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Choice and constraint in the burial landscape: re-evaluating twentieth-century commemoration in the English churchyard

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ABSTRACT Death in the twentieth century is generally defined in terms of large-scale trajectories and meta-narratives that are presumed to reflect changing attitudes towards mortality. In actuality, there is very little historical research that concentrates on the ‘typical’ and domestic experiences of mortality and funerary practice. The assumption that the century can be characterised in terms of ‘disengagement’ does not encompass evidence around commemorative practices. Contemporary accounts indicate that visits to the cemetery were routine for many families and remained central to expressions of loss. However, the twentieth-century burial landscape has been castigated for its apparent monotony and lack of emotional engagement. This study uses a simple conception of agency to consider the issue of choice and constraint in the modern burial landscape. The study focuses on the tensions that followed the decision by the Diocese of York in the late 1950s to introduce stringent regulations on the style, material and scale of monuments in churchyards. These regulations were intended to prevent the erection of monuments that were regarded as inappropriate to the setting of ancient churches, and were largely a conservation measure. However, many families regarded the regulations as unduly constraining the choice of monument they deemed to be fitting. The study indicates that the resultant landscape constitutes an artificially constructed image of a rural churchyard, in which agency has been effectively suppressed. As a consequence, the modern churchyard landscape should not be used as evidence for societal unease with mortality. Overall, the paper suggests that studies of death in the twentieth century have tended not to seek evidence of active agency and choice in funerary practice, which in itself reinforces the view that death in the twentieth century can be typified by disengagement.

KEYWORDS: history; churchyard; commemoration; twentieth century; burial
critique, not least on the grounds of defining an exact chronology (Cannadine, 1981; Kellehear, 2007), the concept retains currency for many commentators. This has been particularly the case, since the study of death has become allied to the task of defining modernity (Meller, 1993). Jalland expresses a consensus view in characterising attitudes towards death in the twentieth century largely in terms of a cultural ‘disengagement’, explained through reference to major global events and grand trajectories (Jalland, 2010; Jupp & Walter, 1999). However, this focus on extreme experiences tends to overlook what was typical. Indeed, it could be argued that the ‘domestic’ history of death in the twentieth century remains largely under-researched. Clearly, new practices, rituals and aesthetics emerged, but there has been no attempt to assess whether these were superficialities that masked deeper-seated continuities.

Central to this task is the need to pay increased attention to historic sources that are close to the ‘day-to-day’ experiences of the bereaved. A small handful of existing studies have begun that process and have included detailed description of preparations for the funeral (Roberts, 1989), the funeral itself (Clark, 1982) and grief (Gorer, 1965). However, these accounts have generally overlooked commemorative practice, which might engage the bereaved in ritual activities in the years long after a death. Aspects of contemporary memorialisation are currently engaging the attention of widespread academic study, much of which indicates that the formal frameworks for remembrance are being bypassed by acts of individual agency: indeed, attaching flowers to street furniture located close to the site of road accidents has become an emblematic symbol of contemporary attitudes to mortality (e.g. Clark & Franzmann, 2006). However, there has been little attempt to project backwards from the current period, or even forwards from the nineteenth century to consider typical acts of twentieth-century commemoration in the churchyard or cemetery.

This study reviews evidence for commemorative activity in the twentieth century, and uses the conception of personal agency to frame the discussion. It was most certainly the case that the structures that defined funerary behaviour during this period were undergoing substantial change, but the degree to which individual and family preferences and choices were still being pursued within those structures has rarely been considered. It is generally presumed that the desire for personal expression was either absent or muted. Jalland refers to ‘blunted’ sensibilities, and a cultural disregard for domestic commemoration particularly in the context of large-scale losses during the two World Wars (Jalland, 2010). However, this study argues that agency in commemorative practice was very much in evidence, despite the restrictions that were often in play. This study focuses on new and highly restrictive churchyard memorial regulations that were introduced in the Diocese of York in the early 1960s. The new regulations attempted to exclude from the churchyard any memorials considered unsuitable as context to ancient church fabric and so restricted the allowable material, the size of stones and their design. This study is not concerned with the aesthetics of the matter. Rather, it explores the tensions engendered by this process of restriction, which comprised in some instances
quite intensive micro-management of the choices available to the bereaved. The material demonstrates a remarkably strong desire of families to express agency in the burial landscape at a time during which it is generally supposed that death was so forbidden a subject, it amounted to a ‘taboo’.

