

Death and Commemoration

SARAH TARLOW

The study of graveyards and memorial monuments in Britain in the early modern and modern periods is underdeveloped. Despite the many (maybe thousands) of graveyard survey and recording projects that have been undertaken, wide-ranging historical research questions have barely begun to be addressed. This paper identifies a number of possible directions for academic research, clustering around the three areas of demographic, family and social structure; the production and expression of identity and changing beliefs about the living and the dead. It is suggested that the full potential of graveyard studies has not yet been exploited for a variety of reasons. First, the essentially local remit and interest of most projects has not encouraged any orientation towards ambitious historical questions; secondly, the absence of any standardised way of recording graveyards and any way of monitoring the work that has been done; and thirdly, the failure of post-medieval archaeologists to develop many extensive or imaginative research programmes.

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the burial places and memorial monuments of the later post-medieval period in Britain. There are hundred of thousands of burial grounds belonging to the post-medieval period in Britain, but at present they constitute an under-exploited resource. In this review I will outline some of the kinds of research possible using grave-stones and graveyards, and then discuss why the full potential of graveyards as a research resource is currently so far from being fulfilled. The individual sculptural monuments of the late medieval and early modern period have been studied within art historical paradigms, and have recently been the subject of more extensive archaeological consideration (e.g. Finch 2000), but the later post-medieval burial place and its mass-produced memorials, having neither the glamour of scarcity nor the intrinsic artistic merit of medieval sculpture have been generally neglected outside of archaeology, and treated as an 'eccentric by-way' (Mytum 2004, viii) even among archaeologists.

Graveyards mean different things to different people and therefore both management of and research into graveyards and memorials need to consider the multiple roles and meanings that they have, and the various 'stakeholders', to use a New Labourite term, interested in their use. First, of course, the graveyard is a place of burial and remembrance. Unlike most burial grounds of earlier periods, the majority of graveyards with post-medieval interments are still in use, or contain the bodies of people who are still remembered by the living. Thus our research strategies must consider the needs of the bereaved as well as our ethical responsibility to those past people who chose to be buried there. Secondly, burial grounds are often significant places of local and family history. Local

communities and the descendants of those buried there may have particular emotional attachments to the place. Indeed, the majority of graveyard recorders in Britain are motivated by a deep interest in their own locality. Thirdly, the graveyard is a scholarly resource. I deliberately put this third because I, in common with many other archaeologists, often find it easy to forget that the graveyard is not just a kind of outdoor and poorly-catalogued archives office. Nevertheless, working with memorial monuments provokes an emotional engagement which is more powerful and more affecting than with most other types of later historical material. There is a terrible poignancy in the lists of names of children and babies following their siblings to the grave. The empathetic instinct has brought most graveyard recorders with whom I have spoken to the point of tears at least once; this profound sense of engagement with the past people is both a good and a bad thing: good because an emotional interest can be channelled into research or conservation, bad because it persuades us that we understand gravestones, that their meanings are transparent to us, and perhaps does not force us to probe as deeply as we otherwise might.

WHAT IS THE RESOURCE?

In this paper I will be using the term graveyard to include churchyards and burial grounds of all denominations, and none. In the mid-19th century the opening of suburban cemeteries, either by joint stock companies, groups of dissenters or burial boards, radically altered the pattern of disposal in Britain. The study of British municipal cemeteries has attracted particular attention in recent years, due in part to the activities of the Cemetery Research Group (e.g., Rugg 1997; 1998a; 1998b; Buckham 1999; Tarlow 2000; Strange 2002; see also the special issue of *Mortality* on

cemeteries [2003]). Memorials include not only gravestones but also mural monuments, memorial statuary and other monuments that may not have human remains directly associated with them, such as war memorials. In some cemeteries grave plots and burial vaults are supplemented by loculi or columbaria — above-ground vaults for the deposition of coffins or cremated remains.

