

## A little slice of heaven

The conservation of graveyards by Adur & Worthing Councils.

As an eight-year old me and my best friend loved to explore our neighbourhood and the more secret the better.



Our favourite was St Mary's churchyard in Perivale, a real hidden gem. The church was established in the 12th century and served its community for 800 years before being made redundant in the 70s and this is when I

discovered it, derelict and overgrown.

These are enduring and precious memories for me and I don't think the eight year old me would have even considered that the childhood interest in churchyards could have developed into part of my day job.

It is common to find many councils now looking after churchyards that have been closed and where the management is transferred from the church to the council by a standing order signed by the secretary of state for the monarch, the Head of the Church of England.

At Adur & Worthing Councils there are 10 churchyards in our care, equally balanced between Adur District and Worthing Borough. The oldest churchyard in our care is St Nicolas in Old Shoreham, an 11th century Norman churchyard.



The care of the churchyards has been very minimal for a number of years, strictly just down to grass cutting, footpath and boundary maintenance. Money is always a concern when you work for a council and I think it also stems from the day job of looking after a crematorium and several active cemeteries. It takes up so much mental load that the churchyards take a back seat considered only when the church warden or incumbent has a problem with a branch that's fallen from a tree, a leaky tap, or a complaint that the grass has not been cut for a while.

This was brought into clear focus for me when I had a call from one of the grounds maintenance team who had almost fallen into a vault that collapsed while he was

cutting the grass nearby. The ground looked safe enough, but it opened up into an enormous deep and wide hole, the memorial disappearing down there too. Whose responsibility was it to sort it out? To make it safe and repair it?

The first task was to make the site safe, the next task was to ensure the dignity of the deceased was maintained. Thankfully the earth that had fallen in had covered the coffins. We were also concerned about the integrity of the adjacent graves. We had our surveyor team bring heras fencing and make a wooden grave cover to secure it, while I worked out what to do next.



I was advised to get in touch with the Registry at the local Diocese to discuss what to do next. I was told that I had to start off by requesting an interim faculty, a licence from a church authority, for the work already done. Then I would have to get authorisation to make repairs and conserve the grave. I would have to appeal for a descendant of the grave owner to come forward to see if they would take responsibility for the grave and if not we would have to make the grave safe.

The whole process is arcane and very long winded. I had to seek out a number of stakeholders that had previously been unknown to me and to work out how the works were going to be paid for. I felt totally out of my depth. I knew nothing about the workings of the church and now I was expected to have an assumed understanding of it all.

At the time I had to do some wrangling with my conscience about the fairness of using taxpayer's money to restore, what is in effect, private property. The Chancellor had specified that the fallen memorials were reinstated as they were before the collapse.

Church of England churchyards that have been closed must be kept in decent order, and their walls and fences in good repair (Local Government Act 1972, s.215). I felt that the



extent of the works the council paid for should cover making the churchyard and memorial safe and not reinstating the memorial. The Local Government Act doesn't mention anything about memorial management in closed churchyards, but is responsible for health and safety of the grounds.

Time passed, no one came forward to claim the grave, the works were carried out at a cost of approximately £2400 for the contractor, the cost of a faculty was approximately £295 and my time was not included, but I spent a fair amount of time on this work.

The contractors were unable to safely remove all the memorial from the bottom of the grave. The grave was filled with Type 1 hard-core to ensure the walls of the neighbouring graves were not at risk, this was compacted down and covered in topsoil and re-seeded. Unfortunately no one had a record or could not remember how the memorial looked before the incident, so the stones were laid flat.

On reflection this left me feeling like I had somehow not done a good enough job. This got me wondering about why that was and the only connection I could think of was that connection to churchyards as a child. This started my journey seeking out how to do better next time.

In my research to do churchyards better I came across Caring for God's Acre (<https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/>). On their website they explain how they support groups and individuals to investigate, care for, and enjoy burial grounds.

They get to the heart of why these spaces are important and should be looked after and conserved. There is a substantial breadth of burial grounds throughout England and Wales, ranging from small rural medieval churchyards to large victorian city cemeteries, spanning different

cultures, religions and centuries. These churchyards hold great appeal for many varied interests, such as local history, social history, veteran trees and biodiversity.

Caring for God's Acre says 'for many people burial grounds are the only locally accessible green space. However their heritage value, and even their continuing presence, cannot be taken for granted. They are under threat from development, closure, under management and mismanagement'.

Fast forward to May this year and mid pandemic. I had a call from one of our local reverend's about several unsafe table top chest style tombs in the churchyard at St Mary De Haura in Shoreham-by-Sea. I contacted the diocesan architect and a conservation stone mason to assess the requirements for the work. The three memorials in question are circa 18th century or earlier. The church does not have any records detailing ownership of the tombs, though inscriptions are legible on two of them. A lot of the information about the deceased on the stonework has deteriorated.



The church and churchyard are grade one listed and in a conservation area.

The churchyard is crossed frequently linking parts of the town on opposite sides of the church. It is very well used. While I was there, most of the benches were being used by the public. There are many interesting memorials, a war memorial in the southeast corner, and the churchyard contains the ruin of the nave which





collapsed around 1700 and there are many fine specimen trees. This is a particularly important local heritage site and has six pages dedicated to it in the Pevsner architectural guides.

Unfortunately we are in a situation where these sites have been neglected for so long and many of the burial vaults and memorials have deteriorated to such an extent that it will take a large scale effort and money to get them back to a decent state.

The stonemason drew up a schedule of works but I have no budget for this work. The conservation work needs to be carried out, but where do you get the money from to do this?

A few months down the road, I am standing in a churchyard in Southwick early morning, it's a damp, grey September morning and the grass is heavy with dew. I am meeting Harriet Carty, the Director of Caring for God's Acre. She is coming to recce all of the churchyards in my care and discuss what will be achievable for each.

One of the things I had never considered is the grass and Harriet is very enthusiastic about it. She explains "the turf of a burial ground is the flowery, meadow turf of our history. In the past this area of open grassland was managed as a hay crop with the hay making up part of the vicar's stipend. Following the hay cut, a sheep or a pony would have grazed it down". She says "Most burial grounds are now managed by mechanical cutting, as long as the grass cuttings are collected and removed, the species that have thrived for centuries will persist".

The end game will be that each churchyard in our care will have its own management plan, which will be developed with the council and the churchyard communities. This will be a springboard for grant bids to the Heritage Fund to pay for much needed conservation work, better

sympathetic management and more community engagement within these spaces.

This journey is very much still at the start. I am excited to see how it goes and I am feeling optimistic that I will be able to pay the debt I owe to the pleasure and joy I had spending time in my own local churchyard as a girl.

Incidentally, St Mary's in Perivale is now deconsecrated and used for concerts. The churchyard no longer looks like the photos at the start of this article and is well maintained and cared for. A special thanks to the Friends of St Mary in Perivale for the use of their photographs. <https://www.st-marys-perivale.org.uk/>

Trying to source information about the churchyards has been difficult and slow. These are some resources and references that I have found helpful.



## References

- The Churchyard Handbook, London, 2012: Church House Publishing
- Churchyard and Burial Ground Action Pack (Accessed October 2020): <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/product/action-pack-english/>
- Guide for Burial Ground Managers, London, 2005, Department for Constitutional Affairs (Accessed October 2020): [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/326370/burial-ground-managers.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/326370/burial-ground-managers.pdf)
- Local Government Act 1972
- The institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management

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