

The Ledgerstone Survey of England and Wales Recorders' Handbook

Welcome to the Ledgerstone Recorders Handbook

This Handbook is intended for anyone wishing to take part in the Ledgerstone Survey of England and Wales and is divided into 5 sections:

A Brief History of Ledgerstones
The Ledgerstone Survey of England and Wales
Making a Record – why it is important and an overview of the process
Carrying out a Survey – some detailed guidance on the process
What to do with the completed Survey

The Survey is being carried out on the basis of *what you see is what you get*. This is to enable us quickly to draw together basic information on the estimated 250,000 ledgerstones in churches and other places of worship in England and Wales. The forms provide a common standard so that volunteers of different interests, abilities and ages can get involved in an exercise of discovery about a special part of our heritage.

The collated records will provide a snapshot of what is out there. Once this is available, it can be used as the basis of more detailed research and analysis. It will assist those responsible for assessment, management and conservation, and will help prioritise funds and efforts to ensure the protection of these important stones.

A Brief History of Ledgerstones

“Ledgerstones” are flat stones placed over a grave: the term derives from the German word *legen*, meaning to lie. They are among the oldest and most common of sepulchral monuments, and they may be found in tens of thousands, primarily in and around ancient cathedrals and churches - some of which will still be in use, others which may no longer be used for worship - but also in places of worship of other traditions.

Ledgerstones can be traced back to the Middle Ages, from the 11th century (and earlier) carved lids of stone coffins through to the incised stones of the 14th and early 15th centuries. Relatively cheap and easy to fashion, compared to more elaborate monuments; they were favoured by the middle classes as grave markers within church buildings. More prestigious and expensive were stones with inset brasses, which first appeared in the 13th century, though in many cases only the stone settings now remain.

Ledgerstones as we understand them today are largely a development of the 17th century. Burial inside churches became increasingly at a premium, and the laying down of a ledgerstone was a way of masking out an area of church floor which would enable the body of the deceased to lie at rest. Generally of local stone or of sombre black limestone, fine-grained and hard-wearing, these slabs normally recorded only names and dates. From the later 17th century, heraldic achievements become more common. The early 18th century saw the arrival of a new fashion for exotic veined marbles, imported at great expense from Italy.

During the Age of Sensibility, from the later 18th century onwards, inscriptions tended to lengthen and to include fulsome tributes to the qualities of the deceased.

The move away from burial inside churches can be dated back to the mid-17th century: John Evelyn, Christopher Wren, Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor all expressed their disapproval of this custom. Not until the mid-19th century was burial inside churches finally forbidden,

although the practice of burial beneath the floor had already fallen into abeyance. The Gothic revival saw a return of figural brasses, which probably gave the genre a new lease of life. The most recent ledgerstone of great fame is probably the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, unveiled in 1920.

The Ledgerstone Survey of England and Wales

Like so many familiar things, it is easy to assume that ledgerstones will be always with us. However, with the passage of time, and as the life of the worshipping community moves on over the generations, they can be eroded by the moving and placing of altars and other liturgical furniture, pews and seating, flower stands and rugs, musical instruments and stands, or removed as part of more major reorderings and refloorings, or worn by the passage of worshippers and visitors, or even damaged by routine floor cleaning.

Churches are not museums and, in any case, not everything is worthy of preservation. Moreover, Christians (and the vast majority of stones are to be found in Anglican parish churches) believe that in death, our fleshly bodies return to the earth as our spirits ascend to eternal perfection with God. Memorials are then for the living left behind and, for ledgerstones at least, those who knew the person commemorated will long have passed on themselves. Nevertheless, it is right that we should seek to respect the wishes of our ancestors, the craftsmen who made the stones and the knowledge that lies ready to be unlocked as the records come together.

The Ledgerstone Survey has been established in order that the aesthetic and historical interest of these stones can be recorded for all time. The Survey has been organised by a broad partnership of official and voluntary bodies, including the Church Monuments Society, the Churches Conservation Trust, the National Association of Decorative and Fine Art Societies, English Heritage and many others. A network of volunteer recorders is being gathered to undertake this valuable work, and it is in order to assist them that this handbook has been prepared.

