

ONE BRITISH ARCHIVE

One British Archive: A Monumental Task: The Archival Potential of Graveyards

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Abstract

Modern gravestones have been a common sight in European towns and cities for just over three hundred years. They provide a wealth of information beyond simply names and dates, and can teach us a great deal about the time and place in which they were erected and the people who built them. I have been recording and conserving gravestones for fifteen years, and here I present some of the techniques, sources, and hard-learned lessons of using gravestones as archival material that will enable you to see your local graveyard in a whole new light.

Gravestones come in many shapes, sizes, and styles (Figure 1). Some are plain, unadorned lumps of rock. Some—the effigies of some medieval nobles or priests, for example—are decorated but have no writing of any kind. But the majority of those erected in the United Kingdom and places where its citizens have migrated over the last three centuries feature an inscription, even if it is simply the name, initials, or the birth/death dates of the deceased person whom it commemorates.¹ This physical and written materiality, in combination with those of other memorials, forms an archive of genealogical, historical, art historical, and poetic material that can be of great use to researchers from many perspectives.

Gravestones are an Archive

The view of modern gravestones as a repository of archaeologically valuable research material has gained academic traction since the end of the twentieth century, although older memorials, like Roman gravestones, ancient Greek grave stelae, and the larger tombs of royals, have been considered valid targets of academic study for centuries—and what is an Egyptian pyramid if not a very large grave marker?² The publication of guides on acquiring and recording gravestone data using systematic approaches, like Harold Mytum's *Recording and Analysing Graveyards*, means we have useful instructions from experienced academics.³ In these books you will find some interesting history as well as instructions for archival use. First, obtain permission to survey a site. Next, make an accurate sketch map of the memorials in it; clear any debris; test for lost memorials below the grass using poles; accurately and

¹ Betty Willsher, *Understanding Scottish Graveyards* (Chambers, 1985); the popularity of this volume served to inspire a significant increase in the number and quality of graveyard surveys in Scotland, partly explaining the great number of published surveys now available. See also Harold Mytum, “Language as Symbol in Churchyard Monuments—The Use of Welsh in 19th-Century and 20th-Century Pembrokeshire,” *World Archaeology* 26, no. 2 (1994): 252–67.

² Sarah Tarlow, *Bereavement and Mortality: An Archaeology of Mortality* (Blackwell, 1999).

³ Harold Mytum, *Recording and Analysing Graveyards* (English Heritage, 2000).



Figure 1. The Wyatt family memorial at St Tegai's churchyard, Llandegai, North Wales, with English inscriptions. Photograph: James Johnson.

carefully transcribe the shape, material, and inscription of your gravestone. Finally, take a photograph with a scale bar that can be used in future research.

For genealogists, gravestones provide links to lost relatives. Families can trace their ancestors using gravestones, and the work of organizations such as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission helps to ensure that the graves of war dead are recorded and maintained both for private mourning and public commemoration. The most complete archive of gravestone data of the UK's home nations is held by the Scottish Genealogical Society (SGS) at its library and archive in central Edinburgh. A number of volumes found in the archive, in hard copy, microfiche, and digital form, contain the recorded inscriptions of thousands of gravestones from burial grounds in every Scottish local authority area.⁴ However, there are limitations to these databases as well as errors, and there remains so much more to learn by visiting the graveyards in situ.

In 2021, I travelled to the Isle of Lewis, off the west coast of Scotland, to see how much Gaelic compared to English was used on gravestones there, and to see if the gravestones in each language had different religious inscriptions or decorative forms. Across hundreds of graves, the most popular Gaelic Bible verse on nineteenth-century Lewis gravestones was *Gus am bris an latha* ("until the shadows flee away"). It is from the Song of Solomon and fits with the island's non-conformist Free Church of Scotland tradition of Psalm singing and its focus on the writings of Solomon in some of their worship. This suggests that many of the Gaelic speakers of the time were members of the Free Church.

⁴ Scottish Genealogical Society, *Memorial Inscriptions (pre-1855) in North Perthshire*, vol. 2 (Scottish Genealogical Society, 1997).



Figure 2. Reused roof tiles at Teampull Eoin, Bragar, Isle of Lewis, Scotland. Photograph: James Johnson.

Of course, lack of inscription can also be revealing. At Teampull Eoin, on the other side of Lewis, there are more than two thousand unmarked stones, laid out in rows, which were made from the recycled roof tiles of the teampull (a local Gaelic term for a chapel of ease).⁵ While they offer no insight into the deceased, they do conform to some of the island's more conservative burial traditions: not mentioning the name of the deceased, not writing down their names in stone, and not marking the grave with anything but a very modest marker (Figure 2).⁶ In this case, the silence is a message.

