

Working Guidance for Inspection and Remedial Work on Church Gravestones



Working Guidance for inspection and remedial work on Church Gravestones

1. Introduction

This working guidance contains further detailed information on gravestones to the Diocese of Blackburn General Guide to Health and Safety in Churchyards and Burial grounds. (see references).

It covers the gravestone safety inspection techniques, the specific faults that are found on gravestones and the remedial work that may be required for different types of gravestone.

It covers safety aspects and risks both for the inspection and the remedial work.

It contains guidance on the procedures to be followed to allow families to be notified.

It provides guidance on the administration and financial issues associated with making gravestones safe.

It has examples of notices and letters that may be required as part of the inspection.

2. Sequence of events summary

A summary of the sequence of events actions that are described in this document to inspect Gravestones in a Churchyard.

- Put up notices on churchyard entrances with general information on the graveyard safety inspection.
- Carry out the graveyard safety inspection.
- Record findings of graveyard inspection.
- Fix warning tape on gravestones that need attention.
- Attempt to make contact with families with gravestones that need attention
- After at least 3 months, agree with PCC the actions and costs required to make gravestones safe.
- Carry out remedial work.
- Contact the DAC secretary with details of the completed work.

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3. Inspection Category definitions

One of these categories are allocated to each gravestone that needs attention.

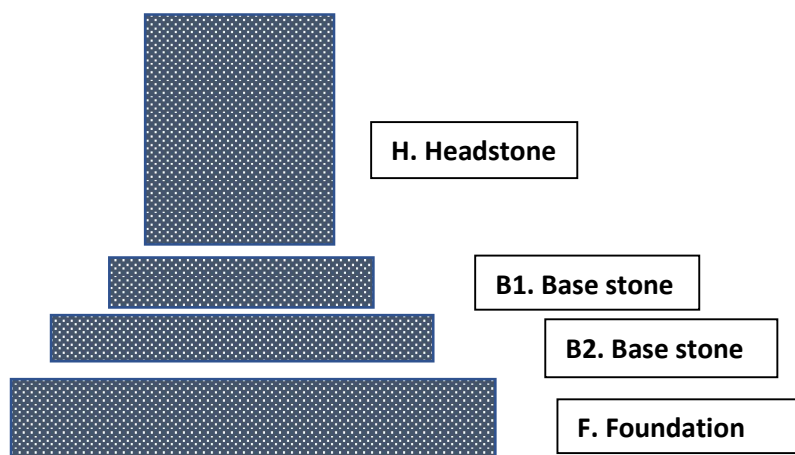
Cat 1. Gravestone is Unsafe. To be made safe within 7 days by laying down or protecting the gravestone area with red and white warning tape.

Cat 2. Gravestone requires attention within 3 months and be monitored regularly or after adverse weather conditions. To be banded in non-adhesive red and white warning tape.

Cat 2A. Gravestone requires attention within a year.

Cat 3. Gravestone needs monitoring at least every year.

4. Definitions and Parts of a Gravestone



Churchyard. The land surrounding the church which is usually consecrated.

Graveyard. The area where graves are located which may be part of the churchyard.

Grave. The location in the graveyard which is dug out for the burial.

Gravestone. The stone or combination of stones which is normally located at one end of the grave.

Headstone. The vertical stone which has the inscription with names and dates etc (sometimes known as the “plate”).

Base stones (B1, B2, B3....). The horizontal stones under the headstone. Numbered from top to bottom in this document as B1, B2, B3 etc.

Foundation F. The large horizontal stone buried in the earth on which the bases sit. This could be a concrete slab.

Memorial. Any type of plain or decorative material put up in memory of someone. A gravestone is an example of a memorial.

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5. Safety Inspection of gravestones

The inspection of churchyard gravestones can be carried out by persons from the church providing that they have received training in the process involved. Safety equipment such as steel capped shoes must be used, and no one must stand anywhere where a gravestone may fall.