It is intended to build up a nation-wide survey of those extant ledgerstones (and, whilst we are about it, other worked stones to be found in church floors – see ***What will we be recording?*** below) which can be easily accessed using non-specialist volunteers, whether individuals or members of groups, associations or clubs. Their contribution will be vital in building up a full picture of the subject. People with skills of all levels can make their own contribution; do not be put off by specialist talk of photogrammetry and rectified photography!

One of the special qualities of ledgerstones is that they record and guard the resting place of one or more individuals; the proximity of the actual person's remains so close by endows them with an extra interest. It means too that the stones should be treated with due respect. Some ledgerstones were deliberately humble: none more so than Speaker William Lenthall (d 1662), whose slab at Burford, Oxfordshire, was inscribed simply *vermis sum*, "I am with the worms". Some wanted their graves and monuments to be walked over as a sign of humility, and we should remember this before becoming too melancholy at the sight of wear and tear. Floors are made to be walked on: but some features are too special to be trampled underfoot. Identifying what really matters is a key part of the Ledgerstone Survey's work.

Making a Record – what will we be recording?

Although this survey is mainly concerned with discovering and recording ledgerstones, to ensure that none are missed and to make it easier for Recorders to know what and what not to include, we propose to make a record of all worked stones found in church floors. So we will be noting the presence of:

- Ledgerstones or ledger slabs
- Incised stones, i.e. flat memorials similar to monumental brasses but design engraved directly into the stone rather than on brass inlaid in it
- Coffin slabs
- Indented stones (missing brasses)
- “Slabs” of material other than stone, bearing incised effigies, crosses, etc (e.g. as at Lingfield, Surrey – several tiles with a figure or a monumental brass)
- Mensas –pre-reformation altar slabs, sometimes found laid in the floor, with consecration crosses in each corner and the centre.
- Any other engraved, incised stone in the floor.

Why is a record important?

Making a record of what we inherit is one of the most important duties to face each succeeding generation. It is remarkable just how much has been overlooked by past generations, and how much fresh information is still coming to light. An accurate transcription of an inscription is a valuable contribution to our understanding, as is information about the type of stone, its location, related monuments nearby and so on. Drawn together in one place, this information will become even more valuable. In time to come, local and family historians, admirers of lettering, students of sepulchral and burial fashions, as well as members of the church, will be thankful for this pioneering effort. Some recording has already taken place. For example, local family historians have often recorded inscriptions, but rarely other details. Similarly NADFAS Church Recording Groups are taking the leading role in this survey, and have already produced highly detailed records of around 1,500 parish churches.

Recording wards off oblivion - it is all too easy to take things for granted until suddenly realising that they are no more – by compiling a properly archived record, historic information is captured for future use by generations to come. Becoming involved in such work is a good way of contributing to the safeguarding of our priceless ecclesiastical heritage.

Overview of the process

In volunteering you need to be aware that to play a part in the Survey will require:

- Organisation – there are permissions to be sought, perhaps plans to research and the plotting of the location of individual ledgerstones to be carried out before being able to get down to making a record.
- Time – it takes time to visit a church, to search out the ledgerstones within, to plot them on the Floor Plan, to carefully and accurately record the inscription and to take a photograph, and to produce the final report. Even experienced “stone hunters” can only record accurately 20-30 ledgerstones in a day. Remember, accuracy is all important not speed
- Money – you will need to pay to travel to the site, to photocopy or download forms, for CDs and postage
- Dedication – we need accurate and complete records. This is often easier in a pretty church on a beautiful summer’s day; less so, on a rainy winter afternoon. However whether you record one church or many, rain or shine, we are grateful for your efforts.

Carrying out a Survey – some detailed guidance on the process

Completing a successful survey depends on organisation and planning, diligence and commitment. It may take several visits by individuals or groups. Sometimes you will find you are picking up and continuing the work of others; other times you will be going back to a church to finish off work you may have started some time before. For this reason, it is essential that everyone follows consistent procedures.

