

The Natural Death Centre's official magazine

more to death

Issue 02 | AutumnWinter13

THOUGHT PROVOKING

**WHAT HAPPENS
TO ALL OF THE
PACEMAKERS?**

Plus

**WAYS TO
REMEMBER**

A look at less traditional ways of remembering your loved ones. Fabulous ideas...

**LEAVE THEM
LAUGHING**

How Carla Zilbersmith dealt with the diagnosis of a life threatening condition.

Plus

**HERE COME
THE GIRLS**

A look at the growing number of
**FEMALE FUNERAL
DIRECTORS**

UNCOVER HIDDEN AND AMAZING OPTIONS SURROUNDING DEATH & FUNERAL PLANNING



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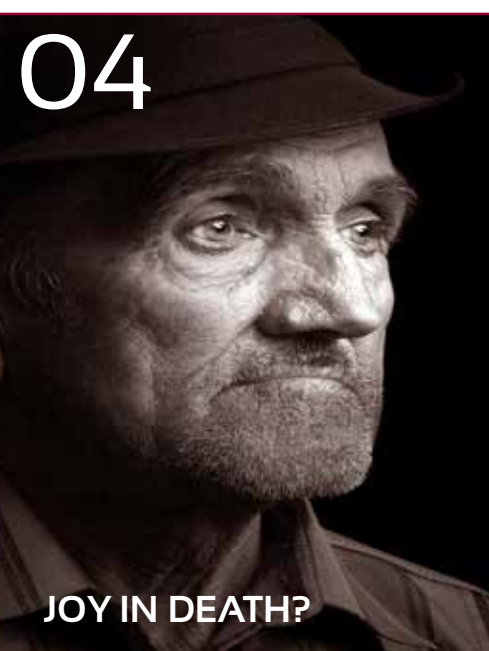
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In the Hill House,
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Twyford,
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What has been happening since the last edition of M2D?

Well, apart from all the media work, manning the helpline and holding the best attended, to date, get together of the natural burial ground managers. We, along with most of funeral world, attended the three day death fest' that is the National Funeral Exhibition. Two huge exhibition halls crammed with every possible deathly product and service.

I would love to say it was great but that probably sounds a bit too weird. It was extraordinary, fascinating, kitsch, inspirational, exhausting, exciting, friendly and great fun.

Each time I attend, (it only takes place every other year) I return home having seen a couple of new products or ventures that, for me, stand out as radical and in my opinion of worth. I am itching to tell you about this year's but it is embargoed. It will however completely change the way the dead are treated and if the company can get it licensed, their product will be a revolutionary improvement for us all.

Our stand was rocking this year, it seemed like we were constantly packed with interested and better quality funeral directors, as well as our many friends and fans who stopped by for a hug. As Dylan and I have said before "the times they are a changing". We were not the lunatic fringe and were even invited to give three seminars entitled 'DIY funerals, are they a threat to your business?' No hecklers, no threats and we made lots of new contacts and friends. Who'd have thought it!

One noticeable change was that the big corp' groups had not let their staff off the leash this year so the vast majority of undertakers walking round were independents. Which was great as they are the ones who have the authority and power to explore and purchase without permission or the say so of some chain purchasing head office - fab.

I hope you find this second edition of worth, please forward it to everyone you know and if you have a website please put a hyper- link through to it. We can provide you with a little symbol/picture thing for this purpose.

Lastly I am in need of ideas and articles for future editions. If you have something to say or share, let's be having your articles.

PS. The last edition had nearly 14,000 readers, exceeding our expectations, come on, let's spread the word even wider.

Together we can make things better.

Rosie and Fran at the NFE



Rosie Inman-Cook Editor
The Natural Death Centre
more to death
magazine

Welcome back to those of you reading this the second edition of our revolutionary, deathly e-zine.

The feedback was 100% positive about edition one, so thanks for that encouragement (apart from folk wanting a hard copy which we cannot afford to produce, sorry) Thanks too to the advertisers without whom we could not fund the project.

Media attention has been frenetic over the last few months, with effective features on Radio 4 and breakfast TV, amongst many others, bring the hidden world of funeral possibilities and empowerment to the public. There was even a full page photo of me in the Big Issue, which was a new experience!

We had the mammoth task of deciding the winner of the Best Natural Burial Ground UK- the people's choice. There is an article, in this edition, about our findings.

