

The Natural Death Centre's official magazine

# more to death

third edition 2014

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**THE BABY  
GROVE**

Plus

**NEW PLACES  
TO BURY -  
THE ECO NETWORK  
EXPANDS**

touching photos of  
**A FAMILY'S  
FAREWELL**



UNCOVER HIDDEN AND AMAZING OPTIONS  
SURROUNDING DEATH AND FUNERAL PLANNING



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If the public are to be respected and given the right to informed choice then some uncomfortable truths have to be openly aired. Distasteful as the reality may be, the actuality of what happens when a body is embalmed should be known before you agree to this process – and non-consensual embalming is just not on!

Some callers to the Helpline have likened the idea to that of rape and would never have allowed it had they known exactly what was involved, whether they had been asked or not.

So **DO NOT READ THE SECOND ARTICLE ON EMBALMING** on page 42 if you don't want to know what it is, or if, like our publisher, (who I thought was becoming more used to deathly stuff!), you think that this kind of information should stay behind the mortuary door.

### On a lighter note

We are over the moon that the last edition hit 26,000 readers by mid December. What we are worried about is that you may miss out on the next and future editions. There is no way of knowing who you are when you click onto the magazine.

So, I would like to ask you to please [click here, now](#). This will quickly take you to a blank email form. Simply type "send mag" into the subject box and click send. We will then get future editions to you - no other junk I promise. Then you can return to see what we have assembled in this winter/spring issue.

**Anything to say?** Let me have your articles/letters.

Exciting times. And a Happy New Year by the way.

*Rosie Inman-Cook*

Editor



# Flick through

previous editions of

# more to death

magazine



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# HOW GREEN IS THAT COFFIN?

**This is a subject regularly debated by the green burial sites.**

## **What should they accept?**

The merits of the various types of coffin, their manufacture and their degradability is a source of furious and bitter letters between competing manufacturers - and their respective solicitors. They are even the subject of patent and idea-wars amongst the more anal of the coffinistas, who sneak around at exhibitions taking photos of shape and construction.

The latest twist in the green coffin story is the rejection of 'wacky' coffins by some crematoria. They justifiably have concerns about the safe charging of coffins into their furnaces. Apparently, some coffins start to combust before they are fully into the cremators, causing a flash of flame that poses a threat to staff. Some are also apparently too soft for the equipment to push quickly into the chamber, the piston that rams the coffin in is puncturing the coffin's end and becomes entangled with it, potentially bringing a flaming coffin back into the room.

There is also the thought that the low density and calorific value of some 'eco' coffins means that they are not contributing to the burn and - counterproductively for a green funeral - the gas is having to be turned up, meaning more fossil fuel usage.

**Here is our take on the situation and our advice to those who are concerned about their choices.**

Back in the day... well the early nineties, when the movement towards green burial and greener funerals started, a demand was created for coffins compatible with the ideals of those early pioneers. Twenty years later, the market place is flooded with 'eco' coffins of every shape, colour and material. I do not know whether back then it was envisaged that alternative coffins would become so mainstream and that their use would be general rather than limited to just green burials, but the aesthetic appeal of coffins made in natural materials and the success of the marketing of environmentally friendly alternatives has seen a huge growth in the alternatives available.

At a meeting of green burial ground managers recently, it was concluded that the only completely green coffin is either no coffin at all, or a locally produced softwood coffin or shroud. If the removal of carbon from the atmosphere is something that is paramount to individuals or families, then a solid wood coffin, when buried, will hold, remove and lock more carbon into the grave than those made of other materials.

## **So what is out there?**

**WOVEN** - There are the woven coffins made from **willow, cane, leaves, wool or grasses**. These are produced both here and abroad and the arguments and justifications over the carbon miles they travel from production range in the funeral press.



Most truly concerned greenies agree that their coffin should be British, even if this means that it is generally twice the price. Imported coffins bring with them a high carbon footprint, no matter how this may be 'offset' by the manufacturers or importers. Then there is the consideration over the 'Fair Trade' element of the far flung producers and worries over their employees' working conditions.

**RECYCLED** - The recycled coffins include **cardboard, papier-mâché and ones made from paper pulp board.** We like these, but note that the paper pulp ones are not suitable for cremation as the china clay used in paper manufacture is causing residue problems. They are great for burial though and cardboard coffins are hugely refined and improved since the early days.

**MDF and CHIPBOARD** - Then there are the **MDF and chipboard boxes.** The manufacturing process of these has been under toxic scrutiny for many years. Unfortunately it is difficult for all other coffins to compete economically against these as their trade price is a fraction of most others and many funeral director businesses like the healthy mark up (up to 1,000%!) they can sometimes cheekily charge on these £50 coffins.

It is interesting to note that these coffins, with their fake wood-effect exteriors, are the default coffin used by the majority of funeral directors across the whole industry. What is of most concern to the green

minded is that they are lined, up to the rim, with non-degradable plastic, thus entombing most conventionally buried bodies to an eternity in a plastic wrap. There are some that claim too that the level of formaldehyde in their board is now insignificant and that their chipboard is green and recycled – laudable though this may be, it can be a distraction from the rest of the coffin, its fixings, glues, lining and varnish.

**SOLID WOOD** - **Solid wood coffins,** once the mainstay of the industry back in the day of local craftsmen and available elm, have been mostly replaced by foreign imports or at least coffins produced from timber grown abroad. However there are artisan suppliers, mainly working in soft pines, still going or even starting up in the UK. There is even one in Doncaster who is making coffins from reclaimed window frames and pallets, saving this useable wood from a different kind of burial.

**SHROUDS** - There are those for whom a coffin is unnecessary, choosing either to swaddle their dead in a favourite blanket or to purchase a purpose made shroud, complete with integral carrying handles and rigid framework. One of the shroud manufacturers has recently created a charging board that allows their shrouds to be used at the more flexible crematoria.





Image courtesy of [www.earthtoheaven.co.uk](http://www.earthtoheaven.co.uk)



Image courtesy of [www.feetfirstcreations.co.uk](http://www.feetfirstcreations.co.uk)

Overall, as in any market, the supply and type of coffins available is dictated by the demand. With the growing awareness of how our decisions as consumers can determine the level of impact we have on the world around us, we have informed choice in most of our purchases, deciding whether to buy British, buy organic, buy sustainably sourced or Fair Trade goods, buy locally produced or crafted items, to use our own bags rather than throwaway plastic ones, all individual decisions made depending on how important these things are to us.

If making environmentally responsible choices is something that is important to you in life, then it makes sense to carry those values through to decisions made concerning death. We think that knowledge is power, and that if the public chose to find out more about the coffins offered to them in the glossy brochure, their provenance and true environmental credentials, the high number of varnished MDF chip-board coffins that are daily delivered to crematoria around the UK might gradually begin to diminish.

Rarely, however, is a funeral director asked direct questions about the manufacture and carbon footprint involved with each coffin in their range – and we suspect very few would be able to answer if they were. We think this needs to change. If enough clients were concerned about the provenance of the coffins they bought, the industry would have to respond with training and information for their staff.

### Questions you can ask a funeral director about different types of coffin in his / her range include:

- Where is this produced?
- Which company produces it?
- Do you know what process is involved in the manufacture?
- Is the entire coffin and the fixtures and fittings (handles, decorative trim and lining) made from biodegradable material?
- Are all of the materials used in the production of this coffin sustainably sourced?

We also feel strongly that the frequent practice of high mark ups on coffins by funeral directors should be challenged – the professional fees charged should cover the costs of running the business rather than there being several hundred pounds added on to the trade price at which each coffin is purchased.

We have a list of coffin and shroud suppliers on the NDC website, specifically these are suppliers who will sell directly to the public, a public who must decide themselves what level of green is important and relevant to them, if at all.

**For Natural Death Centre Recommended Coffins and Shrouds. PLEASE CLICK HERE.**

# What

**As society is turning to a more environmentally friendly lifestyle, cardboard coffins are becoming more and more popular for those searching for a 'greener' funeral. But that does not mean that any style has to be lost.**

It has been over 20 years since William's father developed Greenfield Creation's first cardboard coffin- and they have been selling them ever since. A sign writer and cardboard engineer, he did not just want to offer plain cardboard coffins; he would paint images on to them. William, managing director of Greenfield Creations, said that his father also printed directly on to the board for a stock range of coffin designs. These included green, white, woodgrain, marble - or any colour of the customers' choice. But over the years, the design and make process has evolved, with increasing amounts of customer involvement.

Our customers can simply submit their own photos or images or get their initial inspiration from our website. Sometimes they will give us a theme to work with, for example 'A menagerie of animals'. We then put together design options using photos, drawings or website images. We get so much pleasure working with our customers with design ideas.



# a fabulous idea!!

In 2002, the National Science Museum exhibited Greenfield Creations coffins alongside other death related objects from their historical collections. William said: **“The purpose of the event was to demonstrate changing attitudes to death and how people were now seeking self expression in the manner of death and choice of funeral.”**

The company was also honoured in 2004, when they were invited to exhibit their coffin at the Design Museum in London as part of the Conran Foundations Collection of ‘ingenious inventions’. William said that it was important that they, as in any industry, gave the customer what they wanted. He said: **“People wishing to really personalise a funeral is a growing trend so our range of coffins and bespoke design service needs to take into account that people want variety of choice. “With 20 years of manufacturing under our belts we feel that we have ‘made a difference’.”**

Greenfield Creations was the first company in the UK to manufacture bespoke cardboard picture coffins. Their product was marketed as the ‘Greenfield Coffin’ when it was first sold, as this was the name of the company at the time. But, in the last few years, William changed the name to ‘Greenfield Creations’.

He said: **“I felt it better reflected our complete company range of products. We offer an ‘alternative’ to consumers, without compromising on style or design. This gives customers more choice than ever before.”**

All Greenfield Creations coffins are made to the highest standards, complying with the low emissions levels set by the Government’s Environmental Act and have been tested by the federation of British Cremation Authorities. All the coffins are manufactured from corrugated cardboard, and made from at least 70% post consumer waste sourced from local mills. Greenfield Creations’ material supplier purchases any new fibre or wood pulp from reputable sources, which adhere to the forestry management and sustainability body FSC. The product and the materials are all made here in the UK. Corn starch glues are used during construction and calico liners and natural rope handles, or cotton strap handles, are also available for the coffins. Each coffin has a low resource manufacturing process and low emission levels when cremated, and are suitable for both burial and cremation services. William said: **“We encourage people to have the coffin they really want.”**

Our hope is that, by helping you have the personalised coffin of your choice, we make a difference to you and your family.

**“People are as different in death as they are in life and a personalised coffin can pay tribute to the person who has died.”**



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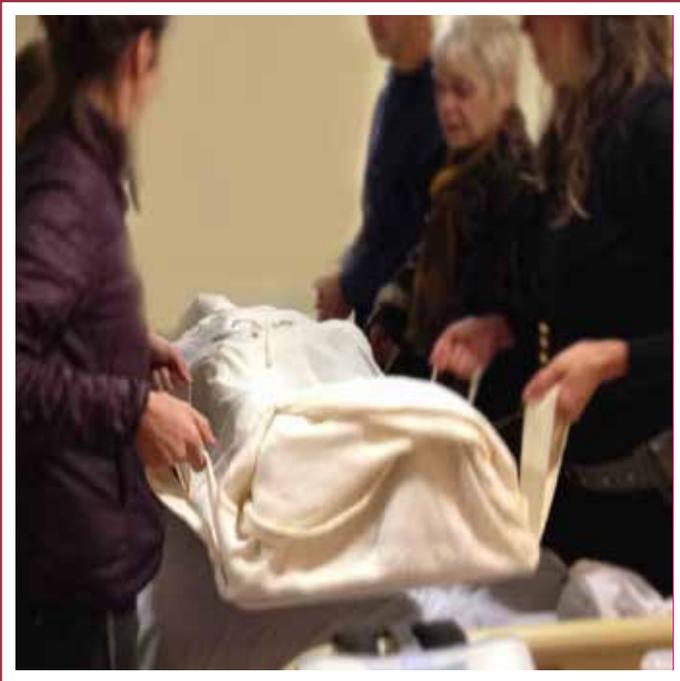
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# in the UK



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In the 1990s Gordon was offered a Cardboard Coffin company by a Swiss firm, at that time knowing little about the funeral industry he turned it down. However, that presentation stuck in his mind and in 2006 he was introduced to the idea of Green Burial by the CLA. Gordon and his partner Alison applied for planning permission on the first of two lots of land totalling 50 acres, some of which he had owned since 1995. Planning was approved in 2009 /10 and they launched Respect Natural Woodland Green Burial Parks one year later. One of Gordon's parks is on the border of South Yorkshire & North Nottinghamshire, the other is in Lincolnshire on the border to North Lincolnshire.

