

# Victorian Cemeteries

The Victorian era is the period encapsulated by the Queen's 63-year reign, the longest of any monarch.

On the death of her husband Prince Albert, Queen Victoria entered a state of mourning, wearing black for the rest of her life. Black and purple became the hallmark colours of Victorian mourning — for clothing, stationery and even cemetery railings and gates. Widows wore respectful black “weeds” for at least two years after their husbands had died.

The Victorians were obsessed with mortality as an unavoidable part of life. Poverty, inadequate sanitation and communicable disease created a high death rate, particularly amongst children and wealth offered little more than a helping hand against it. Most people were vaguely Christian and believed that death led to judgment and a potential passage into heaven.

When someone died, the body was “laid out”, washed, dressed in best clothing and placed in a coffin in the parlour or front room. Curtains were drawn, clocks stopped, mirrors covered and the body watched. After relatives and neighbours had “paid their respects”, the lid was fixed and the coffin taken to the Cemetery. The wealthy could afford ornate coffins conveyed in horse drawn carriages with professional mourners to lead the way but the poor carried their own relatives to the graveside.

The tolling Chapel Bell announced the arrival of a funeral cortege at the cemetery gates. If mourners had already been to a church service the coffin usually went directly to the graveside, otherwise, the coffin entered the chapel feet-first and departed feet-first — still the norm, even in modern crematoria.

At burial the body lies on its back with the head to west and feet to east — an ancient tradition following a belief that the dead would rise facing Christ at his second coming.

Victorian graves tell a great deal about the perceived importance of the deceased and their families. Headstones, monuments and carved texts vary according to social status, wealth and religious belief, whilst the unmarked plots became eternal home to numerous and unrecorded pauper occupiers.



# Victorian Symbolism in Milton Road Cemetery Weston-super-Mare

The cemetery contains a vast display of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century headstones and memorials — each with a story to tell. Some are artistically beautiful, others plain and to the point. Some are proudly triumphant, whilst others evoke quiet grief. Some are for public gaze, others for familial comfort. Those of children are particularly poignant and tender. Chiseled inscriptions range from a few dignified words to epitaphs of unrecognizable exaggeration — few speak ill of the dead in such close proximity to their mortal remains.

Symbolism has always played an important role in humanity's development and still does, even in our more indifferent times.

Some memorials are very personal and unique to the individual and inscriptions can be useful starting points for research into the life of the person interred.

**Anchor** — Greek and Roman sailors often dedicated their anchors to a deity for they were the chief hope in times of storm. It forms one of the most ancient of Christian symbols, sometimes marking a secret meeting place in times of persecution; always drawn as a cross — the symbol of man's 'last hope and refuge' — sometimes embedded in rock. Frequently used on the graves of those from a seafaring background

**Angels** — The heavenly host — intermediaries between God and mankind. Heaven's messengers. The archangels vary in number between four and twelve, though only three appear regularly

- **Michael** (warrior enemy of Satan and weigher of souls, often depicted with sword or scales)
- **Gabriel** (God's messenger, often holding a sceptre or lily)
- **Raphael** (associated with travellers and healing, sometimes with a lion or snake)

During the Middle Ages angels were thought to exist in nine Orders or hierarchical choirs:

- Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones
- Dominations, Virtues, Powers

# Cherubs and Angels





- Principalities, Archangels, Angels

Angels usually have a pair of wings, a nimbus and may hold scrolls, musical instruments or Instruments of the Passion (the title *INRI*, crown of thorns & nails, dice, seamless robe, scourges, cross & sheet, ladder & sponge, lantern of Gethsemane, five wounds of Christ, cockerel of Peter's denial, thirty pieces of silver, hammer & pincers). If the Angel is dropping flowers, a particularly fashionable image adored by the Victorians, it depicts the grave of a young woman taken away before her prime, before she had the chance to blossom into womanhood. Angels in flight symbolise the soul being taken to heaven.

## Animals

- **Butterfly** — An Old Testament concept of the soul. A short life — sometimes seen on children's graves. The caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly represent life, death and resurrection
- **Dog** — Loyalty to a loving Master
- **Dolphin** — Bearing a soul to heaven
- **Dragon** — *Defeated* — Triumph of good over evil usually under the sword of St George or the Archangel Michael.  
*Undefeated* — Satan's triumph, unusual in a cemetery
- **Hart** (male stag deer) — Faithfulness and purity. In old age it may slay a snake or dragon, devour its flesh and be restored to full health and vigour. Christ slaying Satan
- **Horse** — Courage or generosity. An attribute of St. George, St. Martin, St. Maurice and St. Victor, all of whom are represented in Christian art on horseback
- **Lamb** — Universal symbol of Christ from John I and Revelation. "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" Representative of Jewish Passover and used in ancient Egyptian symbolism. Purity, innocence, meekness, gentleness and humility — frequently used in the graves of children
- **Lion** — God's power guarding the tomb against evil spirits. A lion in stone represents courage and determination in the eternal defence of souls. According to the bestiaries lion cubs were born dead and remained so for three days whereupon

# Animals and Birds



their father breathed into their faces and gave them life, hence an association with Christ's Resurrection.

- **Serpent** — Usually associated with powers of darkness but represents eternity when swallowing its own tail, though its coils also indicate limitations of our earthly experiences.
- **Squirrel with a nut** — Religious meditation or spiritual striving.

**Arch** — Columns with an archway — gateway to heaven & eternal life  
Classical symbol of triumph — (*Arc de Triomphe, Marble Arch, Temple Bar*)

**Banner** — Carried in victorious processions and therefore triumphant over death

**Book** — Bible — everlasting faith.

- **Book of life** — Sometimes with details of the deceased.
- **Sign of learning** — On the headstones of teachers & scholars

**Birds** — Some have specific meanings but generally represent the eternal soul.  
Birds in flight represent the soul flying to life eternal — often found on graves of young children

- **Dove** — The most important bird in Judaism & Christianity.  
With an olive sprig in its mouth — peace, forgiveness & hope  
Descending with a three-rayed nimbus — the Holy Spirit at Christ's baptism  
Seven doves — seven gifts of the Holy Spirit
- **Eagle** — One of Revelation's four beasts "round about the throne"  
St John the Evangelist's eyes peering into the mysteries of heaven  
In flight — church lecterns supporting the Bible — the spirit soaring  
Heavenward  
Strength and courage — military headstones
- **Peacock** — Incorruptibility, resurrection, im-mortality, beauty
- **Pelican** — Feeding young from her own blood — sacrifice
- **Phoenix** — Legendary bird. Early symbol of resurrection

**Bouquet** — Sorrow, grief and condolence

**Branch** — When broken or cut short the branch represents mortality.

**Candle** — Life. An illumination in darkness. Christ as "light of the world"

# Crosses and Cloths





**Chain** — Family; if broken “God will link the broken chain” reuniting the family after death

- Three links — Holy Trinity
- God’s hand plucking a link from the chain — God bringing the soul unto himself

**Cherub** — Child angels — innocence & purity — often on the gravestones of children.

- As **Amorino** or **Putto** they are decorative cupid heads and Classical rather than Christian often portrayed as a small chubby faced boy.

*(Cupid was the Roman god of love, a winged boy with bow and arrow;*

*Eros — Greek counterpart)*

**Column** — Doric, Ionic or Corinthian. An upstanding individual. Head of the family. Associated with architects and builders. If broken — a life cut short

**Cross** — A world-wide decorative symbol, linked particularly with Christianity, the Crucifixion and heraldry. There are over 400 variations with about 20 in regular use

- **Calvary Cross** — Latin cross mounted on the three steps of Faith, Hope and Charity
- **Celtic**, Iona or Wheel-head Cross — with a circle around the cross piece representing eternity
- **Christus Rex** — Christ on the cross, crowned and robed
- **Crucifix** — A cross with the image of Christ crucified.
- **Christ in agony** — With eyes open
- **Corpus Christi** — With eyes closed
- **Greek Cross** — Arms of equal length
- **Latin or Passion Cross** — Elongated and upright

**Crown** — Glory. Various styles of crowns & coronets are used heraldically to signify earthly rank

**Draped cloth** — Often seen over columns or urns and representative of mourning

**Flowers** — Flowers convey love, grief, happiness and other emotions. During the 1800’s floral symbolism became so popular that almost every known flower had a meaning attached to it

# Flowers



## *Specifically*

- **Acacia** — Immortality,
- **Anemone** — Trinity
- **Bulrush** — Hope of salvation
- **Buttercup** — Cheerfulness
- **Cala Lily** — Marriage
- **Carnation** — Pure love
- **Christmas Rose** — Nativity
- **Clover** — Trinity
- **Columbine** — Holy Spirit
- **Crocus** — Youthful gladness
- **Daffodil** — Death of a youth, desire, art, grace, beauty & deep regard
- **Daisy** — Innocence
- **Fleur-de-lys** — Passion, ardour, mother
- **Forget-me-not** — Remembrance
- **Honeysuckle** — Love, generosity, devotion
- **Iris** — Sorrow
- **Ivy** — Eternal life, fidelity, friendship
- **Lily** — Humility, purity. Associated with the Virgin Mary & restored innocence. Often seen on women's graves
- **Lily of the valley** — Return of happiness, purity, humility
- **Morning Glory** — Resurrection, mourning, youth, brevity of life
- **Narcissus** — Divine love
- **Passion Flower** — The Passion of Christ : a lacy crown represents the crown of thorns, the five stamens are the wounds of Christ, the ten petals are the faithful apostles
- **Pansy** — Remembrance & humility
- **Poppy** — Peace, rest, sleep, consolation

# Fruit, Hands and Heart





- **Rose** — Unfailing love, hope & beauty — associated with the Virgin Mary as the “rose without thorns”. The Mystic Rose is also Marian. Red — martyrdom; white — purity & virginity. Shown in bud or flower may indicate age of the deceased and joined rosebuds show bond between people eg mother and child dying together. A wreath of roses indicate beauty and virtue rewarded
- **Thistle** — Earthly sorrow
- **Violet** — Humility

**Fruit** — Abundance, but particular fruit can represent other meanings:

- **Almond** — Divine approval
- **Apple** — Salvation
- **Cherry** — Good works
- **Figs** — Prosperity & eternal life
- **Pineapples** — Prosperity & eternal life
- **Pomegranate** — Fertility. Hope of immortality & resurrection
- **Strawberry** — Righteousness
- **Grapes** — Sacrifice. The blood of Christ by association with wine

**Wreath or Garland** — The use dates back to ancient Greek times; a symbol of victory, eternal life & memory. Adopted by Christianity to illustrate redemption

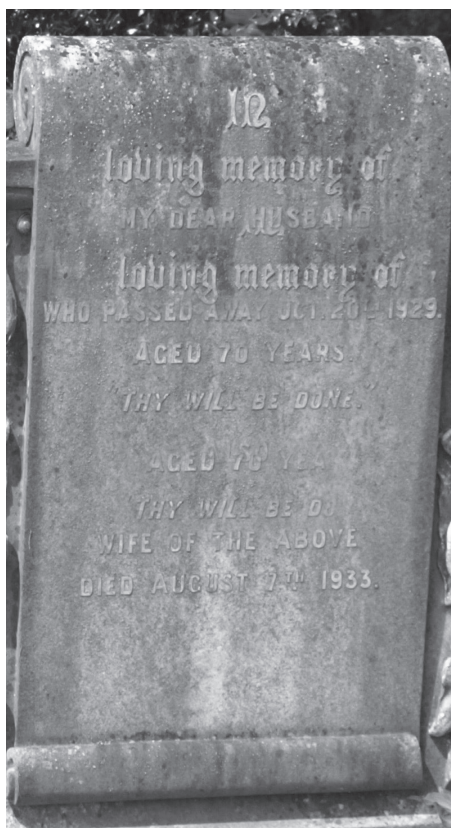
- **Laurel wreaths** — Distinction in the arts, literature, athletics or the military
- **Ivy wreaths** — Conviviality
- **Maiden’s Garland** — A garland of white paper or linen, embellished with streamers and a single white glove, carried at funerals of unmarried women of blameless reputation. The garlands were hung in church after the funeral, allowed to decay and then buried in the graveyard

**Gates** — Doors and gates represent a passage through to the after life; gate way to Heaven

### **Geometric**

- **Circle** — Universally symbolic of never ending existence. Conjoined — earth and sky; man and woman. Various arrangements of triple circles — trefoil, triquetra, interwoven represent the Trinity. The triquetra being composed of three equal arcs in continuous form represents both Trinity and Eternity

# Monograms and Scrolls



- **Square** — Earth and earthly existence
- **Star** — Soul, enlightenment and wisdom
- **Five-pointed** — Pre-Christian & magical with protective powers. The five senses.
- **Five books of Moses** — Christ's five wounds. Epiphany
- **Six-pointed** — Two equal triangles. Star of David & symbol of Judaism. Divine protection. Creation. Being triangular it is also representative of the Trinity
- **Seven-pointed** — Seven gifts of the Spirit
- **Eight-pointed** — Regeneration
- **Nine-pointed** — Nine fruits of the Spirit
- **12-pointed** — Twelve tribes of Israel

**Hair** — Victorian figures with long hair represent penitence

**Hands** — Many meanings but principally 'goodbye'. Clasped may indicate a relationship or a guide heavenward. Downward pointing fingers call the living to bear witness; upward pointing fingers show the heavenward route

**Harp** — Peace between Heaven and Earth. St Cecilia's (Patron Saint of musicians) emblem and illustrative of a musician

**Heart** — Love, mortality, courage and intelligence as well as depicting the love of God

**Heraldry** — Shields & crests of armigerous families

**Lamp** — Immortality of spirit. Love of learning, knowledge and truth

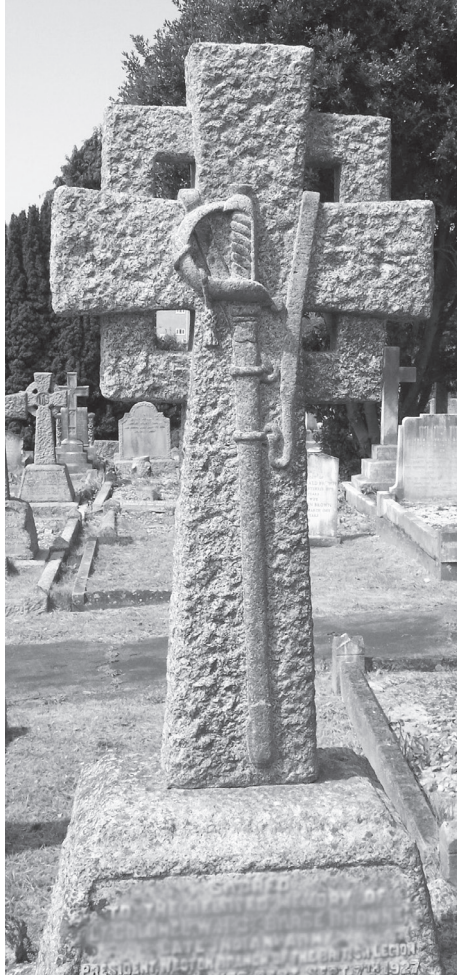
**Linenfold** — Vertical folds representative of the single linen garment in which Christ was wrapped after the Crucifixion

**Monograms** — Interwoven letters taken from Greek or Latin to form a symbol. A horizontal, slightly wavy line over the letters indicates an abbreviation

- **Alpha (α) and Omega (Ω)** — First and last letters of the Greek alphabet (*alpha* = *A*; *beta* = *B*). The beginning and end of all things. The everlasting nature of Christ's divinity as in "I am Alpha and Omega" from the Book of Revelation
- **Chi-Rho (or Labarum)** — **XP** — **HPC** — First letters of Christ in Greek — XPICTOC



# Swords Scythes and Trees





- **IHC / IHS** — Greek spelling of Jesus — IHCOYC was shortened to IHC (sometimes IHS)
- **INRI** — From the Latin — “Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum” — “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” which was written over the Cross
- **MADI** — The “Mater Dei” from the abbreviated Latin for Mary Mother of God
- **MR** — From Latin “Maria Regina” — Mary Queen (of heaven)
- **NIKA** — Greek for Victor
- **RIP** — Latin for “Requiescat in pace” — may he rest in peace
- **SANCTUS** — Usually in triple form — Latin for “Holy, Holy, Holy”

**Obelisk** — Ancient Egyptian symbol for eternal life, also represents rebirth and the connection between Heaven and Earth

**Pyramid** — Pyramid-shaped tombstone prevents the devil reclining on a grave

**Rebus** — Pictorial pun on a name

**Rock** — Associated with St Peter- “the rock” upon whom the Church was set. Everlasting strength, unshakeable faith and eternal foundation

**Rope** — Twist of rope is eternity

**Scroll** — Five books of Moses

- **Symbolic** of life. Past and future are hidden in the rolled-up ends of the scroll
- **Life** unfolding like a scroll
- **Honour** and commemoration

**Scythe** — Death and the divine harvest. The “Grim Reaper”

**Seven** — Holy number. Days of creation; Phases of the moon; Spirits before the throne of God; Joys of the Virgin; Virtues; Spirits of God; Deadly Sins; Sacraments; Works of Mercy; Champions of Christendom

**Steps** — Stairway to Heaven. Three steps represent the Holy Trinity

**Sun** — **Rising** — renewed life, resurrection

- **Setting** — death

# Trumpets, Urns and Wreathes



**Sword** — Military career. If crossed — death in battle

**Trees** — Trees represent life and knowledge as well as the all-covering love of Christ, but particular trees have further meanings:

- **Bamboo** — The emblem of Buddha. The seven-knotted bamboo denotes the seven degrees of initiation and invocation in Buddhism. On Japanese memorials, symbolic of devotion and truthfulness
- **Cypress tree** — Designates hope
- **Dogwood** — Christianity, divine sacrifice, triumph of eternal life, resurrection
- **Hawthorn** — Hope, merriness, springtime.
- **Holly** — Foresight
- **Laurel Leaves** — Special achievement, distinction, success, triumph
- **Oak tree** — Hospitality, stability, strength, honour, eternity, endurance, liberty. It is believed to have been the tree from which Jesus Christ's cross was made. In smaller pioneer cemeteries, it is common to place children's graves near oak trees. The oak tree was the tree of life in pre-Christian times. The Druids worshipped the oak. The oak, oak leaves and acorn can stand for power, authority or victory. Often seen on military tombs
- **Olive branch** — Peace
- **Palm** — Spiritual victory, success, eternal peace. Palm Sunday and Christ's victory over death a week later at Easter
- **Tree** — The all-covering love of Christ. Life, the Tree of Life
- **Severed branch** — Mortality
- **Sprouting** — Life everlasting
- **Vine** — The sacraments. God's blood as in the consecrated wine of the mass
- **Weeping Willow** — Nature's lament, sorrow and mourning
- **Yew tree** — Sadness, eternal life

**Trinity** — God as Father, Son and Spirit. Triangle/Trefoil/Triquetra with or without circles. Equilateral triangle. Three steps. Eye of God surrounded by a triangle and a circle

**Trumpet** — Heralds the Resurrection

**Urn** — Greek symbol of mourning. The body as a vessel for the soul. Repository for the ashes of the dead. Often with a flame or draped cloth as a sign of mourning

**Virtues** — Faith, Hope and Charity are represented by a cross, anchor and heart

**Wheat** — Divine harvest and passage of time. Resurrection. The “Body of Christ” — for consecrated bread at the mass. With grape/wine signifying both elements of the mass

**Wreath** — Victory of the redemption. A laurel wreath is usually associated with a person who has a distinction in the arts, literature or military