

**ARTISAN  
MARKET**

23<sup>rd</sup> September 2023

North Mayo Heritage Centre

Special feature  
**HEADSTONES**

Cover image:  
**Headstone on the grave of  
Michael Davitt,**  
**Straide, Co. Mayo**

(image courtesy of Fáilte Ireland - J. Gruszczyk)

Are you interested in  
**TRACING YOUR MAYO ROOTS?**

If you are interested in professional help to research your family history or are curious about your ancestry, why not contact us?



The  
North Mayo  
Heritage  
Centre

# Headstones

**Serving as enduring memorials, headstones or gravestones, mark the final resting places of loved ones in both burial and cremation practices.**

Originally, headstones were reserved for the middle and upper classes. In fact, those who had emigrated often sent money home to pay for headstones for deceased members of their family.

Nowadays, headstones have become a staple of burial for all and as the name suggests, are placed at the head of the deceased.

Until the 1900s, gravestones served as the lid to a coffin and were placed over the actual grave. Currently, all of these terms - headstones, gravestones and grave markers are used interchangeably.

Inscriptions vary but generally a headstone is not only inscribed with the name of the person who died, but also other vital information such as family relationships, maiden name (if relevant), dates, occupation, ages, the name of the person who erected the headstone and the sculptor.

Throughout history various materials for headstones have been employed. However, as time progressed, marble emerged as a favoured choice, surpassing wood and limestone in durability and longevity. However, it was eventually discovered that marble was not ideal for memorialization because of the softness of the stone.



Granite rose to prominence due to its exceptional durability and in modern times, granite remains one of the most commonly used materials for headstones.

## **Symbols on headstones vary but may include:**

**Anchor:** Usually a symbol of steadfastness, often used by early Christians as a disguised representation of the cross.

**Books or Scrolls:** Signify faith, particularly for early evangelists.

**Cross:** To symbolise the unfolding mystery of life. The arms of the cross offer four ways to ascension, an invitation to objectively know nature, wisdom, god/goddess, and the self.

**Angels:** Depicted in various poses, angels hold individual meanings. An angel with open wings represents the soul's flight to heaven, while an angel carrying the lost loved one symbolizes their escort to the afterlife.

A weeping angel symbolizes grief, particularly for unexpected deaths. An angel blowing a trumpet can represent the Day of Judgment in Christianity.

**Animals:** For instance, a lion symbolizes bravery and protects the grave from unwanted spirits. Traditionally, the back of a headstone was left bare, as it took days or weeks to manually carve inscriptions on the front.

Furthermore, placing carvings on both sides of the headstone had the potential to break it. When headstones were made of wood, carving both sides was next to impossible.

With today's technology, however, it is possible to carve a headstone in a much smaller period of time. Lasers can be programmed to ensure that the stone does not crack if cut on both sides. Hence, it is possible to carve both sides of a headstone. On the back of the headstone, you may find a collage of family photos or indeed some more information on the deceased.

More recently we see QR codes on headstones, which, once scanned can take you directly to a person's family tree or any other webpage detailing the story of their life.

Because of the detailed information headstones can contain, they provide an ideal launch pad for any genealogical investigation. The website [www.goldenlanguan.com](http://www.goldenlanguan.com) features photographic catalogues of the legible headstones from almost every burial ground in north Mayo (80 cemeteries). As there are no parish burial records for most Mayo cemeteries before the early-to-mid twentieth century, these indexed lists of photos may be the most complete or even the only such record available for many of these burial grounds.

**If you would like us to assist you in locating a grave of an ancestor, please contact us.**

**Sources:**  
[Monuments.com](http://Monuments.com)  
[Goldenlanguan.com](http://Goldenlanguan.com)  
[Duchas.ie](http://Duchas.ie)  
[Echolive.ie](http://Echolive.ie)



QR code on headstone being used by a visitor  
 (image from eulogy.ie)

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

*The elaborate modern headstone over the poet Patrick Kavanagh and his wife Katherine's grave, was very mysteriously removed overnight and replaced with a simple wooden cross.*