Gordon soon realised that there was a real gap in the market for an affordable coffin-less burial product. They developed this in the form of a natural shroud with the help of the members of the ANGB and advice from the NDC. He thoroughly investigated the issues of carrying and especially lowering the shroud, developing a pouch into which a Board is inserted. Respect also needed to consider that the mourners might not appreciate seeing through the shroud so a densely woven bamboo cloth was chosen. It is designed to gently swathe the body and allows for certain religions and cultures to easily view the face should that be requested. Gordon launched his degradable shroud at the National Funeral Exhibition and sold out of stock.

Respect have also carried out professionally observed cremation tests in the UK and were subsequently invited by the ICCM crematorium body to present their findings to 200 professional operators late last year which has resulted in several crematoriums actually recommending Respect's Shrouds as fully tested and safe to use in crematoriums.

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# A far fare

**Gordon Tulley has forwarded the following account from the family of William Howland. We would all like to thank William's family for allowing us to share their funeral experience with More to Death readers.**

**William Howland  
(22.07.1943 –  
22.10.2013)**

William in life was a strong, fit, powerful man – both physically and mentally. He died of bone cancer at the age of 70. Binky his wife, Caroline his ex-partner, and his two children Matthew and Flossy, worked together as a family, not only to help him die well but to provide a funeral that felt right for them.



# Family's Jewell

After a short spell in hospital where it became evident that his bone cancer had moved into 'end' stage, Will was moved into a Hospice in Windsor. He became unconscious after a week and remained in that state for 6 days before dying. The family were together for those six days which gave them time to plan and decide what they wanted to do.

Caroline Barnett, a humanist funeral celebrant had talked to Will about a month previously about what he wanted to happen.

He said he would like to be as 'eco' as possible and did not want a funeral but a **'bloody great bash'** afterwards.



With this in mind the family found a natural woodland burial ground through the NDC and bought a plot underneath an oak tree, son Matthew bought the adjacent plot as part of a long term investment! They decided on one of Gordon's natural shrouds, feeling it was the greenest way forward. Matthew made a board of untreated wood to fit into it. They were concerned that the body might decompose and Gordon recommended they contact Simon Rothwell at Flexmort ([www.flexmort.com](http://www.flexmort.com)) who supplied a chiller blanket and insulating cover – this system avoids the need for a refrigerated room (a great innovation developed initially for use in hospitals).

In the meantime they hired an orange VW campervan, identical to one used by the family for years of holidays.







They informed the Hospice of their Direct It Yourself plans and although surprised, as no one had done this before, they went into overdrive to help make it happen: booking an appointment to see the registrar to get the green burial form and arranging for a nurse to help when collecting William's body. Gently wrapping him in the shroud and carrying him to the van they drove him home and put the Flexmort blanket on while he spent the night in the van.



The family of 11 had an Indian take-away meal and lit an outdoor fire by the van. The next morning in glorious sunshine the back of the van was opened and the children – rather nervously at first – stroked his face, did his hair and arranged their flowers around him – they had prepared wild flowers from the garden.



At midday they set off in convoy to the burial site, and carried William through the woods to the prepared graveside.

Several people spoke – and cried - about William before lowering him into the ground – accompanied by apple brandy and Bob Dylan. The kids sat around the edge of the grave, and threw flowers and moss to cover William. They even lowered William's grandson into the grave by his feet to perfectly adjust his final message!



We hope you agree that this is a most wonderful account of a loving farewell and again wish to highlight our thanks to William's family for sharing this very personal occasion with us all.

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OF THE  
SLEEVE  
OF  
A GIRL  
WHO  
LOVED  
ME

# MEMORIALS

## Past and Present

**As a stone sculptor and designer of contemporary memorials, I am always drawn to churchyards and cemeteries to look at old headstones and graves.**

**These traditional burial grounds encompass the rich social and economic history of a village, town or city and often exhibit the finest artisan skills of their day.**

I recently visited Arnos Vale Cemetery, located in a vast wooded hillside near the centre of Bristol. It's packed with huge ornate Victorian mausoleums, graves and sculptures – an historical document in stone, if you will, recording the lives of the great and good from yesteryear. Arnos Vale truly is a fascinating place to explore and observe the grand public gestures people made about themselves or their family members after death.

Generation upon generation were laid to rest there in large plots endorsing an unspoken continuum. Most had always lived in Bristol, held a

significant social standing within the community and felt the need to express their worth - both as part of a larger family and as Bristolians.

I have come to realise that people today are looking for very different ways to commemorate life, compared with these huge Victorian edifices. Intimate objects of mourning from the 19th century - such as jewellery, decorative objects or keepsakes made from human hair and jet – have more relevance to the modern mindset. These were private and individual mementos – permanent and precious physical reminders of a person - and something which could be passed down through a family.

Many of us now lead a more transitory lifestyle. Members of the same family may live in different parts of the country

**By Kate Semple**

CONTINUED

or in far flung parts of the world. A return to the idea of a smaller and more personal memorial is becoming much more appropriate as society's views on death shift and change. We now think about choosing memorials that can be moved with us or shared between a family.

In the 20th century, the variety and choice of memorials shrank. The public seemed to develop a more hands-off approach. We had less involvement in the burial or cremation process, accepting purely what was on offer from the local funeral directors.

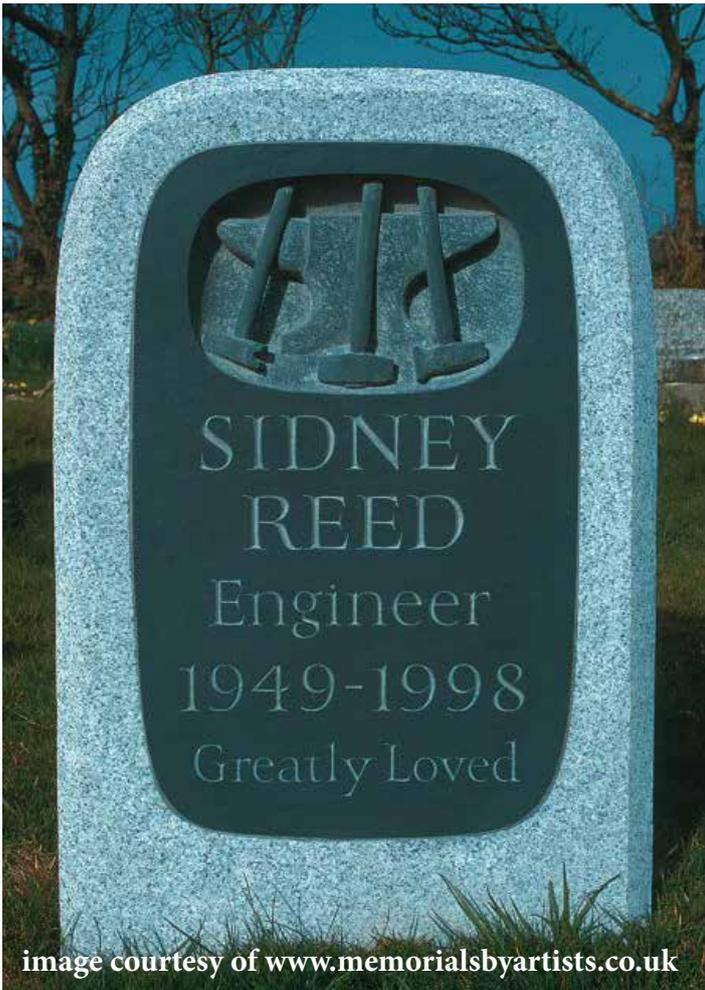


image courtesy of [www.memorialsbyartists.co.uk](http://www.memorialsbyartists.co.uk)

After finding it almost impossible to commission an individually designed and hand cut headstone, Harriet Frazer MBE founded the Memorials by Artists Trust in 1988. The trust aimed to promote the skills of the best letter cutters and carvers in the country, while encouraging the public to choose beautifully made headstones instead of the mass produced versions commonly available.

Since its inception more than 20 years ago; the Memorials by Artists Trust has prompted a quiet revolution, encouraging people to consider a broader range of options for commemorating life. Today people can quickly and easily research online to find a funeral-type, celebrant, casket

design, style of service or choice of final resting place that truly reflects the life of a person. The internet has opened a new world of opportunity for people to source information and ideas for more personal, individual and human commemorations. The choices available are continuing to grow, from the tastefully imaginative, to the openly wacky.

For people preferring the choice of a humanist funeral, green burial or cremation, the option of a



image courtesy of [www.eco-urns.co.uk](http://www.eco-urns.co.uk)



headstone is no longer relevant. In my experience the public are increasingly seeking fitting alternative memorials. The traditional cemetery and headstone will always, of course, have its place, but we live in rapidly changing times and people's needs and expectations are certainly broadening. There is an undeniably growing movement towards finding refreshing, new and uplifting ways to celebrate a life. I genuinely believe memorials will continue to develop in the future – increasingly capturing the essence of an individual for others to quietly reflect upon at home, in the garden and in the cemetery.



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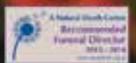
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# OFFICIAL NATURAL DEATH CENTRE PYRE SURVEY

We have been running a pyre survey on the NDC website for a while now..

More than 500 people have voted with just over 90% in favour of this style of disposal being made available again in the British Isles.

Our helpline still receives calls about this every week from families wanting this style of send off and there are a couple of individuals who are seriously thinking about putting planning applications together in an effort to establish the UK's first licensed open air crematoria.

## Take part in our survey

We, the NDC, support the campaign to relegalise outdoor funeral pyres here in the UK. We feel there are strong historical precedences for this in our ancestral past, and we believe it would work environmentally, socially and spiritually regardless of religious belief or ethnic background.

Our full arguments in favour of this are available here on the website, and in the current edition of **The Natural Death Handbook**.

Do you agree with us?



**CLICK TO WATCH**

We thought that you might like to take a look at this video from the Crestone community in Colorado. The only place in the USA, as far as we are aware, that have permission to perform pyre cremations. We hope you find it interesting.

At 12 minutes you can see how they have constructed the pyre walls with fire brick, and the levels of the grating that creates both this very efficient burn and a stable pyre construction.



**CLICK TO READ**

A previous edition of this e-zine where Ru Callender makes a powerful case for pyres...See page 30.



# ARTIFICIAL LIFE

Rupert Callender has recently stepped down from being a trustee of The Natural Death Centre Charity, largely because he and Claire have finally managed to open a natural burial ground with the marvellous Sharpham Trust, and need to give that all of their concentration.

Today, they continue to ask awkward questions and to explore alternative subjects; unafraid of opprobrium or ridicule, they believe that by doing so they continue to push for changes that will one day lead us to a fuller and better way of dealing with death.

