

Burial Ground Activities for Families and Youth Groups

Getting outdoors with young people

By
Harold Mytum

Professor of Archaeology, University of Liverpool

Getting some fresh air and having some outdoor activities is always useful, but even more so in the current conditions. Burial grounds do not sound like an attractive place to visit to many, but they are wonderful locations for respectful but exciting exploration of the natural world and local history and heritage. A lot of aspects of burial grounds are not about death but about life – the natural world, and also the living who chose, made, and visited the monuments.

Each of the following sheets gives you a theme to explore at the burial ground. Some people have access to an ancient churchyard, others an urban cemetery or a burial area associated with a chapel. Burial grounds vary greatly from place to place and depending when they were in use. The layout of burial grounds and the monuments marking burials have changed over time. These sheets are general enough that you should be able to use them anywhere. They are numbered for reference, but they can be done selectively and in any order.

It may be sensible to carry out one thematic activity on each visit to the burial ground. Many of the sheets also support things to do back home, creating a structured set of activities that can last a while. The children in your care might like to start a folder or scrap book to collect the results of all the activities, or make a digital scrap book with writing, scans, photographs; they can gradually develop a project about their burial ground which they can keep. Some of the activities can link to school curricula, especially at primary level. You will have to adjust how to approach each theme depending on the age and aptitude of the children in your care.

Respect for the dead and the visiting bereaved

Burial grounds have been used for many social gatherings in the past, but are also places of memory, respect and prayer. Relatives of the recently deceased visit graves and it does not help them if the area nearby is noisy. It is best if all activities take place in parts of the burial ground where most of those commemorated died at least 50 years ago, but a visit to a modern area can also be interesting as modern memorials can be quite different. Burial grounds tend to have popular areas at different periods in the past, so this is usually easy to do.

Health and safety for you and the children in your care

Be careful in a burial ground:

- Some monuments may be weathered or have been damaged by vandalism. Never lean on, jump on or climb on any monument. Do not crawl under any stones.
- The ground may be uneven, and there can be trip hazards
- Do not eat any berries; there may also be brambles and nettles
- Do not let the children in your care out of sight
- Make sure the gate into the burial ground is closed, if at all possible
- During the coronavirus pandemic, your group should keep its distance from others, another reason not to go close to areas where the bereaved (often elderly) may be visiting recent graves

Care of the monuments

- Do not remove vegetation, including lichen, from memorials
- Be careful on grave plots with kerbs – keep outside them
- Do not do rubbings of designs as many memorials are made of rocks that can be damaged by rubbing them

If any of the users would like to share their results, or give any feedback on these sheets, do email Harold Mytum at hmytum@liverpool.ac.uk

Do let us know if using these sheets have encouraged you to visit more burial grounds, appreciate how important they are as local heritage, or have more interest in your local history than before.

There are full resources for adults or older secondary children to carry out a full recording project of a burial ground and its monuments. These can be found at <http://www.debs.ac.uk/>.

Activity 1

Find the Flowers

The monuments in the burial ground can be decorated with symbols. One of the most popular is vegetation of all kinds, often including flowers. These are usually towards the top of the memorial, but they can be down the edges.

1. Find the memorials with plants on them. How many have you found?
2. What are the plants – can you tell? You can research these when you get home.
3. Do a drawing of the flowers or leaves. You might also like to take a photograph (e.g. using your phone).

Draw your picture(s) here

4. You can colour in your drawings when you get home with the colours you think the plants would be in real life.
5. Who has flowers on their monuments? Men or women? When did they live?
6. Are the flowers with any other symbols and shapes? We look at some of these on another activity sheet.

Plants had meanings in the past. They may be pretty, but they also carried messages. Here are some that are often on monuments; some plants and flowers have many meanings, so you may find different ones for the same plant. They are listed on the next page.

<i>Plant</i>	<i>Meanings</i>
Any flower	Life and the circle of life and death
Acorn	Life, fertility, immortality
Broken branch or stem	Life cut short
Fruits	Plenty – the generosity of God
Grapes, grape vines	Jesus Christ (hence wine used in Holy Communion)
Ivy	Memory
Laurel wreath	Life's achievements, victory, eternal love
Lily	Innocence, purity, popular at funerals
Oak leaves	Strength, honour, immortality
Palm leaves	Spiritual victory over death, eternal peace
Pomegranate	Symbol of Christ's church, renewal
Poppy	Death, eternal sleep
Rose	Love (you also see Yorkshire roses used as a regional symbol)
Tulip	Life
Thistle	Scottish identity
Tree or branch	Life
Weeping Willow	Remembering, mourning
Wheat	Cycle of life, resurrection
Wreath of leaves	Victory, eternal love

Activity 2

Religious Symbols

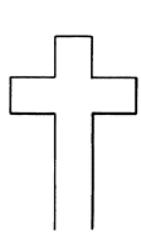
People selecting a memorial are often thinking about religion at that time. Most burial markers have Christian symbols on them, but in some cemeteries, you may find sections of the area set aside for Jewish and other religions. This sheet concentrates on the Christian symbols.

