

A Long and Complex Plot: patterns of family burial in Irish graveyards from the 18th century

Harold Mytum

The Irish churchyard family plot had its origins in the 18th century with the first widespread erection of stone markers, and clearer definition in the 19th century with kerbs and railings. Further evolution can be identified in the 20th century, with elaboration of the plot area. Influences from Britain and Europe can be recognised within the largely indigenous development of a characteristic and still-vibrant cultural tradition of grave definition. The social and ideological implications of plot development are discussed, as are the archaeological implications for interpretation of surviving monuments in contemporary graveyard recording projects.

Introduction

Research on gravestones within Ireland has a very respectable pedigree. Various genealogical projects recording inscriptions have led to publications such as the *Memorials of the Dead* volumes, the *Ulster Historical Foundation* series, and many papers in county journals. Concern with the material evidence was espoused by Ada K Longfield in many papers (eg 1943; 1947; 1954) and followed more recently by others including Finbar McCormick (1976; 1979; 1983), Siobhán de hÓir (1987; 1997; 1998) and Eoin Grogan (1999). This has largely concentrated on issues of design, and often the attribution of work to particular masons. The physical context of external memorials has received little attention in Ireland, however, and they have been largely treated as isolated examples of folk art. Moreover, attention has been directed towards the 17th- and 18th-century survivals rather than the much greater quantity of 19th- and 20th-century material which, combined with the earlier evidence, offers the opportunity to examine change over the long term. Significant encouragement to preserve Irish graveyards has been given by both DoINI (Hamlin 1983) and Duchas (Kirwan 1992), though the full range of post-medieval research possibilities has not been discussed at length.

Interpretation of graveyards can be based on the evidence of individual monuments, but can also combine that with information on two other levels. The first is the grave space, which may or may not have any material features, and which can be termed the grave plot. The second is the burial ground as a whole, of which each grave plot forms a part. Memorials, grave plots and burial grounds are all dynamic (Mytum 1996a), and the shifting roles of things, places and spaces within the burial ground together provide a rich source for studying social identity, practice, and belief. The grave plot is the focus of attention here, though its elaboration had an impact on the development of the graveyard landscape as a whole, and this will be briefly considered.

The development and organisation of historic burial grounds (apart from commercial and municipal cemeteries) can rarely be understood from documentary sources. Burial registers do not have spatial information, and even sextons' records are rare and hardly comprehensive (Houlbrooke 1998, 364-65). Moreover, most Irish records of any antiquity have not survived (Grenham 1992). Many interments therefore have no record at all, and even excavation would be problematic because of the intensity of use of burial grounds, and the degree of intercutting and overburial.

Graveyard memorials provide an opportunity to study the development and patterns of use within burial grounds, particularly from the later 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The role of cemeteries in influencing change in churchyards needs to be considered, though there has been limited research on Irish cemeteries, and particularly from an archaeological perspective. The data from this paper is in part derived from earlier published work, but relies heavily on survey data from Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, Balrothery, Co Dublin, and a number of graveyards in Counties Fermanagh, Louth and Monaghan, recorded using standard procedures (Mytum 2000).

Origins of the family plot

Medieval and early modern churchyard burial patterns do not seem to have been closely based on family groupings in defined areas of the burial ground. Higher status families, both Catholic and Protestant, preferred burial within the church. For these groups, burial with spouses and children was frequent (Tait 2002, 65-68), but not long-term multi-generational burial in the same plot. However, the concept of plot or burial chapel ownership for intramural burial was established by this time, and such locations could even be bought and sold (Tait 2002, 72-73). This indicates an expectation and practice of burial plot ownership amongst the most wealthy and influential by the 17th century, but this was not translated to wider popular practice in the

churchyard until the 18th century. Excavation suggests that there was repeated reuse of core burial areas within and around churches, but there is no indication that in the churchyard this was other than cyclical reuse. Following the Reformation, many Irish churches fell into disrepair but remained foci for burial in and around the ruins for the largely Catholic population. As church locations became full or were otherwise not available, high status families also began to be buried in the churchyard, where burial plots with vaults and mausolea began to appear in the 18th century.

In Scotland, elite family burial developed in specially constructed attached mortuary spaces, often called aisles (Hay 1957; Colvin 1991, 297-300). These had a family gallery above which faced into the church for family use during services, but a vault below which could be considered not part of the church for burial. Those who could not afford, or disapproved of, this degree of proximity to the church could be commemorated within the graveyard. Several choices were available, depending on expense. The most extravagant was the construction of a free-standing mausoleum which could be as expensive as an attached aisle. Less costly was a separate walled enclosure or lair in the graveyard in which monuments could be placed, though many were content with a mural monument fixed to the interior face of the boundary wall (Willsher 1985; Colvin 1991, 301-06).

