

THE TWENTY TWO ESSENTIAL THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU START THE PROCESS OF CHOOSING A GRAVESTONE

A gravestone, or memorial as it is more commonly referred to in our trade, is a lasting tribute to a life now ended; an expression of love and respect for the life of a person. Done well, a memorial will be a source of comfort to those who are left behind and will act as a lasting record for future generations to see.

Choosing and designing a gravestone for someone you love is, for most people, a very emotional and often difficult experience to come to terms with. However it presents you with a unique opportunity to create something that will express the personality and love of a person who was very special to you. It is therefore very important at this time to ensure you make the right decisions and to make those decisions requires an understanding of what goes into the making of a memorial and all the options open you.

The following is a summary of the twenty two essential things you need to know before you begin this process. If you require more detailed information on any of these, please let us know.

1. What the Cemetery Regulations allow.

This is your starting point. All cemeteries and churchyards have regulations covering the type and size of memorials they allow and whether or not you can have surrounds or edgings in front of them. Unfortunately these regulations can vary considerably. Some rules may seem petty and unreasonable but they are there to ensure that there is an element of conformity throughout the cemetery and they also acknowledge the fact that what one person may consider to be perfectly acceptable in a burial ground, others may find offensive. Generally speaking local authority owned cemeteries tend to be more liberal in what they will allow than those run by religious bodies or private companies.

type of memorial you are looking for you must be prepared to accept that the process may take many months to complete and that there is a chance there could be unforeseen problems or delays along the way.

3. How many names and how much text will you want to put on the memorial?

In all probability at this point in time there will only be one person's name going on the memorial. However, it is important think ahead because the number of people who might want to be recorded on the memorial in the future will, to an extent, determine the size of the headstone you will require.

Just as important is what you want the memorial to say. Deciding on the words is probably the most difficult part of choosing a memorial. The important thing to remember is that there is no "correct" way to do this. The words are a very personal thing so make sure the words feel right for you. In this whole process the most important people are you and the person you are remembering.

4. The characteristics of stones used to make memorials.

Stone is a naturally occurring material and each type of stone has its own unique characteristics which will affect the appearance of the memorial. Throughout history the most common types of stone used to make memorials have been sandstone, limestone, slate, marble and granite and each has its own particular qualities.

Around 95% of all the memorials sold today are made from granite. Granite is the hardest of all stones and is virtually unaffected by weather. It is available in an extremely wide variety of colours, although black is by far the most common colour. Granite memorials, particularly those which are polished all over, are generally easier to maintain in a pristine condition.

5. The different types of stone finish.

Stone can have a variety of finishes ranging from a natural, rugged finish though to a highly polished, mirror-like finish. The smoother the finish the easier it will be to look after. All stones can be polished but

only granite retains its polish for any significant length of time.

6. Choice of shape.

Traditionally, because of the cost, the vast majority of memorials have basically been rectangular in form with a shaped top. However, modern machinery has radically reduced manufacturing costs, making complex shapes more affordable. The addition of tapered bevelled edges can transform a plain outline into an elegant art form at little extra cost.

7. The design and layout of the lettering.

The form and layout of the lettering is probably the most important part of memorial design. Well done it can make a memorial look attractive without the need for any other form of ornamentation. Wherever possible the words should create well defined blocks or shapes of text, preferably reflecting the shape of the stone.

The advent of computer graphics has certainly made the laying out of lettering on a memorial a much easier process but ultimately it is the artistic skill of the person doing the layout and their attention to detail that determines whether the lettering is pleasing to the eye or not.

8. Colouring letters.

Letters cut into the surface of the memorial are usually coloured to make them easier to read. They are usually either gilded with gold leaf or painted with a durable, weather-resistant paint. Paint can be longer lasting than gold leaf and is to be particularly recommended for flat plaques or tablets on the ground. Obviously anything applied to the letters to make them stand out will have a finite lifespan and will need renewing from time to time.

9. Ornamentation.

Often ornamentation is chosen to make the memorial look “nice” but it can be much more than that. It can be used to personalise the memorial and convey information such as membership of a body or group through badges or a trade, favourite sport, hobby or place by suitably appropriate images etched into the stone. There is a growing trend towards painting ornamentation, but like painted letters these will

have to be redone from time to time if they are to retain their colour.

10. Portraits.

Many families are now choosing to have portraits of their loved ones on their headstone. This can either be in the form of a porcelain plaque attached to memorial or by etching the image directly into the stone itself. If you like the idea of an etched portrait, for the best results you will need to choose a dense black granite memorial.

11. Night lights and lanterns.

Often frowned upon by cemetery authorities and in some cases banned. If you want night lights it is advisable to keep them within the permitted area for memorialisation.

