

HALTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
ADULTS & COMMUNITY DIRECTORATE
BEREAVEMENT SERVICES

MEMORIAL INSPECTION PROCEDURE

1. Introduction

Over the last 30 years, eight people have been killed when a memorial has fallen on them. Since 1992, following an accident in Preston, there has been heightened awareness about the dangers of memorials. In 1994 the Memorial Advisory Bureau produced “A Guide to Best Practice” for Burial Grounds and Memorials”. In 1996 the Confederation of Burial Authorities (CBA) commissioned some research into the problem of dangerous memorials and the National Association of Memorial Masons (NAMM) issued a set of installation guidelines in their Recommended Code of Working Practice.

Since that time, the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM) have published management guidance in their publication “The Management of Memorials” which is based on the research carried out by the CBA and supported by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

In 2009, the Ministry of Justice issued a publication “Managing the Safety of Burial Ground Memorials – Practical Advice for dealing with Unstable Memorials”

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 Halton Borough Council has a duty to ensure its Cemeteries are safe for all visitors. As a result of Risk Management initiatives the following procedure has been introduced to ensure that any risk to these visitors from unsafe or unstable memorials are reduced. All memorials in Widnes Runcorn and Halton Cemeteries will be inspected and risk assessed on a regular basis to assess their stability and gauge their condition.

Following an initial inspection and risk assessment of all memorials, subsequent inspections and risk assessments will take place within 1 year or within 5 years depending on a memorial’s categorisation (see 2.2 below).

New memorials or memorials removed and replaced by masons will be inspected and risk assessed within 1 year of their installation / re-installation. Memorials that are reported as being unsafe by cemetery visitors will be inspected and risk assessed as soon as is practicably possible.

Detailed records of the memorials will be kept and a photographic record made to ensure any deterioration between inspections can be noted.

2. Inspection and Risk Assessment Criteria

2.1. Records

As already highlighted, detailed records of all memorials are maintained and the Inspecting Officer will be required to update the Erasmus spreadsheet so that a complete safety history of every headstone memorial is maintained, including a new photographic record if the memorial has been found to be unsafe.

The Inspecting Officer will need to carry out a thorough inspection and risk assessment of the memorial and assess its condition based on the criteria set out in Section 3 of the Procedure.

2.2. Category

Each memorial inspected and risk assessed will be placed into a category depending upon its size, condition, angle of lean, stability and risk posed. Remedial action will be directly related to which category the memorial is placed.

Category 1a - Very unstable – high risk - to be temporarily made safe when discovered, but if this is not possible, to be laid-down flat when discovered.

Category 1 – Safe

Category 2 – Cracked joints etc. with the potential to become unstable – medium risk

Category 3 – to be made safe

Category 4 – headstones that have been made temporarily safe – low risk.

N.B. if the inspecting Officer is unsure whether to classify a memorial 2 or 3, they should always decide on the side of safety and classify 3.

2.3. Factors which affect the safety and stability of memorials

The following factors should be taken into consideration when assessing the condition and stability of memorials.

- i) The Physical shape, height and slenderness of the memorial.
Clearly taller, larger memorials are potentially more dangerous. Multi-part memorials, which depend on bonding of their parts for stability, can present a risk where the joint has failed. Some memorials may also be made of material which more readily erodes and becomes unsafe.
- ii) The Condition of the Memorial - It may be cracked, perished, frost damaged or otherwise weakened.
- iii) Movement of the Memorial
Any movement, however slight is an indication of instability. An inspection for movement should be carried out cautiously and from the side of the stone using two hands for larger memorials in accordance with section 3.3 of this policy.
- iv) The Joints
The joints between the plate (upright piece of stone containing the inscription) and the base should be checked, together with the joint between the base and sub-base.
- v) The condition and adequacy of the foundation
Different types of stone have different foundations. The area of foundation and depth are crucial in determining the overall stability of the stone. Where brickwork has been used as a foundation, the condition of the pointing can deteriorate allowing voids to form under the stone.
- vi) The ground conditions/location
Sloping or uneven ground or ground recently disturbed by excavation may present an increased risk.