Ulster practice was, not surprisingly, influenced by Scottish traditions, and indeed these practices also spread further afield. External mural monuments occur, and some were fixed to the exterior walls of ruined churches. Family mortuary spaces were sometimes joined to churches. At Aghalurcher, Co Fermanagh both mural monuments and a burial vault are attached to the medieval church structure and would seem to reuse part of it. The mural monuments may not be in their original locations, as the Plantation church no longer survives; Bigger (1921) suggests that it had been demolished to provide material for the Georgian style church which replaced it and was built elsewhere. In the Aghalurcher vault, two deeply carved slabs survive, to Elizabeth Galbraith (died 1670) and James Galbraith (died 1673); these display mortality symbols which have been compared with those on an external slab at Tydavnet, Co Monaghan (Hickey 1976, 97-98, McCormick 1983, 276). The vault was subsequently used by the Balford family, with a slab to Charles Balford's wife Cecil (died 1688). An example away from Ulster is the walled burial enclosure to the Sproule family with headstones within it, and a plot with unmarked graves for Carmelite nuns, recorded at Carrowntemple, Co Roscommon (Higgins 1995). Free-standing family mausolea also occur frequently in graveyards (Curl 1978), though by the 18th century a few families were following British and European traditions and constructing them on their estates (Colvin 1991).

Large communal crypts beneath city churches could also have family chambers, as was the case at Spitalfields, London (Reeve and Adams 1993), though these have not yet been

researched in Ireland. The partially mummified remains below St Michan's church, Dublin, serve as a tourist attraction (Killanin and Duignan 1967, 255; IAPA 1997), but the 17th-century vaults are full of well preserved coffins which would well repay academic study. Many of the coffins are clearly of 18th- and 19th-century date and comparable in style to those recorded in England (Butler and Morris 1994; Litten 1991, 1999); some may be in family vaults. In the rest of Ireland, family vaults appear in some numbers at church sites. Excavations by Miriam Clyne (1999) at Moone, Co Kildare have revealed a small Archbold family vault within the church, but external vaults have yet to receive attention.

Vaults provided a form of family burial space for those who could afford it. But whilst efforts may have been made by sextons to bury relatives close to each other in the early modern period, burial grounds were not primarily organised with this in mind. Numerous graveyards across Ireland contain rows of uninscribed stones marking graves. These allowed the sexton to know where burials had taken place, and could help relatives to locate their deceased kin, though the date of such stones is uncertain. They may have been a precursor of headstones, but it is more likely that they represent an inexpensive version of grave marking which was introduced alongside headstones. Their spatial arrangement interspersed along rows between 19th-century inscribed stones, as recorded by survey and seen in old photographs, suggests that all were contemporary. It is possible, however, that the headstones reflect families which, on becoming sufficiently affluent, replaced the uninscribed marker with a headstone and continued to use the same plot.

In Scotland, a process can be documented by which family burial plots were desired and obtained by those who previously did not have access to them. This would seem to have begun at the beginning of the 17th century (Harrison 1990, 80-81). These burial plots could be property owned by the family, and there were many disputes regarding their title (Harrison 1990). Some graves had been marked in the previous century with more substantial horizontal ledger stones or deeply carved and highly decorated coped stones. Such memorials survive at a number of sites, with many preserved at St Andrew's (Fleming 1931), but they were clearly for the more established families. The ledger stones covered most or all of the grave, and so helped to define the burial place. Early memorials could be carved with death symbols and could have text running round the edges of the stone, or they may only have initials and perhaps a date. Ledgers could be made more visible if raised up, and the development of table tombs was the result. These occur widely in the later 18th century, and the rare medieval form of the chest tomb also saw a revival. These also became popular with more wealthy families in Ireland.

Permanent stones with names or even initials and dates could help to verify familial rights for successful middling status families, and this led to the development of the

headstone tradition. Harrison (1990, 81) has identified through documents the introduction of head and foot stones at Stirling by 1640, some inscribed; the earliest surviving headstone yet located in Britain and Ireland is one of 1623 from Dunning, Perthshire (Willsher and Hunter 1978, 2).

The early stone memorials erected in graveyards did not all represent the same phenomenon. They could indicate an individual and their date of death, and thus be similar to later stones. But they could mark the foundation of a dynastic burial plot (often represented by the initials of the man and wife, each with their first and family names represented) rather than any specific deceased individual. Details of deaths may then have been subsequently added, and on some Scottish stones these inscriptions were placed on the opposite face of the headstone to the heavily carved decoration, initials and date. Tarlow (1999) has suggested that the use of memorials, even the relatively simple ones with initials, reflected the development of greater emotional bonds within the family during the 18th century. The evidence may rather suggest that definition of property, and the public and permanent marking of family burial space, was at least as important, linked to a sense of kinship and concerns over the intact preservation of the body once buried. Certainly emotion is present in the inscriptions of elite during the 18th century, and amongst the memorials of others from the 19th century, but this seems to be secondary to the desire to maintain intact the burial plot and its family members within it.

