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IHBC GUIDANCE NOTES

Historic Cemetery Monuments Testing and the new British Standard

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This is one of a series of occasional IHBC Guidance Notes published by the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC). IHBC Guidance Notes offer advice on topics that we consider crucial to the promotion of good built and historic environment conservation policy and practice.

The IHBC welcomes feedback, comment and updates on our Guidance Notes to our consultant editor Bob Kindred, at research@ihbc.org.uk

Executive Summary

1. The principal purpose of this briefing note is to draw attention to the intended update of the British Standard BS 8415: 'Monuments within burial grounds and memorial sites —Specification' and potential implications for current practice.
2. The Institute has been made aware of concerns from some of its local authority members regarding the continuing testing of monuments in registered historic cemeteries and burial grounds, irrespective of whether those commemorative structures are individually listed or not, and the potential visual impact on the landscape character of those sites.
3. While IHBC members are not usually directly involved in discussions about monument safety, they need to be sufficiently conversant with the broad issues to ensure that those tasked with such testing (as a precursor to any safety or remedial works) are also fully informed regarding the interaction of heritage and other regulatory regimes.

Background

4. IHBC Members will be aware that as long ago as March 2006 the Local Government Ombudsman criticised the process of monument testing in a Special Report 'Memorial safety in local authority cemeteries' [1]. The publication emphasised that while Councils have an overriding duty to take, as far as reasonably practicable, measures to prevent injury or death from unstable memorials they must balance the (sometimes slight) risk of injury on the one hand and the certainty of distress and outrage if memorials are laid down on the other.

5. The most relevant current guidance from English Heritage [sic] 'Caring for Historic Graveyard and Cemetery Monuments' November 2011 states that [2]:

'English Heritage does not endorse the practice of physical testing using "topple test" devices. In the case of listed or scheduled monuments, no physical testing should take place without consulting the appropriate statutory body.

In general, it is difficult to apply a uniform testing procedure to historic monuments, as they are composed of aged materials, assembled in a variety of ways. The best means of assessing safety in these situations is a combination of detailed inspection, investigation and judgment by experienced professionals.' [3]

British Standard BS 8415

6. IHBC Members should be aware that the process of review of the Standard concerning monuments within burial grounds has recently been initiated through the BSI Committee for Natural Stones.

7. Removal and reinstatement of memorials is to be included in the new Standard and will address the practice of breaking apart joints that are well fixed and the use of secondary fixings for 'reinstatement'.

8. As the National Association of Memorial Masons maintains that test results on ground anchors to secure the stability of monuments belong to the companies that pay for them, the BSI has concluded that the review of the Standard is not the place for arguments about whether such test results should be disclosed.

9. The last revision of BS 8415 did not update the associated illustrations and these now demonstrate the age of the Standard. It has also emerged that the drawings were taken from a New Zealand standard and are

considered inappropriate to the British Isles. The illustrations will therefore require changing throughout to represent current practice and some of the definitions on drawings will also be reviewed. The BSI has also stated that these changes will need to be generic, that is, not favoring the use of any particular system.

10. With regard to the testing of memorial safety devices (Annex F) and the section on the verification of pull tests for ground anchor systems, it is considered that clarification is required on: (a) who is an 'appropriate' person to witness the testing; (b) who should supervise the testing; and (c) the proper recording of the relevant ground conditions (that is, types of soil). Furthermore, with regard to the testing of fixing systems, the current Standard takes its definitions from another earlier standard on building foundations and therefore is not clear, nor suitably specific about correct use of anchors that fixing masons are required to use.

Conclusion

11. It is likely that the major revision of BS 8415 will commence early next year. In the interim the current Standard will continue to apply, and the present advice (English Heritage, now Historic England) should be followed but bearing in mind the particularly formal concerns of the Local Government Ombudsman.

12. IHBC members involved in heritage management issues concerning protected local authority historic cemeteries and burial grounds should therefore be aware of the current deficiencies in the British Standard and the emerging new Standard that may arise in any cross-disciplinary discussion on the subject.

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Endnotes

[1] Report accessible at: https://www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk/~media/Files/Documents_en/Memorial_safety_in_local_authority_cemeteries.ashx

[2] Not yet republished or rebadged by Historic England.

[3] Section 7, Inspection and Assessment, page 26.