Books

Geology of Oxford Gravestones by Nina Morgan & Philip Powell, Geologica Press, £14.99, ISBN 978-1-919158-53-1 (HB) Available from the authors at http://www.gravestonegeology.uk

John Dewey writes The headstones of graves around the world are the repository of family histories, at once fascinating, sad and uplifting. No less interesting are the rocks that comprise those gravestones. Most very old churchyards and their churches are dominated by local stone because of cost and transport. From Victorian times, a more varied and interesting variety of stone became available through canal and then rail transport and increasing and more widely-distributed wealth. In more recent times, global quarrying and shipping has homogenized the cost of more exotic and interesting stone from around the world. This is nowhere better demonstrated than by the gravestones of Oxford churchyards where the older, deeply-weathered, local, limestone headstones give way to more ornate and weathering-resistant rocks of the granite clan from around the British Isles and the ubiquitous Norwegian larvikite, to more recent gravestones of Bushveld gabbro, gneisses of the Northwest Cape Province and Asian granites.

The Geology of Oxford Gravestones by Nina Morgan, the geoscience writer, and Philip Powell, retired Curator of Palaeontology at the Oxford Natural History Museum, is a highly instructive and entertaining description of the petrography and provenance of the headstones of graves, and the occupants in six Oxford churchyards: the 1847 Holywell Cemetery on Longwall Street, Saint Thomas the Martyr on Becket Street, The open and airy St. Andrews Churchyard, Headington, adjacent to the John Radcliffe Hospital, the SS Mary and John Cemetery on Cowley Road, the Headington Municipal Cemetery on Dunstan Road and Saint Sepulchre's Cemetery on Walton Street, the gloomy and hidden burial site of some Balliol Dons who died in the cholera epidemic of 1832. The authors organized a splendid series of guided walks to each of the cemeteries during March 2016.

A very wide variety of rocks grace the headstones, which are simply and accurately described, including local Cotswold limestones, Portland Stone, Clipsham Stone, crinoidal and oolitic limestones, Banbury Ironstone with brachiopod clusters, Carrara Marble, I and S-type granites, including Peterhead, Shap, Cornish and Irish, granodiorite, larvikite, Lizard serpentinite, Bushveld gabbro, green and purple Llanberis slate, Borrowdale bird's eye laplli tuff slate, garnet migmatites and gneisses, and many sandstone varieties. Particularly poignant is the small beautifully carved marble grave of a four year old child who was drowned near Medley Weir in1893.

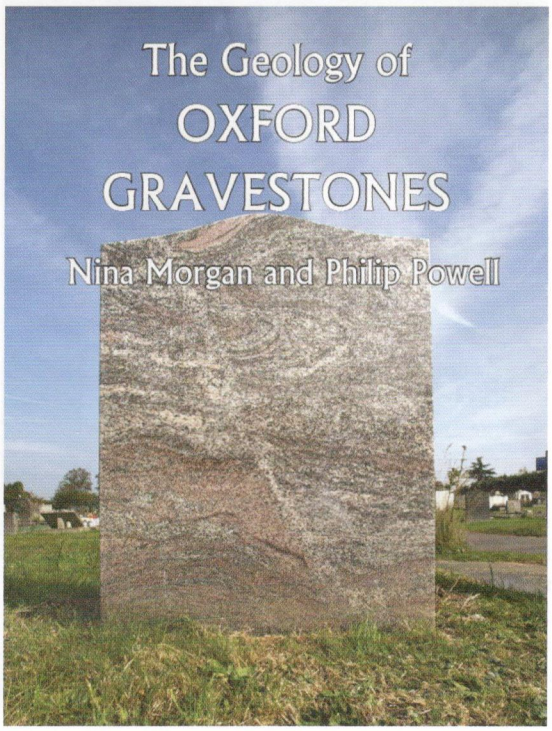

Fig. 1. Geology of Oxford Gravestones.

Wonderfully displayed are rocks, fossils, minerals, textures and structures. Oxford geoscience undergraduates have a geological treasure trove of a massive petrographical collection at their fingertips. Potential readers might be ecclesiastical and local historians, geologists and natural historians, and students of national and international bulk stone transport. I will never look at cemeteries in the same way again and I hope that this splendid book sets an example and standard for others to emulate around the country and the world.