## ARTICLE BY RUPERT CALLENDER

The Natural Death Centre inspired us to become undertakers. I owe it my vocational direction, my life's work, and it showed me the way to heal my own grief. I am particularly grateful for the chance to have co-written and co-edited the latest edition of *The Natural Death Handbook*, and I hope all who have read it - and read previous editions - will feel my colleagues and I carried the blazing torch a few feet further into the darkness, spluttering and guttering perhaps, but illuminating all the same. It has been a genuine privilege.

I thought I would let my final musings on behalf of the charity be about an issue which remains central to its philosophy:

// forward thinking funeral directors who think the scrutiny we give to the industry is needed //

For the past three times the event has been held, we have been very kindly invited to have a stand at the National Funeral Exhibition, the 'Las Vegas-in-a-warehouse' style catwalk upon which the funeral industry struts its gaudy bling. It is more than just an array of dazzlingly weird new products, £90,000 hearses and seminars on facial reconstruction with wax; it is a chance for the funeral world to meet, the various large characters that inhabit it to emerge, mingle and, well, get a little bit pissed as well.

Twenty years ago, the idea of The Natural Death Centre being at such an event would have been as unthinkable as Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness sharing a joke as they jointly govern Northern Ireland, but things do change, more than we can ever really imagine and so we find ourselves not only present, but engaged and even warmly greeted by a surprising number of forward thinking funeral directors who think the scrutiny we give to the industry is needed and welcome.

Of course, there are many who stride past hurriedly, eyes narrowed and fixed upon the 'Ashes to Diamond' stand, management from some of the, ahem, larger chains who suddenly remember a pressing engagement at the other end of the hall when they see our name, but by and large we are greeted with warmth and open mindedness, even if it is simply to stop and engage in some mild ideological banter.

Not so the angry French embalmer who swept up to us, exuding that haughty Gallic fury that only the French can make seem attractive. His ire was directed at our stance on embalming, a practice we are against, a fairly uncompromising position we have maintained consistently since the charity's early days.

We were wrong, he insisted, to tar the process and the chemicals as dangerous. It was the lackadaisical attitude employed by the British that was at fault. Used with much more delicacy and skill, embalming was no more dangerous than any industrial process, but the British light heartedness towards these desperately carcinogenic chemicals meant that early deaths from cancer from mishandling them were inevitable. We, the NDC, were doing the wider global embalming industry a great disservice by attacking it and needed to get our facts straight.



**The latest edition of *The Natural Death Handbook* includes a book of Essays, 'Writing on Death', with contributions from sixteen eminent writers of our time on the subject.**

Maybe he is right. I'm no scientist. My knowledge of embalming is down to having seen it done about ten times, having a layman's understanding of the chemicals involved, reading of the early deaths from rare cancers of various embalmers, and listening to cheery little asides from them like: "I don't ever get any colds you know," and "Of course, the first proper whiff permanently burns all the hairs in your nose and lungs clean off!" which sort of lends a credence to our French critic's point of view.

The Environment Agency isn't that bothered either. They think that by the time they enter the ground, when a body decays, chemicals contained in them are all but neutralised. There are even a number of embalming products that just may replace formaldehyde, the main preservative involved, with a green alternative. Maybe in the future it will be possible to embalm a body to the standard that they expect in the US with no detrimental effect to either the environment or the person doing the procedure.

### **And we would still be, forgive me, dead against it.**

I have been an undertaker for nearly fourteen years now, a 'green' one, though we would argue that the term extends far more into the realm of the social and psychological than it might at first appear. Literally, this means we use far fewer chemicals than our traditional counterparts. We never embalm, but we also encourage far more contact with the body than usual. We think that returning again and again into the presence of the person who has died gives enormous comfort to the bereaved. More important than comfort, we believe it serves them, it allows them to come to terms with the enormity of what has happened.

// death is  
such an  
unthinkable  
concept //

Anyone who has had someone they love die knows that there is a curious unreality to the experience. You can be told the news and totally believe it and understand it on an intellectual level, but somewhere deep inside, let's risk a cliché and say inside your heart, there can be a voice saying No! No! No! over and over again. It's not rational, often not even conscious, but death is such an unthinkable concept that rationality is the first thing thrown out of the window.

Seeing the person as they really are, spending time with them may sound like an astonishingly painful thing to do and most grieving people try to avoid it by saying they want to remember them as they were, but if gently encouraged and supported, given time and cups of tea and a room which feels like a room they might have in their own house, then a process can begin which can radically effect the quality of their grief for years to come, the beginning of acceptance.

There is a strong sense of paternalism in the funeral industry. A feeling that the public needed to be protected from the reality of death. Some of this is good old

// a necessary  
disentanglement  
of body  
and soul //

fashioned entrenched protectionism, but much of this comes from a genuine belief that most people aren't up to the truth. We disagree.

For fourteen years we have been gently leading families into the presence of their dead; unadorned, not filled with chemicals that smooth out their wrinkles and give their cheeks a sunkissed holiday glow, not polyfilled with wax, but dead: skin cold, eyes sunk, grey, the spark that animated them undeniably extinguished and yet filled with a beauty that comes from being part of a universal truth, the truth about our transitory existence, the lightning flash that is our lives. We know this, all of us, but so rarely are we allowed to sit with it.

One of the fundamental ideas behind embalming, aside from the short term preservation of the body, is to make the dead look like they have just fallen asleep. The idea behind this is well meaning, but misguided. In attempting to protect someone from the unprotectable, by presenting someone dead as looking spookily alive, viewers of the body are being set up to feel cognitive dissonance, the distressing feeling of trying to believe two simultaneous but contradictory ideas. We know they are dead, so why do they look so well? This dissonance can rattle down through the years, subtle, influential, shaping the way we mourn our dead, sugaring a pill that none the less sticks in our throats.

### **And then there is the violence of the procedure.**

I write this in the week in which a soldier has been brutally and publicly butchered on the streets of London, and for millions of people around the world, death comes like this.

We cling to the idea of a good death, and that idea shifts and changes with the culture we live in. For the Victorians, it was a lucid farewell, imparting words of love and wisdom. Increasingly for us, it is an unconscious one, pain free, perhaps even unawareness for the dying person of what is actually occurring. The truth is that death is not one moment, but a process that can take weeks. Biologically, it also continues after our own definitions of death - cessation of heart beating, no brain activity - have been reached, with the various cells in our body continuing to futilely divide, getting hotter for a while until the message from on top reaches them. The line is not clear.

// make the dead  
look like they  
have just  
fallen asleep //

And this is where we step into the unknown, all of us. Beyond this point, nobody; doctors, priests, professors or psychics have any idea whether the absence of life in the body means the departure of everything, personality, spirit, or brace yourself - soul. What nearly all cultures agree on is that in the right circumstances, we should give the dead the benefit of doubt and let them be as much as we can, performing simple acts of kindness and respect.

There are some currently unavoidable procedures that are done to our dead bodies. If there is any suspicion as to how we died, then quite rightly a thorough examination of the body in the form of a post mortem is required. But post mortems are not performed routinely, and there is change afoot to limit them.

Our dead deserve, if possible, that time outside time, a dimension of which we have no knowledge whatsoever, to gently sit with what may be a necessary disentanglement of body and soul. They don't always get this, this gentle peace, but if we let go of the intrusive and unnecessary tradition of embalming our dead, who knows what favours we are doing them, as well as ourselves.



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Fran Hall of the Natural Death Centre responds to Ru Callender's article about embalming.

# A beautiful corpse?

Rupert speaks for all of us at the NDC with his views on embalming; he writes so eloquently and with such passion about being in the presence of the unadorned dead – how I wish that he could be wheeled out at every gathering of funeral staff around the country to challenge their acceptance of the process which is carried out on so many of our dead relatives!



## Warning – the following article contains explicit details about the embalming process.

Probably for the best reasons, many funeral arrangers and conductors encourage families to have the bodies of their dead relatives embalmed. Unfortunately, the desire to protect bereaved people from the 'distress' of seeing – or even worse, smelling – death in all its grim reality means that the process is often subtly encouraged, or glossed over by pseudonym and lack of explanation – 'You'll want mum to have our hygienic treatment won't you? And we'll do her hair just like she used to have it.' 'If you want to come and see Dad then I'd recommend temporary preservation so he looks his best.'

Often embalming is done routinely and can be included in the professional fees, or in the 'Care of the deceased' fee charged by the funeral director – requiring a bereaved family to be sufficiently informed and aware at the time of making funeral arrangements to expressly opt out of having a body embalmed.

This is a clear breach of the British Institute of Embalmers Code of Ethics, which states: "The client's informed consent, preferably in writing, must be obtained", however we know that written explicit permission to embalm is rarely routinely obtained in the UK. A signature agreeing to 'terms and conditions' (something that is a normal part of engaging a funeral director's services) is taken as being an implicit agreement to routine embalming. The Charter for the Bereaved warns that 'If you are opposed to embalming, it may be advised to expressly forbid it'.

How can this have become the case? How can a gruesome, intrusive process have become something that is presumed to be the norm? We think basically through a combination of fear, misleading information, laziness and convenience – and quite possibly, profit.

Embalming typically adds around £100 - £200 to the costs of each funeral. The amount paid to the embalmer will vary depending on whether they are employed by the funeral director's company or are self employed – a so called 'trade embalmer', and also on the types of cases they are required to embalm, however I am not aware of any embalmer being paid anywhere near £100 per embalming, I believe the figure is nearer half that amount. I have known trade embalmers to turn up and carry out five or six cases in a morning before disappearing to another company for the afternoon 'batch'.



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## **Warning – the following article contains explicit details about the embalming process.**

Embalmed bodies do not need refrigerating, and can be easily transported from a 'hub' to a branch for viewing and left there until the time of the funeral – fewer costly trips back and forth from the branch back to the fridge, fewer fridges needed, families bear the cost of the process that enables this, and a small mark up can be made too. What's to lose?

Basically, everything, as Ru points out – but everything from the family's point of view rather than the business involved. Embalming suits the funeral industry, and families have been persuaded that it suits them too – avoid all that messy reality of seeing death as it actually is by just nodding your agreement to the suggestion of 'Hygienic Treatment' and it will all be so much better than it could have been.

### **Personally, I think this is the question that should be asked of each family - Would you like us to;**

- Open up the jugular artery and vein in mum's neck?
- Pump all the blood out of her circulatory system and replace it with a gallon or two of 2% formaldehyde (an irritant volatile acid containing a pink dye to give her skin a healthy colour)?
- Make an opening in her abdomen and insert a sharp medical instrument to puncture all her organs and suck any fluid out of them?
- Fill her abdomen with more of that embalming fluid?
- Insert plastic caps under her eyelids?
- Stitch her mouth closed by running a curved needle and suture up through her nostril, through her septum and down into the gum tissue at the front of her jaw,?
- Apply a whole load of cosmetics to her face and dress her in her own clothes before she gets placed in the coffin?

### **Or would you like us to just wash her if needed?"**

I have a feeling the number of bodies being embalmed would shrink to almost nil – and embalming would become the specialist technique it should be, used in cases where reconstruction after an accident is needed, or for preservation for identification purposes.



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# Here are some commonly held beliefs about embalming.