The cross is a significant Christian symbol because Christians believe that Jesus Christ was killed (crucified) on a cross but, after three days, he rose to life again. Christians believe that his death was to take away all the mistakes (sins) that people make, so that they can be forgiven by God and go to Heaven when their bodies die.

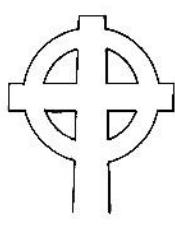
1. Crosses appear on many memorials, and some monuments can be shaped as a cross. Look for crosses – are there any on stones, or as whole monuments?
2. Look at the shapes of the crosses – they can vary. Draw the different shapes.

Draw your picture here

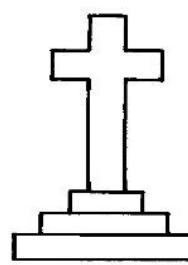
The different cross shapes each have their own name. Here are some of the most common:



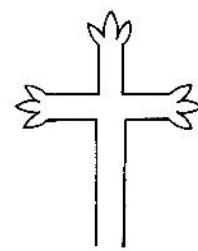
Latin



Celtic



Calvary



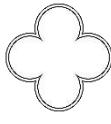
Patonce

Some crosses have IN RI on them, standing for the Latin said by Pontius Pilate *Iesus Nazareus Rex Iudeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews). This was written above Christ on the cross.

On memorials to Roman Catholic people, there may be crucifixions (Christ depicted on a cross); 19th-century and earlier images may have a little skull under the cross because the crucifixion site was at Golgotha (the 'place of the skull'). There may also be a crown of thorns (worn by Christ on the cross) or symbols of the Passion – items mentioned in the Biblical account of the crucifixion. The most commonly seen are: 30 pieces of silver, a scourge (like a whip), nails (usually 3), dice, robe, spear, ladders.

Images of the Virgin Mary (mother of Jesus Christ) or other saints – portraits or whole figures – are also sometimes chosen.

Other religious symbolism includes:

Alpha and Omega	The are Greek letters for the beginning and the end Alpha can be A or α , Omega can be Ω or ω
Anchor	Can be on sailor's (mariner's) monuments but is often used as indicating faith in God that holds firm through life
Angel	Messenger from God, angels with trumpets represent the end of the world and judgement day
Book	The Bible or Book of Life
Butterfly	Soul going to Haven
Chalice or cup	This is used for the wine in Holy Communion (Mass) and normally appears on priest's gravestones; there may also be a circular wafer (sort of bread)
Chi Rho: X ρ	The first two letters of Christ in Greek (look like X p)
Crown	Crown of Life, God's glory – often shown with radiating lines from the crown
Dove (often with olive branch)	Peace, God's forgiveness
Hands together praying	Devotion, commitment to Christ
Hand pointing down	Hand of God
Hand pointing up	The soul of the dead person is going to Heaven
IHS	These three letters are the first three letters of Jesus when written in Greek capital letters, the language the New Testament was first written down in. Sometimes the three letters all overlap in a complex design
Lamb (often with a cross or banner / flag)	The sacrificial lamb from Jewish religion is used here to represent Jesus Christ dying for us (this symbol is also called the Agnus Dei)
Quatrefoil	
Trefoil and Triquetta	 
Scallop shells	Shapes with three elements representing the Trinity – God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit
Snake eating its tail	Christian person's religious pilgrimage (journey) through life
Vine and/or grapes	Eternity Represents Holy Communion (Mass) when bread is eaten and wine drunk in the church service

Activity 3

Other Symbols

People selecting a memorial often wanted to give a message to those came and looked at the stones – like you are now! The message could be about religion, but was often about the person's life or how they died. A message can be through pictures – symbols – or by writing. Writing after details of the person who died is called an an epitaph (see another sheet).

Some parts of the country have lots of stones with symbols, and others have very few. (*Organisers/Parents/Guardians: you might like to look for these as the children work on another sheet and if there are some, then this activity would work for you*). More modern graves often have designs etched on them, but remember about being respectful if you go to look at those.

1. Find the symbols and draw them or take a photograph.

Draw your picture(s) here

2. Are any very common? When did the person live who has that symbol? Symbols were popular at particular periods in the past.
3. A few stones have a portrait of the dead person. In early days this was carved or made of metal, but with photography versions were made to fix to stones. Now portraits can be etched by computers onto stones. Can you find any pictures of people?

