



Minehead Town Council Cemetery Lychgate Preservation Report

Background

Minehead Town Council owns and maintains the town cemetery on Porlock Road, a site over 100 years old. The northern entrance features a historic Lychgate, likely original to the cemetery, constructed with an oak timber framework. While the exact age is uncertain, the structure represents a significant heritage feature to the site that has seen some minor maintenance works over time.

Needs

The wooden Lychgate requires urgent preservation due to significant structural deterioration. A recent inspection revealed:

- Rotten wall plates compromising the structure's stability
- Potential damage to oak timber uprights, particularly around tenon joints
- Deteriorated wooden gates needing replacement

Proposed work includes:

- Supplying oak timber to restore and stabilise the Lychgate (*More information on the type of oak can be found in Appendix 1*)
- Creating three new gates in Iroko hardwood, designed to match the original structure
- Ensuring structural safety and future preservation

Finance

The project costs are estimated at £11,785, based on a quotation from a local specialist contractor. However, the final cost may fluctuate depending on the condition of the oak timber uprights, which can only be fully assessed once the wall plates are removed, and the underlying structure is exposed. This potential variation is common in restoration projects involving aged, heritage structures where hidden damage may not be apparent until work commences. The town council has prepared for this work financially through:

- £10,000 budget for cemetery maintenance in 2024/25
- £10,000 Ear Marked Reserve for cemetery improvements
- Anticipated additional £500 contribution from Minehead Conservation Society

The restoration work will also require repointing works to the wall supporting the wooden frame. While this work is anticipated, it is expected to be relatively modest in

cost. The council could strategically schedule these minor repairs in the subsequent financial year, thereby distributing the overall project expenses more manageably.

Legal Considerations

The Public Contracts Regulations 2015 require the use of Contracts Finder only for contracts valued at £30,000 or above.¹ Since this work's value falls significantly below this threshold, these regulations are not applicable.

While the Council's Standing Orders reference these regulations, the Financial Regulations provide the main guidance for the Town Council's procurement process.

Although the Financial Regulations typically require three quotations, the specialised nature of this preservation work makes obtaining multiple quotes impractical. The Town Clerk considers this project to be compliant with the council's Financial Regulations, particularly under section 11.1(ii) which addresses specialist services

Conservation Aspects

Although the site is outside the Woodcombe conservation area, the Minehead Conservation Society has been contacted and are supportive of any proposed preservation works. They have:

- Provided a letter of support
- Pledged £500 towards the project
- Expressed interest in installing a conservation plaque after work completion

Conclusion

The Lychgate is a recognisable and important site feature. This preservation work, potentially the first major intervention in over 100 years, represents a valuable investment in maintaining the cemetery's heritage aspects.

Recommendation

Approve the quotation for Lychgate preservation works and instruct the Clerk to engage the contractor at the earliest opportunity.

Ben Parker
Town Clerk
November 2024

¹ The Public Contracts Regulations 2015 S 109. (2 c ii)

Appendix 1

Air dried oak is green oak that's been cut to size and left out in the air to dry naturally. It is also known as semi-seasoned oak.

When oak is green – that is, freshly cut – it has a high moisture content. Oak shrinks as it dries. When green oak is used in construction, the joints in the frame have to be specially designed so that the weight of the build settles as the oak dries, shrinks, and moves.

So green oak is perfectly suited for use in new build constructions. But when you're fitting new beams into your home for aesthetic reasons, this movement can cause problems.

This is where air dried oak beams come into their own. These beams have done most of their shrinking in the air. When they're fitted to an existing frame, the amount of movement will be minimal. As oak is a natural material, air drying doesn't eradicate movement entirely. However, it does significantly reduce it, allowing you to fit airdried oak beams to your home with total peace of mind.

Reasons for drying timber - The main reasons for drying timber include:

- To prevent unacceptable shrinkage after installation
- To maximise strength, as mechanical properties of timber generally increase as it dries below 25 % to 30 % moisture content
- To reduce susceptibility to fungal decay. Timber maintained at less than 20 % moisture content is unlikely to be attacked by wood decaying fungi or sapstain.
- To make processed timber easier to handle, as seasoned timber is not as heavy as green timber
- To increase the effectiveness of preservative treatments. Many preservatives should only be applied when the moisture content of the timber has been reduced.
- To effectively glue, paint, stain, fill and polish timber
- To prevent the corrosion of metal fixings
- To meet legislation relating to the use of structural timber in buildings

European Air-Dried Oak would be used in this project that is below 30% moisture content. All beam sections and boards are labelled with the date the tree was felled, sawn and stacked to start the drying process. Therefore, it is possible to date the timbers accurately and gauge the moisture content.