Ireland's Historic Churches and Graveyards

How to get involved

Graveyards are an integral feature of the landscape and are powerful reminders of families from former times. Without the help of local people many of these graveyards and their memorials will deteriorate through neglect, some eventually disappearing into the pages of anonymity. It is important that local communities participate in the proper management and conservation of their local graveyard. You could also help to trace the historical development of your graveyard using historical sources, folklore, early maps and photographs or by studying and recording grave memorials. A good way to get involved is to join a local archaeological and historical society and seek to learn more about your archaeological heritage. You could also enroll in local Adult Education classes in Archaeology that are held in Universities, Institutes of Technology and other centres.

You should contact your Heritage Offiicer for advice before carrying out any work in a graveyard. Before carrying out any work inside a graveyard, a short list or a schedule of works should be submitted to your local Heritage Officer or to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government for advice.

Where can I get further information?

The Heritage Officer in your local County Council will have details of ownership of the graveyard and general advice. A complete list of historic graveyards that pre-date 1700 AD can be downloaded or viewed on the website of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government Archaeological Survey of Ireland at www.archaeology.ie. Archaeological monuments included in the Record of Monuments and Places for every county including historic graveyards are protected under the National Monuments Act 1930-2004. For a description of some churches that were built after 1700 AD check the website of the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage at www.buildingsofireland.ie. More information on Irish war memorials can be accessed on the internet at www.irishwarmemorials.ie.

A comprehensive listing of the works that you can and cannot do inside a graveyard is listed in the Care and Conservation of Graveyards booklet that can be downloaded from the website of the the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government at www.archaeology.ie

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council
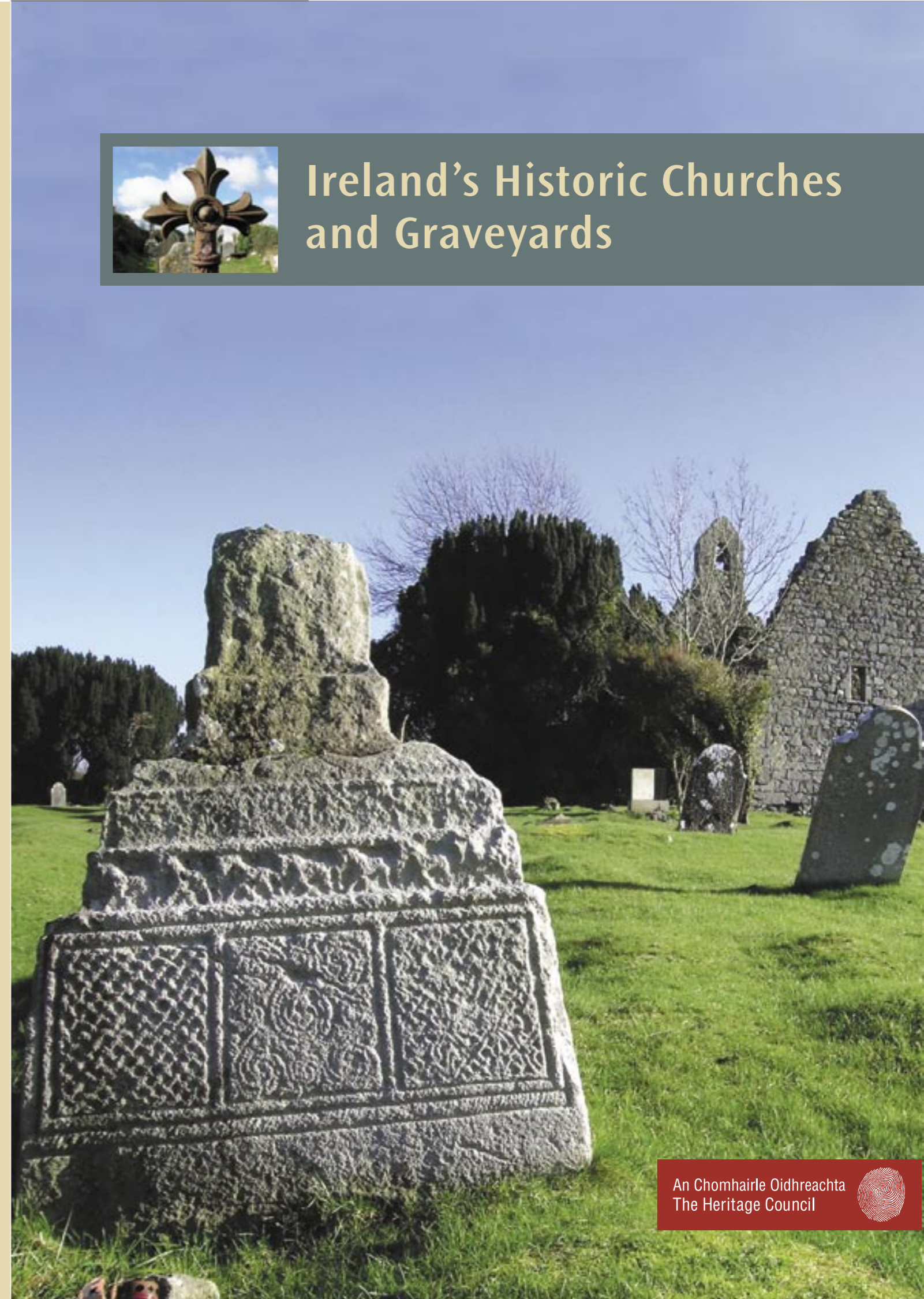
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Grave markers:
from Early Christian cross-slabs to modern headstones:

