

SYMBOLISM

On the Memorials



The Friends of Cathays Cemetery

By the 19th century, the carvings made upon gravestones had changed from symbols of salvation and figures of Hope, Faith and Charity with urns of all types, to a more compact image with a cross, foliage or flowers. Many general carvings, the favourites of the masons were also popular, some copied from pattern books or examples of architecture and symbols from nature. Occasionally a representation of an accident or disaster was used. This short booklet illustrates some of the hidden meanings of the symbols found on the different monuments.



ANCHOR & CHAIN

Symbolises firm faith in salvation. “Hope” or “At Rest”. An Early Christian symbol.

ANGELS



The agent of God, often pointing heavenwards. Also the guardians of the dead. These represent resurrection, the soul of the deceased on its way to heaven.

BED

A deathbed, sometimes only a pillow. Eternal sleep.

BIRD – Often a Dove – FLYING DOWN

With the Holy Spirit

BIRD – FLYING UP

The spirit ascending

PERCHED BIRD

Like Noah's dove after the flood.

BONES

A symbol of mortality. The skull and crossbones are believed to be the parts of the body required for resurrection and date back at least to the medieval period.

BOOK

The Testament or the Bible, often open at a suitable page. Often with a cross lying on it, symbolising faith and resurrection through scripture or a member of the clergy. Books can also mean wisdom.

BROKEN COLUMN

Cut off in the prime of life or a loss of support, often denotes death of head of the family. Traditionally signifies mortality, the support of life being broken.

BROKEN OR SEVERED FLOWER

A sign of early or sudden death. A severed bud denotes a child.

BUTTERFLY

A symbol of resurrection.

CELTIC CROSS



Originally associated with the pre-Norman Church particularly in Wales, Scotland, Ireland & Cornwall.

CIRCLE



The sign of eternity. Usually incorporated into the Celtic cross.

CLASPED HANDS



Found on family graves and symbolising either the hope of reunification in the next life or “Farewell, see you soon.” A symbol of farewell, friendship or brotherly love.

CROSS



The symbol of the Christian religion or salvation.

CROWN

The emblem of the Christian martyr who may expect reward in heaven. Symbolic of victory, honour and glory.

CYPRESS TREE

Mourning and death on account of its dark colour and because once it is cut down it never grows again.

DOVE

The Holy Ghost or peace. The dove could also mean innocence or purity and with a twig in its mouth it could mean hope or promise.

GATE OR ARCH

Entry into Heaven.

HEART

Represents the virtue of love, devotion and charity. When shown with flames it means the fire of Divine love.

HORSE

Strength, courage or the swiftness of the passage of time.

HOURL-GLASS

The transience of this life, mortality and the passage of time. A traditional symbol of Father Time.

IHS



The sacred monogram; an abbreviation of the word for Jesus in Greek.

IVY



Memories remaining evergreen, symbolising immortality or friendship.

LABYRINTH

In popular usage, symbolises eternity; used in esoteric tradition to represent the inward path.

LAMB

Innocence, sometimes used on a child's grave.

LAMB with CROSS and BANNER

Known as the Agnus Dei, latin for the Lamb of God representing Christ.

LAMP

The light of knowledge and truth, Immortality.

LAUREL WREATH

Accolade to life's achievements. Fame. Often of a literary or artistic figure.

LILY



Purity and innocence.

LION

Courage, strength, the Resurrection.

LYRE – (HARP)

A recognition of musical talents.

OBELISK

A tall rectangular or triangular pointed column which is the ancient Egyptian symbol for eternal life and health.

PALETTE AND BRUSHES

The artist's accolade.

PALM

Symbolises the triumph of life or a martyr over death through resurrection.

PASSION FLOWER



Christ's passion, sacrifice and redemption.

PELICAN



The Pelican feeds its chicks with blood by plucking its breast. Symbolises Christ.

PHOENIX

Christ's Resurrection.

ROCKS

A remainder of St Peter, the rock of faith. The Church or Christian steadfastness.

ROSE



Goodness and innocence. Sinless, usually associated with the Virgin Mary or paradise.

SCYTHE or SICKLE

The passage of time and death.

SERPENT

Ancient Egyptian symbol for life and health.

SERPENT or SNAKE – Swallowing or biting Tail

Life eternal, eternity

SERPENT or SNAKE – entwined around a poppy

Eternal sleep

SERPENT or SNAKE – entwined around an hourglass

Links time and eternity.

SET SQUARE & COMPASSES

Usually a masonic mark but also used to denote an architect.

SHELL

Pilgrimage, the badge of pilgrims who travelled to Compostella in Spain.

SHIP

The Christian church, symbolically carrying the faithful through the world.



SKULL

These are the most simple and common symbol of death, the mortality we must all succumb.

SUNDIAL

Passage of time.

SWORD

Justice, constancy or fortitude.

TORCH

The human being, immortality.

UPRIGHT TORCH

Human life

TORCH ENTWINED BY SNAKE

Health

INVERTED TORCH

Life extinguished, death.

TREE

The tree of Life, regeneration and immortality.

YEW TREE

Evergreen, life after death. Mourning on account of its dark colour and association with churchyards.

WILLOW TREE

Grief and mourning

TRUMPET

Victory and resurrection.

URNS



Symbol of death copied from cinerary urns of antiquity. Often draped and empty, symbolises death. If flaming indicates new life. Generally represents the soul and when draped or leant upon by a mourning figure they form a Classical image of grief or mourning.

WEEPERS

Mourning figures holding a skull are believed to represent children who died before the parent whose memorial it is.

WHEAT

Fruitfulness gathered (harvested) into a new life, often denotes someone dying in later life.



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