An annual inspection should take place on all the gravestones in the churchyard. There should be a general statement on the graveyard entry notices stating that routine inspections of gravestones are carried out.

Each gravestone should initially be visually assessed, looking at the surrounding ground, foundations and joints, followed by a physical test called a hand test. The height of a gravestone, any obvious degree of lean, damage, defects, or irregularities in the surrounding ground, may all be factors indicating that the gravestone needs attention.

The hand test will identify any significant looseness, and by application of a steady force will check for hidden instability.

6. Detailed instructions for the Hand Test

There should be at least two persons carrying out the hand test. One to do the hand test on the gravestone, the other to record the results and agree on gravestones which are borderline.

To carry out the hand test, stand next to the gravestone and gently push at the top on a convenient point. If no movement is felt in either direction (to the front and to the rear) then push harder with 1 hand only.

A small amount of movement is common, but this should not exceed 10 to 20mm. Anything in excess of this should be investigated further by observing which joint is moving.

If the gravestone is exceptionally large, is leaning, or looks unstable, it may not be possible to obtain any movement. In this case the base stone supports should be checked visually with care.

If the gravestone has a cross on top, the top base on which the cross is fixed is often found loose. Depending on how unsafe the cross appears and where it is situated it may be safer to remove the cross completely.

For all gravestones which need attention now or may need attention in the future, follow the risk assessment below then allocate an inspection category to the gravestone (see above category 1,2,2A, or 3).

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7. The Gravestone Inspection risk assessment

Could the gravestone fall down if someone grabs hold of it, or if children are playing around it?

Is it a very large stone in an area where people pass regularly?

Is it so unsafe that a very small force could push it over? (cat 1). If this is the case, if it is a small gravestone, it can be pushed over carefully and slowly. If it is a bigger headstone, cordon off the fall area with red and white warning tape and return within 7 days to either push it over safely or decide what further action to take.

Does it need attention within the next 3 months? Cordon off the fall area and inspect every 4 weeks. (cat 2).

Does it need repair work but not immediately (within the next 12 months)? Check at next inspection. (cat 2A).

Does it need monitoring occasionally and to be checked again at next inspection? (cat 3).

If the gravestone is classified as cat 1 and is large or has a cross on the top, do not attempt to lay it down. Cordon off these cat 1 gravestones with red and white warning tape in the areas in front and behind, using stakes or other gravestones to support the tape.

Record notes about what is found and include the category from above (1, 2, 2A, or 3).

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8. Requirement to notify family grave users

Following the Safety Inspections, attempts should be made to contact the family members of the deceased to agree remedial action for gravestones that need attention.

It must be remembered that the gravestone itself is owned by the family of the deceased, and they must be given an opportunity to make their gravestones safe. Reasonable attempts must be made to contact them.

The first and most important way to contact family members is to create general notices for the churchyard displayed in appropriate prominent places (in plastic covers) which achieves the following:

A welcome

A warning about regular inspections of gravestones.

A contact telephone number to ring if anyone knows a gravestone family which has red and white warning tape attached.

A requirement that dogs should be on leads, that children must be kept under control at all times, and that children must not use the graveyard as a playground
To take care with uneven ground or slippery conditions.

In addition to this general notice, an appropriate warning notice (in a plastic cover) can be placed on each gravestone with red and white warning tape attached (cat 1 and 2), asking that the family contact a named person. Examples of suitable notices are given at the back of this document. The warning notice, and red and white warning tape also help to identify gravestones that need attention.

After these actions are complete (welcome notice, inspection, warning tape, and gravestone notice), a letter can be written to all the families with gravestones with red and white warning tape attached. An example of a suitable letter is given in this document. However, remember that any gravestones which are more than 20 years old are unlikely to have a current known address unless the family is known and lives locally. It is also possible that surviving relatives will ignore any requests for making a family gravestone safe.

