



Your Family Tree: 21

A GUIDE TO GRAVESTONE INSCRIPTIONS



Gravestone inscriptions are a wonderful source of information for both the local historian and for the genealogist. As many church registers do not begin until the early to mid 19th century and civil registration of births and deaths was not introduced until 1864, gravestone inscriptions are an alternative way of tracing a family back beyond the middle of the nineteenth century. The difficulty of tracing families through church registers is compounded by the fact that, of the 1,600 Church of Ireland registers in existence, 1,000 were in the safe-keeping of the Public Record Office of Dublin and were therefore destroyed in the Four Courts fire of 1922.

The importance of gravestone inscriptions has long been recognised, and attempts have been made to record for posterity some of the older and endangered epitaphs. PRONI holds a series of journals entitled Memorials of the Dead. These were published annually under the aegis of the Association for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead, Ireland, and span the years 1888 to 1934. The contents were made up of submissions by voluntary contributors, who transcribed whatever took their interest. The Memorials therefore, have a piecemeal, hit-and-miss quality rather than being a meticulous study of each cemetery. Errors in transcription and translation also occur. They do, however, cover the whole of Ireland, and illustrations (some of which are very roughly drawn) are included. Entries are arranged alphabetically by county and subdivided by parish, also in alphabetical order. Additionally, these journals contain letters and articles relating to memorials and the state of graveyards, as well as lists of subscribers to the Association.

For some years past, R.S.J. Clarke has compiled and edited a series of books entitled Gravestone Inscriptions, under the aegis of the Ulster Historical Foundation, formerly the Ulster-Scots Historical Society. While the burial grounds sited in County Down have been substantially covered, only some of the Belfast and County Antrim graveyards have been published. More books are planned, but some of the earlier works are now out of print. They also have a large amount of material still in index card form.

However, PRONI holds the full run of the twenty-seven printed volumes; twenty relating to Down, three to Antrim and four for the Belfast region. Twenty-one volumes are bound in a hardback, green, cover: County Down volumes 1-18, County Antrim, volumes 1 & 2, and Belfast volume 1. In soft binding are:

Belfast (volume 2), covering Friar's Bush and Milltown graveyards;

Belfast (volume 3), covering the Balmoral, Friends and Malone burial grounds;

'Old Belfast Families and the new burying ground, from gravestone inscriptions, with wills and biographical notes', volume 4 in the Belfast series (the new burying ground referred to is the Clifton Street graveyard, no longer 'open');

Two editions of volume 19 in the Down series, one of which contains a list of all the cemeteries covered in the series ;

'Heart of Downe: old Banbridge Families', volume 20 in the County Down series;

Old Families of Newry and District, volume 21 in the County Down series;

'Old Families of Downpatrick and District', volume 7 in the County Down series (New edition). This contains a 'summary guide to documentary sources for the family and local historian, parish of Down';

Old Belfast families of Carrickfergus and Ballynure', volume 3 in the County Antrim series. This includes three appendixes: (i) some Carrickfergus deaths, 1853-72; (ii) summary guide to documentary sources for Carrickfergus; and (iii) a list of subscribers.

Old Families of Larne and District, volume 4 in the County Antrim series.

The introduction in the first book of the series gives an excellent exposition of the aims and objectives of the undertaking. In summary, however, County Down was chosen as the initial area of research simply for its geographical proximity to the compiler. Date was defined according to a compromise between best practice and economic considerations. Therefore, all gravestones having a date of death prior to 1865 (by which date civil registration is up and running) have been copied completely; where practicable, stones containing dates prior to 1900 have been included and, in very small cemeteries, all headstone inscriptions have been transcribed. By imposing strict geographical and period limitations, it was hoped that a more complete and accurate guide would ensue.

Entries are arranged alphabetically by name of graveyard, within which are listed, also in alphabetical order, the names on the stones. As much detail as was possible has been included but, naturally, due to exposure to the elements over long periods, much of the detail on the headstones has been lost. Usually, however, a brief description of the physical appearance of the grave is given. Inscriptions which also appear in Memorials are cross-referenced, and any inaccuracies noted. Of use to the local historian, as well as the genealogists, is the inclusion of the Ordnance Survey grid reference of the burial ground, a potted history of the church or area in which the graveyard is sited, some detail on the oldest graves and their general condition, and some photographs and illustrations. The series is indexed every five volumes (ie., volumes 5, 10, 15 and 20 give details of 1-5, 6-10, 11-15 and 15-20, respectively) with alphabetical lists of surnames and of graveyards.

