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Community Graveyard Survey at Glendalough Monastic Site, Co. Wicklow
Introduction

In August 2015 a new collaborative programme of work began which focuses on the Graveyard at Glendalough. The Glendalough Graveyard Survey was initiated by the Glendalough Heritage Forum and sought to advance our understanding of the graveyard by bringing together the local community, specialists in graveyard recording, State Agencies and University students and researchers. This newsletter highlights the ongoing work of the Graveyard Survey and some key results to date.

Background and Methods

The Graveyard at Glendalough is of considerable importance for many different reasons. For centuries this has been the burial place of many members of the local community, and parts of the graveyard are still active. The graveyard is also of great historical significance, with some spectacular head-stones and grave-markers. The graveyard has
the potential to reveal important information about the historical development of the area. The Graveyard is also the context within which many visitors experience Glendalough as they negotiate the footpaths between the standing buildings. These factors make the management of the Graveyard very important, and finding a balance between the different pressures is pressing. One of the key problems has been a lack of basic information about the graveyard, whilst some earlier surveys of aspects of the graveyard exist, there was, until recently little information about the location of grave-markers. This information is essential if the Graveyard is to be used and conserved appropriately, and the visitor numbers involved mean that there are unusual management challenges for this most important site.

Against this background, and with funding support from the Heritage Council and Wicklow County Council, the Glendalough Heritage Forum invited John Tierney of Historic Graves to lead fieldwork at Glendalough. Historic Graves are experts in conducting community-led graveyard surveys to the highest of standards and with appropriate care for the preservation of all features being recorded. At Glendalough this involved providing temporary numbers for each grave-marker and headstone, taking photographs of each feature, recording its location with a high resolution GPS (global positioning system), and recording a sketch and details of the inscriptions on inscribed grave-markers. All of this data is then entered into an on-line database and publicly available (http://historicgraves.com/graveyard/glendalough/wi-glda). The process of recording the graveyard is non-invasive and non-destructive. The only technologies used to read the inscriptions are mirrors or flashlights to provide low-angle lighting. No vegetation was cleared during the survey.

The project was run as a Heritage Week event and co-ordinated by a combination of volunteers from Glendalough and the surrounding areas as well as students participating in the UCD School of Archaeology training programme. On most days there were 15-20 people recording the graveyard.


The combined teams of community volunteers with the Historic Graves coordinator and UCD School of Archaeology students and project staff. The survey was undertaken during 2015 National Heritage Week.
Outline of Methods

Assigning each grave-marker and unmarked grave with a unique number on a temporary non-destructive label.

Surveying the location of each grave-marker and unmarked grave with high resolution Global Positioning System (GPS).

Taking a digital photograph of each grave-marker and unmarked grave.

Using a mirror or flashlight to create low angle light to assist in reading carved inscriptions on grave-markers.

Sketching each grave-marker and recording the inscriptions including each individual burial.

Sample entry from the Historic Graves project website (WI-GLDA-Z-0012) showing the entry for one grave-marker including its identifying number, direct transcription, database text, locational information and photograph. See the entry here: http://historicgraves.com/glendalough/wi-elda-z-0012/grave

Sample Historic Graves recording forms showing transcribed inscriptions and a sketch.
Key Results

The Survey was a considerable success. Over 1800 grave-markers of different kinds were identified across the graveyard as a whole. This does not include an area west of the Cathedral where high vegetation made survey impractical. These will be surveyed in due course and will likely bring the total to in excess of 2000. All of these 1800 grave-markers have been numbered, photographed and had their location recorded. Many of them have their inscriptions recorded in the field and the process of entering this information onto the database is ongoing. During the survey a number of preliminary observations were made.

Firstly, Glendalough is a remarkably well preserved rural graveyard. It includes stunning individual headstones but also well preserved grave markers and grave mounds which often don’t survive. This will allow researchers to analyse the development of the graveyard over time. A particularly important feature is the preservation of earlier grave-markers within plots. Individual grave-markers include headstones that are the work of famous ‘stone-cutters’, such as Denis Cullen. In many respects these headstones should be celebrated as public works of art.

