



## St Michael's Graveyard, Limerick

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In the early 1980s because of plans to re-develop the area of West Watergate in Limerick city, St Michael's graveyard was under threat and it was feared that the overgrown cemetery would be levelled. At that time it stood isolated, at the centre of the Charlotte's Quay car park, and had not been used for burials in more than a century. In these circumstances it was decided that a photographic record should be made; the inscriptions on the gravestones deciphered where possible, and an examination undertaken of the various decorative motifs used on the slabs.

St. Michael's church and its surrounding churchyard were approximately two hundred yards west from the west Watergate of the medieval city walls. Speed's map of Limerick, published in 1611, shows St. Michael's and its churchyard as a virtual island. The church itself appears as an impressive building with a tower and north and south transepts. In her discussion of the medieval town defences at Charlotte's Quay, Ann Lynch, when referring to St. Michael's, stated that there was no record it having been a monastic possession and it must have served as a local parish church.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest reference to St. Michael's is in the early thirteenth century. Donat O'Brien, bishop of Limerick, (1200-1207) put the reforms of the Synod of Cashel (1172) into effect in the diocese and established a cathedral chapter on the English model with a dean, archdeacon, cantor, treasurer and six canons. To support the canons each was given the tithes and benefices of different parishes. St Michael's was given to the canon, Colomiregan, who also obtained the church of Mungret.<sup>2</sup> This is clear evidence that St. Michael's was an important church by the year 1200. A taxation return for the diocese of Limerick in 1302, lists the value of St. Michael's at one pound and its taxation at two shillings.<sup>3</sup> A similar but later source, the Proxy Tax list for 1418, states that the church of St. Michael belonged to the archdeacon and had a vicar.<sup>4</sup> A reference was made to the site by Edward White, Canon of Ardcany in 1658. He wrote that it was dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel, was near the walls outside the West Watergate and that the church had been 'entirely destroyed in the time of Cromwell.'<sup>5</sup> However as it is not shown on the 1633 *Pacata Hibernia* map of Limerick it was probably already abandoned, if not even demolished, by the early seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> As the headstones listed here show, the site continued in use as a graveyard well into the nineteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> Ann Lynch, 'Excavations of the Medieval Town Defences at Charlotte's Quay, Limerick' *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 84C (1984), pp 281-331.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick Ancient and Medieval* (Dublin, 1906), pp 128-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick, Its History and Antiquities* (Limerick, 1866), p. 558.

<sup>6</sup> Lynch, 'Excavations', p. 284.



## The Headstone Inscriptions in St. Michael's Cemetery.

- 1 Erected M<sup>rs</sup> B. Hanrahan To/The mem of M<sup>r</sup> J<sup>o</sup> O'Halloran/and his Wife.  
Marg<sup>t</sup> Also M<sup>r</sup>. Pat<sup>k</sup> O'Brien & his/Wife Ursula & M<sup>r</sup>. Maurice/O'Halloran/ May they  
rest in peace Amen. [not dated]
- 2 Erected by William Hicks/in memory of his Son/William who Dep<sup>d</sup> this/ Life Oct  
16<sup>th</sup> 1796 Ag<sup>d</sup>/ 3 years. / Also his son James Dec<sup>d</sup>/ June 4<sup>th</sup> 1797 Aged 18 yrs/ may they  
rest in peace Amen.
- 3 [ broken slab] erected by/ memory of his beloved/ and mother/who lie here interred  
Anthony/ and his Wife the former.
- 4 This stone was Erect<sup>d</sup> by/ Mary Downs Alias O'Kee<sup>fe</sup>/ in memory of Her Husban<sup>d</sup> /  
Owen O'Keefe who Dep<sup>e</sup>/ This life Oct<sup>r</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> 1805 Aged/ 78 years/ May his Soul Rest in  
peace/Amen.
- 5 Unreadable – Except for the following – 183 aged 40 years/Ryan.
- 6 Pray for the Soul of/Catherine Barry Alias/Dunworth who Dep<sup>d</sup>art/ This life Feb<sup>ry</sup>  
12<sup>th</sup> 1766/ Aged 92 years.
- 7 This stone was Erected by/ Michael Ryan in Memory/ of his Son James who Dep/  
This life y<sup>e</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> January 1781 /Aged 9 years.
- 8 Underneath lie the remains/of Alice and Margaret O'Shea/ The Infant Children of  
Henry/ and Catherine O'Shea/ They both Died in the month/of June 1842/ Suffer the  
little Children and forbid them/ not to come to Me for the Kingdom of / Heaven is  
for Such/ Mathew CXIV VXIV.
- 9 [broken slab ] - Erected by His - / in Testimony of His/ Affection to [broken] / one  
of the Best/ Companions and Husband/ May He Rest in Peace Amen.
- 10 This Stone was Erected by/ Mary Cronine in memory/ of her husb<sup>d</sup> Wm Cronine/  
Who died March 17<sup>th</sup> 1776/ Aged 30 yr<sup>s</sup> May he rest in/ Peace.
- 11 Erected By Francis Grady/ In Memory of his Wife/ Margaret Grady Who De/ parted  
May the 9<sup>th</sup> 1777/ Aged 58 years Lord have/ Mercy on her Soul Amen.
- 12 Er<sup>d</sup> by Pat<sup>k</sup> Lapin/ in Mem<sup>ry</sup> of his wife/ Mary Lapin died/ A.D. 1795.
- 13 Er<sup>d</sup> By Par<sup>k</sup> Dem/ in memory of his wife/ Margaret Dem who di [broken]/ 8<sup>m</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> 1791  
Aged 30 yr<sup>s</sup> also/ his son Pat died 9 [unreadable] 1799/ Aged 13<sup>yr</sup>.



