

EXETER DISSENTERS' GRAVEYARD TRUST

Martin Dyer

SUMMARY

A programme of site clearance, survey and archaeological recording was undertaken by the Exeter Dissenters' Graveyard Trust between March and May 2014 at the former Dissenters' burial ground in Magdalen Street, Exeter (SX 9237 9228). The work was carried out by volunteers.

The burial ground was established by the members of three Exeter nonconformist meeting-houses, and was in use between 1748 and 1854, from 1760 onwards mainly by the congregation of George's Meeting-House in South Street. It has been estimated from documentary records that the graveyard contains over 1500 burials. The graveyard continued to be maintained by George's Meeting until the early 1960s. It was sold in 1990 and afterwards a succession of owners attempted to develop the site. During this time the graveyard became neglected and fell into disrepair. In 2013 it was bought by the Exeter Historic Buildings Trust with the intention of preserving and restoring the site.

The burial ground was surveyed and recorded in 1984 as a Manpower Services Commission (Community Programme Agency) project, and was surveyed again in 2010 by AC Archaeology.

The 2014 site clearance and survey identified and recorded a total of 90 whole or fragmentary memorials, representing 86 different monuments, mainly headstones, but also chest tombs, ledgers, foot stones, two obelisks and a pedestal tomb. A number of architectural fragments were also recovered, including 28 carved or dressed limestone fragments from memorials that in most cases no longer survive. All the monuments were numbered, described and photographed, and the inscriptions were deciphered and recorded where possible. At least 213 persons are commemorated on the surviving memorials. An updated plan of the monuments was produced.

Many of the memorials are now broken and in a poor state of repair. Examination of photographs taken between 1990 and 2010 has shown that much damage was done to the monuments during this period. Many inscriptions are now partly or wholly illegible, and the 1984 survey records show that the inscriptions were considerably more legible at that time.

A comparison of the current layout with the 1984 site plan and survey records, and examination of photographs taken in 1983 and 1985 has shown that an extensive scheme of reorganisation of the graveyard and the memorials was undertaken in 1985. Many headstones were moved from their original positions and re-erected at the edges of the graveyard or laid flat in rows. Only a relatively small number of the more permanent monuments are now in their original locations.

The path along the west side of the graveyard was laid out at the same time. A trench excavated across the south end of the path as part of the 2014 investigations confirmed its recent date and found no trace of an earlier path shown on 19th century Ordnance Survey maps.

A second trench was excavated to investigate stonework exposed by vegetation clearance at the north end of the site beside the western boundary wall. This was found to be the remains of a small building of 18th-century date that possibly predates the graveyard.

A photographic record was made of the north and south boundary walls and the phases of construction were identified. The walls contain much original fabric of 18th- or 19th-century date. Photographs show that the arch above the entrance in the north wall was built c. 1985, and there is no evidence of an arch before this date. Part of the eastern retaining wall was rebuilt in the 1990s, but much of the earlier 18th- or 19th-century stone and brick wall survives. The western boundary wall was largely rebuilt in 1999.