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**Considering
Graves
when
researching
your
Ancestors**



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Why!

Why are graves important and why do we need to consider them when doing family tree research?

Graves remind us of our own mortality. As a result we often ignore graves as a source of information. Graves and in particular their headstones can tell us so much.

This talk today will take you through the many different aspects of researching graves. From what to look for and what you might find, to what equipment to use and how to gain the best results.

Menu

All Different

History

Records

Condition

Nature

What to look for

Equipment

Websites

Interesting Stories

All Different

Burial grounds and crematoriums come in many different shapes and sizes. From small churches to large sites that can cater for either burial or cremation.

Being aware of your ancestors religious beliefs is also important when researching. This applies no matter where in the world they are buried. Certain time periods mean that some religions were banned or illegal to be practised. So looking for graveyards that were for dissenters, as they were referred to, might also be a requirement.

In this talk I will discuss some of the many differences that can and do occur in graves and gravestones.

History

History of Graves and Gravestones

Burials have always existed with the earliest examples that we can still see today being the Egyptian Pyramids. Vikings are known to have done an early form of cremation as well as burial mounds.

Coming forward in time you can still find early examples of ornate caskets in some cathedrals . Most have no writing on so are unknown but can be aged by the craftsmanship and tools used to create them. Later ones started to include Latin words and then English as we come forward in time.

Recently even graves of those that fought in the Crusades have been discovered in a church ground. Sadly no names and no details in church records but the symbols are ones used by the Knight Templars.

Other types of graves included

Burial pits - or mass graves as they are sometimes referred to are dug in times of decease and also war. They are normally away from other graves and are often uncovered by Archaeologists.

Common Graves - These were for people that had no known relatives or couldn't afford a burial. They would not be marked by a headstone.

Dates in History

Here is a list of the main dates in history that are being covered today with regards to considering 'Age' when researching your Ancestors.

1538

Henry VIII introduced BMD records into law

1666 - 1680

Woollen Act allowed for burials in woollen shrouds which were cheaper and more readily available than wooden coffins. Those in woollen are normally noted in the burial records.

1828

Burke and Hare the notorious grave robbers were apprehended.

1830's

Common Graves started allowing for those without relatives or funds to be buried without a headstone.

1832

Act to allow private cemeteries outside central London to ease over crowding.

1833-1841

Magnificent Seven, private cemeteries built, Kensal Green opened in 1833.

1852—1885

Many and varied laws brought in concerning burials and graves.

1855

Last Church burial in the City of London.

1857

Law brought in to stop the exhumation of remains in full or part without an official licence.

1874

Cremation Society of England and the first in Europe was founded by Sir Henry Thompson, Queen Victoria's surgeon. After concerns for public health.

1878

First modern day crematorium in England was built and opened in Woking, Surrey. The first cremation happened the same year followed by the first in Europe in Gotha, Germany shortly after.

*"They say you die twice.
One time when you stop
breathing
and a
second time, a bit later on,
when somebody says your
name for the last time"*

This saying is widely associated with the artist known as 'Banksy'. However there is no written or recorded proof of this. Other similar words were said by Irvin D Yalom and David Eagleman.

The sentiment for this saying though, goes much further back in history than that of the 20th century. Egyptians not only believed in the afterlife but also on marking their place and thus their memory on earth. The 'Day of the Dead' celebrated in Mexico and other South American countries dates back 3000 years and is about remembering your Ancestors and giving thanks.

Records

Burial records verses Gravestones

Burial records are often preferred as most are available on the Web. Though it is worth noting not all are available and many are incomplete due to damage.

These records only contain location of burial, names, date of burial and age.

Gravestones on the other hand have the actual death date which may have been days or weeks before. This may even put death in a previous month or even year. The age tends to be more accurate often being rounded on burial record.

Graves also sometimes include other information such as place lived and occupation.

Other family members names, especially if they are buried with them.

Cause of death may even be noted.

Work already done.

Some churches have details of grave plots on maps and inscriptions of writing on gravestones. It is always worth looking inside and asking if they have any you can view.

Many of these were created in the latter part of the 20th century. Only those plots with gravestones still standing and readable will have been transcribed. So if your Ancestor is not there on the list it doesn't mean they were not buried there. The church burial records should confirm this.

Like all transcriptions though it is always a good idea to look yourself. To make sure that words haven't been missed or miss-spelt and that numbers for age and dates are also transcribed properly.

Condition

Removed from their bones

Often gravestones are removed and placed along a wall or as a group, somewhere on the ground. This practise is normally because they have become unsafe or broken. Some however have been removed to create green spaces or like St Pancras Old Church, moved to create the railway line.

Used as Pavements

It became common practise in the 1800's to lie gravestones that were outside down, to create pathways. The problem here is that high foot traffic has eroded many inscriptions away.

Underfoot and out of sight

Often inside churches there are graves on the floor. Many are under pews or other seating. In some cases floors have been raised or carpets laid down concealing them.

Graves in unusual places

Places have changed and it is not unusual to find gravestones that seem lost as not in a burial ground or by a church. In these cases looking at old maps is advisable.

Likewise if the church you are looking for, no longer exists, locate it on an old map and search around the area to see if the stones are still there.

Remanent of a grave

Graves sadly do fall into disrepair especially if there are no living relatives that will care for it. If you come across a stone that looks like part of something bigger then it's worth seeing if original grave maps still exist. The example I showed was originally part of a large vault. By looking at the map and grave records it was found to have housed three people not just the one named on the wall plaque the only part that still existed.