Our Chairman, Fran Hall, continues to inspire and guide us into new realms. Notably we are now putting together a list of celebrants to add to our guide on all things funereal.

Apart from that it is business as usual, answering the helpline to thousands of folk looking for guidance and comfort when under pressure.

There are some shocking and cruel thing going on in funeral world. We still have a lot of work to do.

Thanks for your support and please, please, please send this mag's link to all your chums. Better still ensure you have it on your website and forward all our tweets to your social media mates.

Cheers, Rosie



MORE TO DEATH IS NOT AFRAID TO ENGAGE AND MUSE ON DIFFERENT ISSUES. IN THE FOLLOWING PIECES BY **KEN WEST** AND **CHARLES COWLING** WE LOOK AT A VERY DIFFICULT, CONTROVERSIAL AND UNCOMFORTABLE TOPIC.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT BALANCE TO QUALITY OF LIFE AND DYING?
WHAT ARE OUR RESPONSIBILITIES?
WHERE HAS MODERN MEDICINE LED US?

HERE IS WHAT THEY THINK...

JOY IN DEATH?

// you fell ill,
took to your
sickbed
and within days
or weeks at most,
you died //

Ken West, creator of the first modern day natural burial ground, explores the chilling reality of longevity. **Am I alone in worrying about the impact of increasing longevity and how this has changed the nature of death and dying?**

When I worked in Wolverhampton in 1974, our burial and cremation records proved that retirement in that area amounted to five years for a man and seven for a woman. In that short period mental decline was rare and Alzheimer's and dementia was almost unknown. Death itself was also quick; you fell ill, took to your sickbed and within days or weeks at most, you died. Now, the sickbed has been replaced by a protracted death, an incremental demise over a decade or two as various parts of the body fail. The medics keep the heart going, hold back the tumours, thin the blood and only when a combination of factors reaches a critical point, does death occur.

In the 1970's a person died within a few years of finishing work, and their workmates and associates often attended the funeral and remained part of the deceased's community. Now, with longevity, our work is too distant to define us. In this protracted death period, this limbo as it were, people also change out of all recognition. Years of illness, confusion and depression see friends and old relationships fall away. The mental toll on partners and family can be exacting and any thoughts, desire even, that death might resolve the problem can create guilt.

We British have a widespread disinclination to consider death, this abhorrence forces the doctors into an almost absurd optimism about any life threatening illness. They know that nobody wants to hear the truth and because they avoid it, much remains unsaid and unprepared prior to the death.

How guilty is the NHS over promoting a pill culture that suggests some sort of immortality?

The doctor demands you take a pill because it absolves him or her in this blame culture. Yet it is medical arrogance, a demand that we live, no matter what our state, and that when we die it is under medical supervision. This is why the calls for a good death and the right to die are intensifying.

CONTINUED

Perhaps I can make a plea for restful death. It goes without saying that there is a joy in life and yet that very thought creates a counterpoint; that death is the opposite state and is therefore joyless, an ogre. Yet there is joy in death for those who have a religion and are promised paradise.

Even for those without religion, a return to the earth or to trees has a spiritual appeal. For atheists, maybe joy is too strong a word but there is certainly nothing to fear in returning to anonymity, a state of not knowing. We have to die to make room for others; it is our duty. So, we must talk about death, demystify it and also allow those who wish to discuss it, to do so.

// instead of dying
too soon,
we are dying
too slowly //

What we have at the current time is, historically, the opposite of the Black Death. Instead of dying too soon, we are dying too slowly, with profound social consequences. The Black Death created vacancies and work opportunity and, ultimately, reinvigorated British society. The current situation has precisely the opposite effect. An insane amount is spent on the NHS, much of it directed at protracted death. To pay for extending our lives by weeks or months our politicians have decided to charge fees for youngsters to go to university. That is amoral, but at what stage do I take control, refuse the medication and create my good death? It might be seen as the ultimate altruistic act, to die sooner and put the medical expenditure back into society.

For certain, I have to make that decision because the politicians and society as a whole will not do it for me. I will need physical comfort and pain relief but I am aware that nobody can share death with me or ease the experience; it is mine, alone. Picture it, the tubes up my nose, my deathbed visitors sensing a duty to talk to me about the things that fascinated me in life: "Ken, have you heard the latest theory about decomposition?"

