COMMON HEADSTONE SYMBOLS AND THEIR MEANINGS

Below are some of the more common symbols often found in carvings or headstones. Other symbols on a headstone may relate to the person’s occupation, be a family coat of arms, or be a link to membership of some organisation important to them, to their ethnicity or have a special religious meaning. Fashions, even in headstones, change over time so some symbols may only now be found on older headstones. The meaning of some symbols may be regarded differently by some ethnic groups or religions.

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GMCT Trust Member
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ACANTHUS:
Greek and Roman architectural decoration (widely used to decorate slabs) to symbolise enduring life, immortality

ANKH:
Egyptian symbol of eternal life

ARCH:
Ceremonial, triumphant significance. Triumph over death, arch of sky and heaven, passage to heaven

ANVIL:
Martyrdom, symbol of blacksmiths

ARK:
Church, salvation

ANEMONE:
Symbol of a brief blossoming and an early death

ANCHOR:
Hope, life eternal, steadfastness, the seafaring profession

ALPHA AND OMEGA:
First and last letter of the Greek alphabet, beginnings and ends
ANGEL: The agent of God and guide to heaven. Signifies divine communication and spiritual aspirations. Usually have right hand and right finger raised to heaven. Left hand often holds a scroll, the anchor of faith, trumpet of resurrection or palm fronds of peace.

ARROW: Mortality and martyrdom

AXE: Signifies martial themes

BED: Eternal sleep or rest

BEEHIVE: Domestic virtue, faith, education and human industry

BELLS: Church bell or religion, call to worship

BIBLE: Christianity

BIRD FLYING: Resurrection

BOAT/SHIP: A voyage or crossing to the other side, seafaring

BOOK: Symbol of the book of life and often can be surmounted by a crown and quill or held in the right hand of God or an angel. Can also depict learning, scholarship, prayer or trade of a writer or bookseller. Books and scrolls also represent Evangelists.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>BROKEN CHAIN:</strong></th>
<th><strong>CRETUB:</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usually situated around the top of a headstone to symbolise the links of love with a family broken in death.</td>
<td>Angelic; signifies innocence.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>BUDS:</strong></th>
<th><strong>CHAINS:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Renewal of life or loss of a young soul; a child died too young.</td>
<td>Chains bind the body to the soul, broken links denote severance or release.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>BUTTERFLY:</strong></th>
<th><strong>CHALICE:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>The soul, symbol of resurrection or a short life.</td>
<td>Signifies the Catholic rite of Holy Communion. Within a circle denotes the consecrated Eucharist.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>CANDLE:</strong></th>
<th><strong>CHILD SLEEPING:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Stands for the spirit, the soul or life itself.</td>
<td>Victorian motif for death.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>CELTIC CROSS:</strong></th>
<th><strong>CHRYSANTHEMUM:</strong></th>
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<td>Circles symbolise eternity, sometimes linked with Celtic origins.</td>
<td>Japanese national flower.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>CENOTAPH:</strong></th>
<th><strong>CIRCLE:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Symbolic monument of mourning often associated with death in war.</td>
<td>Full circle symbolises eternal life with no ending. A broken circle indicates that life has ended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cloud</td>
<td>Associated with a hand from heaven. Sometimes featured with a broken chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn</td>
<td>Rebirth and fertility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coat of Arms</td>
<td>Lineage, status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crescent</td>
<td>Indicates Muslim belief or rebirth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffin</td>
<td>Death and mortality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross</td>
<td>Christianity, symbol of Christ’s redemption of humanity from sin, faith and belief in God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crown</td>
<td>Symbol of sovereignty, honour, glory, victory (eg. over death) and the crown of Christ’s righteousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crucifix</td>
<td>Suffering and death in a Christian context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Innocence of child, purity of thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column</td>
<td>Free standing column symbolises the sky, God and deity in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column (Broken)</td>
<td>Often used as a symbol of a life left unfinished when cut off by death. Often decorated with laurel wreaths. Other forms are a tree without branches, a tree stump, and a tree trunk with an embedded axe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compass/Dividers</td>
<td>Masonic symbol together with set-square. Also indicative of architects and surveyors. In ecclesiastic art indicates divine measuring and dividing of the world</td>
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DEATH: Often represented with a scythe, an archer, or as a skeleton or skull with crossbones.

DOG: Signifies loyalty, fidelity, vigilance and watchfulness.

DOORS/GATES: Entrance to heaven.

DOGWOOD: Christianity, divine sacrifice, resurrection.

DOVE: Masonic symbol together with set-square. Also indicative of architects and surveyors. In ecclesiastic art indicates divine measuring and dividing of the world.

