

Introduction

Graveyards are an integral part of the Irish landscape. There are over 1,200 of them in Northern Ireland alone. They can be found in a range of different settings. Many are in remote parts of the countryside, near the top of a mountain or even on a small island. Others are within towns, hemmed in between commercial and residential buildings. Because there are so many of them we can often take them for granted. However, each graveyard is unique. Each was created in its own particular set of circumstances. Each will have its own unique collection of headstones. This essay will provide a brief outline of how to study a graveyard.

The graveyard

First of all it is important to get some background information about the graveyard. This provides a context within which the memorials and their inscriptions can be studied. Some basic questions to be addressed include: How old is the graveyard? Is it still in use? If not, when was it closed? Who was / is responsible for it? What forms the boundary of the graveyard? Are there any traditions associated with the graveyard? There are over 1,200 graveyards in Northern Ireland and the number is increasing, if not annually, then certainly every decade. Some graveyards are, therefore, of very recent date. Others have been in almost continuous use for over a thousand years, a few even dating back to the earliest period of Christianity in Ireland. There are nearly 300 identifiable graveyards in Northern Ireland that pre-date 1600. Most of these were the sites of medieval parish churches, though some were the location of a medieval chapel. In some old graveyards there will be relics of the early medieval period. High crosses can be seen at Arboe, Boho, Devenish, Donaghmore (County Down), Donaghmore (County Tyrone) and elsewhere. Round towers survive at Devenish, Drumbo and Nendrum.

Churches in graveyards

Is there a church in the graveyard? Is it still in use? When was it built? By whom? How much did it cost? Are there any monuments inside the church? Are there any other buildings inside the graveyard? In most graveyards there will be a church still in use. It is important to find out something about the church such as the denomination it serves, when it was built and by whom. In many cases the present church will not have been the first on the site. Some churches have been rebuilt several times in their history. In some cases the church will have been in existence for several generations before people started to bury in its vicinity. This is particularly true for Presbyterian and Catholic graveyards. The oldest graveyards with a church still in use are nearly always attached to Church of Ireland churches. This is due to the fact that following the Reformation the Church of Ireland took possession of many of the medieval parish churches and made use of them itself, either repairing or rebuilding the existing building. This did not happen in every parish, however. Probably the only Presbyterian church occupying the site of a pre-Reformation church is Drumbo in the parish of Drumbo. In this case the Church of Ireland did not make use of the medieval church site. A few Catholic churches occupy or are built adjacent to the sites of pre-Reformation churches. These include Boho and Kinawley in County Fermanagh. Again this can be explained by the fact that the Church of Ireland did not make use of the medieval site, preferring to build its parish church elsewhere.

Memorials

What is the earliest date on a gravestone? Are there any gravestones with decorative carvings? Are there any vaults or mausolea? Although gravestones with legible inscriptions tend to date from the seventeenth century onwards, there are earlier memorials in some graveyards. Norman graveslabs can be seen in a number of graveyards, particularly in east County Down. In the chancel of Dungiven priory is the monument to Cooey na Gall, believed to date from the late fourteenth century. Many gravestones, particularly those dating from the

seventeenth and eighteenth century, have elaborate carvings on them. These can include symbols of death such as a skull, crossed bones, hourglass, bell and coffin. Other tombstone decoration includes the use of heraldry. Trade symbols and symbols associated with religious orders and secret societies also appear on gravestones. For discussions on the use of symbolism on gravestones see the articles on this website. Wealthier families often built mausolea. These could come in many forms. An inscribed slab, often of marble, would be affixed to the wall of the mausoleum and this would recount the deaths of those buried beneath it.

The inscriptions

A graveyard is the accessible source for the studying the history of a local community. Gravestone inscriptions have long been valued by historians and genealogists. The information recorded on gravestones varies considerably. Some will bear the name of the family interred beneath the stone and nothing else. Others may contain detailed information about several generations of one family. A date of death will usually be given for each person named on the gravestone. Ages will be frequently given. This allows for a year of birth to be estimated. The relationship between the individuals recorded on the gravestone will often be indicated: 'son of', 'husband of', 'sister of' etc. Many gravestones will provide the residence and/or the occupation of the deceased. In some cases this will not be a recognised townland name. A memorial to a soldier may state where he had fought. Some inscriptions will even give the cause of death, particularly if it was the result of military action or death at sea in a shipwreck. Many memorials will have an overseas connection of some kind. A headstone may have been erected at the cost of a family member living overseas or it may commemorate a family member who died abroad. Graveyards are special places where the memories of the dead can be commemorated by the community they served. Public memorials have been erected by communities to express their appreciation of the service and achievements of individuals, notably medical doctors. War memorials perpetuate the gratitude of the community for those who served and died for their country. A visit to nearly any graveyard will reveal that memorials were by no means the preserve of the wealthier members of society. Many gravestones commemorate people from fairly humble backgrounds. Gravestones provide an ideal launch pad for any genealogical investigation. Often it is possible to relate the information provided by the inscription to other sources such as wills, newspapers, census returns etc. In this way it will be possible to build up a picture of the social world in which past individuals lived. A visit to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland is strongly recommended.

Sources for the study of graveyards

Ordnance Survey Memoirs (1830s)

Ordnance Survey Letters (1830s)

S. Lewis, A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland (2 vols. 1837)

W. Reeves, Ecclesiastical antiquities of Down and Connor and Dromore (1847)

Local parish histories

Published lists of gravestone inscriptions

Church of Ireland vestry books in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

Local Authority papers in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland