How to get involved

Graveyards are an integral feature of the landscape and are powerful reminders of families from former times. Without the help of local people many of these graveyards and their memorials will deteriorate through neglect, some eventually disappearing into the pages of anonymity. It is important that local communities participate in the proper management and conservation of their local graveyard. You could also help to trace the historical development of your graveyard using historical sources, folklore, early maps and photographs or by studying and recording grave memorials. A good way to get involved is to join a local archaeological and historical society and seek to learn more about your archaeological heritage. You could also enroll in local Adult Education classes in Archaeology that are held in Universities, Institutes of Technology and other centres.

You should contact your Heritage Offiicer for advice before carrying out any work in a graveyard. Before carrying out any work inside a graveyard, a short list or a schedule of works should be submitted to your local Heritage Officer or to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government for advice.

Where can I get further information?

The Heritage Officer in your local County Council will have details of ownership of the graveyard and general advice. A complete list of historic graveyards that pre-date 1700 AD can be downloaded or viewed on the website of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government Archaeological Survey of Ireland at www.archaeology.ie. Archaeological monuments included in the Record of Monuments and Places for every county including historic graveyards are protected under the National Monuments Act 1930-2004. For a description of some churches that were built after 1700 AD check the website of the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage at www.buildingsofireland.ie. More information on Irish war memorials can be accessed on the internet at www.irishwarmemorials.ie.

A comprehensive listing of the works that you can and cannot do inside a graveyard is listed in the Care and Conservation of Graveyards booklet that can be downloaded from the website of the the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government at www.archaeology.ie

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

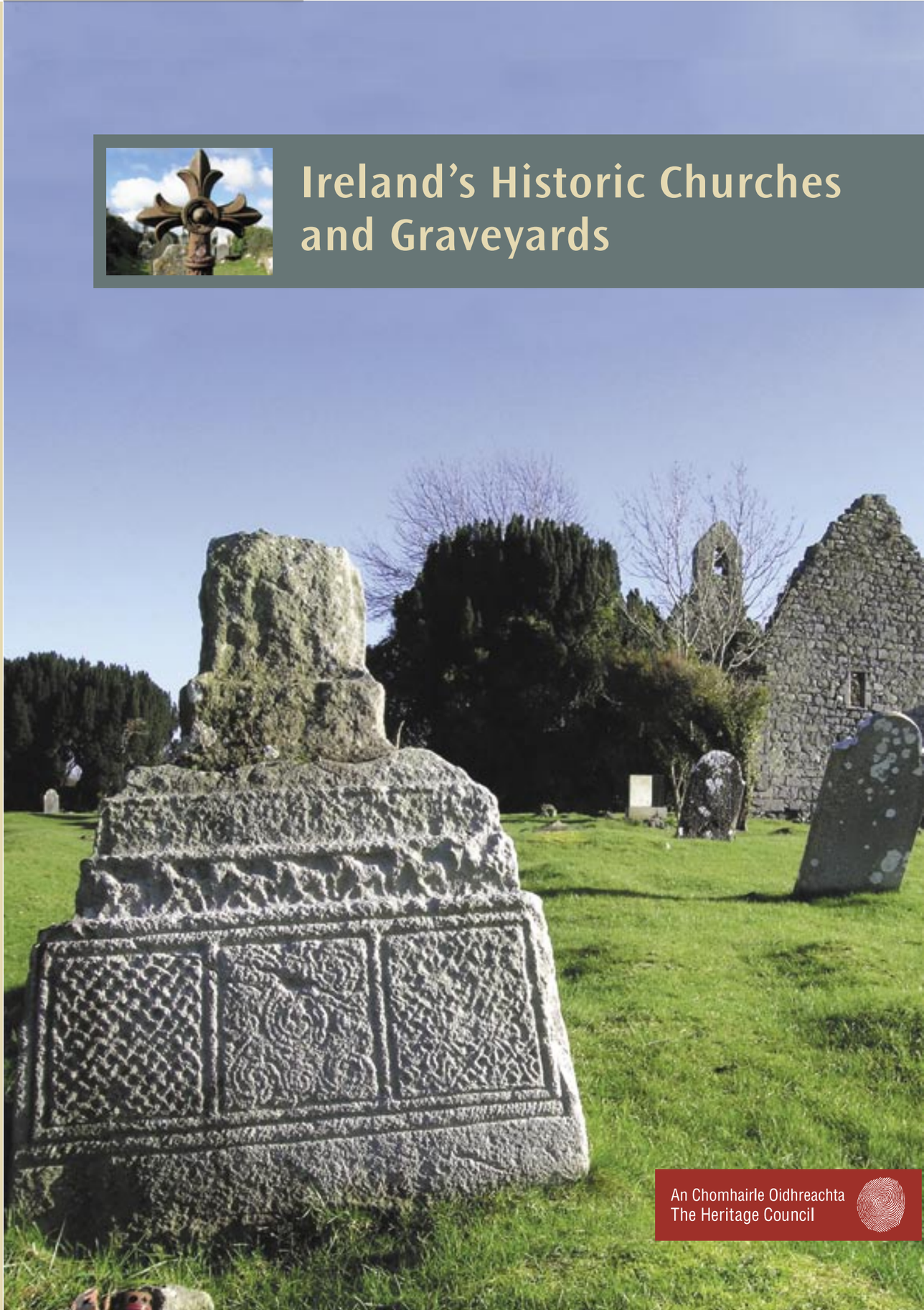
An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