Strong familial identity was expressed on the external ledger memorials that were commonly used by the Plantation families in Ulster. These had carved armorial bearings at the head, and sometimes complex mortality symbolism, and these have the strong Scottish background already described (McCormick 1983), though this is a form also found over much of Europe. The Ulster slabs were often very large and thick, and could be raised up on low bases. These monuments indicated the presence of a family burial space that could be used over several generations. In much of Ireland, ledgers were raised up as table tombs, making them visible at a distance. Many of these have since sunk into the ground or have been dismantled, but it would seem that they rarely raised the slab far above the ground surface. Many had simple rectangular, square-sectioned legs, but others had more elaborate designs. Other slabs were raised up on a low solid stone or brick base.

Ireland shows a similar pattern to that in Scotland with the shift from the ledger slab to the headstone. There was also a clear widening of the social status of those being commemorated, with successful farmers and merchants erecting memorials in some areas by the early 18th century. Areas with early headstones occur not only in Ulster (McCormick 1976, 1979) but also in other areas such as Wicklow (Grogan 1999) and Co Dublin (Mytum forthcoming). These headstones were unlike the ledgers in that they were generally small, however, and most did not

have room to carry more than one or two names (Fig 1, A, B, C, E, G). Even where stones were larger, the lettering of the text could be of such a size that only a limited amount could be included (Fig 1, F). At Clonmacnoise, the average number of commemorations on 18th-century memorials was relatively low (Mytum, 1996b) (Fig 2, A).

In Ireland, the erection of monuments took place either to mark ownership or to remember the deceased. The former indicates the development of plot ownership from the early 18th century onwards. The explicit statement could be about the ownership of the stone itself, the plot which it marked, or both; in all cases both were clearly implied. The phrasing tended to emphasise continued family use with such phrases

Fig 1

- A - Susan O Neil, died 1719. The initials RON below the date are probably the initials of her husband. Balrothery, Co Dublin*
 - B - Marker for plot owned by Nicholas Ball. Balrothery, Co Dublin*
 - C - Ann Eustace, died 1731. Balrothery, Co Dublin*
 - D - Marker for plot owned by John Sharkey, linen draper, and his wife Ann Dowdall, dated 1737. It also commemorates the deaths of Richard and Catherine Sharkey, died 1724 and 1729. Balrothery, Co Dublin*
 - E - Ismay Howe, died 1726 and her son Francis Murphy died 1727. Balrothery, Co Dublin*
 - F - Geain Caddan, died 1766. Clones, Co Monaghan*
 - G - Tauge McBryan, died 1734. Aghalurcher, Co Fermanagh*
- (Line drawings by Steve Rowlands from field rubbings)*

'and his posterity' common in some areas such as Counties Louth (Mytum 2002) and Dublin (Fig 1, B, D). Some inscriptions also commemorated deceased family members, but others did not. Commemorative inscriptions were sometimes added at a later date to some stones. Many early memorials emphasised the commemorative purpose of the monument, though even here dynastic or ownership factors might be stated or implied. The 18th-century headstones in west Ulster do not contain multiple generations of commemorations, and at Killeevan, Co Monaghan where there has been excellent preservation of memorials of this period *in situ*, there was limited family grouping of headstones (Mytum and Evans 2003). The monuments all reflected, however, a strong desire to signal possession of a plot with a physical presence. It is this tendency towards proprietorial control that is revealed to an increasing extent in later centuries. The stones that emphasised family plots comprise a minority of monuments, as most memorials gave personal details of deceased individuals. Nevertheless, many of these also mention who erected the stone and their relationship to the deceased, and provide an identity

structured through kinship. By the later 18th century in those parts of Ireland where the memorial tradition was already well developed, most people were using the headstone as a surface on which to develop social identity.

Grouping of graveyard memorials, sometimes within an enclosure, would seem to begin for prominent families in Ireland during the 18th century. An example is the group of three upright slabs to the Blackwood family at the Abbey churchyard, Bangor, Co Down (Bigger and Hughes 1901). Each commemorated several family members, and two were used for nearly a century. A fourth memorial was added in 1834, a square pedestal monument with marble panels.

Defining trends in the 19th century

Once the concept of plot ownership was well developed, the family and friends of the deceased would focus visits on the memorial, but were aware that the space occupied by interments could be contested by those in adjacent plots, or newly arrived families requiring a burial space. Many families were still erecting stones primarily to mark their plots in the early 19th century, particularly where it would