Gravestones can provide useful material on the death and burial trends and traditions of the cultures that use them, including the dominant religious denominations, artistic motifs, and symbols of mortality of the stone's period of construction. Religious imagery can hint at the denomination: crucifixion scenes are more common on Roman Catholic graves. The popular decorative motifs used in North Wales Victorian graveyards (hands clasped in farewell) suggest a personal connection with the deceased and an expectation of a continued journey post mortem. Sometimes they can also tell you *how* people died. "After a long illness," "after a valiant struggle," "his long suffering ended" are all fairly common epitaphs on the memorials of people who were ill for a long time. One example I recall from Malew parish church on the Isle of Man noted that the deceased fell overboard while at sea and drowned. An early nineteenth-century stone from Pentir, near my hometown of Bangor, Gwynedd, was paid for by the village community and noted that the deceased, a "poor idiot," drowned in the local horse trough. Tragically, in this instance, "idiot" probably refers to a mental health condition or learning disability.

⁵ Rachel Barrowman, *Lewis Coastal Chapel-Sites Survey 2007–8. Project Report* (Glasgow, 2008).

⁶ James Johnson, personal correspondence with the Rev. Canon Peter Moger, 2021. The incumbent priest of the Episcopal Church of St Peter in Stornoway informed me that when officiating at Free Church of Scotland funerals, while their own minister was absent, he was instructed not to mention the deceased's name at any point during the ceremony. It is not known if this tradition is present outside of Lewis.



Figure 3. Welsh gravestone on purple slate. Translation: “In memory of Mair and her baby, Pencefn [a farm].” St. Cedol Church, Pentir, Gwynedd, Wales. Photograph: James Johnson.

Graveyards also relate a demographic tale. Life expectancies can be ascertained through cross-referencing with other life documents.⁷ This cross-referencing is how we created a graveyard map, with an associated booklet of historical people’s names, businesses, and places of burial at Holy Trinity Goodramgate church in York. Graveyards often reveal the practicalities of life. Many villages have only one street and, in Wales, the name of a farm or house, or a house number, was often recorded on rural Welsh gravestones to help identify which of the several families in the village the deceased belonged to (Figure 3). “Jane Jones Felin Hên Station,” for example, is much more useful when there might be half a dozen women with that name in the village (Figure 4). Such information makes finding correct census data easier. Of course, it also works in reverse, allowing us to find the burial place of someone we have already researched in life.

There is more that a graveyard and its stones can tell us as historians. The layout of graves and paths can tell us the popular style when it was arranged or how politics might have dictated use of space. Recycling of gravestones in construction can indicate the passage of time and aesthetic preferences. We can assess the most common gravestone designs, which also draws attention to those that buck the norm (Figure 1). The materials themselves speak. Whether rough local stone, a solidly finished piece by a local mason, an expensive imported marble, or maybe even a combination, tell us about social status. The favored stone type for memorials in North Wales was, up to the 1960s, local purple slate, which by its color can easily be traced to quarries in Penrhyn (Figures 3–4). These material sources can be mapped if you have an interest in the geology, and a whole picture of the process of producing gravestones in an area can then be built up, with the names of monumental masons and clients attached, if their records are available.

Gravestone Surveys are an Imperfect Source, and We are Imperfect Surveyors

While surveying gravestones with the University of Liverpool’s archaeology field-school in 2010–12, my colleague and I implemented a system of checking and correcting the eight

⁷ Tarlow, *Bereavement and Mortality*.

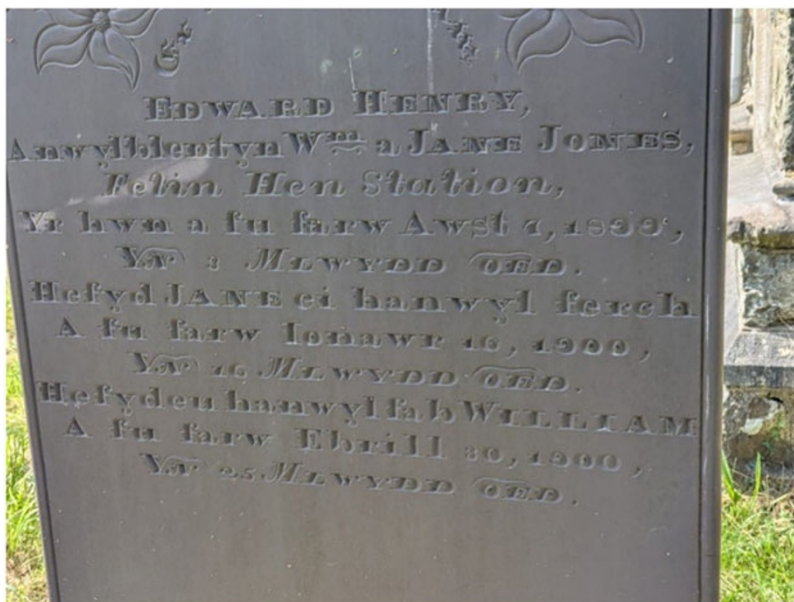


Figure 4. Welsh gravestone on purple slate. Translation of first three lines: “Edward Henry, dear child of Wm and Jane Jones, Felin Hên Station.” St. Cedol Church, Pentir, Gwynedd, Wales. Photograph: James Johnson.