Include news items in Parish Magazines and Newsletters and any Church or Parish website requesting information about any persons knowing families with gravestones with red and white warning tape attached.

It might be acceptable to publish a list of family surnames and dates of death of the affected gravestones that need attention in the local paper and websites to obtain better publicity.

Notify Parish Councils and similar community bodies and ask for notices to be displayed on their notice boards and websites.

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9. Administration and finance of the gravestone remedial work

The administration can be difficult unless good records are kept. It is easier to use a spreadsheet to keep the records but a well organised handwritten document system will be as good.

The cost of remedial work to gravestones can be quite high and may vary from £50 to as much as £2000 per gravestone depending on the complexity of the work.

The responsibility for the remedial work lies with the family as stated above, but if contact cannot be made, the church will need to take appropriate action to make the gravestone safe. At least 3 months must be given for the family to make contact after the red and white warning tape has been attached.

The procedure for this stage is as follows:

Agree with any families who make contact, whether they wish to find a stone mason to carry out the remedial work themselves, or if they would prefer the church to carry out the remedial work on their behalf and pay whatever the cost comes out as.

The church PCC will need to decide how many of the remaining gravestones that need attention can be repaired out of church funds. This will depend on the total cost involved, the location or significance of the gravestone and the complexity of the remedial work. This will usually consist of laying the gravestone down, removing unsafe crosses, digging out a deeper hole for the gravestone, or improving the foundations under the base stone.

At the end of this period arrangements can then be made for the work to be carried out to rectify the gravestones that need attention.

Contact the DAC secretary with details of the work carried out and photographs, for record purposes.

10. Requirement for faculty.

The Chancellor has issued a general faculty dated August 2020 stating that the work required to make a gravestone safe can be carried out without approval from the diocese. The faculty covers the minimum work required to make the gravestone safe which may include laying the gravestone down.

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11. General notes for remedial work.

The remedial work to unsafe gravestones must not be carried out by persons from the church. Suitably qualified persons must be used who can be part of BRAMM the British register of Accredited Memorial Masons, or persons who can demonstrate suitable experience in the handling of gravestones. Refixing joints in gravestones using steel pins and applying ground anchors is a job only for an accredited stone mason.

If the family of the deceased can be contacted and indicate that they will remedy the problem, the remedial work must be done properly, and where appropriate in accordance with the BRAMM Code of Practice. DIY must not be permitted.

If there is any doubt about the stability or remedial work required on a large gravestone, a structural engineer may be asked to inspect and advise, especially ones in excess of six feet in height.

It is possible that the local authority cemetery organisation might be able to assist with large gravestones working in conjunction with a local stone mason.

When carrying out remedial work on a gravestone, it should be remembered that it must be possible to remove the gravestone anytime in the future. A new family member may wish to be buried in the family grave or the family may want to replace the gravestone. To allow this, avoid burying the gravestone in a large concrete foundation. It may be necessary to place a future restriction on the gravestone stating that no further burials are allowed in this grave.

Some gravestones, particularly older ones which consist of large slabs of vertical stone embedded in the ground, can be made good by removing the gravestone, digging a suitable sized hole and positioning the gravestone in foundation material or on a concrete base. Read comments against the different types of gravestone as shown in the pictures below.

12. Notes for lifting Gravestones for remedial work

In the case of large gravestones, the most difficult part of the repair job is lifting the gravestone clear of the plot so that suitable foundations can be created. Risks to be considered are:

- Access to the gravestone past adjacent graves.
- The state of the ground on which any lifting equipment will be working.
- The lifting equipment that is attached to the gravestone.
- Damage caused to the gravestone during lifting.
- Joints on the gravestone becoming detached during lifting.
- Providing suitable supports to the gravestone when lowered onto adjacent ground.

Contractors to carry out the lifting of gravestones must be selected from those who can demonstrate suitable experience in the handling of gravestones. Due to the high cost of setting up this lifting operation, it makes sense to carry out a number of lifts on similar gravestones that need attention at the same time.