## Many people believe

**Bodies need to be embalmed for public health. (This forms the first point of the Code of Ethics adopted by members of the British Institute of Embalmers – “I believe that the practice of Embalming is in the interest of Public Health and promise to promote embalming to the best of my ability.”)**

## The truth is

*Embalming provides no public health benefit according to the US Centre for Disease Control and Canadian health authorities.*

**Bodies need to be embalmed for health and safety reasons.**

*There is no evidence that a body poses a threat to the living, except where death was due to a notifiable disease. No evidence exists of funeral directing, cemetery or crematorium staff obtaining an infection from an unembalmed body.*

*Embalmers suggest that the process thoroughly disinfects the body and removes any risk, however slight, to any person who may come in to contact with the body. Conversely, it would be logical to assume that if a real health risk existed, embalming would be mandatory. In fact, when a person dies of a notifiable disease, embalming is not allowed (Source: Charter for the Bereaved)*

**Hygienic Treatment (aka embalming) is basically washing and cleaning a dead person, possibly with the use of some essential oils or spices like the Egyptians did...**

*Embalming involves the arterial injection of embalming chemicals, frequently formaldehyde containing a pink dye. The full process is described below – only suitable reading for the strong of stomach.*

**A body has to be embalmed if the family want to ‘view’ it in the Chapel of Rest’**

*This is just a company policy, not the law.*

**A body has to be embalmed if the coffin is being taken into church or taken home before the funeral.**

*Ditto above. Not true.*

**Embalming preserves a body forever**

*Not true, arterial embalming merely temporarily delays the normal decomposition process; the speed of this is dependent on the strength of the chemicals and methods used and the humidity and temperature of where the body is placed.*

**Embalming is good**

*If you know what embalming entails and still believe this then fine. It’s a free world and you’re perfectly entitled to your opinion.*

**Warning – the following article contains explicit details about the embalming process.**

# The Embalming Process

by Fran Hall

This is a description of what is involved in a routine embalming process, i.e. where no post mortem has been carried out.

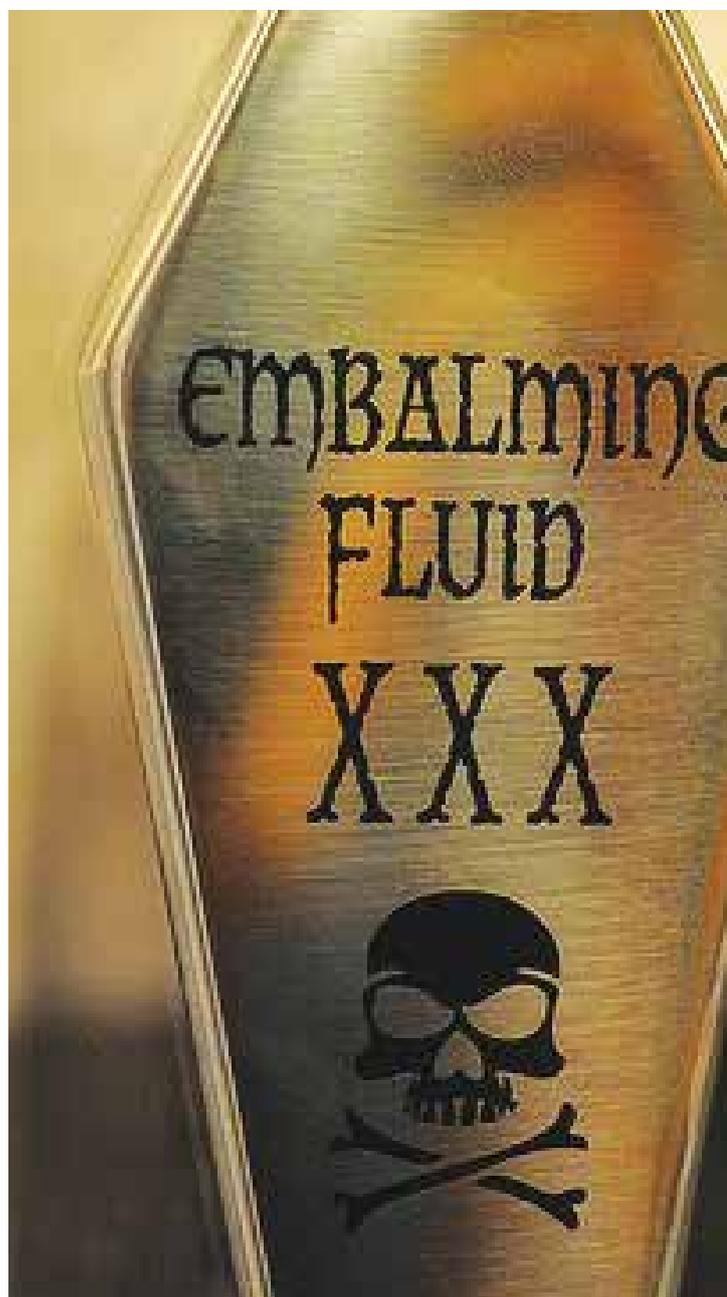
The embalmer will normally wear full protective equipment (PPE) to prevent contamination from splashes or spillage.

The body is placed on stainless steel or porcelain table, then washed with a germicide-insecticide-olfactant. The insides of the nose and mouth are swabbed with the solution.

Rigor mortis (stiffness) is relieved by massage. (Rarely but sometimes, tendons and muscles are cut in order to place the body in a more natural pose if limbs are distorted by disease, e.g., arthritis.)

Massage cream is worked into the face and hands to keep the skin soft and pliable.

Facial features are set by putting cotton in the nose, eye caps below the eyelids, a mouth former in the mouth (cotton or gauze in the throat to absorb purging fluids). The mouth is then tied shut with wire or sutures. (Glue may be used on the eyelids and lips to keep them closed in an appropriate pose.) Facial hair is shaved if necessary. Arterial embalming is begun by injecting embalming fluid into an artery while the blood is drained from a nearby vein or from the heart\*



The two gallons or so of embalming fluid needed is usually a mixture of formaldehyde or other chemical and water. In the case of certain cancers, some diabetic conditions, or because of the drugs used prior to death (where body deterioration has already begun), a stronger or “waterless” solution is likely to be used for better body preservation. Chemicals are also injected by syringe into other areas of the body.

The second part of the embalming process is called cavity embalming. A trocar — a long, pointed, metal tube attached to a suction hose — is inserted close to the navel. The embalmer uses it to puncture the stomach, bladder, large intestines, and lungs. Gas and fluids are withdrawn before “cavity fluid” (a stronger mix of formaldehyde) is injected into the torso.

The anus and vagina may be packed with cotton or gauze to prevent seepage if necessary. (A close-fitting plastic garment may also be used.)

Incisions and holes made in the body are sewn closed or filled with trocar “buttons.” The body is washed again and dried.

Nails are manicured, any missing facial features are molded from wax, head hair is styled, and makeup is used on the face and hands. The body is dressed and placed in the casket (fingers are glued together if necessary).

\*All of the blood and tissue resulting from the flushing through of the arterial / venous system and the puncturing of organs in the abdominal cavity goes down the drain, from where it enters the normal sewage system, along with embalming fluid and disinfectant.





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the range of cemetery services  
it currently offers.

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serene quiet green environments and  
the council is keen to hear from  
land owners, farmers or anyone who  
owns a suitable site or piece of land  
in or near to Melton Mowbray  
who is interested in  
developing a natural burial site to  
contact the council on 01664 502 441  
or [jfarlow@melton.gov.uk](mailto:jfarlow@melton.gov.uk)  
to informally discuss the proposal further.

*Natural Burial sites are generally located in  
tranquil rural surroundings and can be  
designed in a number of different ways.  
However, most minimise the use of  
traditional methods and practises and offer more  
sustainable and naturalistic alternatives such as the  
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**What can our  
boutique undertakers  
learn from Britain's  
micro-breweries?**





BY CHARLES COWLING

There isn't a single successful business in Britain that doesn't seek to grow through mergers and acquisitions. Consolidation, they call it. It's a factor of competitive capitalism. Or greed, if you prefer. Whichever. The bigger you are, the more efficiently you can trade. Economies of scale enable you to bring your prices down, blow off competitors — and hey Tesco.

So far so bad for Britain's independent undertakers. Your days are surely numbered. Consolidation is under way. There's no future for plankton in an ocean ruled by whales. Co-operative Funeralcare, Dignity plc and Funeral Services Partnership are coming to gobble you up.

If you don't believe it, consider the fate of our brewers. In 1900 there were 1,324 distinct breweries in England. By 1975 there were 141.

Take heart! Just when the big brewers thought the field was theirs, something interesting happened. The Campaign for Real Ale (Camra) turned the tables on them.

Camra's campaign stimulated an appetite for well-made beers and choice. In the words of James Watt, managing director of craft brewers BrewDog, "People want something better, something ethical, and something made by passionate people."

He's right, of course. The total number of breweries in England is back up from 141 to around 700 and rising.

CONTINUED

Which is why Camra is credited as the most successful single-issue consumer campaign of all time. In economists' jargon, economies of scale have been trumped by economies of scope (choice).

Is it possible that Britain's independent undertakers might buck economic orthodoxy in the same way as the micro-brewers and chase off the purveyors of keg funerals?

They have a lot going for them. Like the micro-brewers they can compete on price with the consolidated undertakers. Better still, so



//

people want  
something  
better,  
something  
ethical..

//

incompetent and greedy are the consolidated undertakers that indie undertakers are universally cheaper. It's absurd!

Because indies are passionate business owners, they are prepared to work incredibly hard. They offer a service which is of and for their community. They offer a quality of personal service which is everything a funeral shopper could want. Personal service does not fit profitably into scale production operations.

It is unlikely that a Camref (the Campaign for Real Funerals) could achieve for undertaking what Camra has achieved so rapidly for beer, the thirst for the latter being the stronger. What's more, most funeral shoppers have no idea that there are such brilliant indies out there.

So it would be good, perhaps, to see our best indies walk with more of a strut, make more noise about what they do and take the fight to the keggists. A well-kept beer is good for drinkers; a well-kept secret is no use to funeral shoppers.



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# 'Computer says no...'

– and other ridiculous barriers bereaved families face.

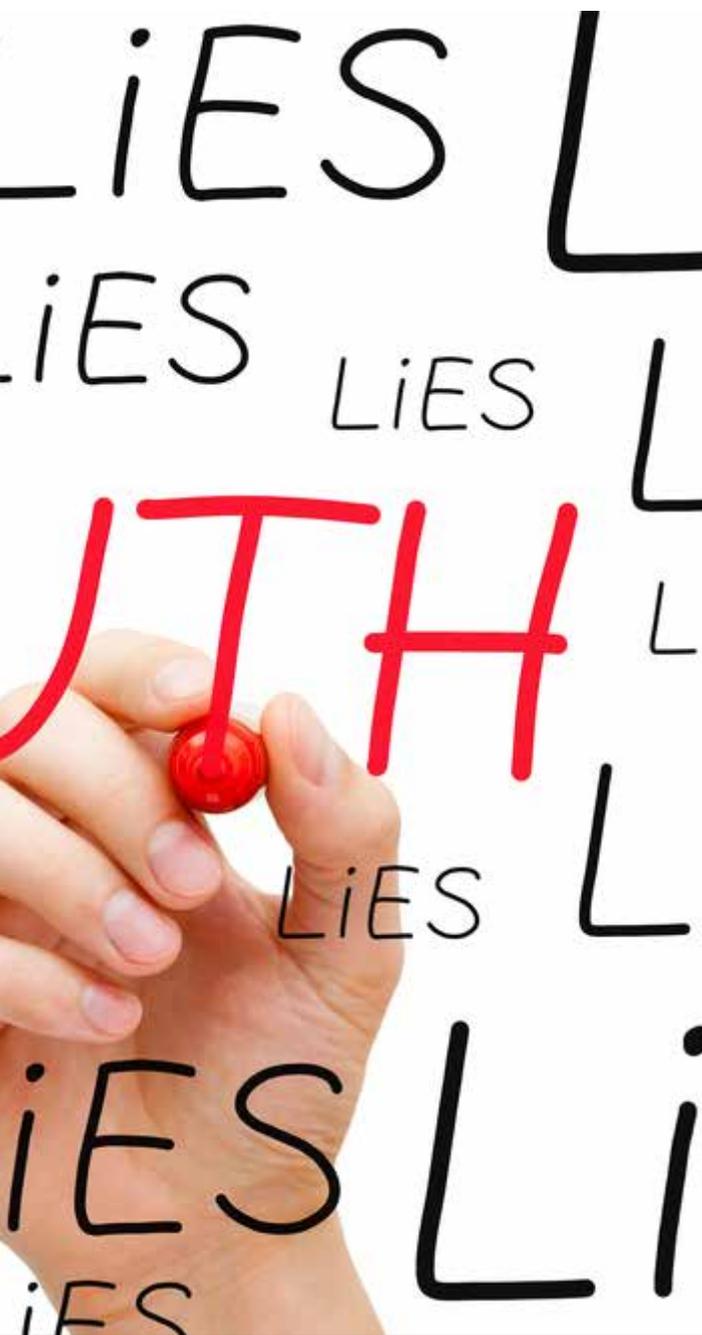
By Rosie Inman-Cook and Fran Hall

Running the Natural Death Centre Helpline, we are increasingly fed up with the misinformation that is churned out by people who should know better. Hardly a week goes by without a call from a family that has been told they are not allowed to do something they want for a relative who has died by a person of authority.



