

The HMAC is a Cork County Council committee consisting of a range of external members, elected representatives, and the relevant in-house staff. The HMAC is keen to promote an appreciation of the historic attributes of Cork County and provide advice and guidance through the production of advisory leaflets. The following are a list that have been produced to date and are available on Councils web site:

- Care of Historic Stone Walls
- Care and Maintenance of Historic Ironwork
- Care of Historic Graveyards
- Care of Archaeological Monuments
- Care of Historic Ruins

This leaflet, the 6th in the series, it is accompanied by a short instruction video which is available on the Council's YouTube channel.

Useful Contacts

Heritage Unit
021 427 6891
Cork County, Council, Floor 3,
County Hall, Cork. T12 R2NC.
www.corkcoco.ie/arts-heritage

National Monuments Service
Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Customs House, Dublin 1. D01 W6X0.
www.archaeology.ie

The Heritage Council
056 777 0777
Church Lane, Kilkenny. R95 X264.
www.heritagecouncil.ie



Carved detail to top of headstone

Decoration: Most historic headstones are decorated with carved motifs, mostly around the head and sides of the stone. The skill of the carvers who created and executed these designs is evident in the richness of what they created using just hammer and chisel. Popular themes included

the sacred monograph (IHS), the crucifixion, the Instruments of the Passion, urns, the crowing cock. Some of the detail on these carvings is very fine and easily erased by inappropriate cleaning. Carvers had different styles and sometimes a distinct local style is apparent on the historic headstones in a graveyard.

Maintenance: Ongoing maintenance is key to keeping the headstone clean, an annual inspection and, where appropriate, regular cleaning.

Do

- Consider carefully the need to clean the headstone- is it really necessary?
- Consider the long-term implications of any action taken in cleaning the headstone
- Use only a low-pressure water spray
- Use only plastic or wooden tools
- Use warm soapy water
- Use a bristle brush
- If cleaning beyond this required consult a professional
- If employing a professional cleaner make sure they are not using any of methods listed below

Do Not

- Do not use an angle grinder
- Do not use a sand blaster
- Do not use bleach or salt
- Do not use any form of high-pressure spray
- Do not use any form of chemical cleaning agent without professional advice
- Do not use a steel brush or any tool with a steel edge
- Do not clean a headstone without the owner's permission
- If the owner is not known consult with the Municipal District office

Professional Advice: Professional advice will be needed if anything beyond the simple techniques set out here is required. The services of a suitably qualified conservation expert should be sought. They should have the necessary experience in dealing with these headstones. For any works proposed, a method statement should be sought, and this should be set out with minimum intervention and best conservation practice guidelines in mind. You should always seek specialist advice to deal with graffiti, especially on porous stone like limestone. Always seek professional advice when dealing with headstones made of materials other than stone. Wood, ironwork and monumental bronze will require different techniques.

Other sources

Historic England - Video on Conserving Stone War Memorials: Cleaning with Biocides (<https://youtu.be/Zp6obZuFhm0>) and (www.historicEngland.org.uk)