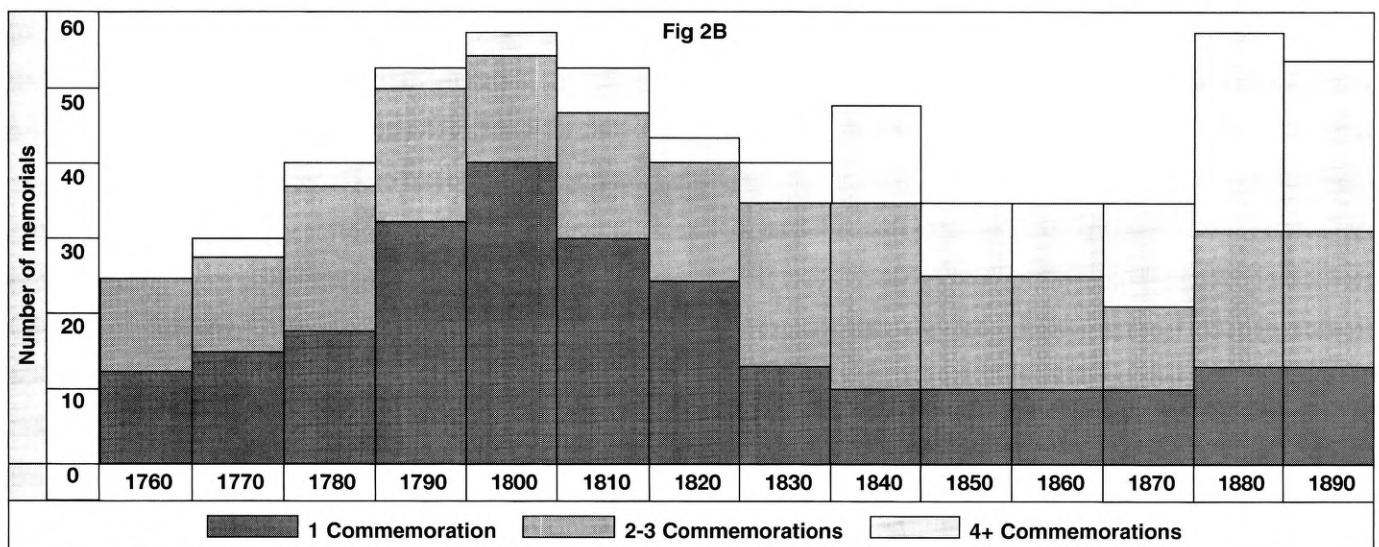
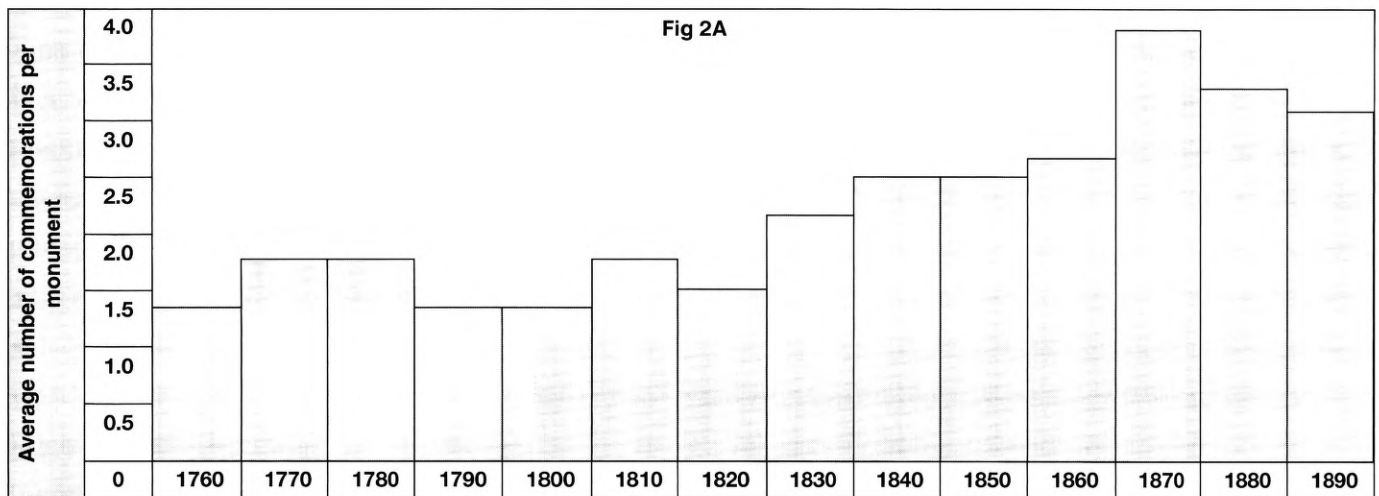


Fig 2A and 2B Bar charts derived from the old graveyard, Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly

seem that these were the first phase of stone markers in that place. For example, at Termonfeckin, Co Louth, ledgers and headstones occur from only the 1750s, and then only rarely; they became a regular form of memorial from the 1790s. Here, stones primarily marking family plots rather than specific burials continued to be erected during the first decade of the 19th century, with the occasional example continuing until the 1820s.

