

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

GUIDANCE ON THE RE-USE OF GRAVE SPACES

In response to the request of the Chancellor for advice in respect of the re-use of grave spaces, the DAC made the following comments and observations at its meeting on Thursday 22nd June 1995.

1. Throughout the history of our churchyards it has been common practice to re-use grave spaces, a practice which still continues. In the past, churchyards were cleared on a regular basis and the graves re-used. The re-use of graves continues without reference to the DAC in the case of unmarked graves and advice on the matter is available in the 4th edition of the Churchyards Handbook, chapter 6. The proliferation of memorials in recent times had the effect of "sterilising" the churchyard, with re-use only possible once memorials had been removed under authority of a faculty. Quite often the term "the churchyard is full" really meant "full of memorials".
2. The Committee agreed it was important that the facility of re-using grave spaces to relieve pressure on available land continued, and particularly emphasised the importance of allowing the practice without overburdening incumbents with rules and regulations.
3. The Committee agreed it was important to remember that the availability of churchyard records, and local soil conditions varied so widely that each case must be considered on its merits and any conditions imposed relating to re-use should be individually tailored.
4. **As re-use was likely to take place in older, more mellowed parts of the churchyard, the Committee strongly recommended that PCCs drew up an additional set of regulations within the existing Churchyard Regulations 1981. These should include more specific details for the design of memorials and materials used e.g. that headstones should be of a traditional English style sunk straight into the ground (overall length 6' with 2' below ground level), and fashioned from traditional sandstones and limestones. In addition, the present trend in the treatment of the grave spaces was cause for concern, and PCCs were again strongly encouraged to include appropriate clauses that would preserve the established visual amenity of the churchyard e.g. that grave spaces were re-turfed after interment and planting limited to something simple and appropriate e.g. spring bulbs or meadow flower seeds. A signed agreement to the PCCs rules should be sought (preferably prior to burial) from those ultimately wishing to place a memorial in a churchyard. The Incumbent has the right to say where a burial may take place, and care and caution is advised on locations.**
5. It was agreed that the absolute minimum period between the last burial and the re-use of a grave should be 50 years. Local soil conditions may indicate that a longer period was advisable. A hundred years time-span would be more normal. Advertising (in the case of a marked grave) may result in objections from descendants. In individual cases, a longer period may be advisable.

6. It was agreed that, generally, the best place for any disturbed remains was to keep them as close as possible to their original resting-place. This could be achieved by digging a suitably sized hole a little deeper than the base cut for the new interment. The bones would be re-interred and a thin layer of soil placed over the remains, leaving nothing open to view at the time of the new interment.
7. Rodding could be used to test the ground to assist in identifying areas where new burials might take place, or to verify the depth of an existing coffin. Rodding was not of much practical assistance where the ground was hard or where other obstructions, e.g. rocks and flints might be present. In cases where churchyard records were poor, or non-existent, rodding might help in identifying whether or not unmarked areas had been used, but it was not an exact science.
8. On the matter of health and safety, these areas were well regulated, but the Committee offered the following comments:-
 - a) Soil conditions. Local grave-diggers would be well experienced with soil types and would know what precautions to take in a given churchyard, e.g. shoring the sides of the cut.
 - b) Bacteria in the ground. Provided grave-diggers took the usual precautions (e.g. a tetanus injection), there should not be a problem. Enquiries of archaeologists have shown that there was no recorded evidence of an archaeologist being affected directly by bacteria from working in excavations.

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(reuse.chyards)
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