Memorials alongside or within a short distance of paths, are more likely to present a risk to visitors than those which are less accessible. Less frequented areas may need greater maintenance as relatives are no longer tending memorials.

3. Memorial Testing Procedure

Testing will be carried out by trained staff. (ICCM or other recognised body)

3.1 Visual inspection and Photographic Record

Before any manual inspection of the memorial takes place a thorough visual inspection should be carried out and the physical characteristics of the memorial noted. A Photographic Record should be made and stored on the Cemeteries database. The inspecting officer should determine the size, type, material and construction of the memorial and any likely hazards i.e. poor foundations, before continuing. The physical dimensions of the memorial should be taken and recorded and the type of memorial noted.

3.2 Condition of the memorial

The inspecting officer should check the condition of the memorial, paying particular attention to the condition of the joints, foundations, general damage or whether there is evidence of cracking or flaking.

3.3 Movement of the memorial

An initial inspection of movement should be carried out by standing to one side of the memorial and applying a firm but steady pressure in different directions to determine to what degree if any the headstone is loose. Great care should be taken when applying this pressure as the memorial may give way and begin to fall. If so, move backwards away from the memorial, making no attempt to slow the fall. **Do not, under any circumstances, attempt to stop the memorial falling.**

The Inspecting Officer will need to assess via this inspection and risk assessment whether any movement/failure is severe enough to warrant a Category 1a, 2 or 3.

Hand testing is appropriate for many memorials, such as the modern lawn type as well as smaller stepped designs and tiered crosses.

Much larger, heavier memorials, such as older columns or obelisk types, may require an assessment by a specialist engineer or competent monumental mason.

Many memorials installed in recent years on independent foundations are fitted with a ground anchor system. These memorials may move, even rock if the base to foundation joint is broken, but do so within designed tolerance limits and represent no danger as the memorial will lock on the ground anchor.

4. Memorial Type

A) Single Slab

Placed directly onto the ground covering part or the whole of the grave. A visual inspection should be carried out noting the condition and any ground subsidence. As these memorials are already laid flat the angle of lean can be omitted.

B) Single Slab Placed on Square Plinth or Foundations

This memorial is the same as the Single Slab but is supported above the ground by a foundation. The full inspection procedure should be carried out with great care being taken when carrying out the movement test. The physical hand test should be carried out by standing to one side of the memorial, and applying a firm but steady pressure to a gradual build up of a force of approximately 35 Newtons (circa 35kg) at the apex of the memorial or as high up the memorial as can comfortably be reached by the operative.

C) Headstone and Kerbstones

This type of memorial has an upright piece of stone at the head of the grave with kerbs that cover the grave its self. The full inspection procedure should be carried out with particular attention paid to the joint between the kerbs and headstone and any subsidence.

D) Plain Kerb Stones

This memorial consists of a set of kerbs covering the whole grave space. A visual inspection should be carried out noting the condition and any ground subsidence. As these memorials are already laid flat the angle of lean can be omitted.

E) Open Book

As the name suggests these memorials consist of an open book supported by rear angle that is doweled to the base. If the memorial is less than 30cm high from ground level, then only a visual and movement test will be required.

F) Multi Based Cross

This memorial consists of two or more bases of decreasing width topped with a cross. The full inspection procedure should be carried out with particular attention paid to the joint between the cross and base.

G) Gothic

These stones are normally over 1.3 metres high and have a gothic top. The full inspection procedure should be carried out with particular attention paid to the joint between the base and foundation, as they may have originally been part of a kerb set, which would have added stability.

H) Lawn Memorial

A number of types exist, however they are all under 1metre in height and often have a basic L shape. The full inspection procedure should be carried out. Particular attention should be paid to the joint between the plate and base.