**Personal agency and funerary practice**

Conceptualisations on the balance of structure and agency in human activity have been subject to exhaustive debate, from which it is possible to deduce that no definite conclusions can be drawn. However, the framework of this duality remains useful as an analytical device to apply to a range of human interactions. For example, within the realms of social policy, early debate on the causes of homelessness were framed in terms of the ability of the individual to act (agency) in the context of rigid legislated frameworks or market circumstances which restrict choice (structure) (see e.g. Neale, 1997). This theoretical debate has become much more complex and nuanced, but for the purposes of this paper, even a very simple application of this dichotomy provokes a series of new and intriguing lines of enquiry. A focus on agency provokes questions on the degree to which individuals are able to express their preferences in the circumstances within which they find themselves and in funerary terms asks how far families can engage in practices and ritual activity they regard as appropriate. The expression of agency is easiest to identify in histories that present more intimate accounts of funerary activity but even so remains elusive. Jalland used private papers and diaries to explore the experiences of bereavement among a selection of upper and upper-middle class families, whose expression of agency was hardly contested (Jalland, 1996). Other authors have chosen to focus on the experiences of the working classes: both Strange’s study of working-class grief and Hurren and King’s research on the pauper funeral have also used personal accounts and correspondence from families lodged among the administrative papers produced by burial boards and Poor Law Guardians (Hurren & King, 2005; Strange, 2005). For the twentieth century, Clark’s anthropological study of folk religion in Staithes, a North Yorkshire village, and written in the 1980s, now comprises a historic text for that decade in its description of contemporary funerary ritual (Clark, 1982). Clark does provide narrative detail on changing funerary activity but tends not to probe on the issue of choice and constraint.

Nested within these accounts are some references to commemorative practice, which constitutes an instructive case study for the exploration of agency. Within the cemetery or churchyard, the personal preferences of the bereaved are framed by the regulations imposed by the owner of the burial space (Rugg, 2000). Historians have alluded to the notion of agency in discussions of the nineteenth-century cemetery. During this period, it has generally been supposed that wealthier families were better able to express their commemorative preferences as the purchase of burial rights meant freedom to erect a memorial
on the grave. Indeed, in early years, it was felt to be advantageous if the cemetery had elaborate and fine statuary capable of elevating moral sensibilities (Loudon, 1843). The ‘Victorian Celebration of Death’ was originally associated with the consequent proliferation of funerary monuments within the cemetery landscape (Curl, 1972). It is generally supposed that as the cemetery encouraged the wealthier classes actively to express their preferences, it also limited the agency of the lower classes and paupers in particular. The Poor Law operated under the principal of ‘less eligibility’: as a deterrent to application for assistance, welfare delivered through the workhouse system was deliberately construed to be degrading. Further, a central tenant of the Poor Law was the inability of paupers to express choice in funerary matters and was for some historians the ultimate symbol of its punitive intent (Laqueur, 1983). Poor Law Commissioners entered into contracts with cemetery providers for the interment of paupers dying in the workhouse. In these circumstances, burial generally took place in common graves, with a number of unrelated individuals. Herman notes that the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company, which laid out the cemetery at Brookwood, actively bid for parish contracts: indeed, in some months, it comprised the majority of the company’s business. Herman concludes that paupers’ agency was limited in these circumstances: ‘poverty acted as a severe structural constraint on their exercise of choice, and the workhouse, that final resort, epitomised a total lack of control, signifying social segregation and the loss of personal freedoms’. Parish burial did not include funds to erect memorials: and the consequent ‘rows of pauper burial mounds did not confer … personality’ (Herman, 2010, p. 312).

Other writing challenges this simplistic framework. Elizabeth Hurren and Steve King offered a more detailed exploration of funerary behaviour under the aegis of the Poor Law and concluded that experiences were in fact variable. Their study of correspondence between different sets of Poor Law Guardians, and of letters between ‘pauper’ families and Guardians indicates that there could be flexibility: families had rather more agency than might be supposed. For example, Hurren and King indicate that in the parish of Hulme near Manchester, soon after the passage of the Poor Law in 1834, it was frequently the case that families approached Poor Law guardians with a request to part-fund a funeral they had insufficient funds to cover. Papers indicate that these funerals often included an individual grave in the churchyard, a decent coffin, payment to the sexton to ring the bell, a mourning tea and a simple memorial stone (Hurren & King, 2005, pp. 329–330). Julie-Marie Strange draws a distinction between the experiences of pauper families and families on low income and again concludes that preferences were actively pursued. Strange found that, among her selection of north-western burial boards, it was not infrequently the case that low-income families – when their economic circumstances allowed – applied for exhumation orders to remove the remains of relatives from common graves for re-interment in purchased family graves. Even in the case of pauper burial, Laqueur concedes that Poor Law Unions allowed pauper families to add to the basic funeral: many opted to pay for a formal nameplate
on the coffin (Laqueur, 1983, p. 114). Strange also noted that families were able to arrange for the replacement of the cheaper ‘pauper’ coffin with one more robust, and with a formal nameplate (Strange, 2005, p. 148). Thus, even within ostensibly rigid frameworks, it was possible to express agency.