Prior to the field survey UCD students digitised previous published surveys of the graveyard by Cantwell (1976–1978) & Clare (1945). These do not cover all of the graveyard but provide important point-in-time records of particular stones. Having them in a digital format will enable comparisons between inscriptions in the mid Twentieth Century and today and may facilitate an assessment of any degradation of the stones.
A finely inscribed slate memorial erected by Honery Byrne of Trooperstown to her husband Francis, 67 (died 1856), her son Dan, 26 (died 1847) and her daughter Honey, 6 (died 1840). (WI-GLDA-A-0150).

Memorial carved by Denis Cullen with crucifixion and pascal lamb motifs to commemorate Francis Byrn who died 1785 aged 76 years. (WI-GLDA-A-0287) Photo: ©Christiaan Corlett

Granite memorial with carved motifs erected to Daniel Brady (died 1773 aged 79). (WI-GLDA-A-0170)

Memorial carved by Denis Cullen to commemorate Elizabeth Roach (alias Burbrige) ‘loving wife and tender mother’ who died 1775 aged 28 years. (WI-GLDA-A-0514) Photo: ©Christiaan Corlett
The graveyard is also of some ecological interest, and provides an important component of the diversity of the natural environment of the region. Management of the graveyard in the future will have to be cognisant of this aspect of the site.

What next?

The Community Graveyard Survey at Glendalough has been a great success so far, although there is still a lot to do! Many headstones still need their inscriptions recording, and some areas of the graveyard can only be surveyed once vegetation has died back. There is also the potential for further work focusing on the orientation of grave-markers and the development of the graveyard over time. But we have provided the first spatially-referenced survey of over 1800 grave-markers and headstones in the graveyard at Glendalough. The local community have been empowered to continue recording their graveyard on an ongoing basis and have the skills and knowledge to do this work using appropriate techniques.

The project has also seen collaboration between different groups and the sharing of knowledge and information. This is essential for the future well-being of the graveyard. In the short-term the collaborators in the survey will seek to develop an appropriate management plan for the graveyard, taking into account all relevant factors: the archaeological and historical significance of the site, the importance of the graveyard to local families, the enormous numbers of tourists that visit and the particular ecologies that have developed on site. The Glendalough Graveyard includes some stunning memorials, and it may be possible to develop tourist trails and guides that take people to the best of these features.

Acknowledgments

We are very grateful to the Heritage Council 2015 Heritage Grant Scheme and Wicklow County Council for financial support. UCD School of Archaeology, National Monuments Service, National Parks & Wildlife Service Office of Public Works and the Discovery Programme all provided support in kind, advice or access: we are grateful to them all. Numerous volunteers took part in the project in the field and have continued to work on digitising the records since. They are too many to name individually, but we would like to thank all of the local community and UCD students who worked so well together as part of the Survey. Finally, Glendalough Heritage Forum would like to express our sincere thanks to John Tierney and his colleagues for bringing such enthusiasm, expertise and warmth to the survey.
John Tierney of Historic Graves training community volunteers and UCD students in recording inscribed memorials.

Credits

The graveyard survey at Glendalough presented here were funded by the Heritage Council and Wicklow County Council and conducted by Historic Graves working with staff and students of UCD School of Archaeology.

Further Reading


Further information

The results of the Glendalough Graveyard Survey are hosted on the Historic Graves website (http://historicgraves.com). The Glendalough survey was conducted under the auspices of the Glendalough Heritage Forum (www.glendaloughheritageforum.org).

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Further detail on archaeological sites in the Glendalough Valley can be found on the Archaeological Survey Database at www.archaeology.ie. Glendalough Valley forms part of the Wicklow Mountains National Park under the management of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Recommended citation: