



GILLINGHAM TOWN COUNCIL

The Town Hall, School Road, Gillingham, Dorset SP8 4QR

GRAVE DIGGING POLICY

REVISION 003 – SEPTEMBER 2023

POLICY

It is the policy of Gillingham Town Council (the Council) to ensure a high standard of grave digging whilst maintaining safety and dignity. This extends beyond the day of interment to the weeks and months afterwards when the soil is settling, to ensure that all graves are maintained to the highest standard.

1. PROCEDURES

- 1.1 The following procedures are advisory and are not exhaustive. It is the responsibility of Funeral Directors to ensure compliance with all relevant legislation and where these Procedures conflict with legislation then legislation shall prevail.
- 1.2 All Funeral Directors, grave diggers and contractors working in Gillingham Cemetery must comply with all legislative requirements and provide to the council copies of policies, risk assessments, method statements, safe systems of work, staff training records, COSHH assessments, insurance certificates or any other document requested by the Council prior to undertaking any work on site.
- 1.3 The Council may undertake spot checks without prior notice to ensure compliance with their Policy and Procedures. Any Funeral Director, their employee, contractor or any other person found to be in contravention thereof may be prohibited from working at the cemetery by the Council and shall not be entitled to any recompense whatsoever.

2. GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

- 2.1 No grave can be dug in Gillingham Cemetery without the permission of the Gillingham Town Council.
- 2.2 It is the responsibility of the Funeral Director to arrange for the excavation of the grave and removal of any existing memorials or kerbstones and the replacement of same after burial.
- 2.3 Funeral Directors are to employ their own grave diggers. It is their responsibility to ensure that the grave diggers employed by them are familiar with the cemetery and abide by this policy and these procedures.
- 2.4 No full grave or cremation plot should be dug more than 48 hours before the interment, except by prior arrangement with the Town Clerk.
- 2.5 Appropriate safety footwear must be worn at all times.

- 2.6 A hard hat must be worn when working in an excavation and protective eyewear should be worn when appropriate.
- 2.7 Entry and egress from a grave must be by ladder. On no account must a gravedigger climb out of a grave by treading on any part of the shoring.
- 2.8 A ladder must remain in place whenever an operative is working in a grave, in order to maintain an emergency exit.
- 2.9 All finished graves should be prepared using imitation grass matting. The matting will be laid out neatly on staging leaving no folds or gaps which may cause any person to trip. Walkboards/staging must be laid along the length of the grave and supported at each end and must be capable of carrying the weight of the pall bearers and coffin.
- 2.10 All graves must be dug centrally within the respective grave space. Graves that are not dug centrally within the grave space will increase the risk of collapse, as the intervening wall of undug soil on one side will be of reduced thickness.
- 2.11 Shoring timbers and struts must be inspected prior to use for any sign of deterioration. Defective timbers and struts must not be used and must be cut down to prevent use by any other person.
- 2.12 Shoring must be incorporated as digging proceeds. The amount of shoring equipment required should be assessed according to the required depth of excavation, soil type, weather conditions and the depth of shoring timbers/hydraulic units.
- 2.13 Lowering webbings and putlogs must be inspected prior to each burial to ensure that no deterioration has occurred and that they are capable of taking the weight of the coffin. Frayed webbings should not be used.
- 2.14 The interment area and surrounding graves and headstones are to be left clean and tidy. All equipment is to be removed and the paths cleared of any debris.

3. PRE-EXCAVATION PREPARATION

3.1 General

It is extremely important that Funeral Directors, their staff and, in particular, grave diggers follow the advice contained within this policy and these procedures to ensure a safe working environment for all Cemetery operatives/visitors when excavating a grave, including themselves. It is important that grave diggers can safely assess the working site, including memorials, assess the risk, record the assessment accurate and understand the range of options available for making the area safe for all who will use it.

