

# 1. Archaeology and Historic Built Features



*This sheet gives information about the archaeology and history of churchyards and burial sites and their man-made features, with guidelines on recording.*

## Below ground archaeology

In archaeological terms, churchyards and burial grounds may contain buried evidence of earlier human use of the site. Some sites have pre-Christian origins and such continuity of use may span many centuries. There may be buried remains of structures, boundaries and other features which can throw light on the history and development of the church building. Historic burials can provide information about past funerary practices and reveal information about diet, disease and other aspects of human life.

Such information is usually inaccessible because of the difficulties of conducting archaeological excavations in churchyards and burial grounds, but other types of evidence do not require ground disturbance.

## Above ground archaeology

Churchyards often contain visible earthworks such as disused boundaries marking the former extent of the burial ground. Even the shape of the site can be suggestive; a roughly circular plan is often thought to indicate early or pre-Christian origin.

Archaeology is only part of the picture. Churchyard and burial sites often contain important buildings and structures (not just the church itself) which are interesting features in their own right illustrating changes in taste, fashion or technology in a very immediate way.

Unlike the church building churchyards are rarely protected by listing or scheduling legislation and they can suffer from pressures of natural decay, rampant vegetation and vandalism. They need and deserve care, not only for their historic interest but also because that history gives us a sense of time and place.

## Surveys

If your churchyard or burial ground has unusual features, an archaeological survey without digging could be worthwhile. A survey may reveal previously unnoticed

treasures, as items may be half-buried in the ground. A survey also provides information on former boundaries, former buildings, the approximate age of each part of the site and the approximate date of features, such as preaching crosses.

A churchyard archaeological dig could take place if, for example, underground drainage work was essential. This is costly and an alternative which may be adequate is to have a 'watching' brief for an archaeologist to observe any digging work and write a report on findings unearthed. This is likely to be grant-aided if done in conjunction with other grant-aided work.

## The law

As churchyards and burial grounds are historic sites, it is illegal to dig (other than grave digging) without applying for permission, and no large scale digging work should take place without an archaeologist in attendance. No item of stonework should be moved without similar permission being granted.

Contact your local council archaeology department or church offices for further advice.

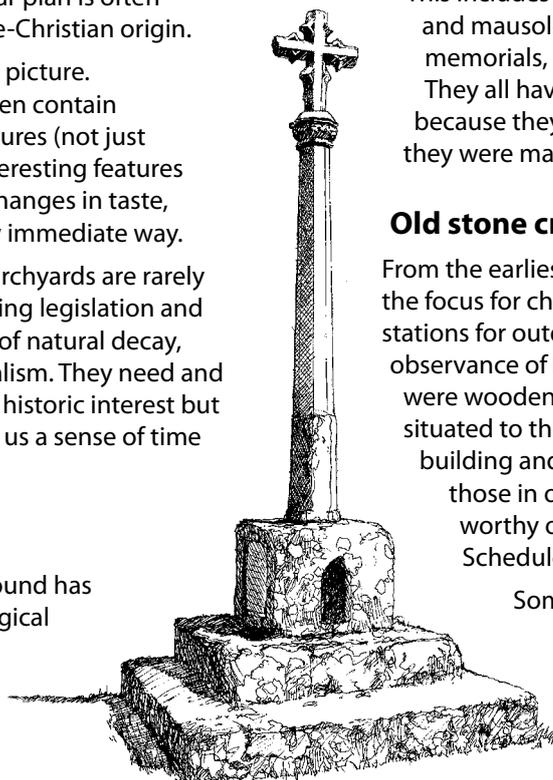
## Historic built features

This includes buildings such as bier houses and mausolea and other structures such as memorials, lychgates and preaching crosses. They all have potential conservation value because they represent the period in which they were made and set up.

## Old stone crosses

From the earliest times, churchyard crosses were the focus for church worship. They were also stations for outdoor processions, particularly in the observance of Palm Sunday. The earliest crosses were wooden, replaced by stone. They may be situated to the sunny south side of a church building and the crosses that survive, especially those in or near their original location, are worthy of protection. Many are designated Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs).

Some of these old crosses had their cross heads taken away during the Reformation and these were sometimes replaced by sundials. The very old



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variety may be monoliths, stone shafts often set directly into the ground, without a base. The more common forms have steps at the base and were erected during the medieval period up to the Reformation.