Charles Cowling's blog has been exploring the subject covered here in Ken West's article. He sums up his thoughts and personal approach to the longevity issue like this.....

A conversation I sometimes rehearse in my head is the one I shall have with the oncologist who tells me I have lung cancer. "You've, er, rather brought this on yourself, you know," she's observes, referring to my devotion to nicotine. "Do you wish, now, you'd stopped?"

I hear myself replying, "No. My relationship with cigarettes has been a love affair. Each one I have smoked has been both a delight and a memento mori, a reminder to confront my mortality and embrace life.

She's unlikely to be swayed by my degenerate rhetoric – nor you, for that matter. The zeigeist is not with me on this. I have chosen to live dangerously and now stand in grave peril of dying what my tobacco pack describes as 'a slow and painful death'. Well, I know what I'm doing, thank you, and I shan't whimper when the dark shadow falls on me.

The public health people-who-know-best incentivise us to look after ourselves by targeting and exacerbating our terror of death. Salt kills, fat kills, booze kills – anything nice kills. As a result there is this widespread supposition that death is a contingency brought on by poor lifestyle choices. Healthy living is the New Virtue. It is accompanied by habits of timidity and self-denial which leach life of an awful lot of fun. I am not a natural ascetic. It is characterised by preachy self-righteousness. I'm not into that, either.

If you turn your face against fun you can add years and years... to the wrong end of your life. Inside those government stats that congratulate us on living longer than ever – until we're 79.9 to be exact – is the stat they don't bang on about so much: the last 11.3 of those years are rated 'unhealthy' – a euphemism for chronic, degenerative illness.

Yes, the unintended consequence of self-denial and jogging is that the longer you live, the longer it will take you to die; the better you have lived, the worse you may die; the healthier you are, the harder it is to die.

That's why we talk about a longevity crisis, not a longevity miracle.

FACT:

Blameless people get cancer too. And strokes and dementia and MND...

FACT:

Blameless people suffer slower and more painful deaths than smokers.

FACT:

My tobacco pack might just as well carry the message: Quit if you like, you'll die anyway.

I want to spend as little time in that 11.3-year chronic illness hinterland as I can get away with. And I figure that I can pack more in and live more fully by using myself up, not eking myself out.

We all have to take responsibility for these things. I believe I have done just that. Which is why I have an Advance Decision to Refuse Treatment (ADRT) ready to rumble. Have you?

The NDC sell very clear and easy to complete sets of advance decision forms which can be obtained by clicking [HERE](#).