From the late 18th century onwards, Irish headstones increased in size, and were more standardised in their shapes. They became thinner, but with a finely finished surface for text and symbol, even where the backs remained roughly hewn. The headstone now provided a suitably impressive context within which to selectively affirm social relations and so define a particular type of identity. This identity could explicitly relate to location of residence (by a named house or farm, or to a more generalised location such as townland). Urban residences could again be general to the town or to a particular street. Occupations, particularly professional and mercantile, also occurred as identifiers, though others would be implicit in rural areas, for example by the use of farm names. Indeed, in some parts of Ireland burial plots may have been more closely associated with a residence than a family, and successive occupants of a property would use a particular burial plot (Cunniffe pers comm). By far the most common social identifiers used on memorials, however, were familial. Indeed, the others could also have a kinship implication, as residence could emphasise a family's estate, and occupation the family trade. Thus, kinship was the dominant theme expressed through the text of the memorial, though the iconography and elements of the inscription (such as *'Pray for the soul of'*) gave a religious affiliation. By the late 19th century, larger memorials such as tall headstones and Celtic crosses often had the family name prominently displayed, further emphasising kinship (Fig 4, C). This was also a trend in Scotland, America, and much of Continental Europe.

Where families remained fixed for generations, this could be reflected on the memorial, and the family nature of the plot could be emphasised. This can be seen at Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, where some memorials were large and could accommodate many names. The average number of people commemorated on a memorial increased steadily through most of the 19th century, and this was due to a drop in the number of monuments erected which attracted only a single commemoration, and an increase in the numbers with four or more individuals (Fig 2). During the 19th century monuments thus came to commemorate many members of the same family, and often over several generations. This pattern of use can be seen on many memorials from other graveyards, though it has not been quantified elsewhere.

The family was celebrated on the headstone, but in addition the family burial plot was very often physically demarcated in the 19th century. Unfortunately, many of the ancillary features of graves have been removed even if the

headstones have survived, so the original popularity of the various features is now difficult to estimate. One common method of demarcation was the placing of both head and foot stones on the grave, though this did not define the width very effectively. Planting of bushes could also define the corners of the grave. More substantial was the use of a ledger slab in front of the headstone which completely covered the grave space, or placing a chest or table tomb over the grave, though these were much more expensive. These choices began to be made in the late 18th century but were most common during the 19th century.

During the 19th century substantial monuments began to be erected in some numbers within graveyards. As internal burial became more difficult or was banned, the wealthy members of society wished to mark their burial vault in the churchyard with a suitable above-ground structure. These often took the form of a ledger slab, chest tomb or pedestal monument, surrounded by an iron fence. These gave a clear three-dimensional indication of private space, visible at considerable distance across the graveyard. They were more costly, and so it is not surprising that Anglo-Irish family graves and their monuments were often enclosed by such protective screens, but they were not an exclusively Protestant choice. A wide range of types of railings can be found, and would have been painted in a range of colours such as black, dark blue or white, but could have additional colouring such as gold or silver. Many now remain only in a rusted state, but there is far greater survival in much of Ireland than in Britain where many were removed as part of the war effort during World War 2.

The use of railings can be well illustrated at Termonfeckin, Co Louth, where several monuments of this complexity were erected (Figs 3, 4). Eight surviving examples of railings and one of iron chains strung between stone pillars survive in the churchyard. No two have the same design, and this variety of choice is also revealed in the range of memorial types so enclosed, including the ledger, coped stone, table tomb, chest tomb, headstone and cross. The fencing separated them as a class from the mass of graves, mainly unmarked in any way, but this variety distinguished between such plots as well. The elite nature of the 19th-century railed plots is most clearly illustrated by that to the Brabazons of Rath House (Fig 3); they were clearly the leading family in the area, and several internal wall memorials along the nave commemorated successive generations. Nevertheless, their external burial vault was marked by a memorial set above it at the end of the 19th century; it augmented the flat ledgers, and consists of two panels topped with a moulding carrying the inscription

'BURIAL PLACE OF THE BRABAZON FAMILY
OF RATH HOUSE THEIR RESTING PLACE
FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TO 1889 A.D.'

Fig 3 Brabazon family plot with memorial of 1889, marked by iron rails. Termonfeckin, Co Louth

The panels are crammed with the name, relationship, year of death and age for a total of 20 individuals, starting with William Brabazon, died 1714, and ending with a sister-in-law Harriet Crane, died 1887. The plot in which the vault lies was marked out with a low fence of two horizontal rails held in place by uprights topped with fleur-de-lys.

Some of the memorials were designed to commemorate several individuals as they died. The chest tomb to Rebecca Pentland, died 1844, at Termonfeckin, had only her name inscribed on a shield at one end, the other shields along the sides and opposite end remaining empty. In contrast, a similarly laid out tomb of the Moore family of Shannon Grove at Clonfert, Co Galway, had the family coat of arms carved at one end, and inscribed on the shields a total of nine individuals who died over a period of over 70 years.

