

Guidance on Funerals, Burials and Caring for a Grave at St Mary the Virgin Church, Westerham



If you have been recently bereaved, please accept our sincere condolences and be assured of our thoughts and prayers.

It is a time of sadness and pain and the church is here to help you through your bereavement. We pray for those who have recently lost a loved one in our main church services, but please do not hesitate to contact us if we can help in other ways.

There is a lot to think about as you adjust to your loss and it can be a bewildering time. The purpose of this booklet is to give you information about the funeral and the burial.

A funeral is the opportunity for friends and family to express their grief and to give thanks for the life of someone they love. Our Vicar is available to lead funerals and the church itself can be the setting for a Church of England funeral or memorial service for those in the parish.

Anyone who lived in the Parish of Westerham at their time of death or died in the parish (or who was on the church Electoral Roll – different to the civil electoral roll - or whose burial has already been agreed by faculty) is entitled to have their funeral or thanksgiving service at St Mary's, regardless of whether or not they attended church services here.

While the churchyard is extensive, there is a limited number of spaces remaining for burials, which means that we can generally only bury those who have the legal right to be interred here. In some cases, the Vicar may also grant permission, at their discretion, for additional burials in existing family graves. It may be necessary to gain agreement from the wider family in these instances.

If you have just been bereaved, your first point of contact will normally be a funeral director. If you would like us to be involved in the funeral, or if you would like to hold the funeral in church, please ask the funeral director to contact us before the date is agreed, so we can ensure that the church and the Vicar are available.

We are able to offer the following services at St Mary's:

- a funeral in church followed by burial in the churchyard or a funeral only at the graveside
- a funeral in church followed by a separate short committal at the crematorium or
- a funeral at the crematorium.

Once the funeral date is booked, the Vicar will arrange to come and meet the next of kin to talk about the arrangements to ensure that the service is a fitting tribute to the deceased.

After the funeral, usually some weeks or months later, we can also discuss the following:

- a memorial or thanksgiving service in church
- an interment of ashes in the churchyard.

Afterwards ...

The funeral is a time to acknowledge your sense of grief and sorrow, but within us we may continue to carry those feelings caused by the love we had for the person who died. If you wish you can meet with our Vicar again, or we can arrange for a visit from our Pastoral Care Team.

We also hold a special annual 'Light up a Life' service in conjunction with the Hospice in The Weald for those who have been bereaved in recent years and who would like a public opportunity to remember their loved ones. Please contact our Benefice Office for details.

Burial of Ashes

A burial of ashes can take place soon after the cremation, in which case the funeral directors can make the arrangements. Alternatively, it can be arranged directly between the family and the church at a later stage. There is normally a short service in the churchyard when the ashes are poured loose into the grave. There is a fee payable for this, set by the Church of England nationally. We do not bury ashes in caskets or urns of any sort, as these take up more space, nor do we permit scattering of ashes in the churchyard.

St Mary's churchyard has a designated area for the burial of ashes. If there is already a family grave in the churchyard, a request can be made to add ashes, but this is at the Vicar's discretion. It may depend on how many burials have already taken place in that grave.

Once a date and time for the service has been agreed, the Vicar will telephone the next of kin a few days beforehand to talk through the service.

Memorial Stones

Graves can be marked with a memorial stone or tablet, but you **must** have formal permission from the Vicar to do this. A funeral director or stonemason will help you complete the application form (CR1), which can be obtained from the Benefice Office. There are strict rules relating to the type of stone used, the inscription and the way the grave is cared for later. The rules are set by the Diocese of Rochester, which has authority over all the parish churches in this area. The Vicar cannot give permission for anything outside these guidelines. The Churchyard Regulations 1981 can be found on the regulations on the [Diocesan website](#) or obtained from the Benefice Office.

We advise that the minimum time between burial and the placing of a memorial stone is 6 months after burial, (3 months for ashes). This allows the ground to settle after the burial.

Permitted Size of Headstones

Headstone Dimensions

- Maximum Height 4ft / 120cm
- Minimum Height 2ft 6 ins / 75cm
- Maximum Width 3ft / 90cm
- Minimum Width 1ft 8 ins / 50cm
- Maximum Depth 6 ins / 15cm
- Minimum Depth 3 ins / 7.5cm

Tablet or Plaque (for cremated remains)

- Maximum size 15 ins x 15 ins x 2 ins
38 cm x 38 cm x 5 cm

A memorial for a child under 16 years of age at the date of death may be smaller than the standard sizes specified above at the discretion of the Vicar.

