

# WHY MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS?

Monumental inscriptions, or Memorial inscriptions, are the inscribed words on tombs and memorials in churchyards and churches. Inscriptions are also found on war memorials and out-door furniture such as park benches and in non-Anglican burial grounds and Municipal Cemeteries. The Society has concentrated on transcribing memorials not in Municipal cemeteries. They maintain good records available to the public. The Society records memorials as they are found in the churchyard and provides a map to their location. Memorials in the vicinity such as war memorials and benches are also recorded.

The Society records the memorials because they can contain important family history and before wind and weather, vandalism and churchyard clearance makes them lost forever. Transcription can be difficult at times and even a modest churchyard takes much time to record properly.

## FEATURES OF A MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTION

Monumental Inscriptions are often divided into parts.

### THE PREAMBLE

"In memory of" or "Here lies the body of" are examples of the preamble. The former may be used when the deceased is buried elsewhere. The latter states more precisely that a grave exists near the stone. There are many variations.

### THE PERSONAL EPITAPH

This section normally states the name of the deceased, the date of death and age at death. Sometimes the birth date is given and the age omitted. There may also be more than one epitaph for say the spouse of the deceased.

### THE SUPPLEMENTARY EPITAPH

This section contains text in verse or prose, sometimes from the Bible. Additional information about the deceased is contained here.

Monumental inscriptions vary. For instance, those of the Society of Friends may only contain the Personal Epitaph. Similarly, plaques in a Gardens of Remembrance to record cremations buried or scattered elsewhere will often just have the name, date of birth and date of death.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Memorials are typically in the churchyard. However, the adjacent church may also contain commemorative plaques, brasses, windows, sepulchres and, sometimes, vaults in the floor. It depends how long established the church is.

In the churchyard, particularly long established ones, there are often memorials and vaults for the more wealthy, often near to the church itself and often on the favoured south side. Early memorials for the poor are now lost but the burial register of the church may still hold records of these now long gone.

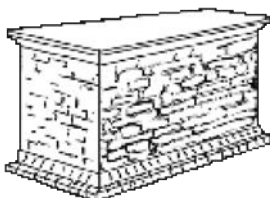
In the Christian tradition, the church lies east to west, the chancel being on the eastern end and the nave, with often a tower and a steeple, on the western end. Graves were traditionally laid east to west. Until the mid-19th Century, headstones were placed looking away from the grave. After that time, and nowadays the norm, most headstones overlook the grave. The presence of a footstone is the most reliable indicator of the actual position of the grave itself, although they are sometimes moved next to the gravestone itself.

## POINTS OF INTEREST

1. Christian tradition followed earlier traditions of placing churchyards near places of religious significance.
2. Memorials on graves, as we would see them now, became popular after the Restoration in the 17th Century. However, the placing of stones on graves has a much longer tradition.
3. Except where stone was plentiful, gravestones of an early date are rare. Generally, they bear no inscription. Wooden markers have long disappeared.
4. In the oldest churchyards, bones were cleared to allow for further burials, the bones being carefully deposited in charnel houses within the church itself.
5. Medieval monuments inside the church can refer to a nobleman of the 12th or 13th Century. Brasses for that period and later are more common.
6. The images and icons of the Church of Rome have largely disappeared, either been removed or damaged where they stood, together with many treasures, after the Protestant revolution.
7. Medieval church naves were brightly painted with Christian images for the enlightenment of the generally illiterate congregation. The Protestants whitewashed them over. Modern research has discovered some.
8. Medieval stained glass windows, where they remain, also displayed scenes from the Bible.
9. Older churches mainly contain memorials from the 18th Century to the present day. They do contain information of interest to family historians. Many churches do have memorials to those who served or died from their parish in the World Wars of the 20th Century.
10. Modern methods to clean up churchyards requires the use of mowers and strimmers but other vegetation and trees are often uncleared.
11. When churchyards become too difficult to maintain, stones can be removed, sometimes propped against a wall or laid flat to form a path or just destroyed.
12. Local councils examine churchyards for unstable memorials. Any found are laid flat face down. This is for health and safety reasons
13. For the same reason, new kerbs around graves have been discouraged as a trip hazard.

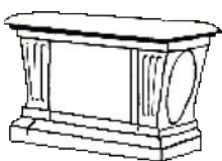
## TYPES OF MONUMENT

### ALTAR TOMBS



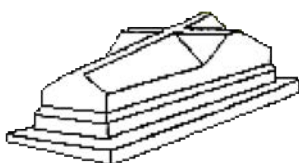
A flat slab inscribed on top and raised on brickwork. Over time, the brickwork would deteriorate and, unless repaired, would collapse or be demolished. These stones are often now seen with only one or two courses of brick, looking very similar to flat ledger stones placed entirely at ground level. Ledger stones, by the way, are large flat stones that were originally inside the church and later placed outside and laid in the churchyard.

### CHEST TOMBS



Although similar to altar tombs, the flat slab is enclosed by stone panelling. More robust than brick-work, the panelling is often decorated with motifs, escutcheons and inscriptions pertinent to the deceased and the family. Ironwork often enclosed the tomb. However, in the Second World War, much ironwork like this was removed to help the war effort, placed in a scrap yard and forgotten.

### COPED OR COPING STONES



These are low lying stones with gables and ridges. The gables and ridges were sometimes cruciform or follow the shape of a ridge tent. Although an old pattern, this shape of stone became popular in the 19th Century. The stone often rests on a base. Any part of the stone may bear an inscription, including the base. Do not confuse these stones with coffin and body stones which tend to take on the shape of a corpse, being tapered towards the feet. Coffin stones, with flat surfaces at the top and sides, bear inscriptions. Body stones are rounded and not inscribed but were designed to have a footstone and a headstone for completeness.

### HEAD BOARDS



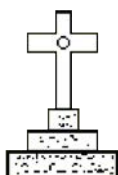
One or two wooden planks, suitably inscribed on the vertical, stretched between two wooden posts, were a common feature of Hertfordshire churchyards. The inscriptions were generally painted on but sometimes they were carved into the wood. The structure is short-lived and rarely seen now. Those from the 19th Century can still be found and the shape tended to become more elaborate as the century progressed, with additional carving and sometimes a roof.

### HEADSTONES



The most ubiquitous of the memorials, in all shapes and sizes, are still the most favoured memorial stone. The shape and decoration is often a guide to the stone's age. Sometimes the headstone is accompanied by a rectangular kerb encompassing the grave which may also bear an inscription. Where there are footstones, they are placed about eight feet from the headstone, often inscribed with the initials of the deceased and date of death.

### THE CROSS



The Cross was for three centuries after the Reformation considered a symbol of the Church of Rome and found no favour in churchyards until Victorian times. They often stand on a squared stone plinths, any side of which may be inscribed.

### THE PEDESTAL



The obelisk shape was often used as a memorial to a senior military man, the shape being favourable for listing battle honours and exploits. Obelisks normally bear inscriptions at the base rather than on the body.