3.2 Using Risk Assessment Techniques

Risk assessment is central to ensuring a safe working environment. Grave digging within the burial ground should be covered by a suitable risk assessment and safe system of work as identified in this policy. When assessing the hazards on a potential excavation site, a number of decisions need to be made based on sound risk assessment principles:

3.3 Which areas of the burial process need to be considered during site preparation -

Consideration should be given to the range of hazards that may exist around the excavation area. Consideration should be given to activities that will subsequently take place:

- Safe and easy access for operatives and equipment

- Safe access for persons attending and officiating at the burial service
- The health and safety of operatives during the excavation process
- The health and safety of cemetery visitors

3.4 **What range of hazards exist in the area surrounding the grave to be excavated? –**

When considering the safety of the site before, during and after excavation work, the following must be considered:

- Ground conditions – proper consideration of the ground conditions surrounding the grave and on the route to the graveside should be taken account of, with particular care to be taken when areas contain multiple trip hazards. Safe route, proper footwear and care in unstable or wet/slippery conditions should be emphasised in the risk assessment for this work.
- Memorials – memorials present specific hazards and must be dealt with according to the guidance produced by the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM).
- Correct positioning and marking out of grave.
- Protection of excavation – proper techniques to protect the integrity of the excavation are dealt with later in this document.
- Vegetation – proper consideration should be given to the effect of any evasive vegetation or work being carried out around trees that have low branches or unsafe branches.

The above risk assessment information is for guidance purposes only - lists are not to be considered all-inclusive but indicative of the types of risks that should be considered.

3.5 **Locating Graves – Measuring and Marking**

All graves to be excavated should be located and identified by using the cemetery grave plan. The location will have been marked in advance by the Council's Works Manager.

All graves must be dug centrally within their respective grave spaces for the following reasons:

- If a grave is not dug centrally within its respective grave space, one of the walls separating the adjacent grave will be of a narrower width and will increase the risk of collapse.
- When reopening a grave that was previously dug out of centre, the risk of collapse is increased.
- When a memorial is erected centrally on a grave that was dug out of centre the risk of the memorial subsiding and tilting is increased, which in turn increases the risk of the memorial becoming unstable and a danger in its own right.

3.6 **Walkboards/Work Platform**

Walkboards must be placed along each side of the grave to be dug that are supported on boards placed across the head and foot ends of the grave. This action will spread the weight of operatives and prevent falls due to crumbling surface edges. Walkboards should remain in place for the whole of the burial process, ie placed before excavation commences and not removed until after backfilling is completed.

3.7 **Soil Box**

- 3.7.1 A Soil Box (soil tidy) should ideally be erected to contain the excavated material. This structure must be securely erected so that pressure from the soil inside does not cause it to collapse. The use of a soil box will assist with protection of nearby memorials and turf and is recommended best practice.

3.7.2 The soil box should be situated no closer than 2' (0.61m) from the edge of the excavation so as to reduce pressure near to the edges of the grave and therefore reduce the risk of collapse. Consideration should be given to increasing the distance of the box from the edge of the grave where unfavourable ground conditions exist.

3.7.3 The soil in the box should be sloped (battered) away from the grave, to reduce the weight at the side nearest to the grave. A front board can be placed across the front of the box to stop soil, stones etc from rolling off the soil stack and onto any operative who may be working in the grave.

4. EXCAVATION AND GROUND SUPPORT

4.1 Preliminaries and Preparation

- 4.1.1. The grave space set aside for each burial shall not exceed 2.44m x 0.91m (8 feet long by 3 feet wide).
- 4.1.2. The grave digger will ensure that double depth graves are excavated to a standard depth of 2m (6ft 6") for the first burial, to ensure that there is sufficient space for the second burial in the future.
- 4.1.3. The grave digger will ensure that all new graves are aligned so that memorial stones, when installed, will be in a straight line along the row.
- 4.1.4. No part of the coffin shall be at a depth less than 1.0m (3 feet) below the level of the surface of the ground adjoining the grave.
- 4.1.5. Burial in a grave in which an interment has already taken place, shall ensure the new coffin is effectively separated from any other coffin previously placed and remaining in the ground by means of a layer of earth not less than 150mm (6 inches) in depth.
- 4.1.6. Shoring must be incorporated as digging proceeds. The amount of shoring equipment required should be assessed according to the required depth of excavation, soil type, weather conditions and the depth of shoring timbers/hydraulic units.
- 4.1.7. Any grave that is left unattended for whatever reason must be completely boarded over in such a manner as to prevent any person falling into the grave and fenced off.
- 4.1.8. All cremation plots will measure 18" x 18" for a single casket and the top of the casket should be a minimum of 2'6" below ground level.
- 4.1.9. No person shall disturb any interred human remains.
- 4.1.10. Spoil from the graves is to be placed in the area designated by the Council Works Manager.