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- 14 [Broken slab] / aged 46/ Also his son/ William/ Died March 16 aged 8 months/ and his son/ Edward/ died March 24 aged 6 years 1851./ Tho lost to sight to memory dear./ May they rest in Peace/ Amen.
- 15 This Stone Erect<sup>d</sup> by Jam<sup>s</sup> /Fitzpatrick in Memory of/ his Father Florence Fitz/ Patrick who Dep<sup>d</sup> this life/ Sept 4<sup>th</sup> 1800 Ag<sup>d</sup> 52 y<sup>rs</sup> / May he rest in peace.
- 16 This monument was erected by/ John Joyce in memory of his daught<sup>r</sup> / Mary who departed this life 29<sup>th</sup> of/ May 1829 in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of her age/ Also his affectionate wife Mary/ Joyce alias Honan whose remains/ were Deposited here August the 30<sup>th</sup>/ 1836 aged 58 years.
- 17 This tomb was Erected by Hen [broken]/ Ellis in Memory of his beloved/ Father and Mother whose/ remains are here interred Anthony/ Ellis And his Wife the former/ Deceased [worn and unreadable] / Dec/ Mercy on their Souls Amen.
- 18 [broken] 1836/ Here lies the remains of Garrett/ O'Shaughnessy who died march 20<sup>th</sup> / 1836 Aged 63 years/ Here also rests the remains of his wife/ Mary/ who died November 8 1838/ Aged 62 Years./ Requim in Pace Amen.
- 19 Here lies the remains of Ellen/ [broken] Who departed this life [worn and broken]
- 20 Pat<sup>k</sup> & Mary/ Laphins bu/ rial place 1819.
- 21 Edward Kiely died April/ the 28 1786/ 19y<sup>rs</sup> [broken]
- 22 The following appears to be another gravestone for the above person.  
Here lieth the Body/ of Edward Kiely/who Departed this/ Life April 28<sup>th</sup>  
1786/ Aged 19 Y<sup>rs</sup>

The carved front of all gravestones in St. Michael's face towards the east.

### Carvings on the Gravestones

The gravestones will be dealt with chronologically in this part of the article, so that changes in designs may be discussed.

The Barry gravestone (No. 6) of 1766 is the earliest one found during this investigation. It is approximately, two feet in height. Its decoration is simple, even austere (Plate 1). The letters IHS are carved on the top section of the erect slab. A cross rises from the centre bar of the letter H and a star is to be found before the letter I and after the letter S.

In the place of the stars, sprays of leaves are carved on either side of the IHS, on the Grady stone of 1777 (No. 11, Plate 2). The Lapin slab of 1795 (No. 12) displays the letters IHS and a cross rises from the middle bar of the H. The terminals of the cross have an unusual battleaxe shape (Plate 3).

The heads of angels, with wings, are found at both sides of the IHS on the Fitzpatrick stone of 1800, (No. 15, Plate 4). The height of the slab is roughly, four feet. Again, a cross rises from the central band of the H. A new departure in decoration is found on the Downs slab of 1805, (No. 4, Plate 5). A sunburst surrounds the IHS but the winged angel heads remain and what appears to be a drop of blood is found beneath the bar of the H.



The O'Halloran stone (No. 1, Plate 6) unfortunately, is not dated. While incorporating many of the traditional features, it also breaks new ground. It is five feet in height; the IHS and cross are no longer raised out from the slab; they are in fact, deeply incised and are totally surrounded by a circular sunburst. A band of diamonds divides the IHS and the sunburst from the winged angel heads. The stone may date to around 1810 or 1815, as it seems to be a further development on the Downs slab of 1805.

Unlike all of the other slabs already discussed, the Joyce monument of 1829 (No. 16, Plate 7), is lying flat and it appears to have been originally intended for that position. Two stylized branches surround the IHS, which is no longer circled by a sunburst but is enclosed in a simple circle. Again a drop of blood is indicated beneath the bar of the H and a cross is carved on top of the bar.