hundred memorials located within the churchyard at Malew parish church; we then double-checked every inscription, as deciphered and transcribed by our cohort of students. Most were excellent, few were perfect. A missing comma in a dedicatory poem, an overlooked stonemason’s name, or a misremembered decorative motif could have led to an error in the final data.⁸ These errors can be frustrating for researchers using epigraphical data (writing inscribed in stone) from gravestone surveys, especially if cultural elements like decorations or poems are missing. In many cases, the object of the research is to gain a broader understanding of the cultural landscape of the area where the gravestone resides.⁹ Non-English inscriptional elements are particularly susceptible to being left out of recordings or misrecorded in majority Anglophone areas. The majority of the inscriptions on British gravestones are in English, but Welsh, Scots and Irish Gaelic, Latin, Hebrew, Greek (ancient and modern), as well as multiple global languages, also appear, especially in larger cities. If the surveyor taking down one of these inscriptions reads only English, or encounters worn inscriptions or those covered in lichen and declared “illegible,” we lose valuable information.

During my 2021 trip to the Isle of Lewis I found myself re-recording gravestones at Liurbost whose inscriptions had been deposited in the SGS archive. I found poems, dedications, names of stonemasons, and even those of deceased persons that had been left out of the initial record. Researchers did not accurately know how Gaelic was being used in the area, names of people were lost, and information on what sort of stone (local limestone) had not been considered. Because I sent my data to be corroborated by the SGS

⁸ In our case, the data were sent to the Manx government.

⁹ Kelsey Jackson Williams, “Towards a Theoretical Model of the Epigraphic Landscape,” in *Dynamic Epigraphy: New Approaches to Inscriptions*, ed. Eleri H. Cousins (Oxbow Books, 2022), 17–38. This chapter uses the example of grave monuments to build a theoretical model for the holistic examination of inscriptions in their broader theoretical context, beyond simply their existence as letters on a stone or reproduced on a page.



Figure 5. Gravestone of James Stephen Frank Johnson with incorrect death date. Menai Cemetery, Isle of Anglesey, Wales. Photograph: James Johnson.

and the local history group, dedicated volunteers are now correcting and augmenting the records.

Gravestones are Not Perfect Either

In the last fifteen years I have repaired and re-erected a number of gravestones, recorded thousands of them, erected two new gravestones, and commissioned one new memorial. The latter was my father's, erected in 2023. He died in 2022, but at the time of finalizing the design, I failed to notice that the wrong year had been drawn on the sketch of the proposed memorial. Upon its erection, this mistake went unnoticed by all of the relatives who visited his grave, until it was spotted six months later by a family friend. The year 2023 had been inscribed in the slate instead of 2022 (Figure 5). The stone remains uncorrected, and it is

likely to remain so for at least a year. The only gravestone that I, a gravestone researcher of fifteen years' experience, have commissioned has a very clear error on it, literally carved in stone. To ensure this error does not then make it into a corpus of gravestone survey data, it would need to be cross-referenced with government data on deaths for the years 2022 and 2023 or with the death certificate.

At the mostly Welsh-language churchyard of Llandegai, there is the grave of a woman named Grace. On the memorial her name is spelled "Grees." The two vowels were an attempt by a presumably monoglot Welsh speaker, but only partially literate stonemason, to render the Welsh ê, an extended vowel sound common to spoken Welsh, in epigraphical form. The name "Rhys" has been misspelled by non-Welsh speakers for so long that its incorrect spelling "Rees" has become an accepted Anglicized form but may not always conform to the spelling found in census data.

Gravestones are thus unreliable narrators: often commissioned by people experiencing grief and in mourning, and sometimes inscribed by people who cannot read. They must, therefore, be treated with caution. Yet they are also an important source for data on demography, life expectancy, religious beliefs and practices, linguistics, and aesthetic preferences. The often-unspoken traditions they reflect are written in stone, or embodied in their spacing, or crafted into the materials used. So much can be gleaned before we even dive into what is buried below.

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