set aside time to review its churchyard or graveyard policy every few years. Best practice would say that an annual inspection, at the minimum, together with a quinquennial (every 5 years) inspection would be the most proactive course of action, and this could be timed to coincide with the quinquennial inspection of the church. The benefits of such a maintenance programme would be that any repairs needed would be caught early so preventing greater or longer term damage, together with minimising health and safety risks, and larger projects could be planned for and financially resourced.

Required Recommendations & Approvals

As with any property vested in the RCB, any structural alterations to a graveyard, such as new pathway, new gate/entrance, will require a recommendation to the Diocesan Council for onward recommendation and approval by the RCB committees. Works such as these will also require approval from the Local Authority both in terms of health & safety and planning permission.

Care for Historic Churchyards & Graveyards

The care and conservation of historic churchyards and graveyards should be guided by general principles of conservation that are often referred to as "best practice". These international guidelines have been formulated and adopted by conservation agencies and are used as a guiding philosophy when carrying out work on places of cultural significance. It is important that parishes carrying out maintenance work inside an historic church or graveyard are aware of the best practice for the care and conservation of such a place. Regular monitoring of the church or graveyard will prevent minor problems from growing into major problems that are expensive and time consuming to remedy. (Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards, The Heritage Council, 2010)

Boundaries

Boundaries to those historic churchyards or graveyards erected in the 18th and 19th centuries are typically constructed of a stone wall built with lime and mortar and local rubble stone, but can also include metal railings built of cast or wrought iron or an earthen bank surmounted by a hedgerow. Sometimes these boundaries enclosed an area smaller than that of the original graveyard which resulted in burials outside of the graveyard wall in adjacent fields and therefore it is important that no groundworks take place in the field surrounding the graveyard wall as they might disturb burials.

Before any work is undertaken on a boundary wall, or other historical structure, it is important that expert advice is sought, and in general, it is advocated that only necessary repairs are undertaken with the general principle of *repair like with like* being applied. Repairs should be carried out with lime mortar and new stone should be similar to the original stonework, with pointing to be recessed and to follow the original style. Ribbon pointing is not appropriate. Little things like the re-use of the original stone to repair a collapsed section of a wall, the creation of small voids or holes to encourage the growth of shallow rooting plants and animals to nest and the retention of features such as coffin stands and stiles all help to maintain the historical character of the wall. The cutting of ivy is discouraged as this could lead to a total collapse of the wall; whereas cutting ivy at the roots and leaving it to die back could result in the immediate need of building conservation. An important point to remember is that no digging for the foundation of a new boundary wall or the rebuilding of an existing wall should be undertaken without first obtaining the permission of the relevant authorities and the arranging for the supervision of an archaeologist.

Boundaries comprising an earthen bank surmounted by a hedgerow should be maintained and not replaced with a fence such as post and wire or with a modern concrete wall.

The maintenance of iron railings, gates or grave surrounds is important to prevent corrosion. Originally these structures would have been painted and it is the loss of paint that is the main cause of corrosion or rusting, therefore it is essential that they remain painted.

Memorials

“Memorial” is a catch-all word that covers headstones, gravestones, tombs, monuments or crypts and any grave surrounds. A memorial remains the property of the person or family who erected it and they are responsible for its upkeep and maintenance and not the parish. In the event of a memorial becoming so dilapidated that it causes a threat to health and safety, interferes with access to other plots or prevents the proper upkeep and maintenance of the graveyard, then the rector and the churchwardens have the right to take such steps as necessary to deal with the issue, but not before all reasonable efforts have been made to trace the interested relatives and to give them an opportunity to carry out repairs, according to Counsel’s opinion given to the Representative Church Body in 1934.

Generally, unless a memorial is in danger of falling or breaking or is a potential threat to the public, it is best to leave it as it is. The main reason for a memorial tilting forward is that the ground to its front has subsided due to the less compact soil of the burial plot and if it were to be straightened the burial plot could be interfered with. A tilting memorial should be monitored over time to ascertain if there is a health & safety issue or if it is in imminent danger of collapse. Before undertaking the resetting or straightening of a memorial, be it a headstone, box-tomb or table-tomb, expert advice should be sought from the local Conservation/Heritage officer to ensure the best methods are used.