The main steps are as follows:

A. Preparatory work

1. Select and assess a church – find a church with ledger stones and estimate how much work will be necessary for you and/or your group. Remember, what looks possible and exciting on a warm summer morning feels less so a few months later as you spend yet another winter afternoon writing down inscriptions. Check with the website to ascertain which churches have already been done or are being done and let them know you will be surveying that church.
2. Obtain permissions to carry out the survey - the most important thing to do. It is best to do this at least one month before beginning formal recording. What access arrangements are required?
3. Assemble your kit – you will need a range of equipment to carry out the different stages of recording, from plenty of Recording Forms, paper and pencils, measuring tape etc.
4. For your own comfort you may take mobile phone, folding chair or stool, First Aid kit, food and drink and warm clothing.
5. Each ledgerstone should be photographed. The preferred format is jpeg of high resolution. Each photograph should be titled to correspond with the numbers on the Plan. Raking light will be needed to bring out the relief of a flat surface, and show up the inscription to their best advantage. This can be achieved by simply using a torch on a stand or holding the camera at an angle.
For photographing the ledgerstones, you will need:
 - Digital camera, memory cards, Scale (30cm/12 inch scale), Notebook
 - Blackboard, chalk and cloth or similar means of numbering the ledgerstones
6. Download the blank forms as word documents at www.lsew.org.uk

B. Recording the church (this may take several visits)

- 1 **Complete the blank forms and refer to the explanatory notes.**
 - 1.1 Complete the details on the **Cover Sheet**
 - 1.2 Plot the ledgerstones on the **Floor Plan**, and list in the **Index**.
 - 1.3 Record the individual ledgerstones onto individual **Recording Forms**.
 - 1.4 **Photograph** each ledgerstone and number according to the plan.

C. Complete and submit report

Before leaving the church for the last time, it is worth making a final field check of the information on your forms. Have you got the spelling right? Is there a stone you missed? Have you switched off the lights?

What to do with the completed surveys

Enter all the information and photographs onto a disc and forward Report on disc to
Dr Neil Rushton
The Churches Conservation Trust
1 West Smithfield
London EC1A 9EE

If you have any queries regarding the completion of the Record forms, please contact the LSEW secretary, John Vigar at jvigar@tcct.org.uk

Appendix:

Grading Standards for the Recording of Ledgerstones

A *For use in only the most exceptional circumstances:*

- **Perfect** – No abrasions or marks, and surface has full lustre. Edges unchipped and no cracks or weathering. All inlaid stone or leading present.

B. *Six categories for general use:*

- **Excellent** – Slight wear on high spots on close examination. Surface properly treated. All other details clear and sharp. Inlaid stone or leading present. Slight chipping to edges.
- **Very Good** – Detail clear, though may be evidence of wear. High spots worn but detail remains. Surface sound. Some loss of inlaid stone or leading. Some chipping of edges, limited cracking to areas free of design or lettering.
- **Good** – Considerable wear over whole stone and high spots worn. Moderate chipping to edges or cracking to areas free of design. Slight loss of inlaid materials or leading. Possible hairline or superficial cracking to areas with design.
- **Fair** – Badly worn but features still mainly distinguishable. Inscriptions legible though some sections may be very worn. Very little detail visible in designs. Extensive loss of inset materials or leading. Large amounts of chipping to edges or cracks across face of stone, with some extending to areas containing detail. Small areas of stone may be missing.
- **Poor** – A very worn stone. Inscriptions worn off, lettering barely legible or almost illegible and only outline design visible. Extensive chipping, cracks affecting lettered sections of stone. Parts of stone containing design missing.
- **Very Poor** – A stone reduced by wear almost to plain flagstone status. Inscriptions worn off, lettering illegible and no design visible. Stone surface pitted, crumbling or uneven. Extensive chipping, cracks or substantial elements missing.
- **Fragmentary**- Deliberately cut ledger to use as paving.