Áras na hOidhreachta
Church Lane, Kilkenny, Ireland

T 056 777 0777
F 056 777 0788

E mail@heritagecouncil.ie
www.heritagecouncil.ie

Ireland's Historic Churches and Graveyards



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Grave markers:

from Early Christian cross-slabs to modern headstones:

The arrival of Christianity into Ireland created graveyards that grew up around the first timber churches. It was not until the final decades of the seventeenth century that wealthy people began to mark their graves with an inscribed headstone. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the headstone would become a popular memorial with the burgeoning middle classes and the historic graveyard started to take on the appearance that the visitor is so familiar with today. It must be remembered that not all graves were commemorated with a headstone and many small and unmarked stones barely protruding above the surface of the graveyard are in fact gravemarkers. Sometimes the corner of a graveyard is known as the 'lonely corner' a place that has been set aside for the burials of unbaptised children or poor vagrants who died while wandering through the parish.

When we first look at a memorial in a graveyard we automatically read the inscription in order to find out the name of the deceased and in what year they died. Very often we fail to notice the important information contained in the symbols used on the memorials themselves. These symbols along with the memorial inscription offer us an insight into the social, political and economic lives of the deceased.

The occupation or status of a person is often recorded in the use of symbols relevant to the working life of the deceased. This example from St Comans graveyard in Roscommon town, Co Roscommon, depicts a ploughman at work indicating the memorial of a wealthy farmer.

Many monasteries today preserve cross-inscribed grave-slabs commemorating the final resting place of early monks such as this fine example from Clonmore, Co Carlow, dating from the ninth and tenth centuries.

This motif from Castletown graveyard, Co Tipperary, is a naive folk art example of a winged cherub. By the 18th and 19th centuries the symbol of the cherub on memorials acted as a portrait of the soul of the deceased.

This memorial from the military cemetery at the Curragh, Co Kildare, displays the compass and square, with an all-seeing eye indicating membership of a secret society known as the Freemasons.