The twentieth century comprises a completely different framework within which to view the concept of choice and agency in funerary matters. The relevant structural influences framing attitudes towards mortality are defined in terms of major global events and grand trajectories: two world wars, the Holocaust, and the threat of nuclear annihilation in the Cold War; the withdrawal of the Church of England and organised religion as a daily presence in family and community life; the accelerating incidence of cremation; the increasing numbers of deaths in hospital; the professionalisation of the funeral directing industry, removing the dead from front parlour to funeral parlour; and terrible disasters such as sinking of the Titanic in 1912 or the landslide at Aberfan in 1966, which destroyed a primary school (Jalland, 2010; Jupp & Walter, 1999). The meta-narratives of twentieth-century mortality describe events and the creation of new structures within which, it might be presumed, individuals and families from all classes had limited control. For example, during and after the First World War, the non-repatriation of remains created a physical distance between families and their dead fathers, brothers and sons. Bourke stated that men’s bodies became ‘unequivocally the property of the state’ (Bourke, 1996, p. 211). In undertaking to care for remains and ensure their decent burial, the Imperial War Graves Commission was in many senses denying agency to the families concerned.

After the War, alternative community rituals of commemoration, such as the two minutes’ silence and laying of wreaths on war memorials on Remembrance Sunday, were created as a compensation for the loss of more private and domestic funerary arrangements (Winter, 1995). During the Second World War, state preparation for high civilian mortality rates as a consequence of intensive aerial bombardment led to the creation of a state funerary infrastructure that centralist sanitary reformer Edwin Chadwick would have recognised: specific teams were arranged to transport bodies to local mortuaries, which were buildings adapted to the purpose, or specially built; death certificates were pre-printed and coffins stock-piled; and trenches were dug in the preparation of mass fatalities (Rugg, 2004). Jalland argued that ‘mass common burials’ were ‘often deemed essential by the authorities’ and ‘the indignity, lack of respect and loss of identity’ compounded the tragedy of loss (Jalland, 2010, p. 128, 129). The use of common interment inevitably echoed practices of pauper burial, particularly in cases where authorities tightly controlled ritual activity as a means of downplaying the overall impact of continued bombardment. After the end of the Second World War, the creation of the National Health Service also introduced a ‘modern’ dislocation, as the extension of a free medical care meant that death in hospital became much more likely than death in the domestic home. This development, coupled with substantial expansion in professionalised funeral directing, meant that traditional practices with regard
to the corpse tended to lapse. Clark concluded, on changes in burial practices in Staithes, that ‘health administrators, funeral directors, clergy and ministry have all in turn helped to erode certain communal obligations and duties and, with them, a sense of control over life-critical events’ (Clark, 1982, p. 143). The primacy of women in the care of the dead body between death and funeral was superseded by medicalised and professional interventions (Adams, 1993; Roberts, 1989). Funeral directors offered the use of their funeral parlour in which the dead might be viewed, and so what had been days’-long exposure to the coffined body between death and funeral in the domestic setting became attenuated to the funeral director delivering the body ‘home’ the night before the funeral, if the body returned to the family at all. The practice of sending a ‘bidder’ to visit neighbours to invite them to attend the funeral was superseded by newspaper notices, and the funeral director provided staff to bear the coffin, which had been a task assigned to close family members. One of Clark’s respondents commented, of the local funeral director, ‘Now the Co-op has it all – tea, flowers, box [coffin] – he will put it in t’paper and everything’ (Clark, 1982, p. 135).

Thus, the history of death in the twentieth century can be interpreted as a progressive denial of agency to the bereaved, and many commentators have accepted those structural constraints as being indicative of a wider cultural disengagement from mortality. However, those conclusions have been based on a failure to recognise degrees of personal agency working within those frameworks, and the consequent tensions that could be engendered. For example, there was not necessarily an overwhelming acceptance of the Imperial War Graves Commission’s appropriation of the dead during and after the First World War, and dismay was expressed at the fact that no choice was allowed with respect to monumentation (Vance, 1997). The issue was debated in the House of Commons, where Sir James Remnant MP argued ‘the right to which is inalienable to every man, the right to do as he likes with his own dead, should not be taken away … the dead are certainly not the property of the State or of any particular regiment; the dead belong to their own relatives’ (Quoted in Bourke, 1996, p. 226). Jalland’s claim that mass burial was ‘often’ used by the authorities overlooks the fact that in most places, the vast majority of interments following bombardment took place in family graves: there was exceptionally strong resistance to the idea the local authorities should take over funerary arrangements (Rugg, 2004, p. 167).

Agency was often most clearly expressed in commemorative practice, an aspect of funerary activity that is largely overlooked in accounts of twentieth-century mortality. Jalland drew the conclusion that following the First World War ‘national commemoration of heroic young soldiers … overshadowed and limited public compassion for the ordinary deaths of individual civilians,’ and after the Second World War ‘mass bereavement in one sense devalued the grief of individuals.’ Indeed, after 1945 in particular, ‘suppressed grieving became a cultural norm’ (Jalland, 2010, p. 8, 10). However, there is evidence that through much of the twentieth century ‘domestic’ commemoration remained
an important facet of the expression of grief. For example, one respondent in Roberts’ oral history study of funerary practices in the north-west in the inter-war period commented ‘We went to the cemetery, what seemed like every Sunday afternoon … the graves were tended and it was what seemed like a weekly ritual’ (Roberts, 1989, p. 205–206).