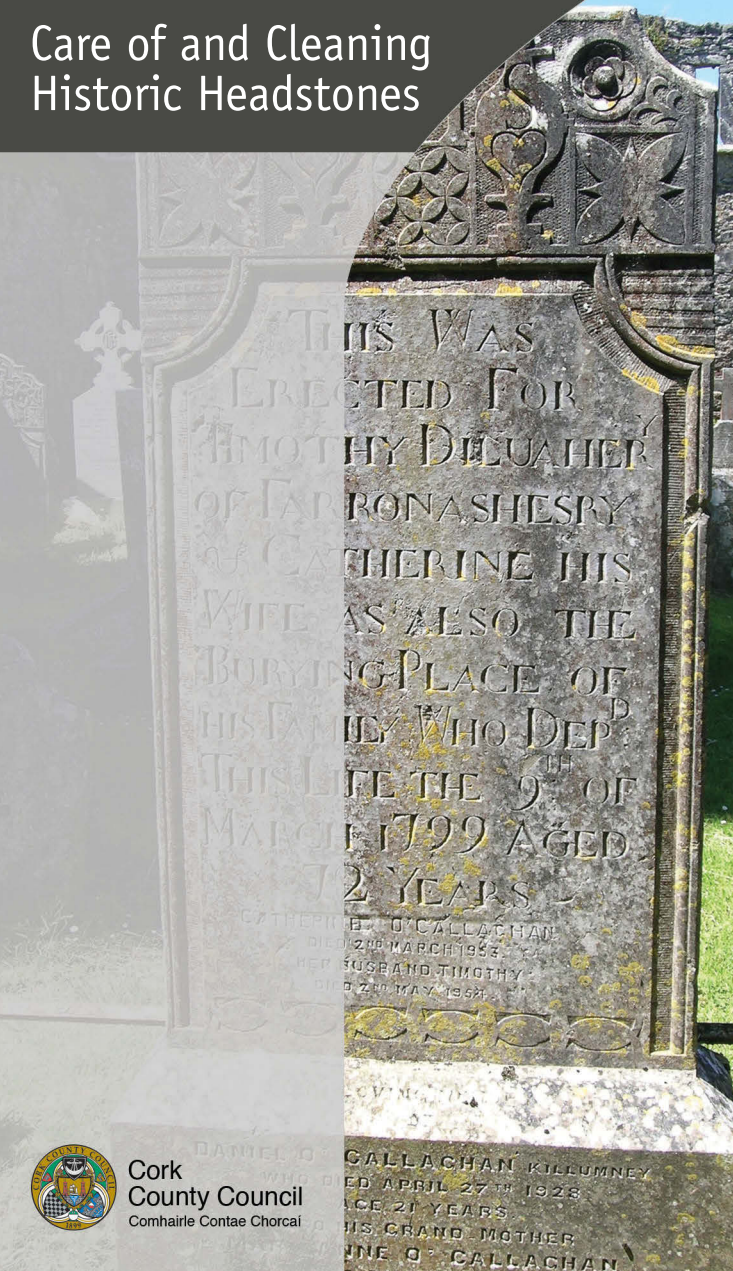
Cork County Council - Video on HMAC workshop: Eoghan Dalton How to Clean Stone (<https://youtu.be/443iGIZsu8E>)

Cork County Council Publications - (<https://www.corkcoco.ie/en/arts-heritage/publications-documents-links>)

Heritage Council Publications - (<https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/publications/p2?q=>)

National Monuments Service Publications - (<https://www.archaeology.ie/publications-forms-legislation>)

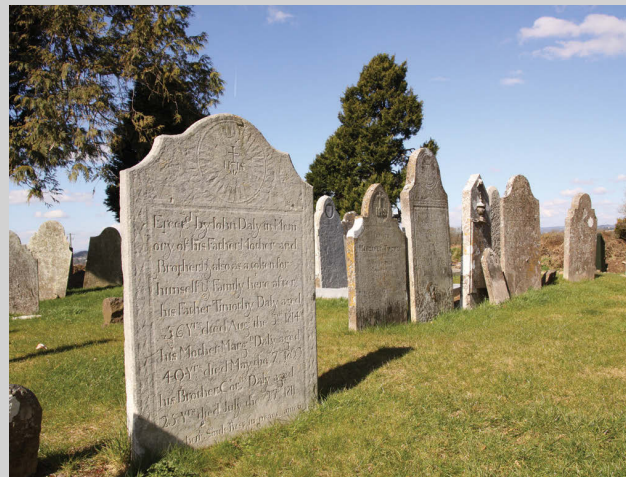
Care of and Cleaning Historic Headstones



Introduction

Every parish in County Cork has a historic graveyard with numerous old headstones. The headstones mark family grave plots and are not only memorials to the dead but are also important historic, cultural, and social artefacts. This leaflet has been prepared by the HMAAC to advise on the care of historic headstones as part of its advisory leaflet series.

Most historic headstones date to the 18th and 19th centuries; in medieval times individual graves were not marked by headstones. By the early 18th century particular plots are being claimed for family graves and these were marked by a permanent headstone. The most coveted place for burial was on the south side of the old church and it is here we tend to find the oldest headstones.