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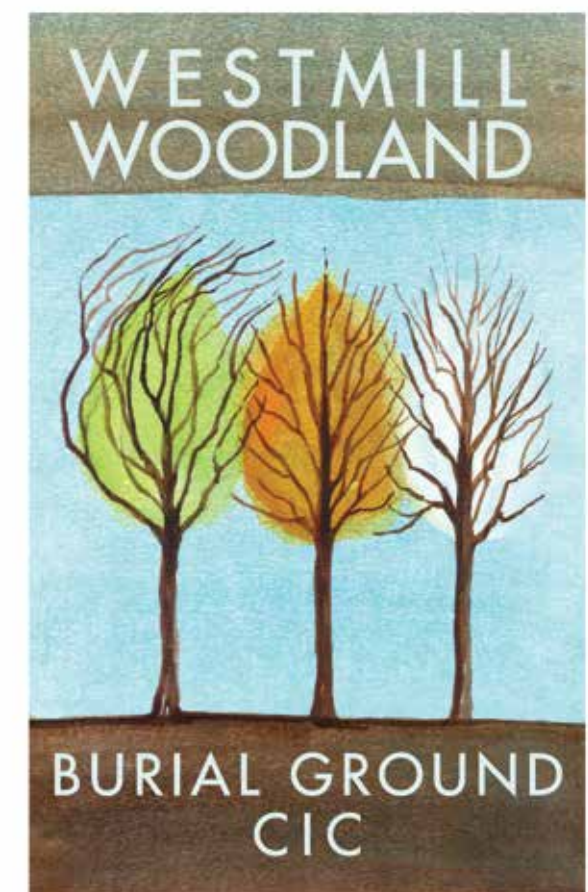
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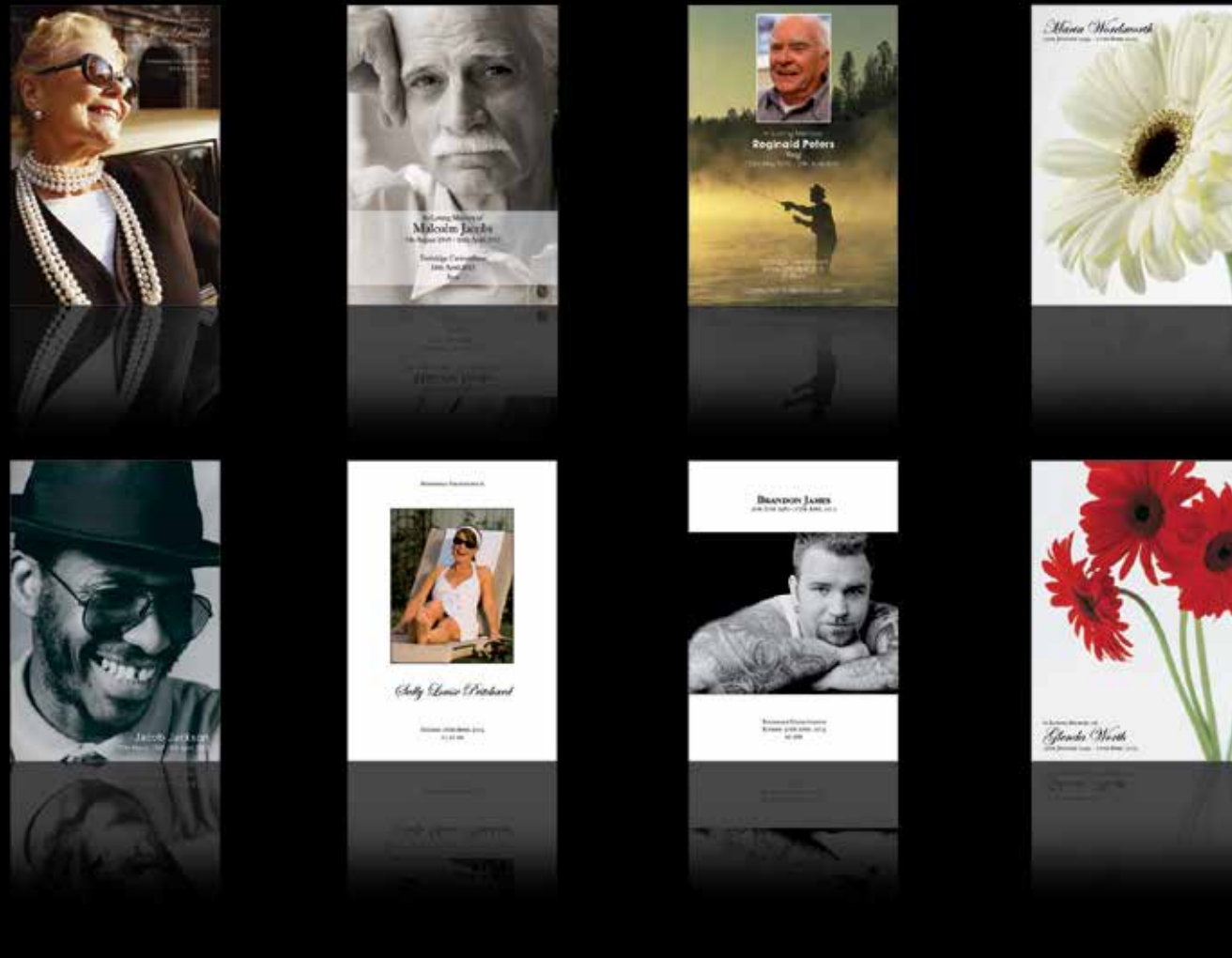


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What happens to all of the pacemakers?

Jo Parker discusses what happens when someone with a pacemaker is cremated...

//

all pacemakers have to be removed before a cremation takes place

//

Anyone who has arranged a funeral where cremation is involved will recall being asked whether the person had a pacemaker; the combination of the heat of the cremator and the little metal device can quite literally be explosive (almost half of the crematoria surveyed in the UK in 2002 stated that they had experienced explosions where bodies were inadvertently cremated with a pacemaker in situ) and all pacemakers have to be removed before a cremation takes place.



