



Churchyard History & Archaeology

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Origins of Churchyards

- Often older than the church
- Sometimes, perhaps often, pre-Christian
- Minsters & manors – parishes
- Archaeologically important




The most common myth

- “There were never any burials on the north side of the church”
- The south and east sides of churches have always been more popular.
- Burials found on the north side may therefore be much older

[The Hunts Post > News](#)


Alconbury church project on hold after skeletons discovered

 Debbie Davies



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Alconbury Rev Mary Jepp is heartbroken that builders have discovered hundreds of skeletons in the church. - Credit: Archant

Later medieval period

- Importance of burial in consecrated ground
- Pressure of burials with population growth
- Many churchyards have been in use for over a thousand years
- A place of burial for everyone, for ever
- Obviously there had to be a flip side..



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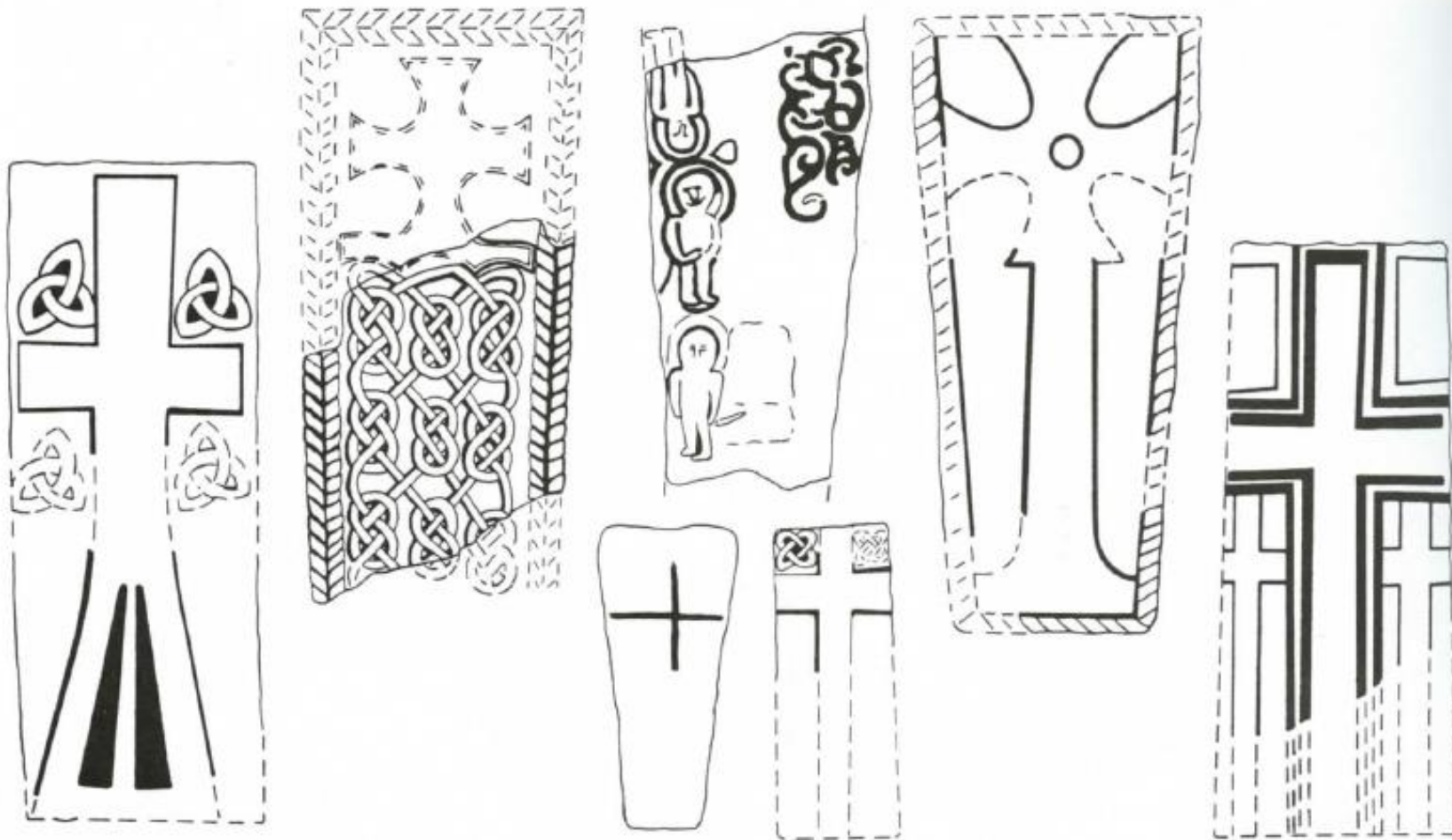
Medieval death – and judgement



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- The east side of a church sees the sunrise - on the day of judgement
- Belief in bodily resurrection
- Efforts to preserve bodies - embalming, evisceration, charring of timber coffins, protective enclosures
- Solutions according to budget...