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13. Specific Instructions for each type of Gravestone normally encountered

EXAMPLE 1. Lawn type stone on base



Very common gravestone in use for the last 20 years or more. The headstone is usually fixed to the base stones with steel pegs which sometimes can allow a small amount of movement. The base stones are usually bonded together and to the concrete foundation with cement mortar. Following the requirements of BRAMM about 10 years ago, the foundation and the lowest base stones of more recent gravestones will have a ground anchor at least 600mm into the ground to prevent movement. If the ground anchor is fitted, there is sometimes a degree of play in the gravestone fixing which might allow the gravestone to move a little, but not to fall over.

These gravestones usually become loose between the base stones and the foundation. Depending on the extent of the instability, and size of the gravestone, either a ground anchor can be fitted, or the surfaces cleaned up and cement mortar applied.

EXAMPLE 2. New stone with poor fixing



This gravestone missed out the base stones, and the headstone was cement bonded to the foundation. The headstone was only about 50mm under earth level.

During a gravestone inspection it fell over with light hand pressure. Despite being a small stone, it was too heavy to move.

This will need steel fixings into the headstone and may need ground anchors as well.

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EXAMPLE 3. Flat heavy stone without base (Monolith)



A very common older variety of gravestone from about the 1920s. It has a single vertical stone inserted into the ground and is called a Monolith. There should be about 30% of the stone beneath the ground. This type comes in a large variety of sizes from quite small to very large, with some wide and some narrow. The problems come about when less than 30% is below ground or the ground level subsides. The stone will then lean and eventually fall over. This will often occur as the surrounding earth slowly sinks into the grave space, and the stone starts leaning forward onto the grave.

If found leaning and very loose in the ground the stone must be removed, the hole enlarged and dug as deep as possible so that any inscriptions are not obscured, the stone replaced upright and back filled on both sides with a suitable gravel, then filled up with normal earth on top.

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EXAMPLE 4. Large leaning stone 1



EXAMPLE 5. Brick foundations



This is a variation of the single stone which has a headstone fastened securely to a large base stone. It relies on its stability to have a large and heavy base stone which is part of the underground weight. The base stone normally sits on a foundation stone and often has a series of standard support bricks on 3 sides of the base several layers into the ground. The headstone stays stable when upright but becomes less stable if it starts leaning. The leaning occurs due to the collapse of the bricks closest to where the grave hole was. It is common to see an empty hole under the gravestone in the middle between the bricks.

To avoid moving the gravestone, it may sometimes be possible to stabilise the base by adding additional support to keep the gravestone in an upright position. Otherwise, the method of repair is to remove the gravestone, dig a large hole to take the base stone to achieve the maximum possible depth, with a concrete foundation stone for future stability. Remove some or all the bricks as required to achieve this depth. See BRAMM guidance for suitable sizes of concrete foundations (the blue book). The base stone must be bonded to the concrete foundation stone with both stones buried as deep as possible.

In the case in the top picture the base stone and the lower section of the headstone would be buried.

The lower picture shows typical deterioration of bricks used as foundations when installed. The gravestone has fallen over.

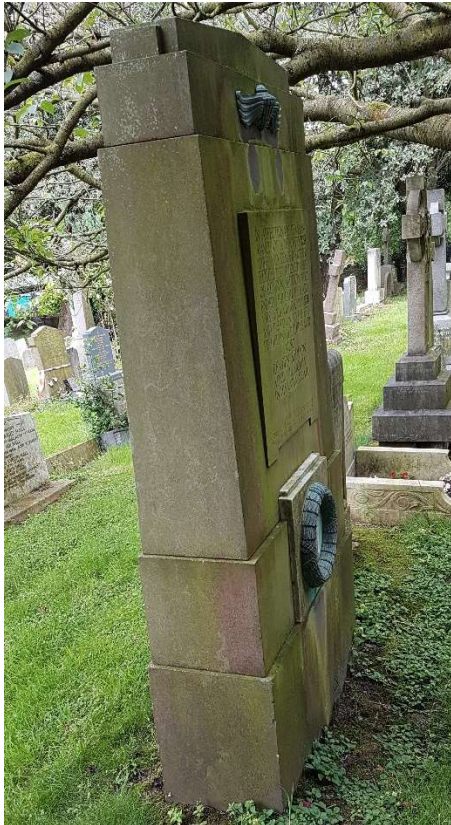
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EXAMPLE 6. Large leaning stone 2



