

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES AND THE CLASSROOM:

CHURCHYARD SURVEY

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Introduction

Many schools are within easy walking distance of a churchyard or public cemetery. For the teacher such sites are resources which can be utilised in a variety of different ways. Here we concentrate on the process of recording names and ages from gravestones. This data handling exercise will then allow us to answer questions about life expectancy in the past.

National Curriculum Links

This activity provides a focus for cross-curricular work on several aspects of the National Curriculum programmes of study. These include.

Maths

- Ma2/1** Using and applying number
- Ma2/ 2g, 2h** Fractions, percentages and ratio
- Ma4/ 1** Using and applying handling data
- Ma4/ 2** Processing, representing and interpreting data

History

- H4** Historical Enquiry
- H5** Organisation and communication

Aims: To provide a focus for numeracy work at KS2 (data handling, averages)

To investigate life expectancy in Victorian Britain

Equipment: Clipboard, pencils, survey sheets, number lines

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

Planning the activity

Contact should be made with the local vicar/ cemetery superintendent to obtain permission to carry out the activity and for information regarding the condition of the monuments (See Health and Safety issues below). You will also need to arrange a time when your activity does not conflict with other church activities such as weddings and funerals.

You will need to decide in which areas of the churchyard you wish to work. As a general rule I tend to work in the older parts of the churchyard and will avoid those areas where burials are still being made. This lowers the possibility of the possibility of the children meeting with the headstone of a family member or friend, who has recently died, and minimises the prospect of causing upset by doing so.

In the Classroom

Begin with a discussion about then and now, trying to bring out such concepts as continuity and change. Start with questions about family members. For younger pupils there is an opportunity to rehearse the vocabulary of relationship (*What is the word for your father's brother?*). Then move on to questions specifically about age. (*Who is the oldest member of your family? How old are your grandparents?*) Or about figures in the news. Move on to more general questions such as *In which parts of the world do you think that people live longest?* or *Do you think people are living longer now than in the past?* Try to reach some conclusion and explain to the pupils that you are now going to test the hypothesis by a maths exercise.

In the Churchyard

Talk to children about behaviour in the churchyard. Remind them not to run and not to climb on the monuments. This is not just a question of Health and Safety, but also of respect. You will want not only the children, but also other users of the churchyard to have a positive view of the activity.

Split the class into pairs or small groups each with a clipboard, pencil, a copy of your recording sheet. Some pupils may also find a number line useful.

Explain to the pupils that they will be using a tally chart to record information in the churchyard. I find a need to explain such issues as:

- What exactly they should do. *Look for the person's age on the headstone. Look for the appropriate date range on your recording sheet and put your tally there.*
- There's an opportunity for talking about date ranges. 1800 to 1849 is 50 years not 49 as some children (and teaching students) seem to think.
- Problems about phrasing. For example on some occasions the age of death is not stated but phrases like *in her 65th year* will be used. Pupils need to be reminded that the person in question is 64 not 65. I find the parallel with

school sometimes helps. *You are in year six, but you won't actually have been six years in school until you leave. An alternative might be to discuss centuries. We are in the 21st century now. Have we reached the year 2100?*

- Problems caused by words unfamiliar to the pupils e.g. *relict and spinster*.

Each group is then assigned a row of headstones, asked to look for the appropriate data. From the point of view of not having the class spread out too much, I find it useful to assign one half of the class to study girls' names and the other boys'. This will also allow the discussion of such ideas as *Did men live longer than women at particular periods in history?*

Care needs to be taken that pupils stay on the rows to which they are assigned. Clearly if a stone is recorded twice this will affect the validity of the data.

Children also need to take care to record all the relevant names on the headstone. Many record more than one member of the family, so children will need to look for more than one name.

Back in the classroom

Once back in the classroom the data can be evaluated. The first step is to collate all the information the children have gathered. I have found it can be done relatively quickly by asking a representative from each group of children to hold up an equivalent number of fingers for each of the tallies in a given box.

This data can then be analysed in a number of different ways according to the age and sophistication of the children.

For young children simple questions like *Who lived longest, men or women?* or *Are more people living longer?* might be sufficient. However, there is further work which could be done analysing averages, discussing ratios (for example, of male to female life expectancy at a given period) and considering the best way to display the information. The latter of course could involve the use of IT in constructing pie charts and bar graphs.