It sometimes seems that replicas of Little Britain's Carol Beer are cheerfully ensconced in cemetery and crematoria offices, bereavement and register offices and unfortunately even funeral directors' branches around the UK – anything out of the ordinary (such as a family wanting to take care of their dead themselves...) can be met with surprise, disapproval or a downright 'that's not allowed' – effectively, "Computer says no."

Let's go through a few things that families who have contacted us have been told, and which are **COMPLETELY UNTRUE!**



- The Registrar who informed a family that they must use a funeral director to carry out the funeral.
- Recently, the Coroner who frightened an estranged family so badly by insisting that they would be pursued by the local council wanting to recoup the cost of an environmental health funeral, that the family ended up paying for and arranging a funeral for someone they had not seen for decades. They thought that they would land up in court.
- The District Council that refused to allow a family to carry out a DIY burial – (apparently their policy was to prohibit anyone other than 'a Registered Funeral Director who is part of their own Stonemakers and Funeral Directors Registration Scheme' to undertake a burial in any of their cemeteries).
- The nursing staff member who told another family that their relative would have to be cremated and not buried because they had died from an infectious disease.
- The cemetery and crematorium manager who has informed families that they have to take out their own public liability insurance if they intend to carry out a funeral without using a funeral director, whether a cremation or burial. This 'ruling' has also been applied to families wishing to carry the coffin themselves.
- The GP who attended to certify a death that occurred at home and told the family that the body had to be taken away and could not be kept at home.
- The funeral director who advised a family that if the coffin crossed county borders an additional charge would be applied.
- Another, very common untruth, is when funeral directors inform families that if they wish to see their relative in the chapel of rest they have to be embalmed.

CONTINUED

These are just a few examples of recent situations that have been brought to our attention and where we have had to get involved to educate and inform the so-called ‘professionals’ involved and put them straight on the facts:

- **There is no law requiring a funeral director be used for a funeral.**
- **A local authority – or any other body – may not prohibit a family from carrying out a burial without a funeral director.** Provided that the Registrar’s certificate or Coroner’s Order for burial is delivered with an interment form prior to the burial, and the deceased is brought to the cemetery with enough people to carry and lower the coffin, it must be permitted.
- **Cremation is never mandatory.**
- **Debt liabilities stops with the dead person.** That includes the cost of any ‘pauper’s funeral arranged by the local authority for unclaimed bodies. The council can pursue the dead person’s estate but not distant or estranged relatives.
- **There is no law to say that once a death has occurred the body must be removed.** Dead people can be kept at home until the day of the burial or cremation if that is the wish of the family.
- **According to legal advice obtained from the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management, it is unfair simply to tell families to arrange their own public liability insurance for a one-off event unless there is already an established insurance scheme, which the family can buy into.** Otherwise it would be too prohibitively expensive and complicated for the family to arrange and would be the equivalent of saying ‘no’.

Clearly there will be liabilities for burial authorities if there are accidents whilst families are doing their own funerals, so the burial authority or company needs to carry out the appropriate risk assessment. It is also important that there is insurance in place to cover all such risks for the benefit of everyone involved. If the cemetery operator extends its own insurance for this purpose it would, in the opinion of the ICCM, be fair to ask the family to contribute to the additional cost of that insurance as well as the cost of any additional supervision required for the event.

- **There are no charges involved in a body or coffin crossing county borders.**
- **Any requirement for embalming prior to viewing is simply company policy, not anything that can be attributed to Health and Safety or other legislation.**



false

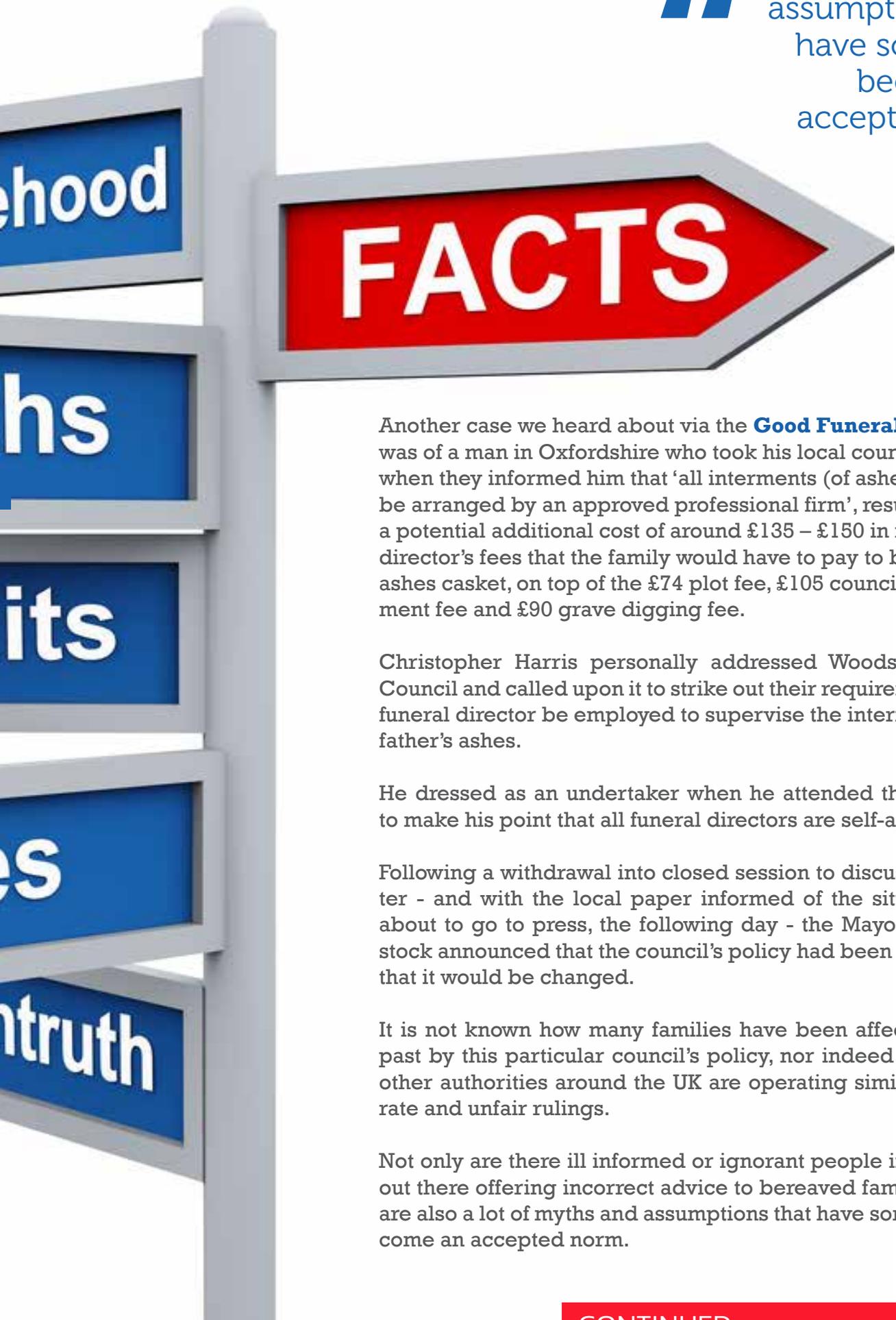
myth

deceit

lie

untrue

// a lot of myths and assumptions that have somehow become an accepted norm



# FACTS

Another case we heard about via the **Good Funeral Guide** was of a man in Oxfordshire who took his local council to task when they informed him that ‘all interments (of ashes)... must be arranged by an approved professional firm’, resulting in a potential additional cost of around £135 – £150 in funeral director’s fees that the family would have to pay to bury the ashes casket, on top of the £74 plot fee, £105 council interment fee and £90 grave digging fee.

Christopher Harris personally addressed Woodstock Town Council and called upon it to strike out their requirement that a funeral director be employed to supervise the interment of his father’s ashes.

He dressed as an undertaker when he attended the meeting to make his point that all funeral directors are self-appointed.

Following a withdrawal into closed session to discuss the matter - and with the local paper informed of the situation and about to go to press, the following day - the Mayor of Woodstock announced that the council’s policy had been wrong and that it would be changed.

It is not known how many families have been affected in the past by this particular council’s policy, nor indeed how many other authorities around the UK are operating similar inaccurate and unfair rulings.

Not only are there ill informed or ignorant people in authority out there offering incorrect advice to bereaved families, there are also a lot of myths and assumptions that have somehow become an accepted norm.

CONTINUED

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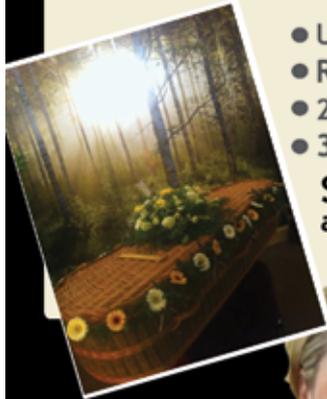


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CONTINUED

**Here's one – 'the funeral director who is first on the scene is the best one to carry out the funeral.'**

**And here's a couple of reasons why this may not be the case:**

Coroners use funeral directors to collect the bodies of those who have died suddenly or unexpectedly. The companies concerned are contracted to the coroner to attend whenever such a death occurs. Mostly, the contract is put out to tender, and the company who wins the coroner's removal tender will attend every death that is under the coroner's jurisdiction in the area. Larger companies obviously are much better placed to fulfil the criteria of attending the scene of death within a specified timeframe across a large area, and frequently these contracts are awarded to one of the large corporate funeral directing companies.

Payments received from the coroner for each 'removal' may be relatively small in relation to the costs involved in sending two members of staff out to each sudden death, and it doesn't take much cynicism to imagine that the companies involved are less interested in helping out Her Majesty's Coroner in his / her work than in the likelihood of each suddenly bereaved family turning to the company who came and collected the body to carry out the funeral for them. In some companies, members of the funeral director's staff attending may also be incentivised for 'converting' the coroner's removal into a funeral for the company involved.

Nursing homes often have arrangements with local funeral directors who will come and collect residents who have died. These arrangements may be formal (and brought to the attention of families when their relative moves into the home), or they may be informal, perhaps based on a good relationship between the manager and a local company, or some proactive 'community liaison' by the company concerned...

