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## **Grave Digging Policy & Procedures**

### **Introduction**

St Erth Parish Council (the Council), as the Burial Authority for Chenhalls Road Cemetery, St Erth (the Cemetery), wants to ensure a high standard of grave digging is maintained that provides both safety and dignity for all. This extends beyond the day of interment to the weeks and months afterwards when the soil is settling to ensure that all graves are maintained to the highest standard.

### **Procedures**

The following procedures are advisory and are not exhaustive. It is the responsibility of all Funeral Directors, Grave Diggers and contractors working in the Cemetery to ensure compliance with all relevant legislation and where these Procedures conflict with legislation, then legislation shall prevail.

No grave or cremation plot can be dug in the Cemetery without the permission of the Council.

No full grave or cremation plot should be dug more than 48 hours before the interment, except by prior arrangement with the Council's Clerk or, in their absence, the Chair or Vice-Chair of the Council.

Upon receiving a request for a burial or interment the Clerk, or in their absence the Chair or Vice-Chair of the Council, shall liaise with the Funeral Director and / or Grave Digger to agree the location of the plot(s).

The Council may undertake spot checks without prior notice to ensure compliance with this Policy & Procedures and any Funeral Director, Grave Digger or other contractor found to be in contravention thereof may be prohibited from working at the Cemetery, and may be charged for reasonable rectification of any works deemed necessary.

The settling period for a grave is defined as 6 months from interment, although the Council reserves the right to extend this to 12 months where there have been issues with a particular grave.

### **Funeral Directors**

Funeral Directors may only engage Council approved Grave Diggers to dig graves or cremation plots in the Cemetery.

All costs incurred for grave digging are payable directly to the Grave Digger by the Funeral Directors.

Funeral Directors will be required to sign an agreement to confirm they have appropriate Health & Safety procedures in place, prior to the Council allowing any work at the Cemetery.

Funeral Directors are responsible for the grave until it has settled; should subsidence occur during the settling period the Council will notify the Funeral Director. If remedial work has not been completed by the Funeral Director within 14 days, the Council may engage its own contractor to remedy the defect and any costs incurred will be payable by the Funeral Director responsible.

## **Grave Diggers**

Only Council approved Grave Diggers may undertake work in the Cemetery.

In order to be considered by the Council for approval, Grave Diggers must provide copies of satisfactory risk assessments and method statements to include safe systems of work, evidence of public liability insurance and two references, preferably from other Councils, and any other relevant documents as the Council deems necessary.

Appropriate Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) must be always worn in accordance with Health and Safety legislative requirements.

Entry and egress from a grave must be by ladder. On no-account must a Grave Digger climb out of a grave by treading on any part of the shoring.

A ladder must remain in place whenever a Grave Digger is working in a grave so as to maintain an emergency exit.

All graves must be dug centrally within the respective grave space. Graves that are not dug centrally within the grave space will increase the risk of collapse, as the intervening wall of undug soil on one side will be of reduced thickness.

All finished graves should be prepared using imitation grass matting. The matting will be laid out neatly on staging leaving no folds or gaps which may cause any person to trip.

The interment area and surrounding graves and headstones are to be left clean and tidy. All equipment must be removed and the paths cleared of any debris.

Any grave that is left unattended for whatever reason must be completely boarded over in such a manner as to prevent any person falling into the grave and fenced off using hazard tape and stakes.

## **Pre-excavation Preparation**

### **General**

It is extremely important that anyone involved in pre-excavation preparation, i.e. Grave Diggers and Funeral Directors, are to follow the advice contained within this policy and these procedures to ensure a safe working environment for all. It is important that Grave Diggers can safely assess the working site, including memorials, assess the risk, record the assessment accurately, and understand the range of options available for making the area safe for all who will use it.

### **Using Risk Assessment Techniques**

Risk assessment is central to ensuring a safe working environment. Grave digging within the burial ground should be covered by a suitable risk assessment and safe system of work

as identified in this policy. When assessing the hazards on a potential excavation site, a few decisions need to be made based on sound risk assessment principles:

### **Which areas of the burial process need to be considered during site preparation**

Consideration should be given to the range of hazards that may exist around the excavation area. Consideration should be given to activities that will subsequently take place:

- safe and easy access for grave digging operatives and equipment;
- safe access for persons attending and officiating at the burial service;
- the health and safety of operatives during the excavation process;
- the health and safety of cemetery visitors.

### **What range of hazards exist in the area surrounding the grave to be excavated**

When considering the safety of the site before, during and after excavation work, the following must be considered:

- Ground conditions – proper consideration of the ground conditions surrounding the grave and on the route to the graveside should be taken account of with particular care to be taken when areas contain multiple trip hazards. A safe route, proper footwear, and care in unstable or wet/slippery conditions should be emphasised in risk assessment for this work.
- Memorials present specific hazards and must be dealt with according to the guidance produced by the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM).
- Correct identification, positioning and marking out of grave.
- Protection of excavation using proper techniques to protect the integrity of the excavation are dealt with later in this document.
- Access and egress into the cemetery with machinery.
- Use of machinery in accordance with Health and Safety legislative requirements and approved codes of practice.

The above risk assessment information is for guidance purposes only, lists are not to be considered all-inclusive but indicative of the types of risks that should be considered.

### **Locating Graves**

All graves to be excavated should be located and identified by using the cemetery grave plan provided by the Clerk of the Council. If there is any doubt as to the location, clarification should be sought from the Clerk in advance of the day planned for the digging of the grave.

### **Excavation & Ground Support**

#### **Preliminaries & Preparation**

The grave space set aside for each burial shall not exceed 2.44m x 0.91m (8 feet long by 3 feet wide).

Grave Diggers will ensure that double depth graves are excavated to a standard depth of 2m (6ft 6") for the first burial, to ensure that there is sufficient space for the second burial in the future.

No part of the coffin shall be at a depth less than 1.0m (3 feet) below the level of the surface of the ground adjoining the grave.

A burial in a grave in which an interment has already taken place, shall require a Grave Digger to ensure that the new coffin is effectively separated from any other coffin previously placed and remaining in the ground by means of a layer of earth not less than 150mm (6 inches) in depth.

All cremation plots will measure 18" x 18" for a single casket and the top of the casket should be a minimum of 2'6" below ground level.

Grave Diggers will ensure that all new graves are aligned so that memorial stones, when installed, will be in a straight line along the row. If in doubt, this must be checked with the Clerk first.

No person shall disturb any interred human remains.

Shoring must be incorporated as digging proceeds. Shoring timbers and struts must be inspected prior to use for any sign of deterioration. Defective timbers and struts must not be used and must be cut down to prevent use by any other person. The amount of shoring equipment required should be assessed according to the required depth of excavation, soil type and weather conditions and the depth of shoring timbers / hydraulic units.

Walkboards must be placed along the length of each side of the grave to be dug, be supported on boards placed across the head and foot ends of the grave and must be capable of carrying the weight of the pall bearers and coffin. They must remain in place for the whole of the burial process.

Soil removed from the grave must be stored safely near the grave site. This soil should not be at risk of collapse and should not obstruct the memorials of nearby graves.

Should water collect in a grave it should be removed prior to the interment. The Council must be contacted immediately before any operation to remove water is commenced.

### **Machine Excavation**

Grave Diggers must ensure that any machine used to dig a grave is operated by a person who has received appropriate training in the use of the machine.

A machine may be used to dig the grave, but backfilling must be completed by hand using appropriate tools.

The machine operator must ensure that no person stands within the area of the radius of the machine boom or bucket and that the working area is clearly marked out.

When moving a digging machine within the Cemetery, the driver must exercise caution and treat the grounds with respect.

When a machine is not in use, it must be parked on hard ground in such a manner that it does not cause an obstruction. When parked, the boom must be lowered with the bucket resting on solid ground. The ignition key must be removed. The blade on tracked machines must be in the down position whenever the vehicle is parked.

The machine operator must ensure that the machine is safely manoeuvred into the digging position.

The blade on a tracked machine must always be in the down position, when digging is in progress.

The operator must ensure that the machine is level before digging commences, to ensure that the sides of the grave are vertical. An unlevelled machine will cause one side of the grave to be under dug, which will increase the risk of grave collapse.

Care must be taken when excavating a grave whilst shoring is in place, to avoid striking any part of the shoring equipment with the machine bucket.

Striking or dislodging shoring will not only increase the risk of collapse of the grave but will also increase risk to the Grave Digger who will be required to rectify the situation.

Digging machines must be operated in accordance with manufacturer's instructions and should be regularly serviced by a qualified person.

Any damage caused by grave-digging machinery must be reported to the Council immediately and remedied by the Grave Digger within 14 days.

### **Preparation for Interment**

Prior to preparing / dressing the grave the surrounding area should be examined to ensure as far as is reasonably practicable, a safe, unobstructed access is available for Funeral Directors, Clergy, and mourners.

Any trip hazards that may be present must be removed.