This is another variation of the large leaning stone which has a smaller headstone fastened securely to a base stone. This one was originally sunk into the ground but started leaning as the ground subsided, or the support bricks collapsing. The only thing that prevents the gravestone falling is 2 bricks inserted close to the base. The gravestone may feel firm but needs attention. The method of repair is the same as the large leaning stone above, with a concrete foundation. It is very important to obtain the maximum possible depth for future stability.

EXAMPLE 7. Very large plain stone without base



This is another very large variation of the leaning stone which has a very large headstone fastened securely to a large base stone. This one is stable with a good deep foundation. If any leaning takes place it could become unstable especially as it has a relatively high centre of gravity. The method of repair is the same as the large leaning stone above, with a concrete foundation. It is very important to obtain the maximum possible depth for future stability. In the case in this picture, it would be expected that the whole of the lowest base stone be under the ground level. The problem for the repair on a gravestone of any size, but particularly this size, is the weight. Proper lifting equipment must be used to handle the weight. The gravestone will need to be lowered very carefully and slowly and supported on a suitable trestle arrangement to avoid damaging either the gravestone or anything it comes into contact with.

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EXAMPLE 8. Large stone with cross



This is one version of the headstone with a cross on top. It has a very broad and heavy base stone and relies for its stability on the size of this base.

Two problems can occur.

The cross stone is usually fixed securely to the top base stone (B1) with steel pins. But the other joints are cement bonded relying on their surface area for stability. The most vulnerable joint is the smallest one between the top two base stones (B1 and B2). When this vulnerable joint becomes loose the cross becomes unstable and can easily be pushed off. The only satisfactory way of fixing this is to remove the cross stone with top base stone (B1) and fix it back in position using steel pins. (or lay the top section with the cross on the ground).

The other problem is where the lowest base stone (B3) is sitting close to the ground. When installed a rectangular line of bricks or stone blocks would have been sunk into the ground so that this base stone was below or level with the ground. Over time, these support bricks crumble or lose their firm base. The complete gravestone can then become unstable.

To avoid moving the gravestone, it may sometimes be possible to stabilise the base by adding additional support. Otherwise, the method of repair is to remove the gravestone, dig a large hole to take the base stone to achieve the maximum possible depth with a concrete foundation stone for future stability. Remove some or all of the bricks as required to achieve this depth. See BRAMM guidance for suitable sizes of concrete foundations (the blue book). There is an additional risk during lifting of separating the base joints under the cross.

A realistic repair method for this type of gravestone, unless the gravestone is in a special place in the churchyard, is to remove the cross permanently and apply suitable supports to the base stone to keep it stable.

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EXAMPLE 9. Very large tall stone with cross



This is another very large version of the headstone with a cross on top. It has a very broad and heavy base stone and relies on its stability on the size of this base. In this case there is plenty of weight lower down, the gravestone is upright and cannot possibly move. The area to look at is the foundations for the largest base stone especially if the base is sitting on bricks. If repair is required to this type of gravestone see instructions for the Large stone with cross above.

EXAMPLE 10. Very large stone with ornate carving



This is similar to the gravestones with crosses but has an ornate carving with a cross with 4 bases below. Any of the base joints could be loose but will become less critical on the lower joints. The most likely source of trouble are the stones or bricks which support the base which can crumble or become loose.