Further evidence is available in Geoffrey Gorer’s study of death, grief and mourning in the 1960s. Gorer provides a highly partial account of funerary practice, drawing substantive conclusions on what he regards as a widespread denial of grief, while at the same time castigating as a ‘cult’ the practice of visiting the grave. Leaving Gorer’s questionable analysis to one side, his narrative reporting from the conducted interviews indicated that continued commemoration was commonplace. Twenty-seven of his interviewed respondents, from a selection of eighty, had opted for a burial and in all but four of these cases were arranging to erect a headstone and visited the grave regularly. Gorer assumed that cremation ‘obviated such a cult’ but nevertheless reported that visits to the crematorium often took place on the anniversary of a death and three respondents ‘treated the crematorium as if it were a cemetery’ (Gorer, 1965, p. 50). Clark’s research in Staithes, North Yorkshire, reported in 1982, also indicates a strong and continuing tradition of commemoration, noting that ‘visiting and tending the grave constitutes the most important way in which the memory of the dead is perpetuated’ (Clark, 1982, p. 137).

**Commemoration and the churchyard**

In reviewing further evidence for agency in the twentieth century, the churchyard emerges as an unlikely battleground. The churchyard has tended to be overlooked as a location for continued interment, largely because the history of burial in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has tended to focus on the shift of usage from churchyard to cemetery, and from a ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ forms of burial management. This transition occurred under the aegis of various Burial Acts, which provided a legislative framework for the closure of churchyards and the establishment of cemeteries by burial boards, funded from the rates. In actuality, change in burial provision during the second half of the nineteenth century was much more complex: massive investment in church building brought many new churchyards to rapidly urbanising areas, and churchyard extension was as common as churchyard closure (Rugg, 2013). Through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, churchyard management began to absorb elements of cemetery management. The addition of a new section to the churchyard brought the opportunity to introduce more formal practices, including the creation of a grave plan: cemetery and churchyard extension became indistinguishable. In particular, and from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, both were sites in which families increasingly sought opportunities to erect formal monuments (Cannon, 1989; Tarlow, 1999).
By the end of the nineteenth century, the churchyard landscape was being regarded as increasingly problematic. Percy Dearmer, who in 1899 published an influential handbook for the clergy, condemned the proliferation of memorials: ‘It may be questioned, however, whether even in the worst period of Georgian paganism, the appearance of our churchyards was half as bad as the ostentation of the last thirty years has made it ... A modern churchyard gives the most wretched impression of competitive self-advertisement’ (Dearmer, 1899, p. 191). In this regard, churchyard management looked very close to its cemetery counterpart, in seeking ways to simplify the landscape and minimise maintenance costs. However, there was an additional imperative in the case of the churchyard: new styles of monumentation were thought ‘alien’ to the English churchyard, and threatened a traditional aesthetic. In the tenth edition of Dearmer’s handbook, the critique was even more baldly stated:

People will not be contented with the use of local stone but desire memorials of marble or polished granite. Now any polished stone is bad enough as a rule; but marble is worst of all. It is utterly out of character with its surroundings, and stands out in glaring consequence, refusing to blend with the quiet grey stone behind it. (Dearmer, 1921, pp. 489–490)

Advice on the issue of churchyard memorials fell within the purview of what was initially the Central Council for the Protection of the English Church and its Treasures, and later, the Central Council for the Care of Churches (CCCC) which was set up in 1921 (Findlay, 1996). The Council guided the work of local Diocesan Advisory Committees, on which sat Church representatives and lay experts established to consider faculty applications including applications to erect memorials. The Care of Churchyards, published in 1930, was the CCCC’s first major pronouncement on churchyards. The report borrowed heavily from Dearmer and contended that ‘the fewer and the smaller the monuments it [i.e. the churchyard] contains the better. And these monuments should be quiet in themselves and not garish or distracting’ (CCCC, 1930, p. 8). Through the 1930s, pronouncements on churchyard aesthetics became commonplace; indeed, a campaign to ‘Buy British’ stone and protect British stone craftsmanship was launched and regular reports and supportive letters were published in The Times.² The issue went into abeyance during the Second World War but reappeared again in the 1950s and was the subject of a Church Assembly enquiry which published its report in 1955.