There is a fee payable for permission to install a headstone, which is a contribution towards the upkeep of the churchyard.

St Mary's does not currently have permission to add memorial tablets to graves with an existing headstone. However, we are applying for permission to do so from the Diocese.

Caring for a Grave

We recognise that it is important for family and friends to have a place where they can mourn someone they have loved. It is natural for them to want to make the grave of their loved one special and personal. We try to be sensitive about this and allow people to grieve in their own way.

However, the churchyard is a public place, which is used by many people, including other mourners. We need to ensure therefore, that graves are tended in ways that are acceptable to everyone and that they fit in with their surroundings. It is also important that the churchyard is safe for the people who use it and that, as a valuable

habitat for wildlife, we do all we can to look after the animals and plants that live there too.

The Diocesan Churchyard Regulations give clear guidance on how graves are to be cared for. These rules apply whether or not there is a gravestone in place, so everyone needs to be aware of them.

The most important rules for maintaining a grave in the churchyard of St Mary the Virgin, Westerham are summarised below:

You must not put loose vases, pots, candle-holders or ornaments on a grave. Any of these items can easily be knocked over and broken, leaving shards in the grass, which might hurt other visitors. Vases must be completely sunk into the ground or incorporated into a gravestone, with permission from the Vicar.

You may plant bulbs or annual plants on a grave, but not shrubs or trees (including roses and heather, which can grow big if untended). You may not plant hedges around the grave space. The Parochial Church Council (PCC) has the legal power to remove any plants which impede mowing and we cannot guarantee that plants will not be accidentally damaged during churchyard mowing.

You must not put fences or edging of any sort around a grave or put chippings on it. This makes it very difficult for contractors to mow around the graves and results in a very untidy churchyard.

You must not place artificial flowers, windmills or wind-chimes on a grave. These soon get dirty and faded when left in the open and spoil the beauty of the churchyard for other mourners. Please remove plastic packaging from fresh flowers to prevent litter and safeguard wildlife.

Please note: These rules apply to everyone tending a grave in the churchyard. The PCC has the right to remove anything which contravenes them. You may see other graves where people do not seem to be abiding by these rules – please do not assume that this means that you can disregard them too. It may simply be that we have been unable to speak to the family concerned yet. We all need to work

together to keep St Mary's churchyard looking beautiful and we appreciate your cooperation in this.

Reburial Area

There are more restrictive regulations that must be observed for the Reburial Area, located outside the main door of the church. This is to ensure that the area maintains its traditional appearance as it is so close to the church building. It is also a conservation area.

- Headstones must be of a traditional English style, in keeping with neighbouring headstones, i.e. sunk straight into the ground (not on a plinth) and fashioned from traditional sandstone or limestone - to the measurements given below.
- Engraved lettering and fonts will be of a traditional style only.
- NO flowers, bulbs, trees or bushes of any sort may be placed on the grave – it must be left flat for plain grass to grow and be mown.

Fees

Fees are applicable to burial and the placing of memorial stones in the churchyard. These are set by the Church of England nationally and revised annually. For the burial of ashes, there is also a verger fee to prepare and fill the grave. This is set by the PCC and reviewed annually. For full burials, the gravediggers' fees will be dealt with by the funeral directors.

Reserving a Grave in the Churchyard

Parishioners and those on St Mary's Electoral Roll may make a request to reserve a space in the churchyard with the agreement of the Parochial Church Council and the Chancellor of the Diocese via the faculty process. A request will not automatically be granted. A grave reservation allows burial even where the deceased is no longer residing in the parish at the time of their death.

The reservation of a grave space by faculty takes 2 – 3 months and costs £500 - £600 (as of 2025). This comprises the reservation fee and if the faculty is granted, a churchyard maintenance fee. Both are set by the Diocesan Registry. If you would like to apply to reserve a space, please contact the Benefice Office for an application form.

The application must be approved by the Parochial Church Council, submitted to the Diocesan Registry and then displayed on the church door for any objections to be raised.

Ownership of a Grave

Neither a burial, the placing of a memorial stone or the reservation of a grave space do not confer any right of ownership upon the relatives of the deceased or upon any other person in respect of any part of the churchyard. It is not possible to purchase a grave space, only reserve one based on the criteria set out above. The whole churchyard is vested in the Vicar alone and the erection of any monument is a privilege.

At the current time, St Mary's cannot permit any form of memorial to be laid in the churchyard without buried remains. However, we are seeking permission for approval from the Diocese for some sort of appropriate remembrance.

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Hours: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 9am – 1pm

Closed Thursday