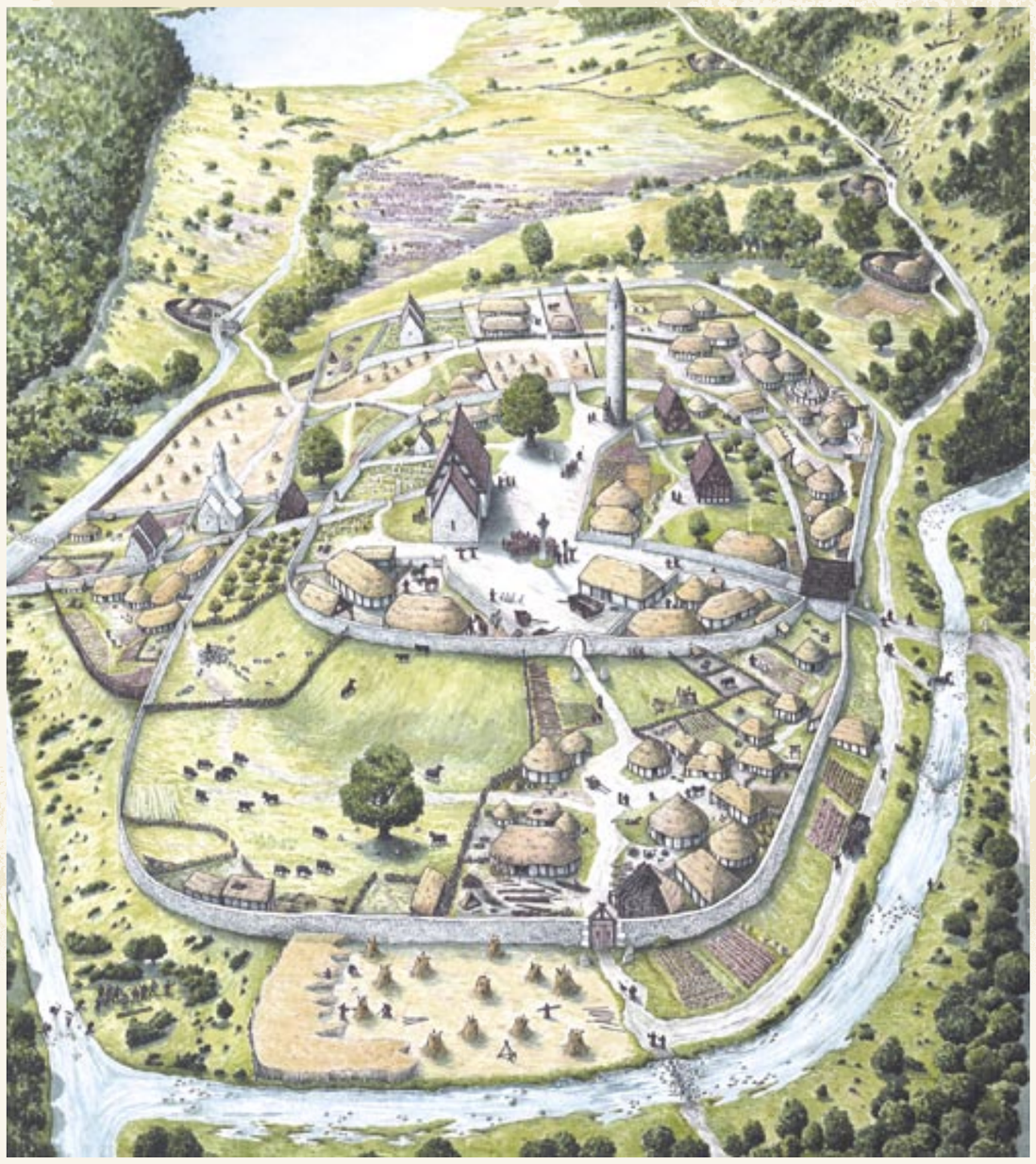
Many graveyards throughout the country contain war memorials, the most common of which commemorate the two World Wars, the War of Independence and many other conflicts throughout the world. This memorial from Newabbey, Co Kildare commemorates a victim of the First World War.

This memorial at Terryglass, Co Tipperary, depicts the tools of a carpenter, indicating the trade of the deceased.

Memorials recording the sporting prowess of the deceased in the game of hurling have been recorded from the medieval period and onwards into the early nineteenth century. This memorial at Killoughy, Co Offaly, commemorates the resting place of Michael Duigan who died in 1801 and shows how hurling played an important role in the sporting pastimes of Irish people before the foundation of the G.A.A. in 1884.