The O'Shea slab of 1842 (No. 8, Plate 8), is standing upright. It is approximately five feet in height. The IHS, is again ringed by a simple circle and on a band underneath the circle there is a branch and leaf decoration.

The name of a stone-cutter does not appear to have been carved on any of the gravestones. The slabs in St. Michael's, Limerick, have very simple decorations. There is a complete absence of any representation of the emblems of the Passion; there are no scenes of the Crucifixion and there are no slabs displaying symbols of people's trades. This could be accounted for by the fact that in the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century all graveyards were in the ownership of the Established Church. Therefore, both Catholics and members of the Anglican Church were buried in the same graveyards. Anglicanism had a very significant influence in relation to the decorations used on gravestones, especially in an important city like Limerick. It did not approve of representations of the Crucifixion and emblems of the Passion and would want slabs to display a minimal amount of religious iconography and symbolism.

Fortunately St Michael's graveyard was not destroyed in the 1980s redevelopment. It was enclosed, cleaned and reconstructed as an area of peace amid the tall, new, office blocks with which it is now surrounded (Plate 9).

### **Acknowledgements**

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Plate 1 Barry gravestone 1766



Plate 2 Grady gravestone 1777





Plate 3 Lapin gravestone 1795



Plate 4 Fitzpatrick gravestone 1800





Plate 5 Downs gravestone 1805



Plate 6 O'Halloran gravestone, no date





Plate 7 Joyce gravestone 1829

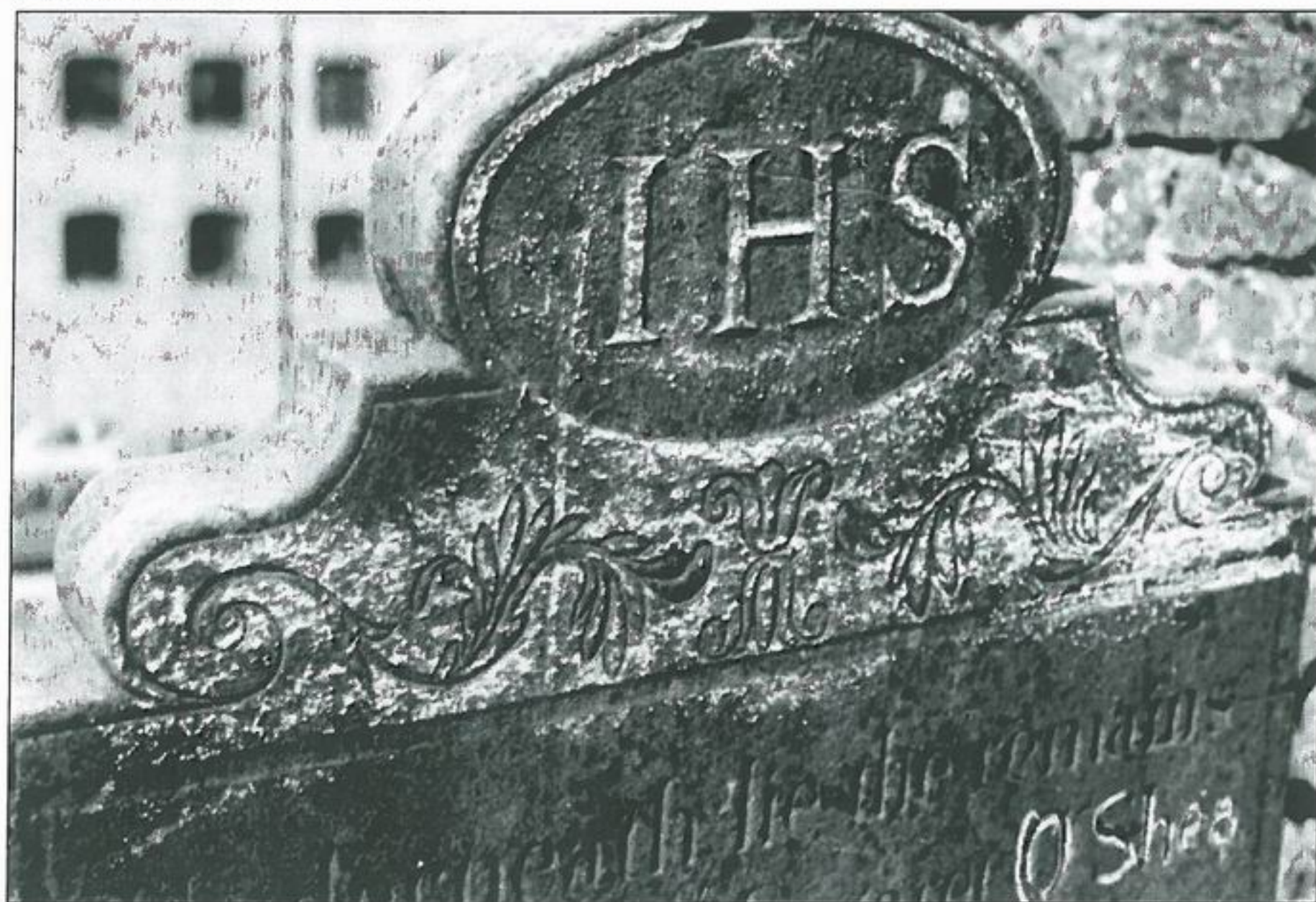


Plate 8 O'Shea gravestone 1842



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**Plate 9** St Michael's graveyard



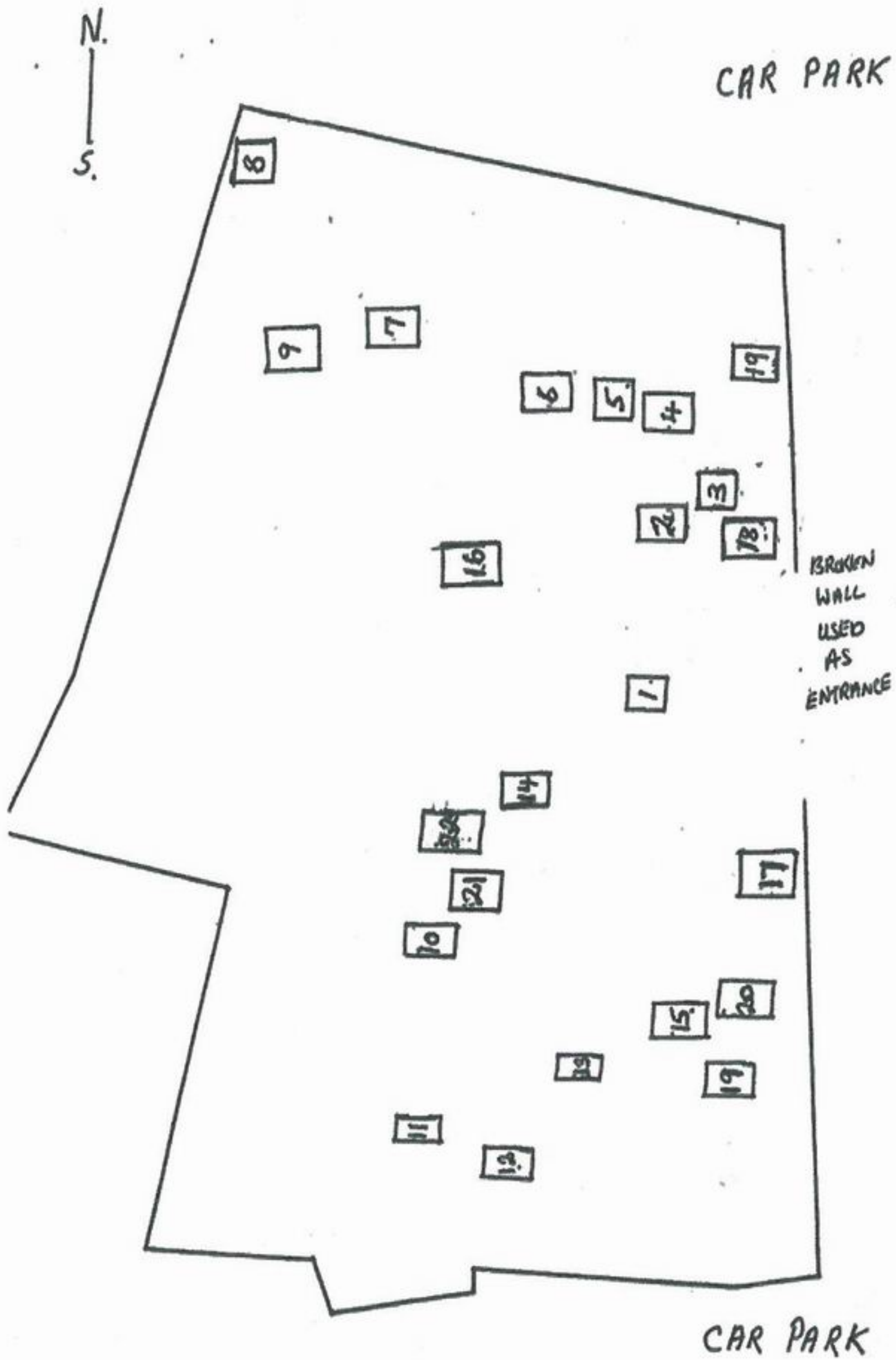


Plate 10 Plan of graveyard