

A review in [Geoscientist Online, November 2015](#)

The Geology of Oxford Gravestones

This lavishly illustrated compendium of gravestones in six Oxford graveyards combines two of my favourite things – beautiful rocks and dead people – so it was always going to be a winner with me. Written by Nina Morgan (who writes the *Distant Thunder* column in this magazine) and Philip Powell (former curator at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History and the author of *The Geology of Oxfordshire*), it combines good writing with in-depth and accurate geological explanations of the textures and structures on display on these delightful memorials.

The book, dedicated to Eric Robinson, doyen of the genre, deals with the Church of St Thomas the Martyr, St Sepulchre's Cemetery, Holywell Cemetery, the Church of St Mary and St John, Headington Municipal Cemetery and St Andrew's Church Headington. It commences with a short introduction, a handy location map, and a stratigraphic column indicating the ages of rocks represented. Then comes a gazetteer, cemetery by cemetery, of the more interesting tombs, a glossary and index. Each tomb is shown in more than one aspect, including close-ups where required to show features. Each rock type is diagnosed, with sections on 'composition' and 'what to look for'.

One of the delights of Oxford is the fact that its cemeteries contain more interesting dead people per square foot than the average British city. So the eponymous occupants are also given brief life-histories, adding human interest. Opening the book more or less at random, I come upon, for example, composer and Professor of Music at Oxford, John Stainer. (George Bernard Shaw, in his music criticism, never omitted the 'Professor', as a mark of his contempt).

This worthy gent, perhaps still wearing his pince-nez, is (we learn under 'Composition'), currently decomposing beneath a Celtic wheel-cross in Peterhead Granite. Very fine it is too, a fitting place of pilgrimage for all those choral society members forced to sing his oratorio 'The Crucifixion'. Now, should any of them bring a hand lens with them, they can admire its K-feldspars and silvery micas too.

But the reason for choosing the gravestones is primarily geological, so it's not only academics and other toffs who get mentioned. The diversity of rock-types is also impressive, ranging from Precambrian to Lower Cretaceous. Nor do the authors shy from the odd terracotta memorial. Mike Tomlinson's beautiful photographs amply complement the text and together they make a fitting tribute to some superb examples of the stonemason's art.

Reviewed by Ted Nield

THE GEOLOGY OF OXFORD GRAVESTONES by NINA MORGAN & PHILIP POWELL Geologica Press 2015 ISBN 978-1-919158-53-1 List Price: £14.99 140pp, sbk. Copies available from the authors. See www.gravestonegeology.uk for information on how to purchase.