(Left) Inside the church of Clonca, Donegal, there is the 'Magnus and Fergus' graveslab dating from the 16th century. This slab is decorated with a floriated cross, foliage, a long sword, a hurling stick and ball or sliotar with an inscription describing who made the gravelslab and for whom it was made. The Gaelic inscription reads 'FERGUS MAK ALLAN DO RINI IN CLACH SA MAGNUS MEC ORRISTIN IA FO TR? L SEO' which in English reads 'Fergus Mac Allan made this stone Magnus Mac Orristin under this'.

Ireland's Historic Churches and Graveyards



Artistic interpretation of Glendalough, Co Wicklow, around 1150 AD showing the position of the church, round tower and cemetery at the centre of a series of enclosures (Reconstruction painting by Uto Hogerzeil).

Medieval reform

Twelfth century reforms stimulated the expansion of the parish church system. New stone churches were built at existing monasteries and at new locations often beside Anglo-Norman timber castles that would later grow into important towns. The parochial church provided parishioners with access to the sacraments.

A bullaun is a term used to describe a stone that has a hollow depression on its surface. These stones were probably used as mortars. Folklore grew up around these stones often giving them magical healing powers and many became known as 'headache stones' or 'wart stones' as the water within the hollow of the bullaun had the power to cure warts and other ailments. This example is from Gallen, Co Offaly.

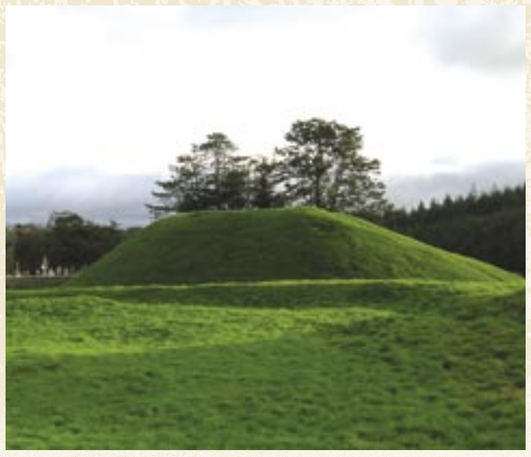
Aerial photograph of the ecclesiastical site at Seir Kieran, Co Offaly, showing how the modern graveyard wall encloses an area smaller than the medieval burial ground. Earthworks and the remains of buildings lie outside the modern enclosing graveyard (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government).

The Early Church

The fifth century AD saw the firm establishment of Christianity on this island. Over the next two hundred years evangelising monks were so successful that by the end of the seventh century, monasteries had been established throughout Ireland. These monasteries were typically enclosed by an earthen bank crowned by a timber fence or hedgerow within which the first timber churches were built and so began the growth and development of the church and graveyard, a monument that has become a symbol of Ireland and has assumed iconic status in the landscape of this island.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries AD the horizon of many Irish monasteries were dominated by beautifully carved high crosses many of which depicted biblical scenes, such as this example from Drumcliff, Co Sligo.

Early stone churches such as this one at Lorrha, Co Tipperary, were built in a style that copied their timber predecessors by building high steeply pitched gables with sidewalls that project beyond the gable of the church known as antae.



Following the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in 1169 many earth and timber fortifications such as this motte and bailey castle at St Mullins, Co Carlow, were built at important church sites. Many of these settlements later developed into towns.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries distinctive churches with tall elegant towers adorned with spires and pinnacles were constructed such as this Church of Ireland building at Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary which was built in 1856. These eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings of all denominations have now become landmark buildings in the Irish landscape.

Reformation and re-organisation

During the sixteenth century, Henry VIII, King of England, dissolved the monasteries of Ireland and introduced the Protestant faith as the established church. The seventeenth century was a time of trouble, which saw conflict break out between Protestants and Catholics resulting in many churches being attacked, set on fire and eventually falling into disrepair. A great rebuilding of churches began in the eighteenth century and was to reach its apex during the nineteenth century when many Protestant and Catholic churches were built.

