**FINDING HISTORICAL BURIAL GROUNDS IN ENGLAND**

When looking for the location of a deceased person in England, there are four main terms to consider: graveyard; churchyard; burial ground and cemetery plus (from 1885) cremations and interments.

**Churchyard**

A ‘churchyard’ is the term that's normally given to an area around a Christian church building where members of that particular faith are buried. In England, it is usually only Anglican and Catholic buildings that are called 'churches' with 'churchyards', though non-conformist chapels may also be referred to non-members as ‘churches’.

**Graveyard and burial ground**

‘Graveyard’ and ‘burial ground’ are more general terms used for an area of land dedicated to burials for ANY faith. They may or may not be located alongside or even near their particular religious building. Though most people would think first of the Church of England when these terms are used, all religious buildings and faiths can have a graveyard or burial ground and normally only members of that particular faith would be buried in them.

**Cemetery**

The term ‘cemetery’ is simply another term for an area where people are buried or interred. In England it is not normally attached to a particular faith, though it can be if, for example, it’s associated with a non-Christian faith, or when a Christian church has no churchyard at all, or has run out of space and therefore creates its own cemetery. Most English cemeteries are public and civil, containing both consecrated areas (for members of the Church of England) and non-consecrated areas (for anyone else). In bigger conurbations, there is often demarcated space for non-Anglican and Jewish burials and those of other non-Christian faiths. Highgate in London, opened in 1839, is considered the oldest cemetery in England. From that date onwards, especially after the Metropolitan Burial Act of 1852, public cemeteries were opened in towns and cities throughout the country.

Private ‘burial grounds’ and ‘cemeteries’ also exist, belonging to individual families, communities, neighbourhoods and funeral businesses. Records of these can be hard to locate.

**Cremations**

1885 was the year of the first Christian cremation in England and crematoria are now commonplace around the country. Ashes of those cremated are either scattered or interred (with legal restrictions on where these can happen) although sometimes retained privately in urns by family members. Interments of ashes are normally made as additions to existing family graves or in crematoria grounds, and in areas of cemeteries specifically for ashes to be placed, called ‘memorial gardens’ or similar.

**Interment**

So a broader term is useful for describing all the options for disposal of a deceased person, both historical and modern, which is ‘interment’.

**Variations**

* In earlier centuries, many people – especially those of higher class or religious status – were buried within and under churches themselves, and the richest had their own vaults. They often had wall and floor memorials and large, adorned tombs within church or crypt.
* Non-conformist congregations may never have had their own burial grounds. The fates of their members can be difficult to locate, perhaps buried in other non-conformist grounds near or far from where they died. They may have ended up in Anglican churchyards, through no other choice, many being slipped into the ground in dead of night to avoid the Church of England ceremony (therefore unrecorded by the church). Some early Quakers were buried in their home gardens, refusing to lie in ‘consecrated’ ground. When they created burial grounds (often the earliest non-conformist ones to happen in England), Quakers often gave space to other dissenters without grounds of their own.
* The word ‘funeral’ has to be considered separately from burial or interment. A funeral is a religious ceremony, a ritual of faith, held in a religious building or elsewhere. Historically in England, the body of the deceased was not necessarily even present for the ceremony, traditionally left in the entrance to the church and interred separately before or afterwards, perhaps hours or days before or after the funeral. The historical ‘Burial Registers’ of Christian churches in England tell us that a person was buried but seldom record the burial location, the default being burial in the church’s churchyard or burial ground. Remembering that funerals and interments are separate matters is important for researchers, especially for 19th century dates onwards, when often there are records of funerals (aka ‘burial services’ and ‘memorial services’) as well as Grave Registers and Plans (recording who was buried where and who with) and Burial, Interment or Cremation Registers (recording deaths, burials and interments in chronological order).
* It can’t be assumed that all burials or interments had a ‘gravestone’ or ‘memorial’ because the great majority of people in England since Christianity began have not been able to afford them and in fact were often interred as paupers in ‘public graves’ containing numbers of non-related individuals. In more modern times, with improved living standards, more families have been able to afford family plots (lairs in Scotland), stones and memorials. Some non-conformist faiths eschewed gravestones entirely, considering them a form of vanity.
* At times of historical crisis, such as visitations of the plague, huge mass graves had to be created in a rush with little documentation.
* When gravestones and memorials do exist, they don’t necessarily indicate that a person lies in that particular location, they could be interred elsewhere. Also, gravestones may be added much later in time, perhaps when a family has sufficient funds. Information on the stone therefore could be inaccurate.
* Burials and interments in the other nations of Britain – Scotland, Wales and Ireland – have different histories, faiths and traditions, and different terms associated with them. In Scotland for example, as well as establishment churches being called ‘kirks’, burials were not deemed as important for recording purposes and burial registers before modern times may not exist or only patichily – while, on the other hand, Scotland has a much stronger tradition of gravestones and memorials, even for less well-off folk. Former British colonies, including America, also have different burial vocabulary and traditions.
* More often than we usually imagine, people were never buried at all, if they died at sea or in circumstances where remains could not be identified or found. And many died away from home, perhaps drowned or undiscovered or unknown to those who buried them. Many church burial registers contain the words ‘stranger’, ‘traveller’ and ‘unknown’.

None of the definitions offered in this article are (forgive the pun) engraved in stone – they are commonly used interchangeably. The word ‘church’ is especially loose, and can mean a building, of any denomination, as well as the congregation that meets there, or even more broadly a whole faith.

For all these reasons, the fate of a deceased ancestor or relative in England is frequently the hardest fact for us to find.