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 graveyards 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 grave markers. Sometimes the corner of a grave yard is known as the ‘Toney 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.

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 markers. 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.

How to get involved

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Where can I get further information?

The Heritage Office 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 of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government Archaeological Survey of Ireland at www.archaeology.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 Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government at www.archaeology.ie.
Grave markers: from Early Christian cross-slabs to modern headstones:

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A comprehensive listing of the works that you can and cannot do inside a graveyard is listed in the Care and Maintenance of Monuments and Places in Graveyards following the guidelines of the Heritage Council and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Where can I get further information?

The Heritage Council at www.heritagecouncil.ie or to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government for advice.

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Ireland’s Historic Churches and Graveyards

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 bordered 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.

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.

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 uneven surface along with the church ruins and the leaning headstones all combine to create the historic character of a graveyard.

Vegetation on walls, including ivy and other plants, should be checked for birds’ nests, eggs and other signs of nesting birds.
• Do not attempt to cut down trees or branches before professional advice is sought. Undercutting is causing structural damage to buildings or walls, it is better to leave trees and hedges in situ than to cut them down altogether. This helps maintain its value for birds and other wildlife.
• Dry-stone and lime mortar walls should not be pointed up with concrete. Dry-stone walls should be realigned/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. If possible, use an organically certified product. Some bird species, such as swifts or swallows, are also used by nesting, roosting and feeding birds, and by lizards.

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 the appearance of a lawn because the cemetery has not been used as a burial place for 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 of ashes means that the area will continue to grow over time because the burial space has not been added to. The uneven surface is due to the accumulation of thousands of years. Historic graveyards are unique in their character and make an important contribution to the historic landscape of this island.

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 apogee during the nineteenth century when many Protestant and Catholic churches were built.

Conservation and re-organisation

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 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.

A coffin rest at Sleaty, Co Laois. Coffin Rests were built into the face of the wall. Coffin rests were built into the face of the wall. A coffin rest at Sleaty, Co Laois. Coffin Rests were built into the face of the wall. A coffin rest at Sleaty, Co Laois. Coffin Rests were built into the face of the wall.