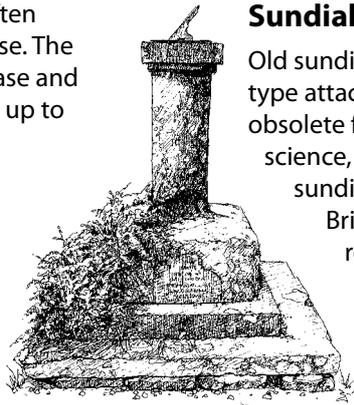
#### Lychgates

The word lychgate originates from the Old English word Lic meaning corpse. In the past the corpse was carried to the lychgate and placed on a coffin stone or a bier where the priest conducted the first part of the funeral service.

Lychgates are found at entrances to churchyards and sometimes at the exit too. They became popular in the 19th century and were constructed of medieval type joinery often to commemorate a local person, a special event or as a war memorial.

#### Carvings on walls

The exterior of the church can have a variety of interesting carved stonework: parapets, pinnacles, gargoyles and grotesques. There may even be a Sheelana-gig, which is a seemingly erotic carving of a female figure. These are usually old and appear to be taken from a previous older building. To find out more about these fascinating sculptures look at [www.sheelanagig.org](http://www.sheelanagig.org).



#### Sundials

Old sundials may be free-standing or the mass dial type attached to the wall of the church. Whilst now obsolete for time-keeping, there is an interest in the science, design, construction and conservation of sundials. The British Sundial Society catalogues British sundials and advises on their restoration.

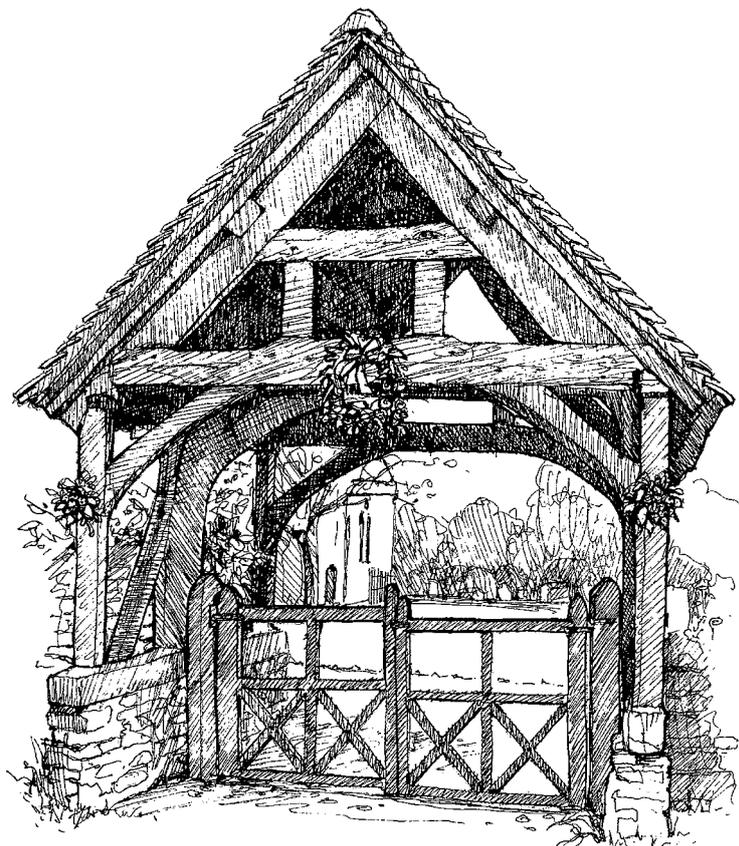
Mass dials (scratch dials) are medieval (c.1100–1600) dials found on the south walls of churches. They consist of a series of radiating lines scratched into the stonework, with a piece of wood or iron peg at the centre which would cast a shadow telling the time for mass.

#### Memorials and monuments

Graveyard monuments are in public view. They can be appreciated and valued by many and this can help limit vandalism and encourage family and community support for their care.

Memorials and monuments are particularly rich in history and display information on subjects ranging from the technology of stone quarrying and cutting to fashions in architecture and verse.

There is a huge variety of memorials from simple functional headstones to grandiose, eccentric and highly decorated structures. A few very early memorials



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such as rough stone coffin lids, sarcophagi and some early chest tombs still survive. Most of the memorials we see today date from the 17th century onwards, a time when the less rich as well as the powerful could erect an inscribed memorial. Stone masons left their marks, which can still be seen on some old stones.