The report of the Maintenance of Churchyards Commission directly addressed the issue of memorial aesthetics. It underlined the fact that, under ancient canon law, parishioners had the right to burial in the churchyard but stressed that there was no analogous right to erect a headstone. Permission to do so had to be sought from the incumbent, and indeed, a monument erection fee was generally charged. However, if there was a refusal then the parishioner had the right to apply for a faculty, essentially seeking a diocesan judgement on the matter. The Commission was clearly of the view that choice in memorial
design and material should be restricted since ‘the appearance of many churchyards have been ruined by the monuments which have been erected in them … In particular, only for the most exceptional reasons should any material other than native stone or wood be permitted’ (Church Assembly, 1955, p. 7). The report included model regulations that were reproduced from the fourth edition of the *Churchyards Handbook*, indicating that agreement to erect a memorial would only be given if it was no larger than 4ft if a cross and 3ft if a headstone, lay flush with the grass if it was a slab, and made of natural stone. No kerbsets delineating the grave would be permitted, and all designs and inscriptions were to be submitted in writing to the incumbent for approval before they were ordered from the stonemason. The Commissioners acknowledged that this policy might create local difficulties for the vicar: ‘many incumbents are unwilling to refuse designs because of their sympathy with the relatives of the deceased, and their desire not to cause them inconvenience and disappointment at such a time’ (Church Assembly, 1955, p. 7). Consequently, it was recommended that the incumbent should simply inform families that ‘non-regulation’ headstones would require faculty. The Chancellor’s decision in the matter would be guided by the local Diocesan Advisory Committee, which would judge each case on its merits.

An impression of the reception of the regulations and of the tone of their implementation is made available through extant correspondence between the Diocese of York and vicars, individuals and stonemasons, held within the Diocesan archive at the Borthwick Institute (BI). 3 The correspondence dates over the period from the late 1950s and early 1960s, just as the new guidance on regulations came to be implemented. The correspondence does not cover all the applications made for faculty, nor fully represent the time spent by the DR in dealing with the matter. In 1962, the Registrar sent a letter of apology for delay on a decision to the vicar of Filey, commenting that ‘the new regulations have inundated me with applications and queries. I am sorry but I am already doing a twelve-hour day and am about exhausted’. 4 The correspondence indicates that parishioners were often dismayed and even angry about the new regulations, placing the vicar – as anticipated – in an extremely difficult position.

The inexorable rise of cremation during the post-war period obscures the fact that, in the 1960s, burial was still favoured by close to half the population and demand for headstones was strong. As yet little information has emerged on the monumental mason industry, but it is evident that business remained brisk largely as a consequence of the increased affordability of what had become simpler memorials, the ability to use hire purchase finance, and the relative cheapness of imported stone. Attached to some of the letters of application were fliers and pages from stonemasons’ catalogues, which indicated that even low-income families had a great deal of choice. Indeed, advertisements for headstones were evidently commonplace in the popular press. One example advertisement within the archive had come from the *News of the World* – a popular broadsheet – in which the stonemason offered ‘simplicity and dignity at low cost.’ For £23, it was possible to purchase a basic headstone with kerbset,
one foot in height and erected on a grave space up to 7 ft by 3 ft, and with sixty letters of inscription. The material could be either Portland grey forest or Yorkshire stone. [Plate 1]. Compared with many Victorian monuments, this style

of headstone appears to be remarkably restrained, but contemporary comment did not necessarily agree. An application to erect the monument illustrated in Plate 1 was sent to the DR in 1960, with the comment from the vicar: ‘I do not like these florid and flamboyant productions of monumental masonry’. It was clear that disagreements on the question of taste, in addition to concerns about appropriateness in the historic setting of the church, were holding sway with the Diocesan authorities. There were also implicit judgements made with regard to the marketing capabilities of stonemasons. It was felt that parishioners were offered monument types by stonemasons who knew that the designs would not be permitted by the Diocese. Indeed, it was suggested by one vicar that the Diocese should issue a pamphlet with approved designs ‘so that people could make a choice from them instead of the trade circulars which so often cause them to set their hearts on things which they cannot have.’

Policing the introduction of the new regulations amounted almost to micro-management for the vicars involved. One detailed example of practice is evident in Easingwold, a market town just north of York, where from 1966 the new vicar adopted a hard line on deviations from the Diocesan requirements. Within the Borthwick Archive, a file remains of dozens of applications for new memorials and the addition of inscriptions to existing memorials, alongside copies of correspondence from the vicar, approving or rejecting the applications. It seems that May 1966 comprised a turning point: a local stonemason had notified the new vicar that he would be erecting a kerbset as agreed by a previous incumbent. Disagreement over the kerbset led the vicar to state his position in a letter sent to the four principal stonemasons in the area:

It seems important that there is a clear policy for monuments etc in churchyards, so that the clergy, the undertakers and masons, and also relatives know exactly what is or is not allowed. Far too much trouble has been caused in the past by widely varying practices. For Easingwold and Raskelfe the policy will be laid down in the memorandum issued by the Diocesan Advisory Committee. You probably are aware of this, but I enclose a copy. From now on, all work under my authority will be in strict accordance with these rules.