Another method of defining the whole plot was the placing of kerbs around the grave. One early example of a family adopting the kerbed plot without railings at Termonkeekin was that of the Pentlands of Black Hall, with their triple plot of the 1830s containing a central ledger slab recording George, his wife Mary and their son Robert who predeceased them (Fig 5). A later generation of Pentlands, beginning with George who died in 1882, had a line of four adjacent single plots marked with kerbs, the lead-inlaid inscriptions carried on small plaques at the western kerb sections. Although these memorials were not greatly visible in the churchyard, both George Pentlands had wall memorials within the church; the kerbs defined the burial spaces and the inscriptions the occupants of the plots.

The use of kerbs was not limited to the most affluent, however, as the kerbs were not expensive. In many cases, these long, narrow slabs set on edge were not decorative, and were of local rock or concrete, placed as a rectangle around the single or double grave plot where the inscription was carried on an upright monument, usually a headstone. They represent the determination to mark ownership of the whole area of the family plot. As kerbs butt against the headstone, it

Fig 4 Chest tomb with gabled top to Rebecca Pentland, died 1844, with gothic revival railings. Termonfeckin, Co Louth

can be difficult to be sure of the date of the kerbs, as they can be added or replaced without any form of documentation. However, where the kerb is of a particular design which matches that of the memorial, then it is likely that all were ordered together (Fig 6). When they became common in rural graveyards is not clear, but they were certainly widely in use during the last decades of the 19th century.

Cemetery management practices may have influenced behaviour and expectations in churchyards during the 19th century. The first cemetery in Ireland was established in Belfast in the late 18th century, though it was decades before urban cemeteries were common. By the middle of the 19th century, however, the tidy arrangement of rows of graves was accepted, having been introduced at new cemeteries such as Glasnevin, and Mount Jerome, Dublin (Langtry and Carter 1997). Roman Catholic burial grounds established in many areas by the late 19th century were laid out with a grid system of paths, and plots were often marked. The concept of plot ownership, asserted from the 18th century, was reinforced by the management styles of new cemeteries. Families expected to be able to shape their old churchyard plots within the same sets of rules applied elsewhere.

Fig 5 The Pentland ledger slab in a kerbed plot, 1830s, with the line of later Pentland kerbed plots in the foreground. Termonfeckin, Co Louth

The levelling off of graves has led to some management problems as this was often undertaken before the decay of the coffin and full settling of the earth. A void then often developed between the concrete screed and the ground beneath; the unsupported screed could often then become cracked and broken. However, the priority was for a smooth surface, no longer weed-covered. It was now a maintained cultural space, rather than an organic, mounded turfed grave, and quite distinct from the grassy communal spaces along the paths, between the plots, and in unclaimed parts of the graveyard.

Evolution and elaboration in the 20th century

In the early part of the 20th century, the decline in the Victorian enthusiasm for mortuary expenditure led to the simplification of headstone designs, and often a reduction in the amount of text inscribed on the monuments. However, the desire to mark the plots remained as strong as ever.

Decorative kerbs occurred more widely, and formed part of the overall composition and image. The much greater use of imported materials such as granite and marble for the memorials themselves reflects a change from the use of regional rock types to ones transported from some distance from specialist quarries. By the late 19th century the more substantial monuments were often carved at the quarry

Fig 6 Wheeled crosses with kerbs to match, early 20th century. Note the repainting of the lettering on the cross on the right; the mason will rub off the surplus paint once dry to leave the incised letters in black. Termonfeckin, Co Louth

Clear, visible definition of family plots by kerbs made the space separate, and discouraged visitors from walking across the graves. It was thus easier to place other items on the grave plot, such as immortelles (glass or ceramic flowers in a glass cover) and flower holders. These items reflected the increasingly sentimental attitudes to death, common by the late 19th century, and the more complex mourning rituals which included grave visiting.

During the late 19th or early 20th century, the area within kerbs started to be levelled off, and sealed with a layer of concrete (Fig 7). The mounds of loose earth marking individual interments now challenged the integrity of the kerbed plot and were not tolerated for long, being flattened off. Moreover, they often contained numerous fragments of human bone derived from the much-used family plots, and this may have been considered inappropriate. Ironically, the definition of family plots to protect the desecration of the body by later interments was, in the long term, ineffective. Where a plot was in continued use for generations, disturbance of earlier remains was inevitable, though these being ancestors may have made this acceptable. The mixing of bones of the ancestors is well documented in several Roman Catholic Mediterranean countries (Mytum 1993; Goody and Poppi 1994), and may have been acceptable within the context of earth burial in Ireland also.

Fig 7 Kerbed plots with a large pedestal monuments with urns. Presbyterian church, Broomfield, Co. Monaghan



Fig 8 Coyle family plot with three headstones. The oldest, early 18th-century stone is in the centre and almost buried, the stone on the left lists deaths from the 1880s to 1990s, the one on the right to a death in 1984. Balrobery, Co Dublin

workshops as blanks, onto which text could be inscribed locally. Kerb sets would also seem to have been produced to standard sizes, as plots were of predictable dimensions.