5. Legal Position if the Memorial is found to be Unsafe or Remedial Work is Required

Although the memorial remains the property and responsibility of the owner of the Exclusive Right of Burial, the Council will need to take action if the memorial is in danger of falling, the owner cannot be contacted or the owner refuses to take action to rectify the problem.

The Council has powers to take action or effect repairs on unsafe memorials under Schedule 3 of the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977, which states " that such powers should not be construed as authorising any action in relation to any vault, tombstone or other memorial other than to remove a danger which arises by reason of the condition of the vault, tombstone or memorial".

There would be two options available to the Council if a memorial is found to be in imminent danger of collapse or becomes unstable from its foundations:

- i) the memorial could be made temporarily safe or laid-flat prior to any further action.
- ii) the area surrounding the memorial could be cordoned-off and a label placed on the memorial advising the memorial is dangerous.

Once the memorial has been made safe or found to be unsafe, the Council shall make every effort to contact the grave owner to advise them of their responsibility. Addresses will be checked from either:-

- paperwork held on file
- names and addresses held on the Gower grave record
- Council Tax records

Letters will be sent to grave owners/applicants of the last interment, where a current address is held on file. **No contact will be made with applicants of interments which took place more than 30 years ago.**

A notice shall be placed in the local press on an annual basis, in April, to advise that memorial testing is being carried out within the Borough's three cemeteries.

Advisory notices will be placed on the section of the cemetery to be tested, a minimum of two weeks in advance of any testing, to notify the public that this work is to be carried out.

Note: unstable headstones will normally be made physically safe. Headstones will only be cordoned or taped off as a last resort. This is so as to preserve the character and appearance of the cemeteries.

For headstones over 6'7" if no contact can be made or the owner refuses to take action, then the only option available will be to temporarily cordon the memorial off until a registered Monumental Mason can safely dismantle the memorial / lay the memorial flat.

6. Re-Inspection of Memorials

Re-inspection frequencies are detailed below. Each time a headstone is re-inspected / re-risk assessed, it shall be classified in accordance with 2.2 above.

All memorials will be tested within a five year period.

In addition to this, headstones in the vicinity of graves which are to be re-opened and which could pose a danger to cemetery workers excavating or backfilling the grave to be re-opened (or indeed the funeral party standing around such grave) they shall be inspected prior to the commencement of any excavation work. Every effort will be made to contact the relevant grave owner in accordance with the procedure set out in section 5.

7. Access to records

Article 10(1) of the Local Authorities Cemeteries Order 1977 states that "the Register, which must at all reasonable times be available for inspection by any person free of charge."

Reasonable in Halton's case meaning any time between 8.45 a.m. and 4.15p.m, Monday to Friday by prior appointment.

8. Training and Competence of inspecting officers

The inspecting officer will be trained in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the Institute of Burial and Cremation Management (ICCM) and the National Association of Memorial Masons (NAMM)

Peer reviews of inspecting officers will be undertaken annually to ensure that inspection competence has been maintained and that best practice can be shared between inspectors to aid continual improvement.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Welfare at Work Regulations 1999, a full risk assessment of the task will be carried out.

9. Tools and Personal Protective Equipment

9.1 Tools:

- Tape measure
- Protractor
- Spirit level
- Hazard tape
- Hammer
- Warning signs
- Drill/drill bits
- Generator
- Steel plates
- Steel pins
- Trolley
- Gantry
- Make safe rods

9.2 Personal protective equipment

- Gloves
- Safety boots with steel toe and full ankle protection
- Goggles/eye protection
- Ear defenders

10 Supervision of this Memorial Inspection Procedure

The Bereavement Services Manager is responsible for ensuring that this procedure is followed, with particular regard to the re-inspection of memorials within the specified timescales, health and safety issues relating to headstone safety and headstone testing, and the training/competence of memorial inspectors.