

Understanding The Stones

For anyone starting out to trace their family tree, the family burial ground is one of the most useful places to start. Even the briefest epitaph can reveal such details as name, age, date of death, religious denomination and social class, while the more elaborate inscriptions can plot an entire family history.



Names are sometimes given in full and occasionally a familiar name is included - for example, 'James Patrick (Jimmy) Boyle', or, less helpful, the family name only, for example, 'The family burying ground of M. Caldwell, Lisburn'. The most useful, for genealogical purposes, are those gravestones which contain references to other family members and which give connecting names, for example:

Erected in loving memory of James Morton, Corbet, who died 14th June 1897 aged 66 years. ... And of his two daughters Margaret S. Steen who died 4th May 1899 aged 30 years, and Jane E. Mercer who died 24th Aug, 1904 aged 28 years.

Age is usually given either directly, 'died aged 78', 'passed away in his 89th year' or by deduction, '1805-1895'. Either way, once the birth year is known it is usually possible to obtain a birth certificate or (if pre-1864) a baptismal reference. The deceased's religion can sometimes, but not always, be deduced from the site of the graveyard or cemetery. Older cemeteries were, in many cases, communal property, or attached to an Anglican (i.e. Church of Ireland) church and used by all denominations. During the nineteenth century (after the Catholic Emancipation Act) there was an increase in the number of churches built by all denominations, and interment according to religious persuasion became more common.

Paupers were, as a rule, buried in unmarked graves, frequently in a communal plot set aside for the purpose. As this was considered a shameful thing, even the poorest of people outside the workhouse would try to have something 'put by' for their funeral. Their headstones were usually quite simple. However, it did happen that as the family fortunes improved, a grieving son or daughter would erect a more fitting tribute to his or her parents. Generally, though, the higher up the social scale, the more grand and elaborate the gravestone, standing as a mark of the status of the entire family, past and present. An exception to this rule of thumb are those religious

sects, such as the Moravians, who believe all are equal after death and all headstones are, therefore, of an equal height.

Other information which may be included on gravestones is the occupation of the deceased: 'Captain in the 18th or Royal Irish, Regiment', 'Eminent Medical Student', 'Merchant of this town'. The home town may be given, for example, 'Erected by James McMaster of Bangor in memory of his father John McMaster of Ballymaleddy'. The cause of death is occasionally recorded: 'John, who died suddenly when bathing on the 29th of June in the 13th year of his age'.

Notable achievements or membership of an illustrious society can be included:

'Minister for 52 years', 'secretary of the congregational committee', 'a founder member of the Society for the Promotion of the True Faith'.

Family members who died abroad are not forgotten:

'Thomas McIlroy who died at Pueblo, Colorado, USA'; 'Gawin McClure, M.D. Surgeon R.N. who died of yellow fever on board H.M.'s ship "Eclair" off Madeira; 'John, late Loco Supt. Nt. Wn. Rly. Sind. who died at Karachi, India'.

The more information that can be gleaned from headstones the easier it will be to find other sources which will be of help in tracing the family back through the centuries.

On-line Access

A useful website to consult is [History from Headstones](#) where you will find details of over 50,000 gravestone inscriptions in Northern Ireland.