Many plots from established families combined old memorials with new ones. Two main forms of monument integration can be noted. The most common method was to move the old stone to one side and set up a second one at the head of the grave (Figs 8, 9). Where double plots were already marked out this was an easy option, though on narrower plots this may have involved near encroachment of adjacent plots. Here, the ancestral members were maintained in a prominent location, and in some cases the old stone was

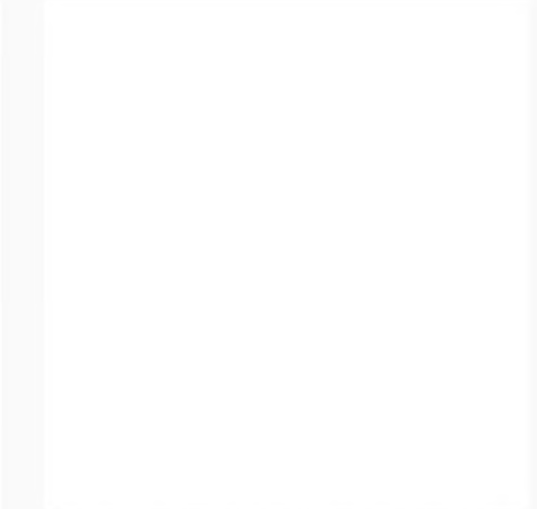


Fig 9 Double plot newly refurbished with kerbs and two headstones. The headstone on the left is 18th-century in date and lists death from 1770 to 1944, the one on the right 1875 to 1997 and is probably a recent replacement of a 19th-century stone erected following the last death when the earlier stone was cleaned, repainted and reset. Termonfeckin, Co Louth

cleaned (Figs 10, 11). This might reduce its ancient appearance, but made it more legible (even at the cost of long-term preservation) and showed that the stone and plot were cared for. In some cases, three successive stones can be found on the same plot.

An alternative to erecting memorials side by side was noted at Termonfeckin, Co Louth. Here the old monument was sometimes laid flat on the grave, and a new memorial was set up at the head (Fig 13). The retention of the old stone affirmed the antiquity of the family and its ancestral rights over the plot, but could prioritise the more recently deceased family members by having their memorial upright and visible from a distance. In one example at Termonfeckin, the new memorial merely amplifies that on the old stone laid flat.



Fig 10 Late 18th-century headstone marking a plot. The primary inscription is not a memorial to any particular death. Commemorations only start from the 1880s and continue to the 1990s. Termonfeckin, Co Louth



Fig 11 Headstone to John Newman, died 1845, with additions from the 1960s to 1990s. Note the new kerbs, bedding plants, and flower vases inscribed Paddy and Phyllis

Fig 12 Late 20th-century plots, some with no headstone, some with headstones erected but with no commemorations yet inscribed. Termonkeekin, Co Louth

In many cases, old memorials could be completely removed, either with no record of their existence, or with the names placed on a new memorial. It is likely that a large number of older stones have been disposed of in the cycle of plot reuse, either by descendants of the original plot occupants, or by others appropriating plots which no longer seemed cared for. It is also possible that old stones have been moved and set up over plots other than the ones they originally marked. For example, examples of such changes have been noted for St James' Church and cemetery, Gleninagh Heights, Co Galway (Higgins 1996, 64-65). Graveyard memorials largely remain static, but even where there has not been systematic clearance, such as part of a grounds maintenance scheme, individual stones may be moved. This may happen when a plot is refurbished and

Fig 13 Old headstone to Alice Connor, died 1888, laid flat within a newly constructed kerbed plot with a new headstone. Though this starts with a commemoration to Mary O'Connor, died 1943, it was almost certainly erected following the death of her brother, died 1998 and last on the inscription

memorials are consolidated at one location, or where the expansion of a plot leads to the movement of a memorial to make room for this. Those carrying out graveyard survey and subsequent interpretation need to be aware of these various possibilities.

Visible evidence of plot care was an important social obligation in the later 20th century, and still is, though contemporary photographs do not suggest that this was so frequent in churchyards, as opposed to cemeteries, for much of the 19th century. This implies that the role of the plot has been transformed in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The 19th-century plot kerbs had largely served to define and protect the burial space, both for those already within the plot and for those yet to enter it. But in the 20th century the whole plot increasingly became an arena within which care for the ancestors was emphasised.

Immortelles continued to be used, later translated into plastic equivalents, as were the containers for cut flowers. Flower vases, sometimes with names or relationships carved on them, also became common (Fig 11). Flower pots and troughs were also widespread. Other items also began to appear, notably souvenirs from places of pilgrimage such as Lourdes, and items associated with the Pope's visit to Ireland. Other forms of plaque, with names, prayers or verse were also introduced. This is similar to many continental Catholic burial plots, and the greater ability to travel to shrines abroad may have been a factor in the growth of this behaviour as these funerary items were purchased as souvenirs, and their use on foreign grave sites could be observed.

