

DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD  
In the Consistory Court

Sarah Vanessa Spear  
Deputy Chancellor

**IN THE MATTER OF  
ROSSINGTON ST MICHAEL  
GUY MEMORIAL**

**Judgment**

**The Facts**

1. By a petition dated 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021 a retrospective application is made in this matter in respect of a memorial in St Michael's churchyard to Fred and Linda Guy, the parents of the petitioner Louise Archer. Mrs Guy died in February 2019 and her remains were interred in St Michael's churchyard, where her parents and grandparents are buried. Mr Guy sadly died just fifteen months later in May 2020. An interment took place on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020 and Keith Ashton Memorials (who had provided a memorial stone commemorating Mrs Guy) were requested to replace that stone with the addition of a short inscription to include Mr Guy. I have been provided with photographs of the memorial stone which now reads:

'IN LOVING MEMORY OF A DEAR WIFE MUM NANNY AND GREAT-NANNY LINDA GUY +CHERRY+ 1951-2019 HUSBAND AND WIFE REUNITED FRED GUY 1948 - 2020 HONEY I MISSED YOU'.

2. Mr Guy died during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ms Archer was unable to visit him in hospital in the weeks before his death due to the restrictions in place at the time, and he died alone. Prior to his last illness she would take her father to visit her mother's grave, where he would sing the words 'honey I missed you'. It is this phrase (and specifically it seems the word 'honey' used as an expression of endearment) which has necessitated this application.
3. Keith Ashton Memorials replaced the stone shortly after Mr Guy's interment. Authorisation for the replacement of the memorial stone with the new inscription was not sought, and indeed the applicant was not aware that such authorisation was necessary. I have been provided with two letters (dated 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021) sent by Revd Canon Ian Smith (Area Dean of West Doncaster) to Keith Ashton Memorials concerning this and another memorial placed in St Michael's churchyard without authorisation. Neither memorial would have been permitted in its existing form by the Area Dean had he been consulted. The situation that has arisen has caused the applicant a good deal of additional distress at a time when she continues to mourn the loss of both her parents in a short period of time, together with concern as to any financial consequences.

## The Law

4. Churchyards are consecrated and fall under the authority of the bishop. That authority is exercised by the Chancellor of the Diocese, an ecclesiastical judge who is ultimately responsible for all decisions affecting churchyards. Priests in charge of individual churches (incumbents) are custodians of the church buildings and the churchyard. It is neither practical nor necessary for every decision concerning a churchyard to be made by the Chancellor, and Chancellors delegate their authority to incumbents. Where a church is without an incumbent the authority to make decisions within the relevant Rules rests with the Area Dean. The Chancellor's Rules set out the limits for incumbents or Area Deans for the exercise of their delegated authority with respect to memorials. An incumbent or Area Dean is not permitted to allow the installation of any memorial which is outside the Rules.
5. The purpose of the Rules is to ensure that churchyards promote respect for the deceased and comfort for their loved ones. Those wishing to install a memorial in a Church of England churchyard should be informed, sensitively and tactfully, that they do not have an unfettered choice to place anything they wish. Memorials must be within the Rules or permitted by the Chancellor. **Memorial masons must be aware of the law as it applies to churchyards and of the relevant local Rules and must advise the bereaved accordingly.**
6. Guidance is provided as to the suitability or otherwise of inscriptions by ecclesiastical law. Compatibility with the consecrated character of the site is expected, though it is not necessary that the inscription (if otherwise inoffensive) should conform to the religious views of the Church of England (*Re St Mary the Virgin, Ilmington [1962]*). Biblical or suitable literary quotations are permissible. 'Homespun verse' and 'pet names' have been met with disapproval (*Re Holy Trinity Freckleton [1994] 1WLR 1588*). Clearly it would be impossible to prescribe exactly which forms of words will be considered acceptable and which will not. I am not told why the Area Dean considered the wording of Mr Guy's memorial to be inappropriate, but it would seem an obvious assumption that the word 'honey' used as a term of endearment was the problem. I very much doubt that, had that one word been omitted, there would have been any difficulty.

### Application of the law to this case

7. Whether or not the addition of that one word renders the memorial in its current form unsuitable could be a matter for much argument. It is indisputably a term of endearment used informally. It is also in this case just one word forming part of a phrase at the bottom of a modest memorial stone. As the applicant points out, the lettering is simple and not in gold leaf. It does not particularly stand out in the churchyard. The stone appears to be flat and can therefore only really be read by those standing very close by. The remainder of the inscription simply commemorates the lives of her parents and expresses her Christian faith that they are reunited in heaven.
8. A quotation from a secular song (as the phrase appears to be) is not in and of itself inappropriate. The phrase 'honey I missed you' has particular significance for the petitioner as her father would sing these words in the few short months before his own final illness when she took him to visit the churchyard. She herself has found much solace in them. The difficulties that have since arisen and the thought of her parents' resting place being disturbed have naturally caused her distress. She also brings to my attention the wording on a number of other memorials nearby in the churchyard which could also appear somewhat informal and might be considered inappropriate by some. Finally, I note that the PCC have no objection to the stone and are unanimously of the view that the inscription should be allowed to remain.

9. I take a pragmatic view in this case. Whilst it may well have been better to omit the word 'honey' from the inscription (or to come up with an alternative quotation), the petitioner had the memorial installed in good faith and in ignorance of the law. The inscription as it stands is neither offensive nor incompatible with the Christian faith. No disrespect for that faith, the Church, or the churchyard as a place of rest and solace for many was intended. Rather, the inscription was chosen by the applicant as a fitting memorial to her parents. The particular circumstances of this case persuade me that it should be allowed to stand unchanged. A faculty will therefore be issued retrospectively allowing the memorial stone to Mr and Mrs Guy to stand in its current form.

**S V Spear**  
**Deputy Chancellor**  
**14 September 2021**