Older stones – those from before the later 18th century – often emphasised the death of the person, and that their body was under the ground, rather than about the memory of the person which was emphasised after that. Early stones may have symbols of mortality on them:

- Skull
- Long bones
- Father time
- Hour-glass (egg timer)
- Skeleton (sometimes with a spear)
- Coffin
- Bell (rung at funerals)
- Picks and/or spades

Gravestones with skull and cross bones on them are not pirate's graves! Other symbols of death are torches with flames pointing downward (putting out the life) or a broken column or flower with broken stem (life cut short). Another death symbol is a sickle, sometimes with wheat being harvested.

Some monuments have cherubs or angels on them. The older ones have cherubs that represent the soul of the dead person going to heaven. These became fashionable after mortality symbols – people became more optimistic about going to heaven, but some mix the two sorts of symbols. After and overlapping cherubs came urns, inspired by urns used for cremations in the Classical world, but the people with such designs were buried, not cremated. The urns come in many designs and may have a cloth draped over them.

Many monuments have carving on them that is the same as in buildings – arches, columns. Some even look like doorways – are they doorways to the afterlife?

4. Look at the designs – and sketch them. Does the church or any other local buildings use those designs? When on a walk, look for other buildings in your area with the same designs.

Draw your picture(s) here

People can show they belonged to an organisation that was important to them. This might be a military unit – war graves have these designs – but many other ex-soldiers, sailors and airmen have them on their memorials. There may be a war memorial in the churchyard; there may be symbols on that – they may be religious, military or other themes.

The Masons or Freemasons were an important social organisation in the past, and members may display some symbols on their memorials. As some of these are also the tools of stonemasons. It is sometimes hard to know if it is a stone carver or a Mason that is commemorated. The most common symbols are:

- The square (for right angles = reason)
- Compass (dividers) (to draw circles = relationship to God)

These may be on their own or together, and they may also have a G in the middle of the design – standing for geometry or God.

An eye with radiating lines from it – the all-seeing eye – is the other very common Masonic symbol but there are many more including columns or a trowel. Many stones have columns but are not necessarily for masons.

Some memorials have large angels or other figures, or they can be large Celtic crosses with fascinating interlace patterns on them.

5. They are worth looking at closely – try to draw them out and see how the ribbons weave round in a pattern. You can research ancient Celtic designs at home.

Draw your picture(s) here

Some stones show people's occupation – such as ploughing for farmers – or their tools such as carpenter's tools. Some sailors have anchors, and they can even have a picture of their ship. Modern stones may show hobbies or pets.

Activity 4

Shapes in the Graveyard

One of the things to look for are shapes – the outlines of the headstones, and some of the other monuments. Some shapes are all angular with straight lines, others are all curves, and some have a mix of both. If you stand and look at the back of the headstone you get a much better idea of its outline.

1. You can draw the shapes, and think about which ones are similar. You can see how stone shapes can be made up out of rectangles, triangles and circles. Crosses are made of rectangles, but a Celtic cross also has a circle. Draw the stone outline and see how it may be built out of these shapes. Then there may be extra bits left to stick out, or other parts cut away. That is most often on the shoulders of the headstone. You can draw the main shapes, then count how many of each there are. There are convex and concave curves in the shapes.

Draw your picture(s) here

Sometimes all the people in the same family have similar stones in a row together, showing how they all belong together. Other times, people like to show they are different. You can also see how some shapes have the same material. You might not be able to know exactly what they are, but they are different colours and some are smooth and shiny (usually granites in pink, grey or black) and others are not.

Some early memorials have stones that are not symmetrical, and some very recent stones are also unusual shapes. But for most of the time people erected gravestones they have a vertical symmetry. Think how one half is a mirror image of the other.

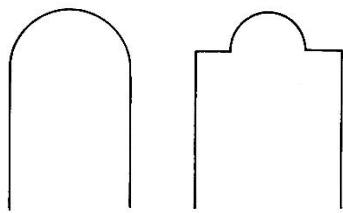
2. Shapes can be carved on stones. Sometimes the text is in a panel with a shaped edge. Sometimes that is the same shape as the stone itself, sometimes it is a different shape such as an oval or circle. How is the edge of the shape marked – with a cut away (incised) line, a raised frame, or is the shape made of a different material such as a marble tablet set into the monument?

If you look at the monuments you can sometimes see how the makers used tools to shape the stones, to get the right thickness and create the shape. Tooling marks can have lots of even parallel lines which shows how it was sawed into a block, or it may show all the individual chisel marks.

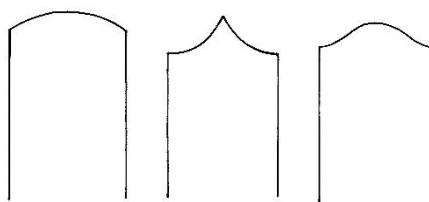
3. Think about how clever the carvers were to make stones that look symmetrical. Can you draw as well as they could carve? It takes a lot of practice!