Caherlag graveyard, image courtesy of historicgrave

These headstones are hand-carved with an inscription and often decorated with symbols and patterns of a religious theme. These are the products of skilled craftsmen, many of a quality that makes them works of art. They are also a valuable source of social and historical information - family names, age and date of death, placenames etc. Over time with lack of maintenance the stone can get covered with biological growth

such as lichen, algae, ivy and moss. Lichen and algae add texture and tone to the appearance of a headstone, however, there is a perception that they should be cleaned. Unfortunately, this perception has often led to cleaning in an inappropriate manner using unsuitable tools and chemicals, resulting in damage to the stone. This leaflet aims to give appropriate advice on the suitable approach to cleaning that will not harm the headstone.



Limestone headstone

Historic headstones are best left alone unless there is an urgent reason to do otherwise. These are sensitive environments of important historic value, and all too easily robbed of their intrinsic nature by inappropriate cleaning techniques. However, biological matter can obscure inscriptions and justify limited safe cleaning. Successful outcomes are best achieved by taking proper advice and following correct guidelines.

Legal Status

Historic graveyards are designated *Recorded Monuments* and therefore subject to statutory protection under the National Monuments Acts. Though historic headstones may be regarded as the property of the family whose grave they mark they also form part of a *Recorded Monuments*. In many cases historic headstones mark graves no longer active - anyone with intentions to clean these should contact Cork County Council's Municipal District office and Heritage Unit for advice regarding what they intend to do.

How to clean a headstone: The golden rule is never to use any machine, implement or chemical that will cause damage to the surface of the stone. The best and safest method for cleaning a headstone is manually. First removing ivy and moss. The correct tools are a plastic or wooden spatula, a plastic or wooden pointed implement and a soft bristled brush. Once larger biological growth has been removed, lichen and algae can be scrubbed off using soapy water and a soft bristled brush. This will work best if the surface is very wet. Drenching the stone loosens the biofilm and makes it easier to remove. Ordinary washing-up liquid can be used when wetting the stone, but it should be Ph neutral. Cleaning in this way will remove much of the biological growth from the headstone without damaging the stone surface.

It is remarkable how a little elbow grease and the use of these simple widely available tools will remove much of the biological growth, although there will always be some stubborn stains that cannot be removed. It does take a little patience, but the rewards are fulfilling knowing that the stone has been cleaned without causing it any damage. Do not use anything with a metal abrasive



Hand cleaned headstone - before and after



Professional cleaning a headstone

edge like a paint scraper, screwdriver or a steel brush and never use an angle grinder, a sand blaster or power washer as they may all cause damage to the stone. Do not use corrosive chemicals such as bleach, vinegar, or salt as these too will cause damage to the stone.

Never attempt to straighten leaning stones and this can disturb graves and may damage the stone.

There are a number of safe techniques for cleaning stones used by conservation professional, but these all require a degree of specialist know-how to be used properly and effectively. These includes an effective cleaning method called ThermaTech, a

specialist machine that heats water and cleans the stone under very low pressure. Alternatively, some companies use biocides. Biocides, if not used correctly, can cause damage to the stone and the local environment and it is recommended they are used only by professional conservators who have a licence to purchase such products. Another method used is poultices which are quite effective in removing black pollution markings from stone.

Cork Limestone: Most historic headstones in County Cork are made from local stone, such as sandstone and shale but by far the most popular stone used was limestone. This was quarried locally, and Cork limestone was highly prized by the building trade as it produced high quality 'freestone'- that is a fine-grained stone that keeps its shape and form when cut and carved. It was used extensively in public buildings and churches, like St Coleman's Cathedral in Cobh and on the county's many impressive courthouses. It was also very popular in the manufacture of memorials and headstones. Limestone is a sedimentary rock composed of calcium carbonate (CaCO₃). In Cork's moist climate organisms like lichens form a biofilm on the stone's surface drawing nutrition from the stone's alkaline minerals. Whether this



Lettering on headstone

causes significant harm to the stone's surface is debatable; the biofilm is probably protecting the stone from the effects of weathering by forming a protective layer on the surface.

Lettering: Hand-cut lettering on stone is a very skilled art. The people who could do this were specialised craftsmen and though the

process was time consuming the result is very distinctive and full of life and personality by comparison to the lettering on modern headstones, which is machine cut. Historic lettering is finely cut and fragile and easily damaged. Highlighting lettering with black paint may seem attractive, but unless a specialised paint is used before long the paint will peel off and deteriorate due to weathering. Lettering should never be subject to an angle grinder or sand blasting as this will cause permanent damage to the carved letters and eventually erase them.