But what happens to all of the pacemakers that are taken out of the bodies that no longer need them?

Up until recently, pacemakers have simply been disposed of, while around the world, up to two million people around the globe die each year because they have no access to the life-saving devices. A new pacemaker can cost up to £4,000, and even the cheapest devices can be more than the annual salary of the average worker in underdeveloped nations.

In a pioneering study in the USA, a few years ago, researchers collected 66 battery-operated pacemakers with more than three years of battery life from patients who had died, and after partial sterilization they were sent to the Holy Family Hospital in Mumbai, India.

CONTINUED

A

fter further sterilization, the pacemakers were implanted in 53 heart patients with no cases of infection or pacemaker malfunctions over an average follow-up of nearly two years.

Lead researcher, Bharat Kantharia said: 'Implantation of donated permanent pacemakers can not only save lives but also improve the quality of life of needy poor patients.'

The successful recycling of pacemakers began in the USA, where a study at the University of Michigan showed that 84% of patients would donate their pacemaker for re-use.

Here in the UK, independent funeral directors are being encouraged to participate in a scheme that recycles the devices, for the benefit of the poorest patients in India.

Jo Parker, of Abbey Funeral Services in Tonbridge, Kent, tells us more.

"What happens to them?" is a question that I have been asked many times when I explain about pacemakers having to be removed. Generally, pacemakers have been disposed of by specialised clinical waste companies, or we funeral directors take them back to our local hospitals. However, both options are either costly or becoming more and more unavailable as hospitals (like my local hospital in Tunbridge Wells) stop removing pacemakers in their mortuary and no longer have the means to offer a disposal service for them. Nine times out of 10, we remove the pacemaker in our mortuary and thereby the onus of responsibility to dispose of them correctly falls on us, the funeral director.

"I have over the past few months been in touch with Heart Hospitals, Heart Charities and manufacturers of the pacemakers to see if there was some way of recycling these devices but it's up until now it was not something that we do here in the UK, these devices are just destroyed.



//

for the benefit
of the poorest
patients in
India

//

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Association of NATURAL Burial Grounds

This got me thinking about overseas charities and I stumbled upon a charity called Healing Little Hearts. The founder of this charity is a Consultant Paediatrician at University Hospital Leicester, Dr Nichani Sanjiv and he takes medical teams to India to perform lifesaving surgery on children whose families can't afford medical care. (google 'BBC - Three Leicester people maintain their ties with India' for more information on his work)

I contacted Dr Nichani, who was delighted with the idea of recycling our pacemakers; although Sanjiv himself works with the children in the hospital, he has spoken with his medical colleagues who take care of the very poorest patients that come into the Holy Family Hospital in Mumbai and the Government Hospital, King Edward Medical College and the pacemakers we send will be used to change their lives.



Dr Nichani said "I will be passing the pacemakers on to my Adult Cardiology colleagues in Mumbai, in particular Dr Brian Pinto who is the Lead Adult Cardiologist at the Holy Family Hospital Mumbai and the Holy Spirit Hospital Mumbai, a sister Hospital run under the auspices of the Vatican.

Dr Pinto is the person who is responsible for Healing Little Hearts adopting the Holy Family Hospital as its base for our charity work 3 years ago and he was very excited when I mentioned the possibility of getting these pacemakers. He has pledged to use them solely for the poorest patients that he and his colleagues treat.

So, having found a charity, I thought why not make this bigger than a few Kent members; why not roll this out nationally? The National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF) has over 1,000 funeral homes as members, and if we all joined in, what a difference we could make." Jo goes on to explain the arrangements that are in place for funeral directors who want to participate in the scheme. The initiative requires a special logistics company to transport the pacemakers to Leicester, as the lithium batteries contained in them means they cannot be sent through traditional means of postage. Dr. Nichani then takes the devices out to his colleague in the community hospitals in India, where they are used to change the lives of patients suffering from heart conditions.

The funeral directors also first secure the permission of the relatives of the pacemaker's donor before sending the pacemaker away for re-use.

"It's such a simple thing, and so easy to do," says Jo. "Instead of being wasted and disposed of in landfill sites, a recycled pacemaker can change someone's life. I believe this gesture provides a small legacy for the deceased as well as allowing us, the Funeral Director, to give the precious gift of Life to many.