Christmas deliveries of generous gifts to nursing homes from funeral directors were far from uncommon in the past, and may indeed contin-



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ue in some places, free 'training days' for care home staff by the funeral director, delivery of flowers to the home after funerals have taken place and the offer of voluntary work running social events at the home are all familiar ways in which funeral directors offer their friendly support. Either way, the favoured funeral director collects the bodies of the residents who die in the home and, almost invariably, ends up carrying out the funeral - and invoicing the family accordingly.

**Not for nothing does the phrase 'Habeas Corpus' (Latin for 'you have the body') exist!**

**Another myth is that a hearse has to be used to transport a coffin.** It has become the accepted vehicle in which a body is conveyed to the final place of rest, frequently at a cost of around £400 for a half hour journey or less - but it is not compulsory, nor in some cases, desirable. Any suitable alternative vehicle can be used, including your own private car or that of a neighbour or friend.

**How about the belief that you have to have a coffin?** Totally untrue, the only legal stipulation is that 'It is an offence to expose a dead body near a public highway as this would outrage public decency'. Basically, a body should be covered in public - but the method of doing so is entirely up to the individual responsible for the disposal of the body.

The Natural Death Centre has always championed the rights of the bereaved to exercise autonomy when it comes to making arrangements for funerals, and we will continue to do so for as long as the need is there. With the reluctance of government to create legislation to make obvious the legal rights of the bereaved, and impose penalties on those breaching those rights, unfortunately we expect to be manning the NDC Helpline for a long time yet.

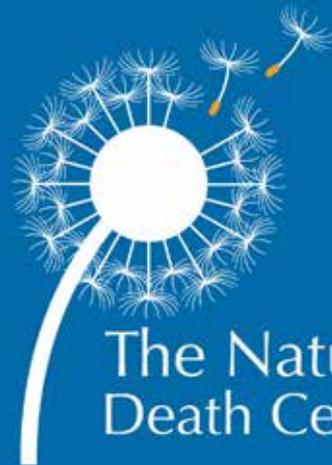
**If you have any questions concerning a death or a funeral, call us for advice on 01962 712690, or e-mail [info@naturaldeath.org.uk](mailto:info@naturaldeath.org.uk)**

## The Natural Death Handbook



Everything you need to know about...  
.....well everything!

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## The Natural Death Centre

If you are looking for help, support, advice or guidance planning a funeral either for yourself or someone close to you, The Natural Death Centre Charity is here for you.

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Normal call rates apply

[www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk)

Registered Charity Number 1091396



# The Baby Grove



There's a special kind of calm in this part of Boduan Sanctuary wood. Sheltered by trees yet open to the light of the sun, you can hear the whispering of the wind without being buffeted by it. Sitting on a hand-made oak bench, it feels as though you're being embraced by the wood, soothed and centred in a place of peace.

And this is a very special place, a memorial garden for people who mourn that most devastating loss, the death of a baby.

The Baby Grove was created so that families can have a beautiful place to bury their babies, a place where they can remember the precious life lost and not feel so totally alone in overwhelming grief. Because even when there's no other human around, the spirit of the wood comforts mourners, reminding us in birdsong of the joy that Nature can still bring, helping us to come to terms with the cruelty of unexpected loss.

Here we become aware of the full circle of life: through death to fresh new life. The yearly cycle from the dark depth of winter to the bright colours of spring, from the summer spread of green leaves overhead and ferns underfoot to the golden patina of autumn, the constant change in the wood mirrors the slower cycles of our own lives.

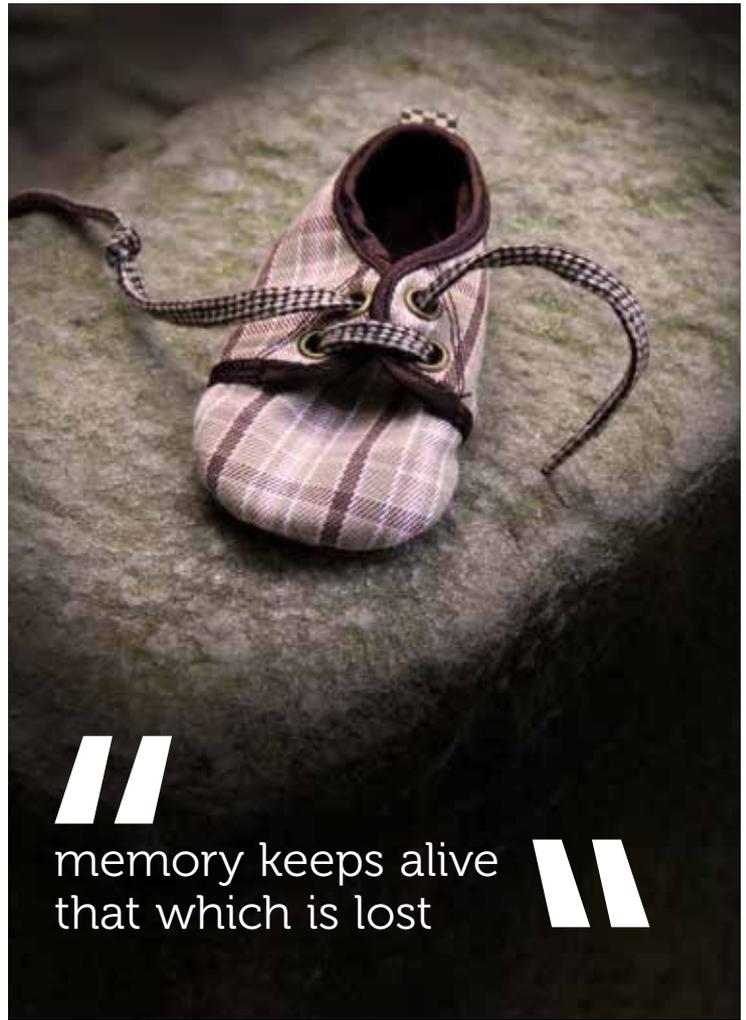
//  
the spirit of  
the woods  
comforts mourners



Memory keeps alive that which is lost; when a baby dies before ever living independently, it lives on in memory.

These memories are particularly painful for the mother, for whom the profound changes of pregnancy and birth create a unique connection with her baby.

We at the Eternal Forest Trust, who care for the Baby Grove, have not had this experience and cannot really imagine the grief attached to such memories; but we understand that when anticipated joy turns to despair, this must be the purest grief.



It was with this in mind that we decided that the beauty of the wood should be focussed in this memorial garden, in a wealth of wild flowers.

We've planted bulbs and small plants, scattered seeds, moved bluebells, foxgloves, campion, meadowsweet and ferns from other parts of the wood where they're plentiful. We've created a hedge to mark the boundary and placed a bench by the path that runs alongside the garden.

Each grave is marked with engraved natural stone or carved wood, each small marker personal. Local artists are working on sculptures to set in the garden. And as the years go on, the Baby Grove will become ever more beautiful.

Boduan Sanctuary Wood is an ancient bluebell wood on the Llan Peninsula in North Wales. It is owned and managed by the Eternal Forest Trust, a Charitable Company based in Pwllheli ([www.eternalforest.org](http://www.eternalforest.org)) which provides woodland burials for all. Everyone is welcome, the pedestrian gate is never locked and there is plenty of space for off-road parking.



Boduan Sanctuary  
Wood, near Pwllheli.  
The only place in Wales  
where anyone can be buried  
in established  
woodland



**The Eternal Forest Trust**  
charity no. 1110801 company no. 5163451  
Connecting the cycles of life  
01758 612006 or 07968 167204  
[www.eternalforest.org](http://www.eternalforest.org)

The ecology of the wood was disrupted by conifer forestry in the mid-twentieth century, but the Eternal Forest Trust has been working since its inception in 2006 to restore the diversity and beauty of the wood, with help from volunteers and donations from those who share our vision.

You can get in touch through our website or by ringing 01758 612006.

Arabella Melville, The Eternal Forest Trust.

by Liz Rothschild

# KICKING THE BUCKET

“You can’t call it that!” a friend said to me in the early days of planning my **festival of Living and Dying in Oxford on autumn 2012**. But I persisted (slightly nervously at first) and a huge number of people commented on how approachable the name made it all feel.

I think it takes a bit of chutzpah to run these kinds of things but it is so worth it. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, reflecting people’s relief at finding a place where they could talk about the subject, not feel so isolated with their particular concerns, where death could become part of their lives not something fearful and hidden away. “I have lived in Oxford for 20 years and this has been the best two weeks of my life” said one festivalgoer.

**So a Festival of Living and Dying to encourage people to broach the subject.**

Our festival used a wide range of different approaches and venues to catch lots of different people. I have a background in the theatre and community arts and I know the effectiveness of the arts in helping us come to term with difficult experiences and feelings and in allowing us to see the world from a different angle.

Experiencing and imagining other ways of doing things can enable us to begin to live them for ourselves. So the arts were a crucial part of what we did but by no means the only approach. We worked through the primary and secondary schools, Blackwells bookshop, the Pitts Rivers museum, the Oxford Union, an independent cinema, a meditation centre, the Pegasus Theatre and the Old Fire Station gallery and performance space.



photo courtesy  
of Fran Hall



// working with  
people so they  
understand  
all the choices  
they have





photo courtesy of  
Rown Twine



The love blanket is by  
Jacqui Patterson

We used Oxford Quaker Meeting House for a wide variety of events and held a free open air fair in a busy shopping thoroughfare in the city centre. We facilitated or supported sessions with Sobell Hospice and Helen & Douglas House for young people and worked with the local homeless community. We aimed to catch people where they usually went, to talk to them through their particular passions and interests, provide practical information, inspiration through visual arts, music and performance and enable them to take part in a wide range of workshops. We ran 38 events over two weeks and involved over 1800 people. To see more about what we did last time visit [www.kickingthebucket.co.uk](http://www.kickingthebucket.co.uk)

I think the way we approach our deaths often reflects how we live our lives. The invitation to really face our own mortality can lead to us asking some pretty fundamental and honest questions about what really matters to us and that isn't always comfortable of course. I know of some people with life shortening illnesses who say that they never lived life so vividly until they began to grapple with the reality of their own death. For others I know it can feel paralysing and impossibly hard to come to terms with in a myriad of ways and none of us know how we would react until we actually face it. But we can all get some benefit from facing our own mortality and realising we share this with everyone we know.

The work done by an Australian nurse, with people nearing end of life showed that people reported their priorities rested with their relationships, with living the life they really wanted to live not just responding to the pressure from family or society to live a certain way. Nobody said they wished they had worked harder!

<http://www.inspirationandchai.com/Regrets-of-the-Dying.html>

Time and again people talk to me about feeling lighter after approaching the subject not gloomier and you would be surprised how much laughter as well as tears there can be in a room where death is being talked about.

I was very inspired by the 'festival for the living' death weekend run at the Southbank in January 2012 whilst I was preparing for my events, now there have been a number of other festivals around the country. I hope to see these becoming as common as gardening and music festivals.

After all, death concerns each and every one of us not just a group of individuals with a particular hobby or interest.



### **Why not run something in your neighbourhood?**

It does not have to be on a large scale. Start with one evening event or a single day. Talk to local groups such as hospices, Cancer groups, Cruse, those involved with end of life care, build on the work already being done in your area. See where the gaps are. I would like to see National Death Trust Classes running everywhere just like we have support groups for people expecting a birth.

We all need lots of advice, information and support in just the same way when approaching death.

And people find themselves having amazing conversations with complete strangers and breaking down the horrible isolation caused by our avoidance of the subject.

### **We will be running another festival in the autumn of 2014.**

If you would like to receive information about it nearer the time please email us [info@woodlandburialwestmill.co.uk](mailto:info@woodlandburialwestmill.co.uk). We will not bombard you with emails.