Lowering webbings and putlogs must be inspected prior to each burial, to ensure that no deterioration or fraying has occurred and that they can take the weight of the coffin. Frayed or damaged webbings should not be used.

Two putlogs should be placed across the grave onto which the coffin may be placed prior to the committal. Putlogs should 4' 6" X 4" (1.37m x 102mm x 102mm) and of good quality knot free planed timber. The distance between the putlogs should no less than 3'6" (1.07mm). Care must be taken to ensure that sufficient webbing is placed on either side of the grave to enable each pallbearer to lower the coffin to the bottom of the grave.

In some instances, there may be insufficient space to the side of the grave for the pallbearers to safely carry the coffin and place it on putlogs directly over the grave. A safer method for this situation is to place a board at either the foot or head end of the grave covered with grass matting on which to place the coffin. Two putlogs are placed across the board so that the coffin can be rested down with no risk of pallbearers trapping fingers. The lowering webbings are also placed across the board. At the appropriate time during the committal service the pallbearers can lift the coffin using the webbings and walk along the walkboards and safely lower the coffin into the grave.

### **Backfilling**

Backfilling should commence immediately after all mourners have left the cemetery and be completed fully on the same day. Backfilling must be carried out by hand using appropriate tools.

Webbings and grass mats must be removed before backfilling commences.

Walkboards should be left in place during the whole of the backfilling procedure to prevent persons walking on any unprotected grave edge.

In order to reduce later subsidence and settlement of the grave, all backfill materials (including the material placed between the liners or vaults and sides of opened graves), shall be tamped and compacted in layers not to exceed 150mm in depth so that a compacted density of 90 percent shall result, using soil free from large lumps. The grave is to be finished with a tidy mound of soil, covered with saved (and if necessary, imported) turfs to leave an immaculate finish. The importance of this action cannot be stressed highly enough as the reduction of instances where the bereaved may be confronted with sunken graves is imperative. It will also subsequently reduce the risk of the memorial tilting and thereby becoming unstable.

Monitoring of the condition of the backfilled grave is to be carried out at regular intervals (at least monthly during the settling period). Remedial work must be undertaken immediately if there is soil settlement leading to an untidy, uneven, or sunken surface and/or if the turves show signs of drought or die-back. The responsibility for monitoring will rest with the Council, whilst any remedial work within the settling period is the responsibility of the Funeral Director

When backfilling large flints, pieces of rock or lumps of clay may damage the coffin when they impact from height. To reduce the risk of coffin damage, an angled timber can be placed into the grave. Backfill material will strike the timber, break its speed of fall, and deflect to the sides of the grave.

Excess spoil remaining following burial is to be removed from site and disposed of by the Grave Digger.

### **Mourner Participation**

Some ethnic and religious groups require carrying out the backfilling of the grave themselves. There is a conflict between health and safety and customer care in this situation and it is for the Funeral Director to assess the risk involved and decide whether to permit mourners to backfill.

In the event the Funeral Director gives permission to the mourners to backfill the grave, *IT SHALL BE AT THE MOURNERS OWN RISK*. The Funeral Director must take control of proceedings and stop backfilling at the relevant stages in order that Grave Digger can remove shoring equipment.

It is vital to the health and safety of mourners that co-operation between the Council, mourners and the Funeral Director conducting the funeral is established prior to the funeral and notified by the Funeral Director to the Council not less than 5 days prior to the date of the funeral.

### **Excavation of re-opened graves**

All processes and procedures above shall apply, with the following additions:

- Care shall be taken when approaching the depth of the previous interment, to ensure no damage to previously interred remains.

### **Exhumation**

All processes and procedures above shall apply, with the following additions:

- Work must not take place unless the relevant paperwork is in place (i.e. the licence issued by the Home Office, or the Faculty issued by the Church Authority)
- Work will only commence following the erection of suitable screening, to prevent public view of the exhumation site
- Suitable lifting equipment shall be engaged as necessary to remove the coffin/remains from the grave. Excess soil shall be cleared from the remains/coffin.
- Freshly ground lime and disinfectant shall be used as required
- The removed items shall be carefully placed in a suitable container. All other items removed from the grave shall be treated and disinfected.
- Should any other remains require removal (to attain access), then such remains shall be returned to the grave in the same position.
- All workers involved with the process shall be supplied with specific PPE (goggles, disposable coveralls, gloves, etc) all of which will be disposed of following the completion of the exhumation.
- Wherever possible, the procedure shall be arranged as early as possible in the morning and outside normal working hours, seeking to achieve completion outside the view of the general public.

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