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It has been many years since the NDC's People's Awards were last made. Well, they are back and the news is that there are some fantastic natural burial sites with kind, dedicated managers right across the UK.

The People's Award

This is totally different to any other assessment of green cemeteries. It is not wholly reliant on an individual site's facilities or grounds maintenance, it is all about the level of service, the personal touches and the impact each natural burial manager has made on the families of those who they have helped to bury. In this way a small site can compete with a big site and a simple one with an all singing other.

How impressed and helped were you?

Every family arranging a funeral at one of the Association of Natural Burial Grounds' sites is given the opportunity to fill in a feedback form that comes to the NDC's headquarters in the Bunker. These forms are also available on line. We get dozens every week. The vast majority are good if not glowing, any niggles are reported back to the members so improving the levels of service.

Last months, during a whole weekend, over one thousand forms were crunched and reviewed by the Charity's trustees. This process narrowed down the regional winners and runners up.



2013

WINNERS

BEST NATURAL BURIAL GROUNDS

PEOPLE'S AWARD

The Winners and close seconds.....

1 SOUTH & EAST
Al Blake and his team at the SOUTH DOWNS NATURAL BURIAL SITE, Hampshire
Wendy Goddon-Wood at Deerton Natural Burial Ground in Kent

2 SOUTH WEST
Jo Vassie at HIGHER GROUND MEADOW in Dorset
Liz Rothschild at Westmill Natural Burial Ground near Swindon

3 EAST MIDLANDS
Chris and Jenny Scroby from the WILLOWS NATURAL BURIAL GROUND near Leicester
Chris and Jonathan at Brightwater Green Burial Meadow near Lincoln

4 WEST MIDLANDS
Andy Bruce at WESTHOPE GREEN BURIAL GROUND in Shropshire
Amy Tolley and Dan Sprague at Westall Park Natural Burial Ground in Worcestershire

5 WALES
Ifor and Eira Humphries at GREEN LANE BURIAL FIELD & NATURE RESERVE near Montgomery
Arabella Melville at Boduan Sanctuary Wood in Gwynedd.

6 YORKSHIRE
Chris and Julia Weston at BROCKLANDS NATURAL BURIAL SITE near Settle
Jacquie Morley at Tarn Moor Memorial Woodland near Skipton

7 THE NORTH
Francis Mason-Hornby at DALTON WOODLAND BURIAL GROUND, Cumbria
Allen Plumbley at Swanlow Park Cemetery near Chester

8 SCOTLAND
Alex Rankin at CLOVERLY WOODS OF REST in Aberdeenshire
Ben Gray at Binning Memorial Woodland in East Lothian



Our Patrons then had the onerous task of trying to choose an overall winner from the above, here are some examples of the types of comments that helped some sites really stand out.

"This was our second burial at The Willows, and at both burials we could not have asked for more. Chris the owner and his family have created a wonderful resting place, and the care and devotion to the site is outstanding."

"As we walked away from the grave I could see the Dalton Estate staff watching from a discrete distance... Dalton Woodland Burial Ground is exactly the right place for her."

"Clovery Wood is the best burial ground I have ever experienced. Mr. Rankin is so kind and respectful, it made two hard losses a little easier."

"I found the whole process to be quite calming and peaceful compared to other funerals I have attended. Natural burial felt much more in tune with how things should be. The staff were amazing. Al Blake gave me great confidence beforehand and during the service. Al did everything as I wished – nothing was too much effort & the feedback from family and friends have been entirely positive and heartwarming – it was not a conventional funeral and that was never a problem – fantastic."

"Informative, flexible and supportive from our first conversation, Jo Vassie also proved to be consistently thoughtful and considerate. Higher Ground Meadow is a true reflection of her dedication to natural burials. On the day, comment was made that a standard had been set for all funerals. Our thanks and appreciation to all."

"I was attracted by firstly its nearness, then the owners, and, on seeing it, its beauty."