4.2 Machine Excavation

- 4.2.1 The Grave Digger must ensure that any machine used to dig a grave is operated by a person who has received appropriate training in the use of the machine.
- 4.2.2. The machine operator must ensure that no person stands within the area of the radius of the machine boom or bucket.
- 4.2.3. When moving a digging machine within the Cemetery, the driver must exercise caution and treat the grounds with respect.

- 4.2.4. When a machine is not in use, it must be parked on hard ground in such a manner that it does not cause an obstruction. When parked, the boom must be lowered with the bucket resting on solid ground. The ignition key must be removed. The blade on tracked machines must be in the down position whenever the vehicle is parked.
- 4.2.5. The machine operator must ensure that the machine is safely manoeuvred into the digging position.
- 4.2.6. The blade on a tracked machine must always be in the down position when digging is in progress.
- 4.2.7. The operator must ensure that the machine is level before digging commences, to ensure that the sides of the grave are vertical. An unlevelled machine will cause one side of the grave to be under dug, which will increase the risk of grave collapse.
- 4.2.8. Care must be taken when excavating a grave whilst shoring is in place, to avoid striking any part of the shoring equipment with the machine bucket.
- 4.2.9. Striking or dislodging shoring will not only increase the risk of collapse of the grave but will also increase risk to the gravediggers who are required to rectify the situation.
- 4.2.10. Digging machines must be operated in accordance with manufacturer's instructions and should be regularly serviced by a qualified person.
- 4.2.11. Any damage caused by grave-digging machinery must be reported to the Gillingham Town Council immediately and remedied by the gravedigger within 14 days.

4.3 **Hand Excavation**

- 4.3.1. Shoring must be incorporated as digging proceeds. Adequate shoring will be incorporated to prevent the collapse of the sides of the grave. Soil type and weather conditions will affect the requirements for each particular grave.
- 4.3.2. Care must be taken during periods of wet weather, when it is advisable to close shore graves to full depth.
- 4.3.3. On completion of each excavation, the gravedigger must ensure that the sides and ends of the grave are vertical and that the bottom of the grave is level. Shoring units must be level.

4.4 **Dealing with Ground Water**

- 4.4.1. Should water collect in a grave, it should be removed prior to the interment. Ideally a motorised pump should be used, as this action will not require a gravedigger to enter the grave. The hose from the pump can be lowered into the grave from surface level.
- 4.4.2. When conditions indicate that water may collect in a grave, a sump pit can be dug in the bottom of the grave towards one end.
- 4.4.3. The hose from the pump can be placed in the sump pit and, as water is pumped out of the pit, the remaining water in the grave will be drawn towards the pit, thus leaving the greater part of the bottom of the grave dry.
- 4.4.4. When hand digging, a sump pit can be kept open at one end with the gravedigger working away from it. This action will assist in reducing the amount of mud created on the bottom of the grave.
- 4.4.5. When machine digging, a sump pit can be dug when final hand levelling off the bottom of the grave is carried out.

- 4.4.6. Should water be removed from a grave using a petrol driven pump, no gravedigger should be working in the grave while the pump is running, as exhaust fumes may enter the grave and collect at the bottom. Ideally the pump should be positioned as far away from the grave as possible and positioned down wind.
- 4.4.7. Water removed from a grave should ideally be pumped into the nearest soak away or sewer.
- 4.4.8. Should foul odours be encountered, Gillingham Town Council should be informed immediately.

5. PREPARATION FOR INTERMENT

- 5.1. Prior to preparing/dressing the grave the surrounding area should be examined to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that a safe unobstructed access is available for Funeral Directors' staff, clergy and mourners.
- 5.2. Any trip hazards that may be present must be removed.
- 5.3. Two putlogs should be placed across the grave onto which the coffin may be placed prior to the committal. Putlogs should 4' 6" X 4" (1.37m x 102mm x 102mm) and of good quality knot free planed timber. The distance between the putlogs should no less than 3'6" (1.07mm) Care must be taken to ensure that sufficient webbing is placed on either side of the grave to enable each pallbearer to lower the coffin to the bottom of the grave.
- 5.4. Webbing should be checked for signs of deterioration or fraying before each burial service. Frayed or damaged webbings must not be used.
- 5.5. In some instances, there may be insufficient space to the side of the grave for the pallbearers to safely carry the coffin and place it on putlogs directly over the grave. A safer method for this situation is to place a board at either the foot or head end of the grave covered with grass matting on which to place the coffin. Two putlogs are placed across the board so that the coffin can be rested down with no risk of pallbearers trapping fingers. The lowering webbings are also placed across the board. At the appropriate time during the committal service the pallbearers can lift the coffin using the webbings and walk along the walkboards and safely lower the coffin into the grave.