All of the information on gravestone inscriptions in these printed volumes has now been digitised and indexed and can be accessed on-line at <https://ulsterhistoricalfoundation.com/history-from-headstones/home>. Here you will also find maps showing the location of graveyards.

Other sources available in PRONI, which have been loosely bound in soft covers, many of them photocopies are:

David R Elliott, 'Boho Church of Ireland Cemetery, County Fermanagh' – transcriptions with an introduction.

David R Elliott, 'The Cemetery of St Molaise, Monea, Devenish Parish, County Fermanagh' – transcriptions with and introduction.

David R Elliott, 'Benmore Church of Ireland Cemetery, Inishmacsaint Parish, County Fermanagh' – transcriptions with an introduction.

David R Elliott, 'Slavin Church of Ireland Cemetery, Inishmacsaint Parish, County Fermanagh' – transcriptions with an introduction.

David R Elliott, 'Sydare Methodist Cemetery, Magheracross Parish, County Fermanagh' – transcriptions with an introduction.

David R Elliott, 'Rossory Parish Cemeteries, Co. Fermanagh' – transcriptions with an introduction.

David R Elliott, 'Old Derrygonnelly Churchyard, Inishmacsaint Parish, Co. Fermanagh' – transcription with an introduction.

'Gravestone inscriptions in Aghalurcher churchyard, Aghavea cemetery and Drumully cemetery', taken from the Clogher Record, vols I-VI.

‘Gravestone inscriptions in Creggan graveyard, Donaghcavey cemetery, old Kilskeery graveyard, Drumglass cemetery’.

‘Gravestone inscriptions in Lambeg churchyard’.

‘Catholic gravestone inscriptions in the vicinity of Draperstown, County Derry’, comprising Moneyneeny, Kilcronaghan and Straw.

‘Tombstone inscriptions’, copied from the Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical society, vol XIX, 1, 1977, contains information on St Mary’s ‘Abbey’; Dunany; Salterstown; County Louth; Rathdrumin; Bawntaaffe; Urnai; Fochart; St Nicholas, Dundalk.

D. Johnston, ‘Clogher Cathedral graveyard’ (1972) includes a short introduction entitled; ‘The graveyard in History’.

‘Carved in stone: a record of memorials in the ancient graveyard around the church of the Holy Evangelists’ (Church of Ireland), Carnmoney, Newtownabbey.

‘The Hidden Graveyard: Memorials in Graveyard No 1, Church of the Holy Evangelists, Parish of Carnmoney, Church Road, Newtownabbey.

B S Turner, Gravestone inscriptions for Ardclinis, Nappan and Kilmore, Co. Antrim .

John A McCurdy and Norman Parkes: Billy Parish Church Old Burying Ground.

Carmavy and Templastragh graveyards, Co. Antrim.

Ballymena Borough Gravestone Series: Kellswater Reformed Presbyterian Church, Ballyclug, Cullybackey Old Methodist Church, St Saviour’s Parish Church, Skerry, 1st and 2nd Killymurriss and Racavan.

Other sources, including original documents, can be found in the electronic catalogue, on-line and in the Search Room, under the heading, ‘Graveyards’. These are arranged by county for both municipal and church cemeteries, and include:

T/1761 Transcripts of gravestone inscriptions in the Shankhill graveyard, 1690-1953.

T/3715/1 Gravestone inscriptions in Larne Union burial ground, Kilwaughter, Co. Antrim.

- D/3672 Gravestone inscriptions from churches in Counties Antrim and Londonderry (13 volumes).
- MIC/1/29 Book containing tombstone inscriptions from tombstones in Templemore Parish graveyard c.1800 – c.1880
- MIC/61 Gravestone inscriptions in the New Burial Ground, Clifton Street Belfast, 1800-1897.

See also Leaflet 27 for a list of records in PRONI for local authority burial grounds.

The Tennison Groves papers also contain various transcriptions of headstones for a number of counties; see T/808/14917-14924

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