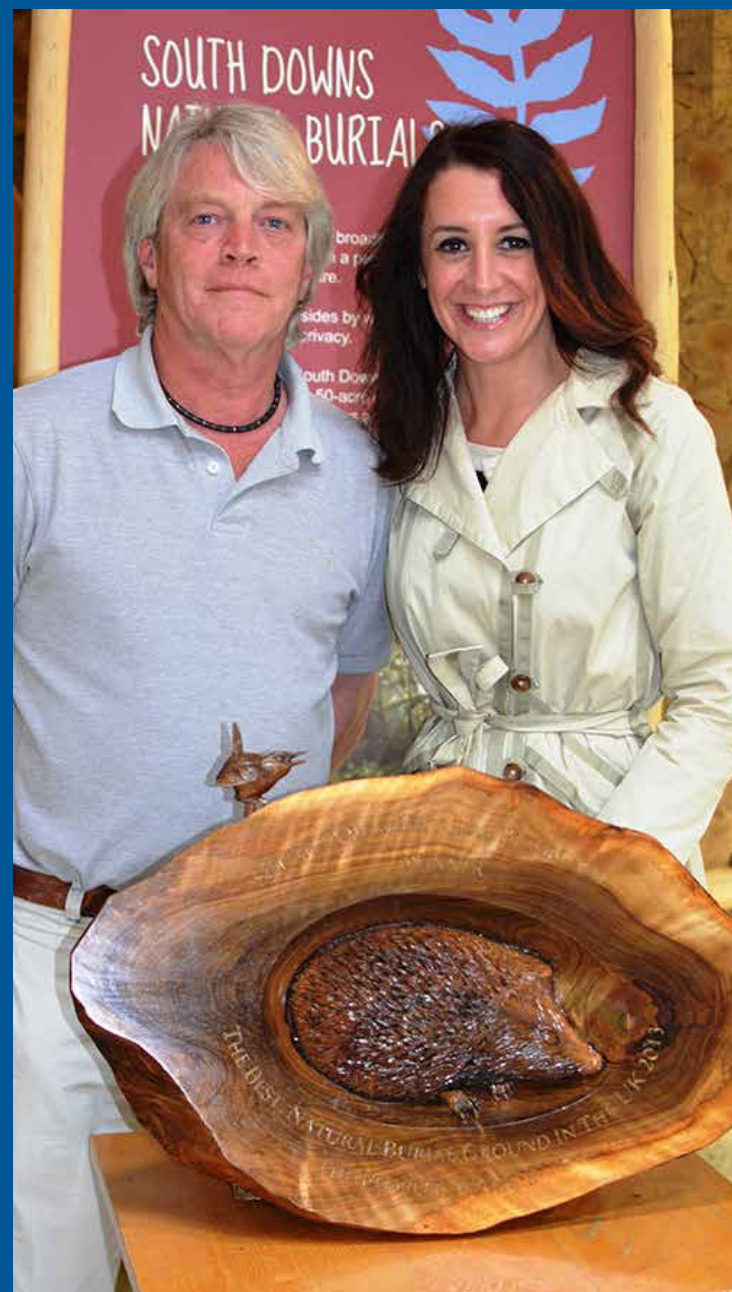
"I would like to give special mention to Andy Bruce at Westhope – he was so friendly, understanding and helpful, a real diamond, much needed at the time."

"Sensitive, kind, attentive and sympathetic. Excellent in every way. As was the case with my mother's ashes and tree planting in 2010."

And the winner of The People's Award for The Best Natural Burial Ground in the UK is South Downs Natural Burial Site

Huge congratulations to them from all at the NDC and on behalf of all the families whose lives and funerals you have touched.

A Huge THANK YOU!!



The beautiful walnut winner's plaque, created and donated by woodcarver Luke Chapman (www.locarve.com) was presented to Al Blake at South Downs by our patron, One Show journalist Lucy Siegle.

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HERE
COME

THE GIRLS

In the last edition, our editor Rosie wrote about the rise in direct cremation services. This time she is observing another trend, the rise of the progressive female funeral director.

"I am not saying that there are no new male undertakers, it just seems that more often than not they are women".

Rebels? Mavericks? What on earth inspires these women to work with death and to be doing it so differently?

Who are they?

Well, there are the stalwarts who have been going for many years, they are and were forward thinking women within established firms. Like **Anne Beckett-Allen** in East Anglia and Tracey Warren at **Stoodleys** in the West Country. **Barbara Butler** was one of the pioneers in both alternative undertaking and green burial provision down in Somerset. Then there is **Cara Mair** in Brighton whose original funeral company is now well established and expanding across Sussex.