Gravestones lie between archaeology and text; their proper study demands consideration of their materiality as well as the inscriptions on their surface, work which might include artistic, geological and archaeological analysis; inscriptions often require literary analysis as well as the bare extraction of facts, names and dates. Gravestones are not traditionally archaeological artefacts insofar as they are not 'finds'; but neither are they the kinds of text or document with which historians or literary scholars normally or preferentially engage. Art historians have not so far shown much interest in memorials other than unique, élite sculptural ones and there is very little research on the mass-produced, artistically poor and poetically undistinguished memorials that comprise most of Britain's post-medieval assemblage.

WHY DO GRAVEYARDS AND GRAVESTONES HAVE SUCH POTENTIAL AS A RESEARCH RESOURCE?

Graveyard research is cheap and non-destructive. To carry out primary data collection all you need is a clipboard and a tape measure. Although it is polite to talk to the incumbent, or check with the council, no formal permissions are required. This makes it eminently suitable for community and educational projects, for avocational archaeologists, students and independent researchers. The research value of gravestones lies more in their collective numbers than in the curiosities or memorials to local people of note that usually feature in graveyard guides. Graveyard recording at its best yields a body of chronologically highly organised data which can be reliably used to address many kinds of quantitative research questions. One can easily assemble a database of hundreds or thousands of stones, most of which have a date written on them; analysis of variables relating to features of the inscription or the monument itself can produce fine-grained pictures of change over time and variation in the commemoration of different kinds of person and family.

WHAT KINDS OF QUESTIONS CAN ONE ADDRESS WITH THIS MATERIAL?

Most people who participate in graveyard research are primarily interested in the

monuments and graveyards themselves. Research questions are thus frequently afterthoughts to the process of field recording and may be limited in ambition, focusing on the collection of data to fill in gaps in family trees, or the local history of movements into and out of the area. Yet research using grave monuments can easily be situated in wider intellectual contexts, illuminating aspects of cultural and social history more broadly and even challenging and shaping the theories and methods of archaeological analysis in other periods and places. Here I will suggest a few research areas to which graveyard studies could contribute. I have divided these research questions into three areas: those concerned with demographics and family structures, those relating to past identities and those centred around changing beliefs about the living and the dead.

Gravestones can be a good source of information for quantitative demographic study of mortality rates, fertility, and so on in the 19th century, but only where it is recognised that the commemorated population does not represent the total living population. Thus, within the memorialised population of a particular cemetery or group of cemeteries, interesting demographic trends may appear. However, the significance of any resulting patterns will only make sense in comparison to statistical data derived from registers, censuses or similarly comprehensive sources. For example, if analysis of a gravestone assemblage shows twice as many infant boys commemorated as infant girls, this does not necessarily mean that infant mortality was higher for males, but in comparison with other sources of demographic statistics, may mean that infant boys were more likely to be permanently commemorated. Thus what is revealed is not raw population data, but the assumptions and values that informed gender and age roles and changed the shape of the family. In the early 19th century, memorials frequently commemorated 20 or more people belonging to many generations. By the mid-20th century, the majority of memorials commemorate only two people. This relates to changing living arrangements, and revaluing family relationships so that marriage relationships are valorised above inter-generational ones. Unmarried children will still usually be commemorated on the same monument as their parents, but married offspring, as a new family unit, will generally buy their own plot and monument. Cultural beliefs about gender hierarchy within the family also affect commemoration. The ordering of names on stones can demonstrate assumptions about roles and relationships within the family; frequently the name of the patriarch is nearest the top of the monument, even when he is not the first to die.

Gross demographic trends, like the population of a parish, are better approached through documentary sources than by monuments which commemorate a changing and locally variable proportion of the population. Changes in family structure and gender role, however, may be evident, as we have seen.