Some of these churches were built at new locations while others were built on the site of the early medieval church. The medieval graveyards were now enclosed, many of them for the first time with a stone wall from the eighteenth century onwards.

A coffin rest at Sleaty, Co Laois. Coffin Rests were built into the graveyard wall usually beside the entrance into the churchyard and are often indicated by a flat-topped wall below which, there are a series of small steps protruding from the face of the wall. It was here that the coffin was rested before entering the graveyard.

A lych gate built in 1869 marking the entrance to the military cemetery on the Curragh, Co Kildare. This is a covered gateway intended to provide shelter to the coffin and its bearers.

Looking after your graveyard

Historic graveyards are very different in their character from modern cemeteries that are often described as 'Lawn Cemeteries'. The latter are usually laid out in neat rectangular burial plots that are accessed by a network of pathways. In these modern cemeteries the surface of the ground is level and has the appearance of a lawn because the cemetery has not been used as a burial place over many centuries. The opposite is true for historic graveyards some of which have been used as burial grounds for over a millennium. The continual burial over a thousand years in a confined area has resulted in the growth in the height of the burial ground and gives the graveyard its distinctive appearance with its many humps and bumps. This uneven surface along with the church ruins and the leaning headstones all combine to create the historic character of a graveyard. No work should be undertaken in a graveyard that would result in damaging this character. We should not try to convert the appearance of a historic graveyard into that of a modern lawn cemetery.

Where practical, the easiest and traditional way of maintaining your historic graveyard is through the use of sheep or goats to lightly graze periodically within the graveyard. This will ensure that vegetation is kept at bay without having to use weed killers which only encourage the growth of briars and thorn bushes, or the purchasing of expensive grass cutting machinery or having to find a volunteer to cut grass on an uneven surface that is often unsuitable for such equipment.

Conserving and Enhancing Wildlife in Historic Graveyards

In addition, to the archaeological and architectural heritage value of historic graveyards, they are also very important areas for wildlife. The normally low levels of human activity in historic graveyards make them ideal refuges for our native flora and fauna. This is particularly important in areas where much of the surrounding land is either intensively farmed in rural areas, or developed, in urban areas.

Graveyard grassland can support high numbers of native grasses and wild flowers compared to improved agricultural land, as well as providing food and nesting areas for some birds, and mammals such as hares. Old walls, either of dry stone or bound with lime mortar, host plants, such as ferns, which are normally only found in rocky areas. They are also used by nesting, roosting and feeding birds, and by lizards. Old boundary banks and hedgerows provide habitat for animals such as badgers and hedgehogs while church towers or roofs can provide roosting habitats for bats and owls.

Old buildings and crypts may be important habitats for birds, bats and some species of plants. All bat species are protected by law.

- Vegetation on walls, including ivy and other plants, should be checked for birds' nests or roosts prior to undertaking any works.
- Marginal areas or larger areas of grass are best managed by cutting as hay once per year, or else by cutting infrequently. Leaving some grass to grow provides food for seed-eating birds, especially if left through the winter. Care must be taken when using strimmers in graveyards to avoid damage to headstones.
- Do not attempt to cut down ivy before seeking professional advice. Unless vegetation is causing structural damage to buildings or walls, it is better to trim it back, outside of the bird nesting season, than to cut it down altogether. This helps maintain its value for birds and insects.
- Dry-stone and lime mortar walls should not be pointed up with concrete. Dry-stone walls should be rebuilt/maintained as such, and mortared walls re-pointed using the traditional method.
- Avoid use of weedkillers. Spot-spraying can be used to control noxious weeds but the cheapest and most wildlife-friendly solution is to graze or mow the graveyard. Never spray off the entire graveyard.

An Initiative of The Heritage Council
Text by Caimin O'Brien with additions by Ian Doyle of the Heritage Council, 2008.
Wildlife text based on an original by Mieke Muyllaert
All plates by Caimin O'Brien unless otherwise stated

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Áras na hOidhreachta
Church Lane, Kilkenny, Ireland

T 056 777 0777
F 056 777 0788

E mail@heritagecouncil.ie
www.heritagecouncil.ie

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