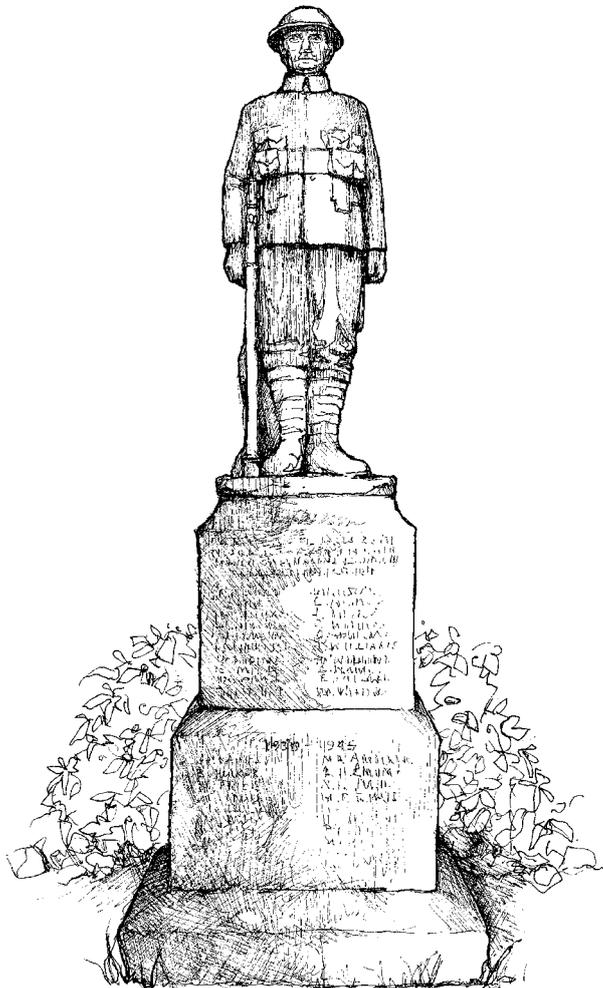
Memorials can be headstones, ledgers (horizontal slabs), chest or table tombs. There are also more unusual grand types such as statues and mausolea, which are buildings constructed as monuments enclosing the burial chamber. Historically, they were, and still are, large and impressive buildings for a person of importance. 18th century and early 19th century headstones are renowned for the lovely lettering.

The geology of memorials is interesting (see sheet C3, Geology of the Stones). The carved symbols found on memorials are a further area for study. This study is known as symbology.



#### War memorials

A war memorial is generally erected by local communities or groups to commemorate those people involved in or affected by war or conflict. Many are important for their architectural and artistic heritage and are listed; new memorials continue to be erected. The War Memorial Trust works for the protection and conservation of war memorials in the UK.



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#### **Useful contacts**

British Sundial Society, [www.sundialsoc.org.uk](http://www.sundialsoc.org.uk)

Church of England, ChurchCare, [www.churchcare.co.uk](http://www.churchcare.co.uk)

Church in Wales, [www.churchinwales.org.uk/heritage](http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/heritage)

Churches Conservation Trust, [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk)

Council for British Archaeology, [www.archaeologyuk.org](http://www.archaeologyuk.org)

Federation of Family History Societies, [www.ffhs.org.uk](http://www.ffhs.org.uk)

Local Authority Archaeological Services

The Natural Death Centre, [www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk)

War Memorials Trust, [www.warmemorials.org](http://www.warmemorials.org)

#### *Statutory government agencies:*

Cadw, [www.cadw.wales.gov.uk](http://www.cadw.wales.gov.uk)

English Heritage, [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)

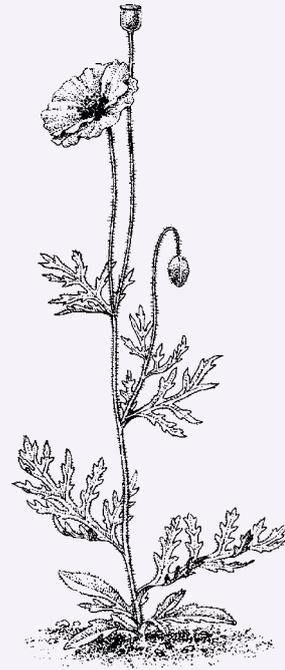
Historic Scotland, [www.historic-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk)

Northern Ireland Environment Agency, [www.doeni.gov.uk](http://www.doeni.gov.uk)

#### **Useful reading**

English Churchyard Memorials – Frederick Burgess, Lutterworth Press

Understanding Scottish Graveyards – Betty Willsher, Canongate Books Ltd



*Poppy*