A large set of research questions relates to identities: religious, local, family and gender identity for example. Memorial monuments can provide interesting information about overt, performative identities: what are the most significant facts about a person that should be recorded for perpetuity? Do they relate to a person's ancestry, their profession, their association with a particular place, their personal qualities, their emotional relationship with other family members, or their manner of death? Changes over time in the kind of details included in the inscription are fascinating. Throughout Britain there was a general trend away from detailing ancestors and position in the community, which was common on 17th- and early 18th-century memorials, and towards including more information about their emotional relationships with spouses, parents and children — expressions like 'Beloved wife', 'Sadly missed father' and so on appear in the majority of 19th-century inscriptions. In particular areas or regions, place may be more or less important. The addresses of the deceased were very frequently included on Welsh monuments, even up to the present. The conditions and manner of signalling Welsh cultural identities, through language, gravestone form and other variables, changes over time (Mytum 1999). In England, Keith Snell has recently shown how the significance of parish identities over the 19th century relates in complex ways to the mobility of the rural population over a period of rapid demographic and geographic change (Snell 2003). For people killed in war, the manner of their death often assumes primary importance in material commemoration. Personal qualities are more often referred to on women's gravestones; professional identities on men's. Children's memorials, when they are not recorded on the same stones as their parents or other adult relatives, are often different in design: in the 19th and 20th centuries they are often smaller, perhaps miniature versions of adult styles (although some children have huge and elaborate memorials, too). Studies of the ages of children on 'children's' memorials may tell us something about cultural conceptions of childhood; looking at the styles of their memorials certainly tells us something about the sentimentalisation of childhood and the emotional significance of childhood death.

Another set of research questions clusters around notions of class, wealth, status and power. Some gravestone scholars, notably

Parker Pearson (1982) and Mytum (1989), have focused on the way that commemorative monuments might function to structure relationships among the living. In the 19th century, Mytum has noted, ostentatious memorials were erected, especially in the new suburban cemeteries, which had a role in status consolidation or class aspiration among the middle classes. In the big new cemeteries, it is notable that the most ostentatious and expensive memorials are situated at the intersection of paths: premium spots for simple status display. Even away from the paths, however, many cemetery memorials display a concern with respectability, not limited to class. Strange (2000) has studied the strategies used by the poor in Liverpool to maintain private grave plots by elaborate exchange within working-class networks of kin and friendship. Everywhere the kerbs that commonly mark out grave plots at this time relate to a capitalistic understanding of 'private property of death'. The relationship between graveyards and social structure in terms of class and hierarchy is, however, complex. Status cannot usually be 'read off' monuments in any simple way, and the social meanings of stylistic variation do not remain constant through time. Parker Pearson (1982) has argued that class ideology can also work more subtly. In the 20th century there has been much greater standardisation in the size and shape of memorial monuments, and it is usually hard, on the basis of a stone's material features alone to attribute a class affiliation to the deceased. Parker Pearson has argued that this is not because 20th-century society was necessarily more egalitarian, but because a masking ideology was in place to conceal real differences in access to power and resources by the use of similar material culture in cemetery discourse.

Recent work by Helen Swift has overturned the assumption that graveyard memorials were exclusively a middle-class phenomenon.¹ Her work among Sheffield steelworkers demonstrates that in a 19th-century urban context, even low-status metalworkers often erected memorials, perhaps taking advantage of burial clubs, and that the identities expressed there relate more to professional association, shared community histories and tradition than to either religion, class or aspiration.

Identities may also be evident in commemorative practice in more subtle and less performative ways, simply through particular normative ways of doing things or patterns of belief. In fact, 'identity' is probably not quite the right term for this kind of study which relates more to cultural difference and particularity. The decision to cremate rather than bury the dead body, for example, was, in the 19th century, associated with radical

political and social beliefs in general (Jupp 1990). 'Cremationists' were popularly associated with vegetarians, anarchists and other unrespectable members of society. Cremation in that context would necessarily be regarded as an explicit and discursive statement of political identity. In the later 20th century, however, cremation had come to replace interment as the means of disposal of choice for the majority of Britons. Its mainstream acceptance changed the cultural meaning of cremation, so that it could no longer be regarded as a political act. This does not mean, however, that cremation in the 20th century was not culturally meaningful, only that its meanings had passed from what Giddens calls discursive consciousness to practical consciousness. The popularity of cremation in the later context relates to

particular cultural attitudes towards the body and bodily decay. At a time when emotional relationships between highly individualised people were accorded great significance, the decay and putrefaction of the individualised body caused particular anxiety for the bereaved. Cremation circumvented the whole process of bodily decay, and provided one way to address this cultural anxiety about the corruption of a beloved body. Another example, returning to the numbers of people commemorated on a stone: being commemorated with one's spouse only is not an explicit statement of identity, but it does reveal values, assumptions and aspirations dominant among particular groups at particular times. Thus, burial and remembrance do demonstrate social beliefs and ideologies, even when identities are not being discursively paraded.