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EXAMPLE 11. Box Grave



There are various types of box grave which can be seen. They are normally the size of a coffin and between 300mm to 600mm high. They are sometimes enclosed on 4 sides, but some have 4 stone supports like a table. What usually happens is that one or more side stones fall away leaving the top stone liable to collapse onto the ground. As these can be used as hiding places or dens by kids who might unintentionally push out a side support, these should be examined very carefully. The only safe procedure for a box grave that needs attention is to lift off the top stone, remove the side stones and lay the top stone flat on the ground. The one in the picture is fairly typical with very unsatisfactory attempts to make it safe..

14. References

Blackburn Diocese. General guide to health and safety in churchyards and burial grounds. Issued September 2006. Due to be updated 2021.

Ministry of Justice. Managing the safety of Burial Ground Memorials. January 2009.

BRAMM British Register of Accredited Memorial Masons. The Blue Book. February 2016, updated 2020.

4th January 2021.

Ven Mark Ireland. Archdeacon Blackburn Diocese

Ven David Picken. Archdeacon Blackburn Diocese

Justin Stopford. DAC Blackburn Diocese.

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15. Notice for Churchyard/ Graveyard

XX Churchyard

Diocese of Blackburn

Welcome

Please keep children under control and away from the gravestones at all times.

The Churchyard is not a playground.

The gravestones in the churchyard are periodically checked and as a result some gravestones, particularly the ones that have a red and white warning tape, may become loose if disturbed, or under certain weather conditions. The gravestones are very heavy and could cause injury.

If you know a family who has the warning tape round their gravestone, please contact the number below.

Please be very careful when you walk in the churchyard either on the paths or the grass. We do our best to look after the churchyard, but there will often be times when the surfaces will be slippery or uneven.

There is a water tap on the church wall for flowers. Please remove old flowers and take them home, or place them in the bins at the side of the car park.

Please keep dogs on a lead and clean up after them.

**Any questions please contact the
Church Warden on xxx**

16. Notice for Gravestone

xx Churchyard
Diocese of Blackburn

This gravestone has a red and white warning tape. This means that it may become loose if disturbed, or under certain weather conditions. The gravestone is very heavy and could cause injury.

If you know the family who has the warning tape round this gravestone, please contact the number below.

If we are unable to make contact with the family, we will take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of the gravestone, which may include laying it down flat.

**Any questions please contact the
Church Warden on xxx**

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17. Letter for sending to families with gravestones needing attention.

XXXX Churchyard Diocese of XXXX

Date

We are writing to you at this address as a family who has a grave at XXXX church at XXXX.

A safety inspection has taken place in the churchyard recently which has revealed that the memorial gravestone of your family grave requires attention to ensure it is in a safe condition.

We are having to write to a number of families, as the families of the deceased are liable for the maintenance and safety of their gravestones.

If you have not contacted us within 2 months from the date of this letter, then the XXXX Church Council will have to take the necessary action to make the gravestone safe, which may include laying it down flat.

What you need to do:

- 1. Please contact us as soon as possible.**
- 2. We will explain what the problem is and what the options are to make the gravestone safe.**
- 3. We will give you the opportunity to contact a local stonemason to carry out the work.**

Unfortunately, we cannot allow DIY work in the graveyard as the gravestones are very heavy and could cause injury.

- 4. We may be able to arrange the necessary repair with a local stonemason on your behalf. If this is agreed, we will give you an idea of the cost before going ahead.**

To understand what is required you should make contact with the church warden as follows. We can send you a photograph of the gravestone if that would be helpful.

Contact XXXX on telephone number XXXXX

or E mail XXXXXX@XXX

Yours sincerely

XXXXX Church Warden/ Vicar

(On behalf of XXXX P.C.C.)

PS. I would be very grateful if you could send a reply even if the grave has nothing to do with you.