

Tracing a baby's grave or record of cremation

At Sands, we know that parents never forget their babies. We are often contacted by bereaved parents whose baby died many years ago and who now want to find out what happened to their baby's body. We know that this can be very important not just to parents, but also to surviving brothers and sisters.

However, tracing a baby's grave or a record of cremation may not be easy. It can take time and persistence and can be frustrating.

"Late miscarriages"

Cemeteries and crematoria have always been required to keep records of all stillborn babies and babies who die after birth. However, they have not been, and are still not, required by law to keep records of babies who were born dead before 24 weeks gestation (until 1992, 28 weeks gestation). In law, these babies are regarded as "late miscarriages". They cannot be registered as stillbirths and the law does not require them to be formally buried or cremated.

In recent years there has been greater understanding of the significance of the death of a baby at any stage of pregnancy and so more "late miscarriages" have been formally buried or cremated and proper records are more likely to have been kept.

But sadly, if your baby was born before 1992 and before 28 completed weeks of pregnancy, there will probably be no record of burial or cremation.

Stillbirths and babies who died after birth

It was only in the mid 1980s that parents of stillborn babies and babies who died shortly after birth began to be consulted about funeral arrangements for their baby. Before then, parents were not usually involved and many were not told what happened to their baby's body.

Some parents who have tried to trace the grave or cremation record of a baby who died some time ago have been successful. However it is not always easy:

- Hospitals do not keep records indefinitely and some records may not contain enough detail to be helpful.
- The hospital where the baby was stillborn or died may have closed, or the funeral director who was involved may no longer be in business. However, cemeteries and crematoria are legally obliged to keep permanent records.

The best place to start your search

The first thing to do is to contact the General Office of the hospital where your baby was stillborn or died. The hospital staff will need to know:

- the full name and address of the mother at the time of the baby's birth
- the date of the baby's birth
- any other information that you may have, such as the stage the pregnancy had reached.

The staff should then be able to tell you if the baby was buried or cremated and/or the name of the funeral director who made the arrangements at that time.

If the funeral director is still in business and still has records from that time, he or she should be able to tell you which cemetery or crematorium was used. You can then contact the cemetery or crematorium and ask the staff to carry out a search of their registers.

If neither the hospital nor the funeral director has a record of which cemetery or crematorium was used, you will need to contact local cemeteries and crematoria yourself. Start with those nearest to the hospital where your baby was stillborn or died. If you cannot find any record of your baby at the nearest cemetery or crematorium, the staff may be able to suggest which other cemetery or crematorium you could ask. You may find the following website useful in finding cemeteries and crematoria in your area www.iccm-uk.com

Remember to keep a record of your search, including a list of the places you have contacted and the names of the people you spoke to.

Members of the public are legally permitted to inspect burial registers, but you don't have an automatic right to inspect cremation registers. This is because of data protection issues. However, the staff can search on your behalf if you provide the following information:

- the baby's surname, and
- the date of the death or stillbirth.

Shared burial or cremation

In many cases stillborn babies were, and may still be, buried in a shared grave with other babies. These graves are usually unmarked, though they do have a plot number and can be located on a cemetery plan. In other cases babies were buried in shared graves with adults.

In many cases several babies were cremated together. This still happens when a hospital arranges funerals for very premature babies. The crematorium should have a record of where the ashes were scattered or buried.

If your search is successful, make an appointment to be shown the exact location of the grave, or the area where the ashes were scattered or buried. Most cemetery and crematoria staff will be very helpful and will give you as much information and help as they can. You may want to take a camera with you to take photographs. There are sometimes restrictions on what can be placed on a grave – especially if it is a shared grave – or a place where ashes from several babies were scattered or buried. The staff will tell you what is allowed.

You may also want to:

Visit a Sands Garden

This might be especially important if you cannot find any information about your baby's burial or ashes. There are several of these around the UK. Phone our Helpline to find out if there is one near you and get the garden contact details.

You could also visit the Sands Garden at The National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas, Staffordshire which is open every day except Christmas Day. The Sands Garden was established in 2000 and is dedicated to the memory of all babies who have died. It is a tranquil place where families can remember their own baby in peace. The paths within the garden are lined with stones or pebbles on which families have written their baby's name or a short message. If you would like to visit and add your own stone, use one that is no bigger than 7 cm diameter and write on or decorate it with indelible markers. Stones and indelible markers are stocked the National Trust shop at the Arboretum. You might also want to attend the Sands annual service in June at the Arboretum. Information about the service is posted on our website each year in March www.uk-sands.org



Come to a Lights of Love non-denominational service



These are held every year in December in several towns in the UK. During the service, parents and families can light a tea light in memory of their baby and write a message to hang on a Christmas tree. The date and venues for each year's Lights of Love services will be announced on the website each autumn. There will also be information about how to have a message card placed on the tree if you can't come. www.uk-sands.org

If you would like to talk about any of the issues discussed here, or to get more advice or information, please contact the **Sands Helpline 020 7436 5881**. We offer support to anyone affected by the death of a baby however long ago the baby died.