

Grave Understanding

Elizabeth Jones offers tips to assist you in your cemetery research at home and afar

To some people, researching your family tree is a dusty activity carried out in the confines of record libraries and local archives. However, this is not always the case. A key part of researching your family tree is spending time in the great outdoors, visiting villages where your ancestors once lived or wandering lonely graveyards looking for the correct headstone.

To the uninitiated, headstones and family monuments may not seem the most interesting objects, but they can contain vital information, such as the correct date of birth or the names of forgotten ancestors. While this process is rewarding, it can also be time consuming. What follows are some tips designed to help you with your search.

If you don't know where your ancestors are buried, sometimes a parish will have more than one place of burial, then you will need to track down the relevant parish burial registers. Usually held by the local archives, these will tell you where your ancestors were interred. If you are lucky, the local archives may also hold plans of the relevant graveyard, which will show you exactly where the grave is.

Sometimes archive services will also hold surveys of graveyards. These usually contain transcriptions of the headstones in the graveyard. While this may seem like a time-saving solution, it is still wise to visit the location yourself, if possible, as information may have been incorrectly recorded or omitted.

When visiting the site, be sure to take a notebook with you to record any details that you learn. Many people also like to take photographs of the grave, while others prefer to take rubbings; either method can provide a physical link to an otherwise distant relative.

If your family is not native to the country in which you are living, then don't be surprised to find your ancestor's headstone inscribed in their native language. If this is the case and you are unable to read the text, don't despair. Simply record it as best you can and translate it later. This is where a camera often comes in handy as it allows you to accurately record the inscription.

A table translating some of the more common words and phrases found on gravestones into a



Graveyard in Gjemnes, Norway.
(Photo by Halvard Hatlen, 2006, Wikimedia Commons)

range of European and Slavic languages is available at <http://yourgenealogytoday.com/languageable.pdf>.

If you are still struggling to understand the text, both Cyndi's List (www.cyndislist.com/languages/foreign-language-translations-and-dictionaries-genealogy) and Ancestry (<http://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Researching-Foreign-Language-Records>) have a collection of useful resources such as dictionaries and other research tools.

If you come from a Jewish family, you may find your ancestors graves inscribed in Hebrew. JewishGen (www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/tombstones.html) has compiled a helpful guide to understanding Hebrew inscriptions.

Finally, be sure to take notice of any symbols carved onto the headstone. This was a common practice in the Victorian era. Today these may appear to be pretty decorations, but at the time, they were full of meaning. For example, the daisy was seen as a symbol of innocence and often used on the graves of children, while an oak leaf symbolized longevity. A helpful list, complete with pictures, allowing you to identify and decipher any symbols you may find can be found at Grave Addiction (www.graveaddiction.com/symbol.html). ☞☞



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