Cleaning of memorials should be approached with caution and only after careful consideration. Sandblasting or the use of power washers should not even be considered, nor should they be cleaned with abrasive materials or brushes, or strong cleaning agents; only cleaning with soft brushes and water is appropriate. The reason for this is that while the use of abrasive or strong cleaning agents will, in the short term, enhance the visibility of the inscription, in the longer term, it will hasten the process of erosion. Lichens on a memorial help with estimating the age of a memorial/graveyard and can be an interesting feature that helps its overall appearance and in turn the graveyard, along with playing a role in monitoring pollution.

Nature in the Graveyard

Graveyards can be a haven for both flora and fauna, providing a rich biodiversity, particularly those located in rural areas or those that are overgrown as a result of the normally low levels of human activity. The grasslands of graveyards can support a high number of native grasses and wildflowers compared with those that are intensively farmed and maintained. Historic graveyards are very often bounded by dry stone walls or walls bound with lime mortar which allow plants to gain a foothold, or serve as nesting or feeding places for lizards or birds; while those bounded by banks and hedgerows provide a habitat for badgers, rabbits or hedgehogs. The church tower or roofs are often used by bats or owls for nesting or roosting. Many trees were planted in graveyards for both symbolic and aesthetic reasons and should be respected, with removal only being considered on health & safety grounds or if the trees are diseased.

A maintenance regime that welcomes nature into a graveyard and protects potentially rare or endangered species of flora and fauna is to be encouraged and will be cheaper and require less time than a more labour intensive maintenance regime and will support the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan.

Ground Surface

The ground surface of an historic graveyard is usually covered in grass that is undulating in nature which is very characteristic and should be maintained. Rather than using mowing machines, strimmers are easier to use but should be used with care when working in close proximity to upright memorials to avoid cutting into the surface of the memorials. In some counties sheep are used to help to control grass growth through periodic grazing of the graveyard. They will graze right up the base of memorials or a wall which prevent the growth of ivy or briars on these structures. Another option would be to consider letting the grass to grow into a meadow and cut pathways through the long grass to allow access to different parts of the graveyard.

Pathways

Existing pathways should be maintained and kept clear of vegetation and new pathways should never be constructed without consultation with the local Conservation/Heritage Officer. Careful consideration should be given to the design and type of any new pathway, together with the timeframe required by statutory bodies.

Further Information & References

Printed Material

The Care and Conservation of Graveyards, OPW (1995) – ISBN 07076 1614 X

Irish Churchwarden's Handbook, Rev. James B. Leslie; revised Very Rev. W. G. Wilson (1979) APCK

Places of Worship: The Conservation of Places of Worship, Department of Culture, Heritage & the Gaeltacht – Advice Series (2011) – ISBN978 1 4064 2320 4

Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards, Caimin O'Brien, Heritage Council of Ireland (2010) – ISBN 978 1 906304 11 9

Church of Ireland Handbook: A Guide to the Organisation of the Church, J. L. B. Deane LL.B (1982) APCK

The Churchyards Handbook, 4th ed., Thomas Cocke FSA (2001) – ISBN 0 7151 7583 1

Online Material

Paving: the Conservation of Historic Ground Surfaces

<https://www.chg.gov.ie/app/uploads/2015/07/Paving-The-Conservation-of-Historic-Ground-Surfaces-2015.pdf>

Places of Worship: The Conservation of Places of Worship

<https://www.chg.gov.ie/app/uploads/2015/07/The-Conservation-of-Places-of-Worship-2011.pdf>

Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards

https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/guidance_care_conservation_recording_historic_graveyards_2011_7mb.pdf

The Care and Conservation of Graveyards

<https://www.archaeology.ie/sites/default/files/media/publications/care-and-conservation-of-graveyards.pdf>

Graveyards: Checklist of Good Practice

<https://www.tipperarycoco.ie/sites/default/files/Publications/checklist%20of%20good%20practice.pdf>

Guidelines for the Safe Custody of and Permissions For Copying of Parish Records & Memorials in Burial Grounds

<https://www.ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/Resources/ParishResources/SelectVestry/Guidelines/ParishRegisterGraveyardGuidelines.pdf>

Ministry of Justice: Managing the safety of Burial Ground Memorials – Practical advice for dealing with unstable memorials

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/326725/safety-burial-grounds.pdf

QUERIES TO: property@rcbdub.org or Property Department, Representative Church Body, Church of Ireland House, Church Avenue, Rathmines, Dublin 6, D06 CF67.