From this juncture, it was clear that each application was scrutinised with care. The vicar required a sketch plan of the proposed monument, with dimensions clearly indicated, alongside a copy of the inscription. The vicar preferred dates to be written ‘day-month-year’ and checked each memorial once erected to ensure that it matched the application exactly. Where there was deviation, the stonemason was contacted for an explanation. In one instance, a memorial erected by a stonemason from out of the district – unfamiliar with the vicar’s close management practices – was informed that the inscription on the stone did not match the application: the changes in lettering style, mixing italic and plain, ‘does not look well’; and a flower container had been affixed. In his defence, the stonemason argued that his customer had requested a change in
the wording, which was regarded as being ‘so slight I thought you would approve’ and the flower container was readily removable.10

The vicar was very particularly opposed to flower holders that were built into the base of the monument, although one of the local stonemasons – who also owned the private cemetery company in York – argued against the prohibition as being counter-productive. Where families were unable to place flowers then ‘the relatives have no alternative but to litter the grave with receptacles’. The vicar responded that the rules were ‘far from perfect’ and the ‘miscellany of flower containers is deplorable, but they can at least be disposed of, after the family stop decorating the grave’.11 It was clear that the vicar relied on stonemasons to convey the regulations to customers and explain to them that the rules came from the Diocese, not from the vicar. The vicar noted that ‘in the past people have ignored, evaded or avoided the rules’ which ‘reflects little credit on them; and this in fact has given rise to much unnecessary trouble.’12 Evidently, in this parish, the vicar held the upper hand in the process, and masons were minded to be deferential and compliant. Even in arguing against the flower-holder regulation, the York Cemetery Company manager ended his letter, ‘assuring you of our best co-operation at all times,’ and as the 1960s progressed, and through into the 1970s, the vast majority of applications conformed to the rules.

Correspondence between the DR and vicars, families and stonemasons across the Diocese indicates that families were generally dismayed by the imposition of the regulations. It evidently appeared to parishioners that the list of things that were no longer allowed was unduly long and ran counter to a deep-seated desire to do what was thought to be fitting. For example, when it came to memorial choice, it was felt that the restrictions made it impossible for families to fulfil the expressed wishes of their relatives. A widower writing from the village of Rillington indicated his preference for a particular monument style because it was favoured by his spouse: ‘I have lived with my wife for 49½ years, and naturally, we have discussed our likings in this respect.’13 This application was refused. However, in another village, an application for a polished black granite gravestone ‘by a widow trying to carry out the express wishes of her deceased husband’ was allowed because it was in the corner of the churchyard, and so presumably out of sight.14 Confusion over what would be allowed led to successive re-applications. On one occasion, the vicar felt compelled to intercede with the decisions being made and wrote to the DR on a parishioner’s behalf: ‘May I point out that the lady who seeks this permission has already had a previous design turned down. In view of this, will the Committee please handle this matter gently – even to the extent of compromise where possible.’15

For families, the choice of memorial was not often simply a matter of aesthetics. Similar designs were often chosen by different family members as a means of expressing its unity. Buckham’s substantial study of memorial choice in York Cemetery found that the choice of identical stones generally denoted a family connection (Buckham, 2007), and within churchyards, it remains the case that family memorials often constitute a coherent group within the churchyard. A
shift in regulations created difficulty in the continuation of those traditions. One such case was reported by the Registrar to the CCCC which in 1962 had asked for a summary of the Chancellor’s recent judgements on memorials. It was noted that in an East Yorkshire churchyard, application had been made for ‘a marble headstone with curbs to be covered with light Creetown Scotch chippings, similar to the design of the grave in which the applicant’s brother was buried in the adjoining grave.’ The Chancellor had refused the application: it was felt that although the memorial corresponded to the one chosen by the deceased husband of the applicant he came to the conclusion that the tombstone on the brother’s grave ought never to have been allowed. The green chippings were most unsightly. Another stone of the same material would be most unfortunate. The churchyard was now spoilt and the tombstone existing being quite unsuitable he could not authorise a duplication, one was bad enough, two would be still worse.

However, the petitioner was advised that ‘a headstone without a curb not in white marble would be given consideration.’

The fact that families often wanted a kerbset as part of the chosen design was also a cause of difficulty. Kerbsets were deemed to be particularly problematic within the burial landscape. Mowing was made an infinitely more complicated and expensive task where the grasscutter had to trim edges around each individual grave, and the central portion of the kerbset often contained coloured chippings that were deemed unsightly or filled with items that were not considered appropriate. If the kerbset interior was not properly gardened, its neglect became unduly prominent. Nevertheless, kerbsets were considered to be a significant part of the monument. Explanation for this preference is indicated in a letter to the Diocesan Advisory Committee from a stonemason, who wrote ‘there are people – like myself – who object to others walking over the grave of a loved one and for that reason desires it to be enclosed.’ However, a refusal to allow kerbsets as part of the monument design was standard for the Diocese and caused substantial distress. Again, a vicar from an East Yorkshire coast parish felt obliged to intervene on a particular case of refusal:

The widow is under considerable stress over the project. She is a faithful though sensitive and emotional worshipper; and she is under the impression that she had been promised something of that sort by my predecessor. No doubt she is mistaken in this, but her mistake is genuine. She can, in any case, point to a kerb-type memorials erected within the least two years only a yard or two from the grave of her husband.