For those considering this primarily as a history rather than a maths project. There are also a number of issues relating to the nature of the evidence which can be discussed by raising the question *Were there many children's graves?* In a Victorian cemetery they will be severely under represented due to the cost of erecting a monument. This reflects on such topics as *Rich and Poor in Victorian Britain*. Pupils might then be asked to suggest alternative ways of finding out information and perhaps be provided with a sample from a local parish register.

Variant Exercise

A similar exercise can be carried out on the popularity of certain names at given times. In that case I would start the session with questions about whether there are people in the class/year group with the same name. For instance I recently worked with a school in which 5 of the boys in year 5 were called Josh. From there I go on to ask if their grandparents have the type of name that is used now. Ask what the pupils think might influence the choice of names. Is it famous people (pop stars for instance), names of characters in books or TV programmes (J. M. Barrie, author of Peter Pan, made the name *Wendy* up). Are they Biblical names or perhaps the names of the royal children?

Working with names does however require a little bit more mathematical skill. A name is given when a person is born, not when they die. It is therefore necessary to subtract the age at death from the year of death to find the date at which the child was born.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Permission

Permission should be sought from the minister/cemetery superintendent before undertaking a churchyard survey. S/he will be able to inform you of unsafe monument which should be avoided. Other factors which you will need to consider are given in our accompanying download '*Risk Assessment Action Plan*'.

OTHER IDEAS FOR USING YOUR LOCAL CHURCHYARD

Churchyards can also form a focus for other activities. These include:

Art:

It is possible to make rubbings of some of the patterns/text engraved on the stones. These could be used as the basis of further work back in the classroom.

You could look at the influences of history on the style of monuments. Some are built as classical Greek or Roman Columns. Others are Celtic crosses or have elements taken from medieval architecture. Undercliffe cemetery at Bradford even has a vault designed in the Egyptian style complete with two Sphinxes.

Citizenship: What is the best way to look after such places? Should we mow the spaces between the monuments in an attempt to preserve the archaeological landscape? Or should we allow parts of the churchyard to return to nature to encourage biodiversity?

Ecology:

The number of species of plants and animals which live in the churchyard can be very varied, especially in those which have areas which have become overgrown.

Geology:

Where do the different types of stone come from?

Literacy:

How are the sentiments expressed? Do we use language like that today? If copies of parish records are available for comparison with the headstone evidence, handwriting could be studied.

History:

Churchyards can provide material to illustrate several other aspects of the past. These include:

Rich and Poor in Victorian Britain. Compare the size of monuments. In Holbeck cemetery a former Mayor of Leeds has a monument with a praying angel on top. At the lower end of the cemetery people are stacked six deep in paupers' graves.

Famous Local People. Some West Yorkshire churches contain memorials to famous people who lived and worked here. The poet, Sylvia Plath, is buried at Heptonstall and there is a memorial to the Victorian engineer Matthew Murray in Holbeck churchyard.

Locally important events. Some churchyards have monuments to people who died in local disasters. Otley, for instance, has a monument to men who died when a railway tunnel at Bramhope collapsed during construction. Thornhill has memorials to men who died during a mining disaster.

Information Technology:

Work in churchyards presents an opportunity to record the headstones, or the work taking place, with a digital camera. This could then be used as a basis for a PowerPoint presentation.

Maths:

Measuring and drawing plans of the churchyard.

Designs on the headstones can also be used as a basis for work on symmetry.

Personal and Social Education:

Attitudes to death (both the children's and the sentiments expressed on the gravestones)

Religious Education

Religious ritual

...a final tip:

Whenever you carry out a project like this you will be seen by lots of people. Why not capitalise on this and write a brief article for the parish magazine explaining what you've been doing and what your results were. It's your chance to inform the local community about the good work that you do at your school.

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FURTHER READING

Churchyard Surveys

Mytum H., 2000, *Recording and Analysing Graveyards*

General works about churchyards and cemeteries

Burnham, P., and Stapleton H., 1988 (Third edition), *The Churchyard Handbook*

Lees, H., 2000, *English Churchyard Memorials*

Other Ideas for Working in Churches and Churchyards

Morris R, and Corbishley M., 1996, *Churches, Cathedrals and Chapels*