The arrival of Christianity into Ireland created graveyards that grew up around the first timber churches. It was not until the final decades of the seventeenth century that wealthy people began to mark their graves with an inscribed headstone. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the headstone would become a popular memorial with the burgeoning middle classes and the historic graveyard started to take on the appearance that the visitor is so familiar with today. It must be remembered that not all graves were commemorated with a headstone and many small and unmarked stones barely protruding above the surface of the graveyard are in fact gravemarkers. Sometimes the corner of a graveyard is known as the 'lonely corner' a place that has been set aside for the burials of unbaptised children or poor vagrants who died while wandering through the parish.

When we first look at a memorial in a graveyard we automatically read the inscription in order to find out the name of the deceased and in what year they died. Very often we fail to notice the important information contained in the symbols used on the memorials themselves. These symbols along with the memorial inscription offer us an insight into the social, political and economic lives of the deceased.

The occupation or status of a person is often recorded in the use of symbols relevant to the working life of the deceased. This example from St Comans graveyard in Roscommon town, Co Roscommon, depicts a ploughman at work indicating the memorial of a wealthy farmer.

This motif from Castletown graveyard, Co Tipperary, is a naive folk art example of a winged cherub. By the 18th and 19th centuries the symbol of the cherub on memorials acted as a portrait of the soul of the deceased.

This memorial at Terryglass, Co Tipperary, depicts the tools of a carpenter, indicating the trade of the deceased.

(Left) Inside the church of Clonca, Donegal, there is the 'Magnus and Fergus' graveslab dating from the 16th century. This slab is decorated with a floriated cross, foliage, a long sword, a hurling stick and ball or sliotar with an inscription describing who made the gravelslab and for whom it was made. The Gaelic inscription reads 'FERGUS MAK ALLAN DO RINI IN CLACH SA MAGNUS MEC ORRISTIN IA FO TR? L SEO' which in English reads 'Fergus Mac Allan made this stone Magnus Mac Orristin under this'.

This memorial from the military cemetery at the Curragh, Co Kildare, displays the compass and square, with an all-seeing eye indicating membership of a secret society known as the Freemasons.

Memorials recording the sporting prowess of the deceased in the game of hurling have been recorded from the medieval period and onwards into the early nineteenth century. This memorial at Killoughy, Co Offaly, commemorates the resting place of Michael Duigan who died in 1801 and shows how hurling played an important role in the sporting pastimes of Irish people before the foundation of the G.A.A. in 1884.

Many monasteries today preserve cross-inscribed grave-slabs commemorating the final resting place of early monks such as this fine example from Clonmore, Co Carlow, dating from the ninth and tenth centuries.

Many graveyards throughout the country contain war memorials, the most common of which commemorate the two World Wars, the War of Independence and many other conflicts throughout the world. This memorial from Newabbey, Co Kildare commemorates a victim of the First World War.