Nature

Taking back its own

On a lighter note, nature often re-consumes it's own , especially if left to thrive and to its own devices. Gravestones that have fallen over or laid as paths can be covered by grass. Ivy, brambles and bushes often take over and hide from site. Even trees that self seed near a grave can grow to eventually have the headstone embraced within its bark.

History verses Nature

This is a sensitive topic, especially as nature is important as are green spaces, when in built up areas. So clearing headstones and leaving bodies to rest where they lay is justifiable.

However many of these sites are being cleared without a second thought to or the importance of the history. What many don't seem to understand is the amount of details that exist on these stones, that cannot be found on burial records and may not exist in any other records. Also the locality in some cases is not being mapped. Which for family tree research can give many clues.

What to look for

Locality

Placement of a grave can tell you a lot about the persons standing within their community. Graves near walkways or doorways might indicate a high standing. Checking business directories and newspapers might help to identify why.

Relatives and ancestors are often buried together. Checking graves next to, in front and also behind, is always a good idea. Check also around for others of the same surname or similar sounding surnames. It may well be, that they are related.

Checking the graves next to your ancestors is also important as though they may have a different surname they may well still be related and closer than your realise.

Graves that need a closer look.

Writing can be found in different places on a grave. Sometimes in a different or smaller font. Also some may have foot stones with different initials indicating another person may be buried there as well.

Deterioration can still give clues

The type of stone used on graves can cause problems due to deterioration caused by weather and climate. Sadly also vandalism can cause irreversible damage to gravestones.

It is possible even from the most damaged to retrieve the odd words or dates. Even part words or numbers can be useful. Checking against a grave map or burial record will help. It is always worth transcribing, taking notes also of quality and location, taking photos or gentle rubbings if possible. This will allow you to refer back especially if any clues from other sources come to light at a later date. Even those with just a few words or letters can still be solved.

Not always born where they die

Travel is nothing new and often people passed away in places far from home. Even in different countries. Especially if you know their occupation would mean travel or their wider family lived in another area.

Cost of moving bodies has always been expensive and difficult so they were more likely to be buried where they died.

If your relative could have been buried abroad, then contacting the archive in the area or a generalist in that area might be a good idea. Not all countries have digitised or made public viewing available for digitised copies. Many are still in paper not transcribed formats.

Military and Common Wealth graves

Not all graves of those that served their country are Common Wealth Graves (CWGC). Those that died in conflict before WW1 such as in the Boar Wars or Crimean War are not covered by CWGC. There sadly, are also occasions where people died from their wounds caused in the war, but do not have a CWGC grave. This is because those that died after 1921 or after 1947 fell outside of the rules for a CWGC grave.

Not all those that could have a CWGC grave do. Family members were given the choice and some chose to intern their loved ones in family plots instead.

So if looking for a grave, you may need to look for a family plot.

Not all CWGC graves look the same or have the same type of stone. Some Countries chose to make the tops slightly different.

Victoria Cross graves existed since 1857. It is not always in a grave that stands out, so looking closer at graves is needed. These days most sites do say if they have a VC grave within, but not always the exact location.

Military Graves from before WW1 tend to have inscriptions that say rank and sometimes further information. Some are even designed and carved to give clues to the military unit they were attached to.

Interesting designs

These can give clues to Occupations, passions or interests. As already mentioned to Military Units. Some of these are very ornate and even artistic in design. If looking around a graveyard or cemetery, it is always worth while looking at some of these.

Equipment

Wellies and trainers

Dry and wet clough

Bottled Water

Soft / medium toothbrush

Hand brush

Garden pruners

Paper or tracing Paper

Pad and pencil HB is best

Camera or phone

What 3 words app

Using cameras

Taking photos is a good way to record a grave and to keep a record. Taking a photos in both colour and black + white can sometimes show up different details.

Mobile device settings

Modern technology allows you to play with the colour, light filtration and saturation of a photo. Which again can make details much clearer or even reveal items you may not have originally seen.

Websites

- Find a grave - free site,
- Billion graves - charges apply
- Deceased online- charges apply

Always look for those with original photos, so you can zoom in and check inscriptions. Some records that have only been transcribed, do contain errors.

Other sites

- Family tree sites
- Research sites
- Society websites

Often these will have trees that people have submitted themselves, many of which contain photo's. If the tree has been made public then you can look at the photos that have been included.

Other places to Look

- Local archives
- Libraries
- Churches
- Museums

These sometimes have records of what can be found. Sometimes they have old photo's or written records and maps of grave yards and gravestones that no longer exist. So they are worth checking.

Church of England have started a project to map all gravesites in the UK. This will be available to view once the church you are looking for has been mapped.

Graves with stories

Some graves you may come across have fascinating stories. It is always worth checking with the church, graveyard or cemetery as to any they are aware of. Checkout their websites, as these often contain details of any unusual graves or people of interest buried in their sites.

Recap

- Make sure you have the right equipment
- Use mobile devices
- Always use gravestones for dates of death
- Know your ancestor's religious beliefs
- Checkout other possible burial locations
- Check other graves around the location
- Look at records held in the church
- Ask church wardens
- Use websites
- Be mindful of transcriptions
- Look at original photos
- Try colour contrast and filters

Place for Wildlife

Graves yards are often full of all sorts of wildlife. The quiet peaceful nature of the sites makes them great places to see wildlife. So when looking at the stones watch to see what else is about. The friendly Robin can often be seen bobbing from headstone to headstone.

This is a lovely saying that always comes to mind when I'm walking amongst the gravestones.

"Robins appear

When

Lost loved ones

Are near"



No matter what type of research your doing or what century you are searching in, this next saying is something I have always worked by and encourage others to do so.

"Always

*Keep an open mind and
think outside the box"*

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