The shapes and materials used for memorials changed dramatically during the 20th century, and the concept of the plot as an integral setting for the memorial grew. This became particularly notable with increasing affluence in the latter part of the 20th century, and many burial grounds around the country are still being developed by the defining rectangles of new plot kerbs. At Termonkeekin the northern part of the graveyard is now largely mapped out with kerbs, even if no headstones are yet in place, or they have no inscriptions upon them (Fig 12). This establishment of family plots in a 'pre-need' format indicates new families without old plots, or old ones wishing to start a new dynastic location. The rapid acquisition of the plots reflects limited space and relative affluence, and is a matter that burial authorities are having to address across the island.

Plot definition is now the norm, and the use of imported marbles and granites for memorials commonplace. The infilling of plots became more elaborate during the 20th century, with the concrete screed often covered with gravel chippings in local grey or white limestone, or coloured glass, often white, green or blue (Figs 12, 13). Peat is a popular medium in some areas, and some family the plots have been converted into small gardens, rich in colour with perennial and annual bedding plants (Figs 8, 11). The individuality of

the plots, and the desire to display care, is therefore shown in a wide variety of forms. This churchyard maintenance is also linked to annual services held at many active graveyards. Feverish tidying up and repainting on many graves, and monumental cleaning and resetting on some, leads to a competitive yet also communal affirmation of the burial space as a whole. Though most effort is expended on the individuals' family plots, the overall effect is also valued.

One explanation of the transition to an intensively maintained plot was the shift in the role of the grave and memorial. Previously a focus of kneeling prayer (as seen on 19th-century engravings of graveyards), the grave became a place of action in caring during the 20th century. Where prayer may still have formed a part of graveside behaviour, and much overtly religious text and symbolism remained, in a more secularised society the actions of cleaning and gardening provided a context for grief and remembrance. Moreover, in an increasingly affluent society, where time has become the most valued commodity, the use of that time to tend the family grave plot is one of the most powerful messages of love and respect for the deceased that can be displayed. Whilst some plots lie untended and overgrown, silent testimonies to extinguished or emigrant families, others are well kept. Like many Mediterranean Catholic cemeteries, grave maintenance can still be high in Ireland, and provides powerful links to place and past in a fast-changing world where even the currency does not remain the same. This concern with the past is also seen though the cleaning and sometimes repainting of older memorials.

Conclusions

The social importance of the family burial plot in Ireland is amply illustrated by the physical developments from the 18th to the 20th centuries. However, the physical remains allow more than affirmation of the well-known and accepted cultural importance of kinship in the structuring of social relations in Ireland.

It is possible to identify a first attempt at physically marking owned family plots in the 18th century, in part to define property and also to protect the integrity of the family burials. The introduction of kerbs and other methods of defining the whole plot in the 19th century emphasised ownership, influenced by the cemetery movement. Plot definition could in itself be competitive and helped to differentiate through elaborate kerbs and railings.

The earlier 20th century saw a wider use of kerbed plots but the erection of often smaller memorials. In the later 20th century the intensity of plot care, through horticulture and monument renewal, demonstrates a continued commitment expressed both materially and through action. These shifts in graveyard choices reflect changing attitudes to the family in relation to the community, increasing expenditure on materiality of commemoration in the 19th century, and a

change in investment from materials to time in the later 20th century. With increasing affluence, a much higher proportion of the population could afford a stone memorial; time became the valued commodity that could be devoted to the family plot. The continued use of old memorials demonstrates family lineages, as does the accumulation of memorials on a single family plot.

Many plots are now no longer used, but many others are still active. As demand for plots continues there is a danger that abandoned plots will be acquired and the old memorials removed as part of the process of 'redevelopment'. Archaeologists need to record graveyards effectively as weathering, vandalism, and continued patterns of use and reuse lead to the modification and destruction of historic evidence. This is at a rate far greater than many who do not repeatedly visit graveyards appreciate. This is a situation not limited to Ireland but also applies to much of Britain, though the nature of the threats varies according to context.

Recording (and more than just the text of inscriptions) is vital, and analysis of the results needs to be sensitive to the issues of survival and modification of individual monuments, the form of plots, and the overall graveyard layout. Research, education, and conservation-aware management are all urgently needed, and when integrated can increase public awareness and appreciation of the historic resource and so ensure its continued survival. We have here a long and complex plot, still unravelling, which provides a window on aspects of popular culture over three centuries but which may not survive many decades in this millennium.

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Harold Mytum is Reader in the Department of Archaeology, University of York. He is a member of the York DAC, and has been director of graveyard recording projects in Yorkshire, Wales, Ireland and Gibraltar since 1995. He is an Associate member of the Irish Association of Professional Archaeologists.

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