// the way we approach our deaths reflects how we live our lives //

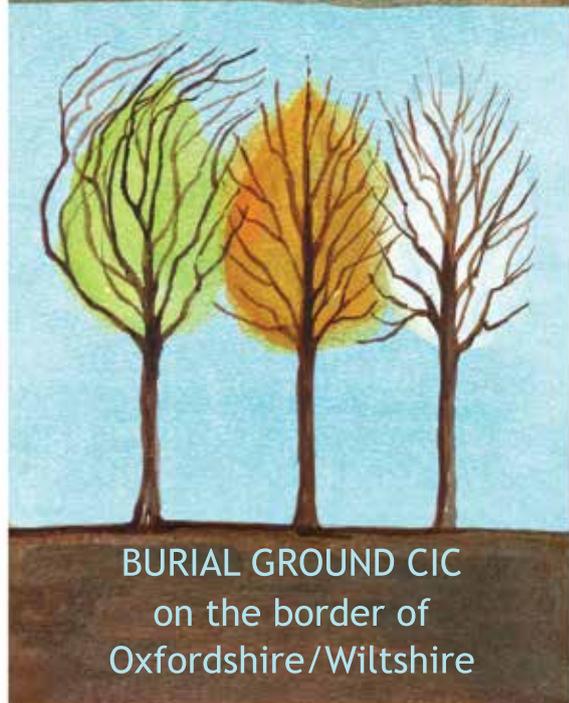
New elements in next year's festival will include the first secondary school conference on death and grieving in conjunction with Child Bereavement UK, a range of new topics including coping with sudden deaths, advice on being at the bedside of someone who is dying and dementia and end of life.

There will be writing workshops, photography projects and singing events as well as a Day of the Dead Ceilidh with local band Kismet, more Death Cafes in Oxford and around the county and repeats of some of the most popular elements from last time. I am delighted to be working with Sue Brayne (The D Word) and Hazel May (co author of Enriched Care Planning for People with Dementia) in developing this Festival. We look forward to seeing you there.

I think Finity in Buckinghamshire are doing very interesting work and will be featuring it in the Festival.



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I am a celebrant and I run a green burial ground on the Oxfordshire/Wiltshire border. I am passionate about working with people so they understand all the choices they have about how they go about arranging funerals and burials. It rapidly became clear to me that I needed to reach people before they come to me at the burial ground when a death has already occurred. They are then in a state of shock and grief and it feels hard to take the time to think about things slowly. When the person who has died has left no clue about their wishes it can feel very confusing.

This can really increase the amount of pain experienced especially when different family members do not agree what their mum might have wanted or when they plan it all as they think best and then find an outline of wishes they did not know existed which suggests something quite different from what they arranged.

**We were very proud to be the runners-up in the South West region People's awards from the Natural Death Centre.**

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Days of The Dead at Minstead Study Centre

# A Celebration of Life and Lives Lived

A funeral for a road kill squirrel, a small Viking boat launch for a demised wood-mouse, and a puppet chimp called Pan - all helped in delivering our Days of the Dead.

Die....it's the one thing we are all going to do.. Guaranteed!! Yet it still takes a lot of people by surprise.

We had plans for putting on a 'Death and Dying' event for a while - then we went to the positive and busy 'Deathfest' at London's Southbank, and our plans came to fruition!

We planned, and had, a fun, uplifting, creative and informative day, that was enjoyed by all ages of the 150 or so visitors. With a £3 entrance, kids free, we just about broke even and covered costs and some expenses.

Taking the Mexican festivals' colourful approach as our inspiration, by the time the sun had set, we had seen....

...one hundred sugar skulls decorated, photos, gifts and memorabilia placed on the large pink Ofrenda altar, papier mache calaveras admired, funeral myths busted, a roving poet rhyming, reflections on life with the celtic goddess Morrigan...

...faces intricately painted, books perused, celebrants consulted, 'Do before I die' graffiti wall, Barbie's willow coffin weaved (she really does have everything now!), one's own death meditated on, songs sung, puppets playing, tea drunk...

...an Egyptian Sarcophagus in the village church - decorated by Hospice patients and school children on the Acorn Project, wish carrying tissue fire faeries dancing over flames, epitaphs written, prayers made, skull stones painted, stories told and a candle lit procession to a tuneful church service.

The blank cardboard coffin - in the middle of the room ready to be decorated, also took on a different meaning when we heard Ken was dying, and his family hadn't got the money for his funeral - we would be happy to paint it for him.

A reflective, colourful and productive day was had by all !

*Watch out for the next one:*

**A 'Dead Good Day Out' on Saturday May 10th 2014 at St Andrews Church Hall, Southampton.**

**Chris Townsend teaches at Minstead Study Centre and Deb Wilkes is a nurse at Oakhaven Hospice - both located in the New Forest - It was a natural combination!**

Contact [chris.townsend@hants.gov.uk](mailto:chris.townsend@hants.gov.uk).

**facebook photos here**



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# The Willows

natural burial ground

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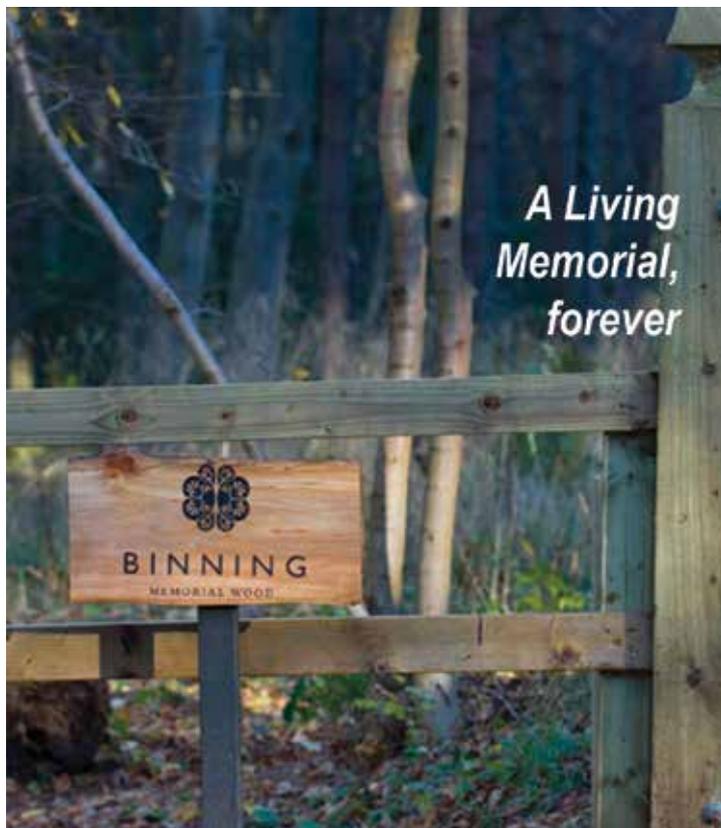
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# NEW PLACES TO BURY

*The Eco Network Expands*



**Several of our provisional natural burial grounds, ANBG members have gained planning permission to open sites this year.**

**Here, Rosie asks some of them why they have been moved to get involved with death and nature in this way.**



In Doncaster, Eleanor Parker from the Meadow Cemetery, tells me that it was husband Jamie's idea! "He read about it somewhere and was inspired."

**How did you find the land?**

"We already had it, I provide a home for retired race horses too." That will work well, I tell her. My site in Kent has a paddock on one side; the plots near the horses are always chosen first.

**How are you getting on and how do you find dealing with the sadness you encounter?**

"Well, I enjoy it, I am here with the kids every day, it is a bright place, there is nothing to be sad about. It is my life's work now and I hope to be good at it. I want people to share in the excitement of our venture and to appreciate our vision. We have built a wildlife pond area and planted many trees; the site is transforming already."

**What do your friends think?**

"I have some leaflets in my car window and some Mums on the school run were horrified, they couldn't believe it when I told them that, yes, of course I have to be there on the day when the coffin and family arrive. When I explain all about it, they start to see how beneficial and helpful it all is. Our family are fully behind the project - they have booked plots!"

**How nervous did you get before your first funeral?**

"Very! I had awful nightmares – arriving to find that the gravediggers had fashioned the grave into a pyramid was one; I was glad to get up that morning!"

**How was the planning process?**

"Painful, we had to go to appeal, the council knew so little about it and one consultee was irrational, almost hysterical."

Nearly three hundred miles away near Oakhampton, Devon, Christopher Voden from Beer Cross Woodland Burials tells me that his motives were more life changing and radical. "I wanted to do something different from my previous career as a lawyer and the diversification of my lovely field is what has motivated me."



“

every visit brings  
something different

”



“The site has been owned by my family for years and as far as I know it is the closest green burial site to Dartmoor. I want families to feel relaxed here, it is such a beautiful setting which I hope they find informal, not stuffy. I also hope they will love the developing deciduous wood, as I do and that they find every visit brings something different”

#### **What do your family and friends think?**

“That it's a bit weird, so different to law. Some are confused as to why I would give up a safe career. They know me though and I think they were not too surprised!”



#### **How was your first funeral?**

“I think I spent four days preparing the site, considering its appearance and function from every angle. Very nerve racking, I just don't want to mess it up.”

Back, up north in Durham I spoke to Jonathan Elmer from the Woodland Burial Trust.

“As an ecologist, I saw the opportunity to use natural burial as a mechanism to fund ecological improvements to the land,” he explained. “The site is owned by the council and we negotiated with them to find somewhere suitable. It is in the green belt outside Durham City, which is a world Heritage Site. We are creating a range of diverse habitats, flower meadows and woodland.”



“Collectively we have the skills to give a great service and I would like to think that we have plenty of empathy. We don't see it as a business, that is why we are a community interest company. When I told my family about the project it raised a few eyebrows, I had to reassure some that I would be able to pay my mortgage. I had a good laugh with friends though, they thought it was well timed considering the ageing baby boomers”

“The first burial was difficult as we were not really ready but the family were insistent that this is where they wanted to have the funeral”

On the other side of the Pennines just off the M6, Susan Gutierrez, a diversifying farmer who knows her way round the planning system, has gained permission in record time, a few weeks from conception to permission - unlike most other sites who are averaging two years.



### **How is everything going Susan?**

“We hope to open in the spring but are waiting for the erection of a wind turbine and for the car park to be constructed. We have already planted 3,500 trees and my vision is that the site will become a sanctuary for wildlife; we have plenty of hares and partridge here already. On a clear day you can see Blackpool tower and I think families will appreciate the beauty of the land which lies in the foothills of the Trough of Bowland.”

What gave you the idea? “It is quite personal actually. I had a stroke a while back and for the first time it made me focus on my own death and what I wanted. I decided that I wished to be buried on my own land, then I thought how nice it would be for others to have the opportunity too.”

## What do your family think and how will you cope with the sadness you will undoubtedly meet?

“I have been through quite a lot in life and my experience of bereavement has taught me that it is not a permanent state. My family? Well, a mixed reaction, some wonder why I would want to live next to a field of dead bodies!”

On the North Norfolk coast retired barrister David Oliver has gained planning but is yet to discharge all the planners' conditions. Delay due partly because his site, unusually for a new green burial ground, is heavily wooded. “I have to agree a revised woodland management plan and finish some routine thinning” he tells me.

## What made you think of doing this David?

“It was a fellow committee member on the board at Cromer Hospital that asked me one evening whether I owned the woodland and would consider opening a natural burial ground.”

“My wife hates the idea but I think she will come round! It is a splendid woodland, part of the Norfolk coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. I think families will find a wonderful sense of tranquillity within it. Most people think it is a good idea and I have had a lot of local support”

So, contrary to the worrying BBC reports back in October, the UK is not running out of burial space, it is just that councils are running out of burdensome conventional space. The Natural Burial Grounds are beautiful and spacious. If you don't know where your local ones are, **check out the list on the NDC website.**

## Two things to remember

Not all sites who describe themselves as ‘woodland burial sites’ are environmentally careful. They can usually be identified by a lack of terms and conditions appertaining to acceptable coffins, non-embalming and low impact land management etc.