The third area of research question I want to flag up here, therefore, is the history and nature of social beliefs and values more broadly. My own work on commemoration has considered the changing histories of emotion and the relationship between the living and the dead. I have argued that over the period from the 17th to the 19th century, for example, that relationship became increasingly personal and individual. In the 17th century the living related to the dead as a group or class, rather than primarily to particular deceased individuals. The relationship was essentially a chronological one between present and future states. Inscriptions and motifs on the stones emphasise the universal progress from life to death: *memento mori* commands the most commonly found inscription, remember death. The stones bear symbols of transience: an hourglass, a candle snuffed out, a tree being felled; and symbols of mortality: a coffin, a bell, and most commonly of all, skulls and bones: your inevitable destiny (Figure 1). Stones are commonly zoned spatially to show earthly things below (including the bones and the symbols of mortality and transience), and heavenly things above. The soul, often represented by a cherub, the arch of Heaven, and symbols of eternity are positioned at the top of the stone (Figure 2). The relationship between the living and the dead is chronological: you who are now living will become dead. It is not personalised. Insofar as the separation of the living and the dead is spatially envisaged, the journey from life to death is an upwards one, and includes passage through a doorway or gate.

By the 19th century, the relationship between the living and the dead has changed radically. The *memento mori* device is very rarely seen. Allusions to the fate of the body are infrequent. Instead the dead person is commemorated as a specific individual

Figure 1.
*Symbols of mortality
on a 17th-century
memorial.*



Figure 2.
*This monument from
St Magnus Cathedral,
Kirkwall, Orkney, is
zoned to show earthly
things at the bottom
(bones symbolise the
transient life of the
body), and Heavenly
things at the top: the
arch of Heaven and
crown of eternal life.
The design has a
strong upwards
dynamic.*



enmeshed in a web of personal and unique relationships. It is as parent, child and spouse that they are primarily remembered, in explicitly emotional language. Loss, love and grief are the emotional tropes invoked, not the need to prepare one's own soul. Ascent to Heaven has been largely replaced in the metaphors by the evocation of sleep: in the very form of the bed-head shaped monuments as well as in the language of inscriptions (Figure 3). Where the metaphor of journey is used, it is no longer a journey of the soul ascending to Heaven; the journey now is a sea voyage, with the expectation of a personal reunion to follow: 'not lost but gone before'. The relationship between the living and the dead is personal and individual.

This change in relationship is evident in many features of the stones: their form and placement, their decoration, features of the inscription including not only the obviously discursive epitaphs, but also the euphemisms used to talk about death, from 'departed this life' to 'fell asleep in Jesus'; and phrases used to introduce the inscription, where the notable change is from something like 'Here lie the remains of' to 'In loving memory of'.

Other broad cultural changes evident in post-medieval memorials relate to changing artistic tastes. We are not generally looking at high culture in post-medieval graveyards. Most gravestones of the 19th century are mass-produced and highly formulaic; often the poetry on them is excruciating doggerel: the 19th-century mortuary equivalent of those birthday cards with kittens on the front and a rhyme about a special niece inside. Nevertheless, the fact that they were commercially produced and marketed does not mean that they cannot tell us anything about people's tastes and ideas. The marketers in the growing business of death were responding to popular demand, and the history of popular taste, its local variations and its relationship to high culture is also fascinating social history. What factors, for example, influenced the change from classical-style monuments, to medievalist or Gothic ones in the mid-19th century? This change, of course, is evident in other fields of material expression besides gravestones and relates to complex intersections of taste, value, and something like national mood.

WHAT IS CURRENTLY LIMITING RESEARCH USING THIS MATERIAL?