Families pushed on the issue of precedent and consistency. In particular, it was felt to be reasonable to extend an existing kerbset – erected before the regulations were introduced – to encompass the bounds of a new neighbouring family grave. For example, one application from a village near Leeds was lodged by a family who had buried their mother in the churchyard a decade
previously and, following the death of their father, wished to lay down a new kerbset to encompass both graves. The DR commented, in writing to the vicar, ‘I don’t know how many of these queries I have had to answer since the new regulations came in’ and hoped that the matter would settle down.\textsuperscript{19} However, in the meantime, each case had to be decided individually. Where it was allowed, the Registrar stressed that ‘stonemasons should be made abundantly aware that a concession of this kind is not a precedent’.\textsuperscript{20}

A further aesthetic consideration, which ran counter to burial tradition was the omission from the monument of any built-in receptacle for flowers. Twentieth-century monument design commonly included, immediately before the headstone, a hole set into the base into which a metal vase could be inserted. On applications where this kind of receptacle was built into the monument, it was generally the case that ‘petitioners were invited to submit new designs omitting any permanent receptacles for flowers.’\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, the Chancellor appeared to be particularly adamant on the issue, and with regard to a North Yorkshire churchyard made some concession in allowing white marble – the churchyard was already full of this type of memorial – but would not countenance ‘curbs or marble flower receptacles.’ Again, families were unhappy. In 1962, a vicar from a North Yorkshire churchyard complained to the Registrar that some families had started to place ‘a kind of ‘substitute’ memorial. They appear to be removable vases, made in the form of headstones, apparently of metal but counterfeiting marble or granite and engraved ‘In loving memory’ (no further inscription)’. These memorials were left on the grave with no formal application for faculty. The Registrar’s response was robust, recommending to one vicar that that the vases be moved, commenting ‘I know the sort of object you mean and most of them are perfectly ghastly’.\textsuperscript{22}

It was perhaps unsurprising that some families took the more extreme step of arranging for full monuments to be erected without any intention to apply for faculty, knowing that the application would be rejected. In an East Yorkshire churchyard in 1960, a family had taken the opportunity to alter the design of a memorial after a second burial had taken place. There was already a kerbset in place, but the family replaced its grassed interior with hard cement and green chippings. The Diocese threatened litigation if the family did not return the monument to its original state. The family was clearly very angry, particularly given the fact that – as farmers – they had ‘found’ or given considerable assistance to the creation of a new churchyard in a neighbouring village. Writing to the Diocese, the family warned that ‘if this grave is torn up at [village], it is the last time we find help in any shape or form.’ The vicar, with perhaps nervous understatement, commented in other correspondence, ‘There is, I gather, in some quarters here, considerable criticism of my action in this matter.’\textsuperscript{23} However, there is no note of any Diocesan compromise on the judgement.
Re-evaluating twentieth-century commemoration

The uniform and restrained aesthetics of twentieth-century burial does not generally convey an emotional engagement with loss, and the banality of repeated designs and motifs appears to convey a failure of imagination. However, this study has evidenced a series of highly localised spats between families, vicars, stonemasons and the Diocesan authorities. The ‘lawned’ aesthetic – removing kerbsets, restricting individualised planting around the grave, and reducing the scale of the monument and variety in design – required rigorous policing.

This fact indicates that an assessment of agency in family choices around commemoration is essential in understanding the resultant landscape. Families had little option but to comply, and although stonemasons were occasionally complicit in erecting monuments that did not accord with the guidelines, the practice at Easingwold indicates that where a vicar was determined then masons were obliged to capitulate. Even in these circumstances, there are indications that families adopted alternative strategies: a proliferation of removable vases and other flower containers was one option, which would have been highly expressive of loss but which has left no permanent mark on the landscape. It would seem, then, that the burial landscape is not necessarily the best place to find evidence of ‘disengagement’ with mortality in the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, in counterargument, it could be contended that the very desire of authorities to constrain choices and minimise the physical expression of the corpse in the landscape is reflective of a compulsion to ‘hide’ or disguise mortality and is therefore congruent with prevailing judgements on attitudes towards death in the twentieth century. However, this interpretation remains problematic, since it is so very clear that the introduction of churchyard monument regulations were not ‘about’ death at all. The new guidelines sat very firmly within the framework of historic conservation issued by and developed through the aegis of the Council for the Care of Churches. In implementing the regulations, issues of ‘taste’ were very much in evidence, but underlying the highly judgemental comments passed by vicars and the diocesan authorities lay a genuine desire to protect the curtilage of historic churches from the encroachment of unnecessarily discordant modern monumentation. This paper has indicated that difficulties arose where judgements were inconsistent, and the inconsistency often rested on the fact that in some churchyards – already considered irredeemably ‘blighted’ by too many new memorials – the regulations were relaxed. For example, the Registrar noted that the Chancellor had decided in favour of a particular non-regulation monument that included a kerbset, commenting that ‘The contents of this churchyard were so incredible that the Chancellor said that the material in this case would be acceptable and as there were so many curbs in the churchyard he would also grant the widow’s request and a faculty was granted in special circumstances.’

24
Rather than judging the modern burial landscape through comparison with its Victorian predecessor, it might be appropriate to consider a fresh assessment. The apparent monotony of the landscape obscures the fact that families made very personal choices about the stone they erected, even within the limited options available, and that the choices carried substantial personal significance. Buckham’s detailed study of the modest nineteenth-century monumentation in York Cemetery indicates that, within a vista of ostensibly identical headstones, there was a great deal of variation. Indeed, it was rarely the case that the models displayed in masons’ pattern books were reproduced exactly: many stones were ‘personalised’ through the addition or omission of elements of detail, or were ‘new’ memorials created from composite elements of those in the book (Buckham, 2007). Even where choices became more restricted as the twentieth century progressed, it is evident that similar negotiation and discussion took place in the choice of modern headstones. The grave was evidently no less meaningful, and the commemorative act no less heartfelt. If anything, the landscape overall demonstrates a massed engagement with mortality and a large section of society clearly at ease with the public commemoration of its personal, domestic loss.

Conclusion

This study has reviewed the commemorative landscape of the twentieth century, using the concept of agency as an analytical framework. Histories of death during this period have tended to concentrate on the larger structural changes that carried the capacity to undermine and constrain ‘traditional’ funerary practices. Indeed, modern funerals are judged largely in terms of comparison, with very little attempt to unpick and explore the significances of new and evolving practices. For example, there has been very limited exploration of personal and familial ritual activities that attended a cremation. Gorer noted in passing that visits to the garden of rest after a cremation were commonplace but did not take time to examine the significance of those visits to the families concerned. Overall, ‘typical’ commemorative practice has been largely excluded from any assessment of death in the twentieth century, perhaps because the growing incidence of cremation has in itself been deemed sufficient commentary on attitudes towards mortality. However, this study indicates that the material cultures of loss are much richer than might be supposed.

It is hoped that this study might point the way to further research. Understandably, death in the twentieth century is often defined almost purely in terms of the more readily available data, but there has been a lack of ambition to probe the absences in the way that Strange, for example, actively sought evidences for the expressions of grief and loss among the very poorest members of late nineteenth-century society. Definitions of class difference and a concern to establish ‘traditional’ practice have also constituted overly rigid frameworks for analysis, which have become self-defining. For example, it is generally
presumed that ‘traditional’ practices endured among the working classes and in the north, but this may be because this is where evidence of funerary classes is generally available. Furthermore, historians often seek evidence of change from one time period to another, and so generally overlook the fact that funerary practice – like all human behaviour – contains deep consistencies. ‘Before’ and ‘after’ are not always useful constructs particularly when primary material remains patchy at best.

It is therefore valid to review funerary practice during the twentieth century and pinpoint some essential continuities. Gorer’s study is inadvertently useful in this regard. A re-reading of his study, focussing largely on the primary data presented demonstrates that among his respondents there was clear evidence of new ritual behaviours, running counter to Gorer’s overall conclusion that mourning activity had become attenuated in the period in question. One example, dismissed by Gorer, was the then recently emerging practice of sending condolence cards following a death. One widow reported that she had received sixty-three cards although Gorer, typically, chose not to look at them (Gorer, 1965, p. 62). Even a limited glance at local newspapers from the 1960s reveals obituary columns in which expressions of loss were lengthy and emotional. Through the second half of the twentieth century, it was clear that a series of ‘structural’ changes were indeed impinging on the ability of families to express agency, and there could be conflict as a consequence, as has been seen. However, a change in ritual behaviours does not necessarily connote a diminution in emotion: small actions can still express strong sentiment.

Overall, the material invites a reappraisal of the twentieth century funerary landscape in the churchyard and cemetery and asks what action in particular is being judged as indicative of ‘disengagement’ from mortality. It may be that decisions taken by professionals in authority to restrict choices in the scale and style of memorials is reflective of a desire to contain the expression of loss as being somehow inappropriate. It could be argued that the public response to the churchyard regulations indicated little more than a continued adherence to ‘traditional’ practices that might be expected amongst working class rural northerners. However, there is a point at which it will be necessary to stop interpreting expressive and engaged funerary activity in the twentieth century as somehow abnormal, exceptional or explainable through the ‘traditional’ nature of the community involved. Indeed, it could be argued that it is the historian of the twentieth century, rather than individuals and communities in the past, who tends to be disengaged from evidences of mortality.

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Notes

[1] There are some exceptions, including Jupp (1993).
[3] I am grateful to the Diocese of York for access to this material, which comprises a single box of DAC miscellaneous correspondence, ordered by place. Note that because of the date of the correspondence, no individuals will be named. Rather, reference will be made to the Diocesan Registrar (DR), ‘the vicar’, ‘the family’ and, for clarity where necessary, the place.
[6] Ibid.
[18] BI (DAC Correspondence and reports, 1930–1970), Letter from a vicar to DR, 4 September 1962.
[20] BI (DAC Correspondence and reports, 1930–1970), Letter from DR to a vicar, 10 April 1963.
[22] BI (DAC Correspondence and reports, 1930–1970), Letter from DR to vicar, October 1962.

REFERENCES


Biographical Notes

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