

Tombstone Genealogy

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There are many articles providing technical tips and descriptions of the tools needed to rub tombstones or incised memorial brass lids that cover coffins.¹ This article is not one of them. Rather, it is an article about exploring one's desire to rub or not to rub a tombstone. I do not propose that the act of rubbing a tombstone is always a good practice. I do intend to look at the reasons people sometimes have to rub them.

Rubbings from tombstones or grave markers are of interest, partly because they offer valuable genealogical information about our ancestors. An oil painting of the interior of the Old Church at Delft in 1656 shows people making a rubbing of a stone or brass. Again in the seventeenth century, artist Hendrik van Vliet painted the same activity in progress in the New Church at Delft. No rubbings from so early a date have survived, but these pictures give proof that such an activity existed.



Old Church, Delft



New Church, Delft

Some of the earliest surviving full-scale rubbings of brasses were made at the end of the eighteenth century by the antiquarian Craven Ord. Ord's collection, now kept in the British Museum, is of special value since he recorded some brasses and parts of brasses that have since disappeared. Rubbings are revered not only for their value as copies of relics, but because they contain memorial inscriptions of the persons they commemorate. Whereas the history of our ancestors is recorded in bibles, censuses, and county records, inscriptions or motifs carved on grave markers offer additional documentation or new information for those whose records cannot be found. Some grave markers are appreciated and rubbed for their aesthetic qualities.

In recent years there has been a remarkable growth in the number of persons who have taken to tombstone rubbing for artistic, historical, or genealogical research and records. Inevitably this has aroused misgivings among thoughtful people deprecating the practice, warning that repeated rubbing may prove in time to cause deterioration. Friction from heavy rubbing will inevitably increase damage to a stone monument whose surface is disintegrating with the elements of weather or is being claimed by vines, bracken and lichen. On no account should one attempt to rub such a stone. On

¹ Pertinent articles are:

Cook, Malcolm. *Discovering Brasses and Brass Rubbing*. Shire Publications Ltd. (Colchester, U.K.), 1971.

Catling, H. W. *Notes on Brass Rubbing*, Ashmolean Museum (Oxford, U.K.), 1973.

Beedell, Suzanne. *Brasses and Brass Rubbing*, John Bartholomew and Son Ltd. (Edinburgh, Scotland), 1973.

Skinner, Michael Kingsley. *How to Make Rubbings*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. (New York), 1973.

the other hand, a stone which is in fair condition, clean and firmly fixed, will suffer no measurable injury or abrasion, provided it is carefully and correctly rubbed with recommended materials.

Tombstone rubbing can serve many interests and be turned to for a number of reasons. For example, it is a pursuit that has the benefit of creating a memento of an ancestor, and it is a way to collect accurate copies of information from original documentation for study and research.

The question is: "Will rubbing a stone contribute to spoiling it?" I've made rubbings of tombstones and left confident that I did not cause damage.

In some cases, I've found clerics or cemetery sextons who are responsible for the graveyard and asked permission to rub a tombstone. There is an ancient churchyard surrounding a 500-year old parish church in the County of Argyll, Scotland, near Loch Fyne where I and my husband, Wally, searched for and found a Ewing ancestor's burial plot. Anne MacEwen was buried there in 1851. We asked a local historian and preservationist of the church for permission to rub the gravestone. She replied that no rubbing was allowed. After a conversation about our mutual interest in genealogy and appreciation of historical markers, she reconsidered our request and declared: "It's your tombstone. Rub it if you wish." It is nice to have the rubbing as a memento of our discovery of Anne's burial site and as a different kind of record of Ewing genealogy.



Jane making a rubbing of Anne MacEwen's tombstone, Argyll, Scotland

In summary, to rub or not to rub a gravestone is a difficult decision and should be made on an individual basis. I've been granted permission and, when not able to contact a pastor or vicar, followed my own instincts about whether or not it was wise to rub a particular stone. Grave monuments should be cherished and protected because they are irreplaceable, unique historical records and memorials that perpetuate the memory of the dead. This is to be respected.

Jane Ewing earned her bachelor's degree from Western Michigan University and master's degree from Wright State University in Ohio. She has been a lettering artist for the past twenty-five years, exploring traditional and abstract calligraphy. Her work has been published in Letter Arts Review and accepted by the Smithsonian Institution and juried exhibitions.