12. Provision for flowers.

Containers for flowers are usually incorporated into the memorial base. Alternatively you can have free-standing vases

13. Kerbs or edging stones.

At one time most gravestones comprised a headstone and a grave surround, known as kerbs. In the 1960's these fell out of favour with the cemeteries as they involved more costly ground maintenance. In recent years public demand driven some cemeteries to allow kerbs once again, though not necessarily over the full length of the grave.

14. The way memorials are fixed.

Increasing emphasis on health and safety issues over recent years have led to changes in the way in which memorials are fixed. All parts of the memorial have to be securely dowelled together and in most cases the whole memorial fixed with a ground anchor system. These act like the keel on a yacht, making it difficult to push the memorial over.

Unfortunately, there is a downside to all of this as the new standards make it more difficult for the mason should the memorial have to be removed for any reason, such as a further burial. Any cemented joints are now much harder to split with a hammer and chisel, increasing the

risk of damage to the stone in the process. As a result some masons are now using cement-free fixing systems which use concealed bolts to secure the memorial instead of cement. Not only are the joints much stronger when fixed this way, they are also also easier to take apart with no risk of damage to the stone.

15. How much will it cost?

The cost your memorial will depend on many factors such as the size, shape and type of stone used, whether you require any carvings or etchings and the amount of care and attention to detail that the mason takes in designing, creating and installing the memorial. Buying a memorial is not like buying washing machine; it is not manufactured on a production line, put in a box and sent to a reseller to sell to you. Memorial A produced by mason X will not be the same as memorial A produced by masons Y or Z. The end product will depend on the artistic flair, skill and attention to detail of the mason who produced it. Having said all of this, if you tell your chosen mason what your budget is, they should be able to produce a suitable memorial which comes within that budget

16. How long it will take to complete.

This depends to a great extent whether the memorial you want is in stock. If it is then it will probably be a matter of a few weeks, but if it has to be made then it will probably be at least three months, if not longer. However ground conditions and the type of foundation to be used will over-ride manufacturing time. If your grave has a pre-installed concrete strip foundation at the head of the grave your memorial can be fixed as soon as it is ready. If it doesn't then you will have to wait for the ground to settle following the burial. Usually four months is an absolute minimum time to allow for settlement and it may be advisable to leave it longer than this.

17. Trade bodies for the memorial industry.

Consumer bodies often recommend you to look for evidence of qualifications and membership of a trade association that when selecting somebody to carry out work.

The National Association of Memorial Masons (NAMM) is the only trade

association for memorial masons in the UK. It has a basic set of criteria for membership relating to the goods and services offered by its members and all of its members are required to abide by its Codes of Ethics, Business Practice and Working Practice.

There are two national registers for memorial fixers, the Register of Qualified Memorial Fixers (RQMF) and the British Register of Accredited Memorial Fixers (BRAMM). It should be emphasised that being on either these registers only indicates an ability to meet the minimum requirements for fixing a memorial. It is not an indicator of the standard or range of service provided by the company or its professional competence to produce a memorial.

18. Insurance.

If you want complete piece of mind there are specialist, relatively low cost memorial insurance policies available which cover virtually all eventualities such as accidental damage, storm damage, vandalism, theft and even ground subsidence.

19. Guarantees.

When buying a gravestone you have the same statutory consumer rights as when purchasing any other consumer goods. However your mason will probably offer you some additional guarantees. For example, the structural integrity of the memorial will usually be guaranteed for up to 10 years.

Members of the NAMM are required to provide a Guarantee of Conformity. This guarantees that the work has been carried out to the relevant codes and safety standards in operation at the time the work was carried out.

You may be offered a price match or price beating guarantee. However as the quality of the end product depends on the skill of the craftsman producing the memorial, any such price comparison guarantee is probably relatively meaningless.

The final guarantee you may occasionally be offered is a money-back guarantee if you are not satisfied with your memorial when it is completed. Any mason offering this sort of guarantee has to be very confident about their standards of workmanship and ability to satisfy

their customers if they are to stay in business.

20. Try to see the memorial you will buying.

Beware of buying a memorial purely from photographs either in a brochure or on the internet. Photographs can be misleading. They give no impression of size and the colour reproduction may not be accurate. More importantly, most stones are subject to variations colour and pattern and the actual memorial you get may look very different to the one in the picture.

21. What happens if something goes wrong?

If you find yourself in dispute with your mason over something and it can't be resolved amicably then ultimately have recourse to the Courts to try to get it put right. However this can be both time-consuming and sometimes costly.

If the mason you bought your gravestone from is a member of the NAMM then you can use their free arbitration service. The Association will commission an independent report carried out anonymously by one of their experienced assessors. Following receipt of the report a complaints panel will make recommendations on what needs to be done to remedy the situation and liaise with the mason on your behalf.

And finally ...

22. Don't rush things.

Make sure you feel ready to start the buying process for it can be a difficult and emotional time following a bereavement. A good mason will put you at your ease and will not pressurise you to make quick decisions. Your memorial will outlive you and your family. Take your time, it is import for you to get it right.

S. Critchley & Son