Despite the great historical and archaeological potential of British post-medieval graveyards, they are presently seriously under-researched and under-valued. Guidelines and legislation designed to protect the historic environment leave many graveyards in at best an ambiguous position and at



worst with no protection at all. Consequently memorial monuments are regularly destroyed or removed to facilitate development. Other monuments are moved away from their original positions. For reasons of safety, stones are laid flat; for reasons of convenience to the mower driver, kerbs are lifted and headstones either repositioned in straight lines or simply stacked up against the perimeter wall (Figure 4). Many churchyards, especially in urban areas where land is at a premium, have been cleared altogether in recent decades (Mytum *et al.* 1994). Approaches to preservation which seek to identify single 'important' monuments for selective preservation miss the point: the value of most grave memorials is collective, so that statistical analysis can be worthwhile. Individual monuments may be delightful curiosities, but are far less useful in the identification of historical process.

Problems about protecting the archaeological resources for later historical periods are not, of course, unique to the case of graveyards. However, I want to suggest that the major problem in the full exploitation of graveyards is not one of management or inadequate legislation, although these are undoubtedly important issues. Rather, it is

Figure 3.
Bed-head shaped monuments, South Ronaldsay, Orkney. In the background one lair (plot) is marked out with an actual bedframe.

Figure 4.
Gravestones repositioned as a retaining wall, Widecombe, Devon.

the intellectual and imaginative failure of scholarship, and the difficulty of accessing and disseminating data that constitute the greatest impediments to the serious academic development of this field. Graveyard recording projects are being completed all the time. Local history societies, schools, student projects, community groups, women's institutes and friends' associations have all been instrumental in carrying out large numbers of basic surveys. However, we have almost completely failed to move beyond the level of primary data collection. My own book on Orcadian commemorative practice (Tarlow 1999a) and Finch's (2000) study of memorials in Norfolk are still the only archaeological monographs dealing with the interpretation of post-medieval graveyards of which I am aware. Harold Mytum has produced an excellent methodological book and very recently an international survey of approaches to graveyards and monuments. Other scholars have produced article-length interpretative pieces (e.g., Buckham 1999; Cannon 1989; Mytum 1999; Tarlow 1999b), but there are still very, very few academic archaeologists working on this plentiful material.

Graveyard survey projects have mostly been carried out with the aim of illuminating aspects of local or family history. Some graveyards recorded primarily for genealogy or local history have noted only the inscriptions, or only names and dates, paying little attention to the materiality of the stones themselves; others have recorded only those erected before a particular date. Some surveys are very full and include photographs or drawings of all stones, plans of the graveyard and full information about each monument; others are far more selective and may only include a few monuments, judged to be interesting on the basis of the artistry or the person commemorated. Despite a recent CBA manual (Mytum 2000), its predecessor (Jones 1976) and its Scottish counterpart (Willsher 1985), no common standards of graveyard recording are used, leading to a serious lack of comparability in the data.

Historic Scotland addressed this problem through the appointment of a full-time Carved Stones Advisor, whose remit is to liaise with and advise community projects, promote best practice and encourage the production of a standardised record, in which respects the project has been successful. In theory the work of the Carved Stones Advisor has been carried out in order to develop the serious academic study of Scottish graveyards. However, at the time of writing, the Scottish recording projects have not so far been used to launch any more extensive or comparative academic study. The reasons for this are complex.

First, as we have seen graveyards are of interest to multiple constituencies. Most of those who provide the labour, effort and initiative in graveyard recording do so on a voluntary basis in association with local groups. Generally their interests are focused on local history and genealogy, the pursuit of which is accomplished through specific graveyard survey. Local Societies are, by their nature, local. Their records have not been made in order to pursue questions of cultural history, attitudes towards the body or whatever. Because graveyard research is usually undertaken as part of local history, survey archives tend to be deposited only in local archive offices, if at all.