- Stone coffins common from Roman times to the medieval period
- Timber/lead sandwich coffins from 17th century
- Timber coffins evidenced by "stains" and nails
- Many burials probably used shrouds only
- Survival of organic material heavily dependent on acidity of soil – prevalence of charnel houses?



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Marking graves above ground

- Many of our churchyards are now becoming full - of stone monuments



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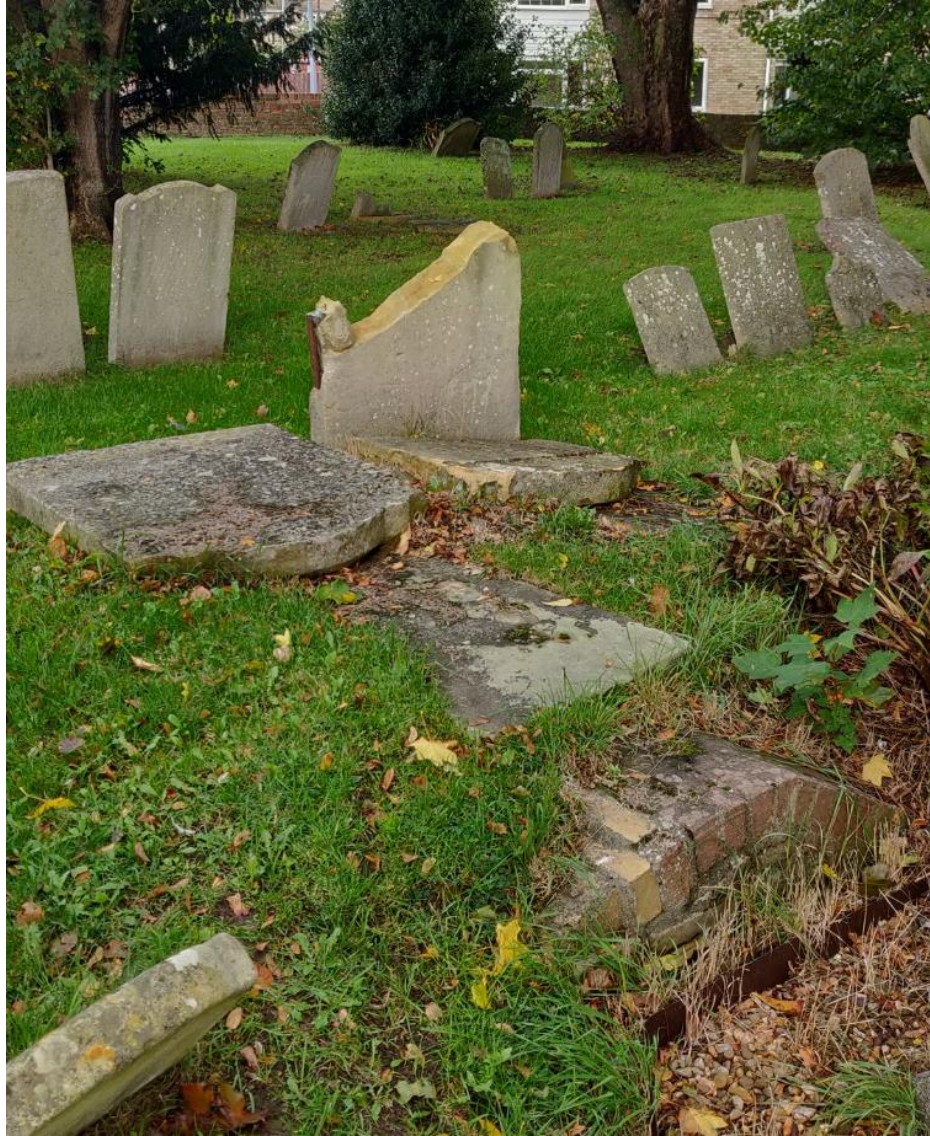
There have been other ways of marking graves

- Historically the simplest and oldest form of grave marker was a mound - not necessarily as big as Sutton Hoo
- Timber memorials, mainly crosses
- Incised stone memorials (headstones - and footstones), mainly from 18th century onwards
- Tomb chests and vaults



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- But it was only really in the 20th century that most burials became marked with a permanent stone memorial



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The way churchyards are managed has changed too...

*Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.
Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.*



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Escaping the City – the drawing room of the dead



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Mechanisation of death, mechanisation of memorials



Re-using graves means UK cemetery will never run out of space

Re-use of spaces is the sustainable solution to overflowing graveyards, if done sensitively, says one of Britain's biggest cemeteries



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- Goes to show there's nothing new under the sun
- Most ancient churchyards have been buried over and over
- A churchyard only really becomes “full” when the rate of burials exceeds the processing capacity of the soil
- Lawn cemeteries and necropolises were a valid statement of their times
- In a world living through a biodiversity crisis, and a region with a shortage of burial space, what should become the 21st century way of managing churchyards?



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