

The Future of St George's Church Churchyard

Those who visit our churchyard will be aware that our parish's churchyard is almost full. With between 20 and 30 grave spaces left, we would expect it to be full within the next couple of years.

Over the years our volunteers have done amazing job in maintaining the churchyard. Keeping a churchyard open uses up a lot of time and resources and despite our best efforts we have been unable to persuade more people from the community to help us on a regular basis.

It is wonderful that so many people visit our churchyard and churchyard closure will not prevent that from continuing. Our volunteers' work is, however, made much harder by the few who ignore the diocesan churchyard rules. These are set to help keep the churchyard easy to maintain and a place where all can find peace and solace. Sadly, we are the ones who receive the complaints about those graves that cannot be mown and other issues beyond our control, such as the excess soil from newly dug graves. Despite our best efforts to maintain the churchyard with the limited resources we have, these leave us in an awkward position as a church who wish to serve this community as best we can.

Over the past couple of years, aware that grave space is running out, we have had a number of requests by families to reserve graves. In the past, we had assumed that this could create issues once the churchyard was otherwise full, but we have recently discovered that it is possible to reserve a grave through a legal mechanism called a 'faculty' that allows burials after closure.

With a view to closing the churchyard once every remaining grave is either full or reserved, the Church Council (PCC) has taken the decision to allow anyone living in the parish or connected with St George's church to apply for a faculty to reserve one of the last few graves.

To purchase a grave in Sunderland Cemetery costs over £1000 and in Chester-le-Street it is substantially more. Their burial fees on top of that are a further £1000+ as well.

For your churchyard, a faculty application is dealt with by the Diocesan Chancellor and the set reservation fee is £345. Normal burial fees (£341 in 2019) still apply when the time comes. We have been told by the solicitors that, '...people... can bring forward a Faculty Application for consideration. I hasten to add that there is no guarantee that a Faculty Application is granted, but if the PCC's policy is to support such applications, applications have, in the past, been considered sympathetically.'

There is a lot of work required to complete each faculty application (they are not unlike a formal planning application) and we appreciate that their complexity may dissuade some people. Therefore, as a church, we are willing to help and support people complete faculty applications and support them through the PCC. Given the £1000+ cost in the council cemetery, we hope that people will give a generous donation to support us in this work and help us serve the community more.

As a church we have a vision that once the churchyard is closed we will refocus our efforts on developing the building and grounds to create a better community facility to serve the community. Any donations we receive will be restricted towards serving this community in these ways and not go into general church funds. Despite commonly held myths about the wealth of 'the church,' all the costs of maintaining the local church and serving our community come from local people, donations and grants alone, so please do consider supporting your local community church in this way.

Once the remaining grave spaces are full or reserved, we will apply to the Ministry of Justice under Section 215 of the Local Government Act 1972 to close the churchyard and pass maintenance responsibility to the council.

To be clear, once closed, graves can still be visited and tended and burials CAN still take place in existing and reserved graves. i.e. Despite closure, burials can still continue where a family plot already exists (if space) or where a grave is reserved following on from a Christian service in a church or by the graveside. Once closed, however, no new plots can be opened or reserved (as the churchyard will be full there will be no space for further new plots anyway). Burials of cremated remains can still take place in the garden of remembrance and into graves as before. Headstone rules and fees remain unchanged

If you are interested in applying to reserve one of the few remaining graves, please contact the office to begin the process of a faculty application to reserve a grave space. We will need Full name, address, telephone number, e-mail, the fees and any donation. It may also be helpful to be given next of kin details so that we know who to contact in the future when the time comes.

To be clear, there are limited spaces left. Applications to the Chancellor for faculty will be made in order of application received and any payments and donations made. Faculty applications can take several months to process, require public notices and can take much longer if any changes are required. Grave reservation permission is granted by the Chancellor alone, over whom we have no control and we cannot be held responsible if for any reason he chooses to reject an application. Like a planning application fee, the faculty fee is non-refundable as it is payable to Smith Roddam Solicitors, not the church. Any donation to the church will be returned if an application is not successful.

It is advisable that once a grave space is reserved that you express your desire to be buried in St George's church churchyard in your will, along with any legacy gift you wish to leave to support our ministry to this community.

If you have any questions at all, please do contact us in the office, office@stgerogesfatfield.co.uk, 0191 415 4200 or pop in during office hours.

It is with a heavy heart that we are having to close the churchyard, but ultimately the space is almost gone. By inviting anyone in the parish to reserve a plot we feel this is the best way to proceed and we hope to share our plans for the future development of the building to serve the community soon.

Rev. Nick Barr-Hamilton