DOVE WITH OLIVE BRANCH: Signifies peace and security. The dove returning to the ark with an olive branch indicated that the land had reappeared after the flood.

DRAGON: A Western symbol of evil and the serpent. For Eastern people it is the symbol of imperial power and the universe.

DRAPE (PALL/S): Expression of mourning, sorrow, symbolic of the palls sometimes used to cover coffins in Christian funerals.

EAGLE: Fierceness, ascension, heavenly conveyor. Also an American symbol.

EGGS WITH DARTS: A common design for the edges of tombstones or as a frieze, symbolising resurrection after death. The egg symbolised life and birth while the dart (arrow) depicted death.

EYE OF GOD: All-seeing.
COMMON HEADSTONE SYMBOLS AND THEIR MEANINGS

FERN:
Symbol of New Zealand; also, humility and sincerity

FIGS:
Prosperity and eternal life

FISH:
Christianity; also plentiful, bounty

FLAG:
Veteran’s grave

FLAME:
Eternity

FLEUR DE LIS:
Symbolises life or the Trinity. It may represent conventionalised three white lilies or white irises; sometimes incorporated into geometric designs

FRUIT:
Eternal plenty

GARLAND:
Commonly made up of roses, lilies or several flowers. Used as decoration or hung over crosses or surrounding urns. Victory in death

HANDS:
Right hand emerging from a heavenly cloud symbolises a blessing from God (Moses saw the right hand of God but not his face). It often holds a broken chain, a scroll, or points to a cross or heaven. A heart in the palm means charity

HANDS (PAIR):
Two hands signify prayer and/or supplication

HANDS (CLASPED):
A female hand (with lace at the wrist) is usually on the left side and a male (with cuffs and links) is on the right signifying union, friendship and affection. Used as a sign of farewell, love and friendship not severed by death. A ribbon may join them

HARP/LYRE:
Praise to God, harmony; sometimes signifies Irish connections. Symbol of St Cecelia, patron saint of musicians. Broken string indicates a break in mortal life
HEART:
A symbol of charity or the Sacred Heart of Christ or with flames as the Divine Heart. It can be pierced, held in hands, crowned or appear with a cross. Two hearts together can symbolise love in marriage.

HOLLY:
Foresight; people believed holly protecte tombs from lightning

HOURGLASS:
Symbolic of time and life running out, quickly reaching its end and this can be emphasised by giving the hourglass wings. Time can also be represented by a scythe, clock or sundial.

IVY:
Friendship and immortality

KEYS:
Spiritual knowledge

KNOT:
Interlaced Celtic knot indicates resurrection and life everlasting. Tied knot indicates marriage and unity

LAMB:
Innocence; marks the grave of a child or the sacrificial lamb of God

LAMP:
A light source and associated with knowledge, wisdom and faithfulness

LAUREL:
Signifies victory, or heroism and achievement in arts. Usually presented in the form of laurel wreaths. Evergreen memory of deceased

LETTERS (XP OR PX):
The letters XP, or Chi-Rho, are the first two Greek letters in the name ‘Christos’ and refer to being buried under Christ. Today the letters may be reversed as PX to represent ‘pax’ or ‘peace’

LETTERS (AO):
AO or Alpha and Omega refer to the beginning and the end and are often shown with the book of life

LETTER (IHS):
First three letters in the Greek spelling of Jesus
LETTERS (T):  
The Greek T, or tau, is the initial of Theos (God), and is also the Egyptian hieroglyphic for life

LETTERS (TNZBH):  
Hebrew symbol for ‘may their soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life’

LILY/LILY OF THE VALLEY:  
Chastity, innocence and purity

LIGHT HOUSE:  
A beacon indicative of a safe haven

LION:  
Power of God or guardian of the tomb. Watchfulness and strength

LOTUS:  
Creation and rebirth

LYCH GATE:  
Churchyard gate below which the deceased can rest awhile before burial. Sometimes shown in miniature surmounting crosses

MARIGOLD:  
Associated with the Day of the Dead and leads the souls to the home altar

MENORAH:  
Emblem of Judaism

MISTLETOE:  
Sacred plant and symbol of immortality

MYRTLE LEAF:  
Undying love and peace

NUMBERS:  
Three, the Trinity; beginning, middle and end; the three graces and the three fates. Seven (perfection), the world was created in seven days; the seven ages of man; and the seven pillars of wisdom. Three-leafed shamrock and seven-petalled flowers
**OAK TREE:**
Hospitality, stability, strength, honour, eternity, endurance, power, victory

**OX:**
Patience, strength

**OBELISK:**
Symbol of eternal life, fertility, regeneration and resurrection

**PALM:**
Spiritual victory over death, success, eternal peace

**OBELISK (BROKEN):**
Symbolises life being cut short

**PINEAPPLE:**
Hospitality

**OLIVE BRANCH:**
Associated with the return of the dove to Noah’s ark representing peace and security; peace and healing faith

**PASSION FLOWER:**
Symbol of Christ’s passion, sacrifice, suffering and redemption

**ORL:**
Wisdom, watchfulness

**ORB:**
Celestial body and reward of resurrection

**PITCHER:**
Jewish symbol

**PLOW:**
Harvest, the reaping of a life
POMEGRANATE:
Immortality, unity, nourishment of the soul.

POPPY:
Eternal sleep; sometimes associated with war-related death.

PYRAMID:
Chastity, innocence and purity.

RAINBOW:
Union or fulfilment of the promise of resurrection.

RABBIT:
Humility, gentleness and self-sacrifice.

RING:
Similar to a circle indicating completeness and perfection. Marriage.

ROD OR STAFF:
Comfort for the bereaved.

ROOSTER:
Vigilance and wakefulness.

ROSARY:
Catholic symbol, devotion to Mary, Mother of God.

ROSE:
Love, beauty, hope, unfailing love.

ROSEMARY:
Remembrance.

TWO ROSES:
Two roses signify a couple.
SCALES:  
Weighing of souls, justice, legal profession

SCROLL:  
Symbol of life and time. Both ends rolled up indicate a life that is unfolding like a scroll of uncertain length and the past and future hidden. Often held by a hand representing life being recorded by angels.

SCYTHE (SICKLE):  
Signifies time and death; indicates life cut off

SERPENT:  
An ancient Celtic symbol for eternity; may be depicted as being trampled as a triumph over sin and death or may be depicted with its tail in its mouth

SHAMROCK:  
Symbol of Ireland (Eire). Commonly used on Irish Catholic monuments and incorporated into the design of some crosses

SHELL:  
Pilgrimage, journey, resurrection, baptism or rebirth

SPIRAL:  
Symbol of movement and progressive development; often appears as an ascending spiral around a column

SPIRE:  
Religious aspiration

STAR:  
Light of the spirit which is not overpowered by death, divine guidance

STAR OF DAVID:  
Symbol of Judaism

SUN:  
Symbol of light and warmth, life everlasting, soul rising to heaven. Setting sun=death, rising sun=resurrection

SUNFLOWER:  
Symbolic of gratitude and affectionate remembrance. The flower turns towards the sun, indicating brightness
**COMMON HEADSTONE SYMBOLS AND THEIR MEANINGS**

- **SWALLOW:**
  Immortality, unity, nourishment of the soul

- **SWORDS:**
  Martyrdom, courage, warfare

- **SWORDS CROSSED:**
  Military person of high rank

- **THISTLE:**
  Symbolic of Scotland. Often appears with the cross of St Andrew. Earthly sorrow and remembrance

- **TREE:**
  Life or human fragility. The most commonly depicted trees are weeping willows for mourning; oaks for life and steadfastness; and palms for peace.

- **TREE BOLE:**
  Bole cut off signifies life’s end

- **THREE:**
  Three of anything indicates the Trinity

- **TORCH:**
  Zeal, enlightenment

- **TORCH INVERTED:**
  Inverted indicates extinction of life

- **TRIANGLE:**
  Symbol of the Trinity

- **TRUMPET:**
  Judgement day and entry into heaven; the trumpeter is the herald of the resurrection

- **TULIP:**
  Love and passion
URN:
Signifies death and mourning. Popular in late Victorian period in a vase form and earlier in a gravy-boat form. Symbolic of Roman cremation urns depicting remembrance.

VACANT CHAIR:
Death of a child

VASE:
Widely used in ancient burial and memorial art. Signifies death and mourning

VIOLET:
Humility

WHEAT:
Represents bread, or the Body of Christ. Bread was also said to be the Staff of Life or the divine harvest

WHEEL:
Usually broken; a break in the circle of life

WILLOW:
The weeping willow signifies sadness, perpetual mourning and death

WREATH:
Common symbol of mourning and respect. Also represents martyrdom

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Jan is an historian with an interest in Aboriginal history, local history and the Murray River Region. Between 1998 and 2012 Jan was the Executive Chair of Mint Inc. and for several years has lectured at the tertiary level, including the Master of Public History course at Monash University. Jan was formerly CEO of the Goldfields Library Corporation, Bendigo and Director - Museums at Sovereign Hill Museums, Ballarat. She was also Chair of the Heritage Council of Victoria, taking a special interest in the adaptive re-use of heritage buildings and archaeological sites as tourism components. Jan was appointed to The Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust in 2010 and is a current Trust member.