6. BACKFILLING

6.1 General Requirements and Considerations

- 6.1.1. Backfilling should commence immediately after all mourners have left the cemetery and be completed fully on the same day.
- 6.1.2. Webbings and grass mats must be removed before backfilling commences.
- 6.1.3. Walkboards should be left in place during the whole of the backfilling procedure to prevent persons walking on any unprotected grave edge.
- 6.1.4. In order to reduce later subsidence and settlement of the grave, all backfill materials (including the material placed between the liners or vaults and sides of opened graves), shall be tamped and compacted in layers not to exceed 150mm in depth, so that a compacted density of 90 percent shall result, using soil free from large lumps. **The grave is to be finished with a tidy mound of soil, covered with saved (and, if necessary, imported) turfs to leave an immaculate finish.** The importance of this action cannot be stressed highly enough as the reduction of instances where the bereaved may be confronted with sunken graves is imperative. It will also subsequently reduce the risk of the memorial tilting and thereby becoming unstable.

6.1.5. Monitoring of the condition of the backfilled grave is to be carried at regular intervals (at least monthly). Remedial work must be undertaken immediately if there is soil settlement leading to an untidy, uneven or sunken surface and/or if the turfs show signs of drought or die-back. The responsibility for monitoring and maintenance rests with the grave digger.

6.2 Protection of the coffin

When backfilling, large flints, pieces of rock or lumps of clay may damage the coffin when they impact from height. To reduce the risk of coffin damage, an angled timber can be placed into the grave. Backfill material will strike the timber, break its speed of fall and deflect to the sides of the grave.

6.3 Mourner Participation

6.3.1. Some ethnic and religious groups require carrying out the backfilling of the grave themselves. There is a conflict between health and safety and customer care in this situation and it is for the Funeral Director to assess the risk involved and decide whether to permit mourners to backfill.

6.3.2. In the event the Funeral Director gives permission to the mourners to backfill the grave, **it shall be at the mourners' own risk**. The Funeral Director must take control of proceedings and stop backfilling at the relevant stages in order that grave diggers can remove shoring equipment.

6.3.3. It is vital to the health and safety of mourners that co-operation between cemetery staff, mourners and the Funeral Director is established prior to the funeral and notified by the Funeral Director to the Council not less than 5 days prior to the date of the funeral.

7. FUNERAL DIRECTORS

7.1. Only Funeral Directors who have signed and returned the agreement to adhere to this policy and these procedures will be allowed to work in Gillingham Cemetery.

7.2. The Funeral Director is responsible for the grave until it has settled - should subsidence occur the Funeral Director will be notified by the Council. If remedial work has not been completed by the Funeral Director within 14 days, the Council may engage its own contractor to remedy the defect and will be entitled to full reimbursement of the cost from the Funeral Director responsible.

8 REVIEW

8.1 This document was first adopted on 28th September 2020.

8.2 This policy was reviewed by the Finance and Policy Committee on 18 September 2023, minute no 588b and ratified by Full Council on 25 September 2023

Policy reviews will be carried out at the start of a new council term in September or when there are changes to current legislation, whichever is the sooner.

Signed by:

The Mayor of Gillingham: _____ Date: _____

Appendix A

GILLINGHAM TOWN COUNCIL'S GRAVE DIGGING POLICY AND PROCEDURES

DECLARATION

I (name).....

on behalf of (Name of Funeral Director)

.....

Address:

.....

acknowledge receipt Gillingham Town Council's Grave Digging Policy and Procedures 2023 at Gillingham Cemetery and undertake to comply with it. I shall make the Policy and Procedures known to all concerned and accept that it is my responsibility to ensure that they, in turn, comply with them.

Signed..... Date.....



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