

THE CLEANING OF GRAVEYARD HEADSTONES

In relation to the reading of inscriptions, and cleaning of headstones, as discussed at the presentation given by Doctor Matthew Potter, could I please try to explain best practice, that I am aware of, in relation to this topic? In Ballybrown, Clarina we did an extensive restoration project of Kilkeedy Graveyard, and, consequently, learned a lot about the way to treat headstones. In general, cleaning of headstones should only be carried out after careful consideration, because of the risk of damage to the inscriptions, and escalating the rate of erosion of the stone.

If cleaning a stone it should only be done with a soft brush and soapy water. You could clean the lettering also with grass. Some people rub baking flour into the inscriptions, and when wiped over the inscriptions become more visible, and the flour will wash out with the rain. Abrasive material, brushes and strong cleaning agents should never be used. The use of sandblasting should not even be considered.

I know all of this may be disappointing to some people, but permanent damage could be done to a stone, and then the inscriptions could be lost forever.

A word from a Senior Archaeologist at National Monuments;

“All of the types of stone used prior to c. 1940 are liable to erosion, particularly sedimentary types such as sandstone. Many form a crust on the surface where the minerals have interacted with the air. By removing this one is actively enhancing erosion, especially with the recent addition of “acid rain” in the atmosphere. Slates and shales are particularly vulnerable to flaking and this will entirely remove any inscription.

So the final word is SANDBLASTING –NO! POWER HOUSING – NO!!

CHEMICAL CLEANING AGENTS- NO!!! Warm soapy water and a soft brush are the perfect solution and will give maximum effect with the minimum of damage.”

It is further recommended that unless headstones are in danger of falling or braking, it is almost always best to leave them as they are. Headstones lying at odd angles are part of the charm of old graveyards. It is sometimes easy to crack or break a stone, and water getting into a crack will expand in very cold weather and break the stone.

For further reading consult The Care and Consevation of Graveyards, available from Limerick County Council and “Kilkeedy” available from Frank Hanley

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I hope this message of some assistance to interested people.

Frank Hanley.