Secondly, this localism should not matter. The research questions of local groups should surely be compatible with those of archaeologists and historians with wider research aims. But it does matter. It matters because we do not know about and cannot easily access the work done by local groups. For people outside the loop, accessing graveyard survey records, or even finding out what records have been made, is difficult and depends on the right personal contacts or the luck of looking in the right place. Some records are in county archives; some in HER offices; some are held by universities or other educational institutions; some by private individuals; some by local history societies; some in parish or diocesan offices and some, no doubt, are gathering mould in lofts and garages. No survey of a British graveyard is fully published. There is no central register of survey data at present. This means that research that seeks to use graveyard data to look at questions which are not primarily related to the local history of a particular area do not have an obvious starting point. Despite the excellence of many survey-based research projects, it is at present almost impossible for scholars to make use of data collected by others, or to find out about commemorative practices in other parts of the country. This means that the conclusions of graveyard researchers can usually only be applied with confidence to the area of the survey itself. Because of the difficulty of accessing other records, or even obtaining any idea of the extent and value of other records, the only way that the growing numbers of people engaged in graveyard research in Britain can obtain comparative material at present is by making speculative enquiries of the sorts of archives likely to possess relevant data. Even then the archive may not possess useful material, or the record may not include the kind of information sought. Much time and energy is wasted carrying out reconnaissance visits to check records which turn out to be inappropriate or non-existent, while good and potentially useful research remains neglected. Anyone

trying to say something about national trends would be even more stuck because of the total absence of synthetic work, or interpretative projects which abstract general trends from particular contexts. While we all recognise the value of the local, for this period in particular we also need to be able to consider national trends; similarities, continuities and the big picture, as well as the particular and small-scale.

Moreover, the lack of any way of monitoring the amount of graveyard work and the areas in which it is being carried out makes the formulation of research strategies for graveyard studies impossible and hinders the further development of this area of research as a serious academic field. At the moment there is no broad, national research strategy relating to graveyards. Graveyards scholars are affiliated to many different departments and disciplines. Consequently, the informal flow of information does not work for scholars in this field as successfully as it does for those in many other areas. Without a record of what work has already been completed and to what degree, there is a serious probability that on the one hand graveyard recording work will be duplicated, and on the other, that major gaps in our knowledge will not be addressed.

How far should we go in order to resolve this problem? First we can aim low: simply trying to ensure that where surveys have been undertaken the resulting archive has been lodged somewhere: anywhere other than under somebody's bed. A step up from that would be to ensure that the existence and location of archives is entered on a central

register with some information about what information has been recorded so that researchers can identify the archives they need to use. Beyond that strategies are too expensive and logistically complicated to consider at the moment, but we might ultimately anticipate a graveyard studies nirvana in which all survey data is comparable, digitised and available remotely.

However, there are steps that can be taken now at very little extra cost. We should be getting beyond the accumulation of unpublished local histories and begin to publish some more ambitious work addressing historical questions, and theoretically-informed work with implications for scholars from a range of disciplines. This should include book-length studies, and some exciting papers in mainstream archaeology and history journals with international distributions. There is no reason why graveyard research should not be as exciting, as dynamic, as audacious and intellectually adventurous as the study of European Neolithic landscapes was a few years ago. In fact, because we have more data, more committed and enthusiastic voluntary surveyors and are already used to working in interdisciplinary ways, we should be able to go even further. We should be using our brains and imaginations a bit more. We have barely dipped our toes into the interpretative seas of memorial data. It is time to strip off and jump in.

NOTE

¹ Ongoing doctoral research by Helen Swift, School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester.

Sarah Tarlow completed a PhD on metaphors of death in the post-medieval archaeology of Orkney at Cambridge University in 1995. She was a lecturer in archaeology at the University of Wales, Lampeter, from 1995–2000, and has been lecturer in historical archaeology at the University of Leicester since then. She is the author of *Bereavement and Commemoration* (Blackwell, 1999), co-editor of *The Familiar Past?* (Routledge, 1999) and numerous articles on the archaeology of death, archaeological theory and the archaeology of later historical periods in Britain. Address for correspondence: Department of Archaeology, University of Leicester, Leicester LE1 7RH.

Copyright of Industrial Archaeology Review is the property of Maney Publishing. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.