## Here is a link to our downloadable PDF ‘Questions to ask a woodland burial site.’

Remember, natural burial grounds are as different as their managers and owners, they offer varying services and facilities. They are lovely places run by caring people.

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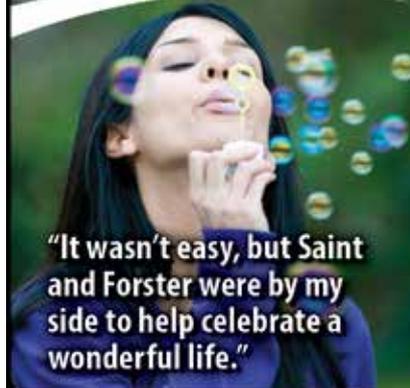
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# Let's Hear it for the Funeral Celebrant

[www.iocf.org.uk](http://www.iocf.org.uk)  
by Anne Barber

After speaking at a recent conference, Rosie hung around to listen to other talks and sessions. At one, attendees anonymously wrote down some of their most challenging funerals incidences, these were then read out and discussed. This exercise really got her thinking about celebrants and their encounters. A call to Anne Barber at the Institute of Civil Funerals has resulted in this article.

A funeral celebrant has to be all things to all people and much more besides. They lead funerals that can include anything from physical fights to families at war to malfunctioning curtains!

At the Institute of Civil Funerals' recent annual conference, members gave dramatic accounts of some of their experiences. It takes a certain type of individual to cope with the dramas and high emotions that arise and experiences seem to fall into certain categories.

Firstly what you might call 'content issues'. At the slightly less difficult end are the families where the celebrant, try as they might, simply cannot extract any information whatsoever about the person who has died in order to make the ceremony personal and 'tell the story' of the life that has been lived. Using their own resourcefulness, celebrants report how they track down other people who knew the person and endeavour to build a picture to portray at the funeral. In other instances content is put forward by families with wording that is simply not repeatable or else it sets out to attack another person or organisation or is so badly written to be unreadable!

This is hard enough. Then we get to the category of 'difficult family situations' when the family is literally 'at war' within itself or family members detested the relative who has died. The amount of tact and diplomacy required to create a meaningful funeral ceremony in these circumstances is unbelievable. Examples were given by members where families have actually sabotaged a funeral to ensure the 'other' section of the family did not get the funeral content they wished for. The poor celebrant, who is bound to do as their client instructs them, is caught right in the middle.

Take this a stage further and you see the physical fights that have broken out at some funeral cere-

monies. Special qualities are indeed required by celebrants to deal with these situations. Unflustered professionalism, along with great teamwork with chapel attendants and funeral directors. Fights aren't the only physical issue to be dealt with however, one celebrant recounted the funeral where an ex-girlfriend of the man who had died, flung herself on the coffin and would not be moved. Drunken mourners, abusive language and heckling are far too often experienced and dealt with by the celebrant, who on occasions have had to ask mourners to leave the funeral out of respect for the family.

Equipment issues arise all the time, broken microphones, curtains getting stuck at the committal or failing to close when they should or the wrong music is played, however carefully it was checked beforehand.

Then there is the isolation of the work, sitting up till all hours the night before the funeral, composing a revised ceremony with information that a family has just sent through. It happens all the time. The other side of this difficult coin is the family that believes you can fit two hours' worth of material, stories, poems and music into the permitted single slot at the crematorium. The art of saying a lot in a few words is a key celebrant skill!

Taking funerals for people who are known to the celebrant is really hard too, they have to put their own feelings under their professional hat. The emotional drain involved can only be imagined, especially with the 'too soon' deaths of babies, children and young people, the suicides and the deaths by accident or murder. Dealing with other peoples' extreme grief and making the day of the funeral something that a family can bear is the role these amazing people play.

So all in all – let's hear it for the civil funeral celebrant.



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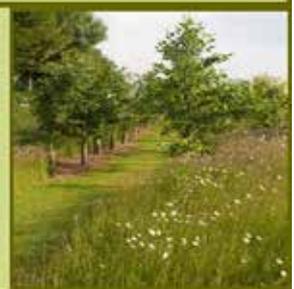
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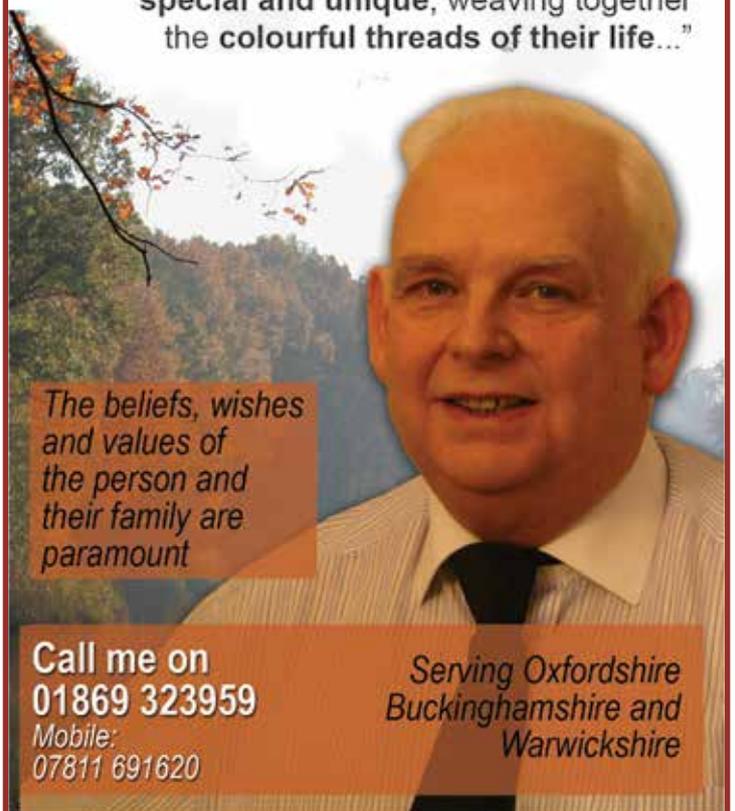
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# A Celebrant's Point of View

Here, Ruth Valentine, a celebrant, explains her positive approach to arrangements and delights in the choices available.

Twenty years ago, I was considering an eventual deathbed conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church. Not for its doctrine; I knew very little of that. For the funerals.

I'd been to one in the Russian Cathedral in South Kensington. The music was wonderful; years back a Jewish friend had put non-belief aside for the privilege of singing in that choir. There was the open coffin, the congregation lining up to kiss our friend goodbye, then hug her children. There was the priest, newly arrived from Russia and, we heard later, anxious about his English, who stood beside her and spoke, not to us but her: 'You had a long and eventful life... In the past few years walking was painful for you...' Later, after more unaccompanied singing, he turned to us, the mourners: 'You think today that you'll never forget G, but soon there'll be whole days when you don't think about her.' The combination of the matter-of-fact and the personal, the sublime and the physical, struck me at the time as the perfect acknowledgment of a complex life.

## What do people want when they plan a funeral?

The simplest answer I think is choice. The immediate aftermath of a death can feel like the worst time to have to make choices; but finding it hard doesn't mean you don't still want it. And choice is perhaps the most controversial topic in the funeral trade today; or more positively, it's the trigger for change.

Fewer people nowadays want the done thing simply because it's done, or because everyone in the family always has, or because someone in black says so. Some examples that in the past dozen years have become accepted: a cardboard coffin; the favourite music of the person who's died; a child's poem.

Choice doesn't mean not having the horse-drawn hearse, only that you could equally have a motorbike with the coffin in the sidecar. But if you don't know about motor-bike hearses, how can you choose one? This I think is the challenge to funeral directors and celebrants: to help the bereaved use all their creativity and intimate knowledge of the person who has died and come up with something that exactly matches them.

At my end (I'm a celebrant and occasional funeral director) this involves time, patience and empathy. Because the second thing I think that people want is to deal with an ordinary human being: not an efficient bureaucrat (though that's useful), not a customer service adviser, but a person. I'm fortunate in working partly in people's homes. They don't have to put on their best clothes and ring at the door of a shop-front with net curtains. Instead they're in charge, on their own territory; they can offer tea, and explain the photo on the mantelpiece and we can have an ordinary conversation about planning this extraordinary occasion.

### So what are the choices?

**Infinite, probably, at least within the limits of law and the rules of the crem or graveyard (and if those rules seem too tough we can shop around). For instance:**



- You don't have to have a ceremony at all.
- You can sit in silence, or just play music, or chat among yourselves about the person. You can have a simple cremation, with no-one present and hold a memorial later in a hall, or a pub, or your own home.

- You can ask Uncle Fred and Cousin Dinah to talk about the person's life; and friend Mavis and grand-daughter Chloe and neighbor Stan. Then have a space where anyone can come up and tell a story, or one of the dead person's awful jokes. (You can definitely laugh). If all that is likely to take too long, book a double time-slot.

- You can tell everyone to wear purple, or Arsenal shirts.

You can carry the coffin; and you here isn't just six strong blokes of the same height, but men and women and teenagers, holding it not on their shoulders but in their hands.

- You can delegate as much or as little as you want to the funeral director and/or the celebrant. There's no law saying you have to use anyone, except the staff at the crem or the cemetery. You can tell the celebrant about the person's life and ask them to write the eulogy (a good celebrant will give you the draft to check); or write it yourself and ask him or her to read it; or both write and read it and use the celebrant as a kind of MC. Or get Step-brother Pedro instead to run the thing.

- You can film the ceremony or take photos. In some crems you can webcast the funeral so that Mo and Roshan in Argentina and Auntie Vi ill in bed at home can watch it and hear their messages read out.

- You can scatter the ashes just about anywhere (of course you need permission from the landowner). So you can say goodbye in a park, by the river or on a hill.

The funerals I've felt most privileged to work on have been the most surprising and personal. A poet reading her own poems to her mother; a jazz musician playing for his wife; an elderly woman leaning on the lectern to say what an old stickler her good friend was; the congregation singing The Lambeth Walk as a pearly king and prince led the coffin in. I've never met the dead person, but feel I know them.



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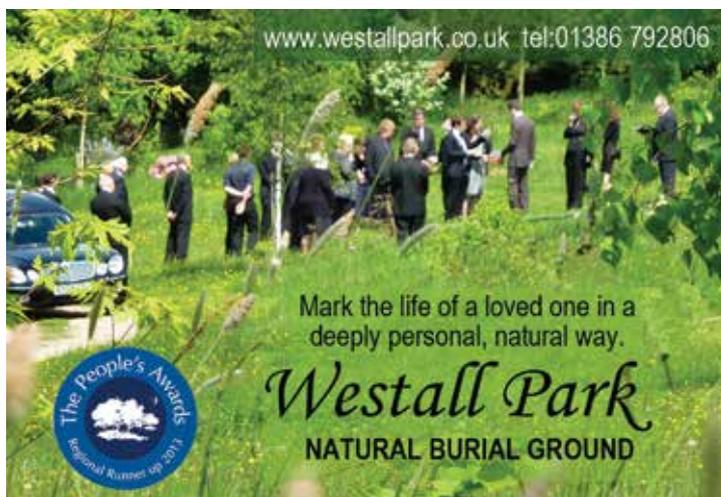


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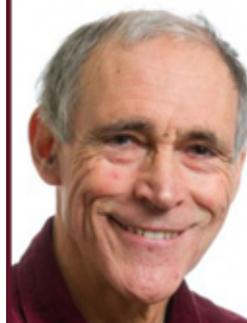
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