

BURIAL IN SEAL CHURCHYARD

Seal Churchyard is a beautiful and peaceful spot – you don't need me to tell you that. For almost a thousand years people have been buried here. Most people's graves were unmarked, and grave spaces reused again and again, which is why burials have been able to continue for so long.

However, the churchyard is now very full. There is very little space left, and so parish policy on who is allowed to be buried here, as in most churches which still have open churchyards, has to be very strict. I inherited a policy which had been in force for some time when I arrived, which is that we can only bury those who are entitled by the law of the land to burial here. This consists of three groups of people.

1. Those who live in the parish at the time of their death (whether they die at home or in hospital)
2. Those who happen to die in the parish.
3. Those who are on the electoral roll of the church, (Which is not the same as the civic electoral roll.)

We can also, of course, bury in an existing grave – for example a widow in her husband's grave - providing the grave was dug deeply enough at the time of the first interment. This is arranged at the time of the first burial. We can inter ashes of those who don't live in the parish, and, of course, we can hold a funeral service in the church before interment elsewhere or cremation.

Although the policy above might seem very restrictive, it is really the only sensible and fair policy to have, and is held by the vast majority of churches which still have an open churchyard. The only alternatives would be either to let anyone be buried here, which would mean that the churchyard would soon fill up with people who might have no connection with the area, but just happened to like the spot, or for the church to make a judgement case by case, which would be terribly difficult to do fairly and consistently.

Our policy is clearly stated in the leaflet "Burial in Seal Churchyard" which has been available in church for some time, and is also available on the church website. It has, as I have said, been the policy for many years. However, I do occasionally find that families are unaware of this and have assumed that if they lived here at some earlier stage of their lives or were married here or have relatives buried here, they will be able to be buried here too, but this isn't the case. Having to say "no" to a bereaved family who may have always assumed they could be buried here is very upsetting for all concerned, including me, but I can't "bend" the rules for anyone, no matter how strong a case the family offers, and no matter how much I would like to. A set of clear criteria, consistently applied, is vital for the sake of fairness to all and transparency in this very emotive issue.

If you have your heart set on burial in Seal Churchyard, therefore, you need to think about the following things;

- **Do you live in the parish?** Seal parish is smaller than many people think – Highlands Park is not in it, for example, and nor is any part of Seal Hollow Road. **If you are in any doubt about whether you live in the parish, please contact me and I will tell you.**

- **If you aren't in the parish, could you come onto the electoral roll?** This is not the same as the civic electoral roll, which you sign up to to enable you to vote in local and general elections, but a separate roll kept by the church. You need to worship regularly here to qualify (about once a month), and you need to be baptised (christened). If you have been on the electoral roll in the past you can continue to be on it, even if you can't get to church any more, so long as there is a good reason for this. This means that those who become too infirm to come to church, or who have to move away to live with family or in a nursing home can still qualify. You can join the electoral roll by filling in a form which I or the electoral roll officer, Mrs Jill Myers, (01732 762803) can supply.

I am writing this in the hopes that it will prompt people to think about the issue now, before they or their families have to face it at the time of a death. As you can see, it is possible to safeguard an entitlement to burial here (so long as the churchyard remains open), provided action is taken before the event – sadly once a death has occurred it is impossible to do anything about it, which can be heartbreaking for those involved.

Two other matters

1. The burial of cremated remains (ashes) is possible whether or not you are entitled to full burial here. It is at my discretion, but I would never, in practice, refuse this. It is always possible to have a funeral service at Seal followed by interment elsewhere, providing the priest in the parish where the person resided is in agreement.
2. There are rules that govern memorials in churchyards – what sort of stone they are made of and what form they take, for example. These are laid down by the Chancellor of Rochester Diocese, who is the Diocese's chief legal officer, and are the equivalent of planning permission in a secular setting. They also govern the way you look after a grave. They say that you can't, for example, put kerbs or fences round graves, or put chippings on them, that you can't use loose vases (a hazard if they blow over and break, leaving shards of glass or pottery concealed in the grass) or put statues or other objects on a grave or plant anything other than small plants and bulbs (i.e. not shrubs or trees). These aren't my rules, and I haven't any power to vary them. They are made so that the churchyard, which is a shared public space, is maintained in a condition that everyone will find acceptable, is in keeping with its setting surrounding a Grade 1 listed building, and is safe both for people and for wildlife. You can find more about these rules in the leaflet "Burial in Seal Churchyard" or on the website (click on the link "Burial in Seal Churchyard"), or by reading the Chancellor's Regulations, which are on display in the church porch, and also available on the website.

I hope that this letter will be helpful. I am not someone who enjoys enforcing rules and regulations for their own sake, but these are things we all have to abide by. I know that there are many people who treasure and enjoy the churchyard, whether they have a loved one buried here, or simply value the spectacular views and the peaceful space it offers. I hope it can continue to be loved and appreciated by local people and visitors alike for many years to come.

Revd. Anne Le Bas