

Duffield Parish Council News Letter - Issue No.48(AUGUST 2007)

MEMORIAL INSPECTIONS AT DUFFIELD CEMETERY PRESS RELEASE FROM THE HEALTH AND SAFETY EXECUTIVE:

Since Victorian times memorials have been erected at the head of graves as a permanent reminder of those buried within. Research has shown that the average length of time that relatives actively visit graves is only about 10 years. It has wrongly been assumed that memorials are permanent structures that have been installed to the highest standards and will therefore last forever without any need for repair.

Unfortunately, this assumption has cost the lives of six people in the past 12 years, most of whom have been children, and there have been a countless number of accidents ranging from bruising to severe crush injuries and bone breakages. Following research into memorial safety it is clear that cemetery managers now have to tackle years of neglect and poor workmanship, even though the memorials do not belong to us, they are still the property of the owner of the grave rights. Guidance has been issued from national bodies within the industry following the research and it indicates that cemetery managers have a responsibility, under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, to ensure that risks within their cemeteries are properly managed.

To do this they must inspect all the memorials in their cemeteries to ensure they withstand a reasonable pressure that may be applied by users of the cemetery should they slip and use the memorial to try and stabilise themselves for instance. Approved methods for carrying out this test do exist and staff should be properly trained and use the correct equipment in order to identify the potential dangers of unstable memorials.

Some authorities have started this work in order to protect visitors to their cemeteries, only to find that the standards of workmanship often leave a lot to be desired, this can be particularly evident within newer sections of cemeteries where failure rates of between 35% and 95% have been regularly experienced. In the vast majority of these failures poor workmanship can be clearly evidenced.

The Health and Safety Executive are concerned about this trend and now expect burial authorities to be inspecting memorials at least every 5 years and to be making safe any memorials that fail the inspection process. Some cemeteries that have been found with high numbers of unsafe headstones in their cemeteries have had improvement notices placed on them by the HSE or have even been closed down until the cemetery has been made safe. This seriously affects members of the public who wish to visit relatives buried in the cemetery and also those wishing to have funerals during a period of closure.

To make safe the memorials cemeteries are considering a range of options based on a proper risk assessment. This will include placing notices on memorials, setting memorials in the ground, temporary make safe systems, laying memorials down, barrier fencing each memorial or fencing/cordoning whole sections if the problem is severe enough. Of course cemeteries try and advertise that they need to carry out this work, they place notices within the cemeteries and owners are advised when

their memorial is found to be unsafe, where this is possible. When memorials have to be laid down or are fenced off for safety purposes, it is inevitable that some families will tend to become upset.

This work is costing millions of pounds throughout the UK and it creates a significant workload for cemetery managers, add to this the upset they know it may cause to bereaved families and this becomes a potentially huge problem area. There is a temptation to ignore the problem, but someone could be killed or managers could be investigated and found guilty of criminal negligence. There is also the danger that the making safe of large numbers of dangerous memorials would cause a public outcry. The manager is faced with a 'no win' situation, so must then consider the safety of visitors to the cemetery a priority.

If memorials are laid flat in the cemetery, if others are fenced or cordoned off, it is not because this is some contrived way for the burial authority to make money, quite the opposite this costs money. Nor are they simply trying to upset families, this wouldn't make sense for dealing with an upset family is no fun for anyone. So why are cemeteries doing this? To protect unsuspecting families that visit their memorials, sometimes only months after they have been installed, only to find that it is dangerous and could fall and injure someone.

The staff at the cemetery will be happy to help the public make memorials safe again if they have been found to be dangerous. Those advised that their memorial is unsafe should be thankful it has not hurt anyone. Cemetery staff will always advise the public to use a qualified mason to re-erect memorials to the highest national standards, if this is ignored by the owner then they could be liable for any injury it causes. See local cemetery staff for more details, they are there to help and protect you.

In the meantime, the public should be aware that cemeteries are potentially dangerous places, particularly if they have not yet been inspected. Visitors to cemeteries should keep to footpaths, avoid touching any memorials and ensure their children are supervised at all times.

As a response to the requirements detailed above, Duffield Parish Council have instructed an independent inspector to carry out the required testing on all memorials at Duffield Cemetery on Hazelwood Road, currently just over 700. The inspection process will commence in October 2007 and all inspections are open to be viewed by the public. If you would like to attend these inspections or receive further information about this process please contact the Clerk or Cemetery Superintendent at the Cemetery or by phoning 01332 840265. You can also contact the Clerk by email at sally.bygraves@duffieldpc.org.uk

Thank you for your co-operation