Draw your picture(s) here

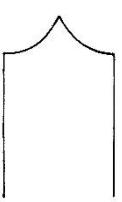
Common shapes on headstones



Semi-circle as part of the shape



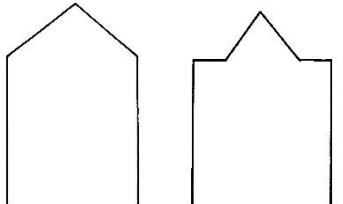
Convex



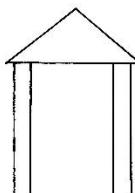
Concave



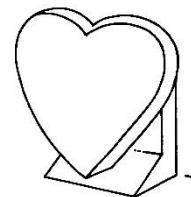
Both



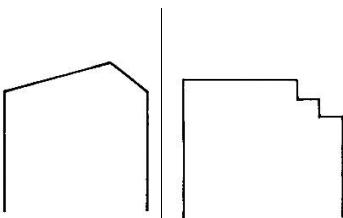
Triangle as part of the shape



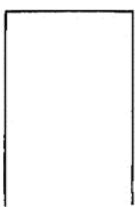
Pediment like a door



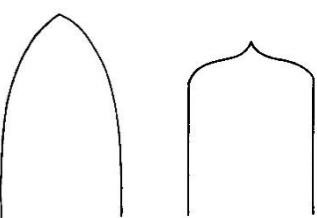
Heart shape



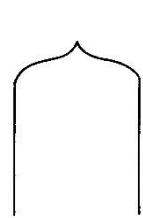
Asymmetrical



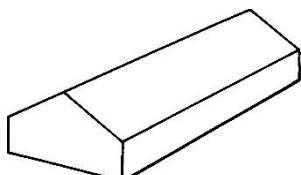
Rectangle



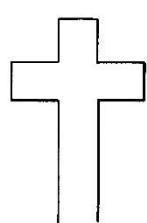
Curves to make architectural shapes
Gothic



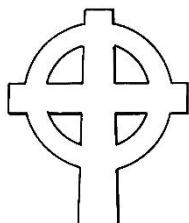
Ogee



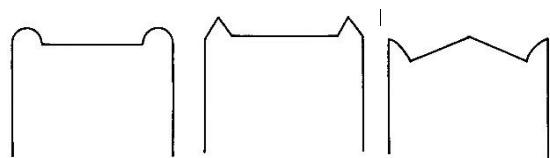
Triangle within profile, rectangle in plan



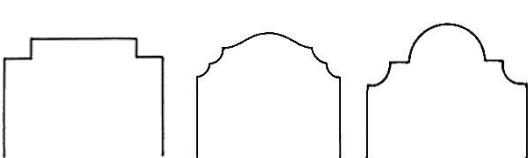
Cross made
of rectangles



Celtic cross
with circle



With protruding shapes
including convex curves



With cut away shapes including
concave curves on the shoulders

Activity 5

Names and Numbers in the Graveyard

The inscriptions on the memorials are full of names and numbers – dates and ages. These can be fun to look at for older primary age children, and they can collect information to work on back home; younger children can try to read numbers, older ones can collect data to then work out averages, differences between men and women and trends over time, and you can adapt data collection accordingly.

1. The names on the stones have people's first (Christian) names. Copy them down and see which ones were popular.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, people had some names that are still popular now – like Emily, George, James, Lily, Olivia, Sophie, Thomas, William. But others are very unusual now. Some you might like to look up to see what they mean.

Surnames may show which families were large and important in the community that used the graveyard. In some parts of the country, groups came from other countries and settled. Wives normally used their husband's surname, but in some areas wives kept their own family name or put in both (sometimes with 'alias' to show their maiden name). Some older stones describe a widow as 'relict' as that was the word used for a widow then.

2. You can note down the age and when the person died and work out the year they got their name, and so see when parents thought that was a good name to give their children. You may also see names go in and out of fashion, and may find some unusual names that seem really weird!

3. As many memorials give the ages of people when they died and when that was, you can see if people died in particular months. Use the chart below to do the counting. There is also a chart so that you can count the people who died, by decade, and so see when the burial ground was most in use. If you want, you can turn these numbers into graphs.

January

February

March

April

May

June

July

Aug

September

October

November

Decades Chart – do tally marks to count e.g. 1-5 | || ||| |||| 

Anything before 1800

1800s

1810s

1820s

1830s

1840s

1850s

1860s

1870s

1880s

1890s

1900s

1910s

1920s

1930s

1940s

1950s