In the last edition we looked at **Poppy Mardall** in London with her simple funeral company. Another brand new start up is **Tracy O'Leary** whose speciality is direct and natural burials in the Cambridgeshire area. **Rosie Grant** up in Manchester is a well respected flexible provider as is **Victoria Allan** in Ludlow. **Claire Callender** in Totnes, **Linda Blakelock** in Gateshead and **Paula Rainycroft** in Bristol are partners within very different, progressive undertaking companies.

Two of the most recent to take the plunge are **Wendy Pratt** in Yorkshire and **Maggie Brinklow** in Northamptonshire. Wendy of course was the manager of Tarn Moor Natural burial site and has now decided to become a full time undertaker. **Lucy Jane's** 'individual funeral company' is just opening up in Oxford and **Lel Wallace and Sarah Stuart** "lady funeral directors" are doing great things down in Bridgwater.

Clare Brooks with her Volkswagen funeral company will do whatever is needed in Coventry and beyond. Then there is the plucky **Catherine Broad** in Barnet, London who is offering the best value direct cremation service of all in the UK for £950 inc. She is already twice as busy as last year.

GRANT

MAIR

MARDALL

BUTLER

O'LEARY

“
What on earth
inspires these
women to work
with death..?
”



CALLENDER



WARREN



BLAKELOCK



LUCY
JANE

//

because we make such incredible connections with people, there is no bullshit around death, everyone is very real

//

So Girls why DO you do it?

Barbara

Over 20 years ago I started getting involved in funeral arrangements out of sheer anger at how many of the undertakers I came in contact with just 'took over', telling families what they should have, at prices providing the highest profit. I felt families should be given as much choice as possible and to be helped to have whatever they wanted - so long as it was legal!

Paula

Although I receive money it is more like a vocation. I get very close and intimate with families maybe never to see them again. However, many do keep in touch, coming to buy presents or accessories and talk about the funeral. I think death, like life is wonderful and like life it has its good and bad times. We all have to go so let's rejoice in the way we do and not persist in the Victorian way of death that still abounds today.

Tracy O'Leary

I like to raise awareness of the simplicity of 'green' burials without all the fuss, environmental damage and unwanted expense of mainstream funerals. Something simple, natural, personal and affordable.

Wallace Stuart

It is very hard to convey our passion into words but above all we treat people how WE would want to be treated. As women, our care and empathy come naturally - we can put our arms around a widower and give him the reassurance that his wife has been cared for and dressed by our lady only team (for couples who have been married for 60 or so years, this can be so important). Just the smallest attention to detail such as styling their loved one's hair correctly or putting on a favourite lipstick or perfume - can leave a lasting and comforting memoir.

Claire Callender

Because we make such incredible connections with people, there is no bullshit around death, everyone is very real.

I was introduced by one woman from a family as her 'temporary best friend', this sums it up perfectly I think. I aim to be that lovely mate who is practical and prepared to get stuck in and help with everything. But also to gently hold whatever feelings come up, the grief is fairly expected, it's the anger and the guilt and so on, they need more skilful holding. I cry at every funeral.

Linda Blakelock

I became interested after my Mam passed away. She was 86 and wanted to plan her funeral, we didn't know there were alternatives or that we should have 'shopped around', we just settled. It left me feeling that we didn't give her the send off she wanted, it was a compromise.

Then both of my sisters lost their husbands, one was a huge Elvis fan. After arranging a traditional funeral my sister told me that she would have loved an Elvis themed funeral. Why didn't she do it? "Who would have provided that?" she said. That got me thinking, there had to be something better.

Lucy Jane

To help people at a time when they need help. To listen to clients and give them exactly what they want. For me and my staff to be the very best we can be.



WALLACE &
STUART



PRATT

Anne Beckett-Allen

We constantly ask ourselves “How could we improve this?” I like it when a family are able to come in and pay their bill because we helped them fight the Department of Work and Pensions for the bereavement benefits that they didn’t know they were entitled to. And of course we never complain when families send us chocolates telling us what a great job we did!

Rosie Grant

The work is varied, interesting and sometimes creative; but mostly the satisfaction of helping families is where the meaning lies for me. I left the funeral profession for a number of years and had a glamorous job as an entertainer travelling all over the world. I pined for my funeral work. Now I’m back to my vocation and all is well.”

Wendy Pratt

The only regret is that I didn’t come into it earlier in my life. ‘A good funeral’ is probably one of the most important events and of course it is the last gesture that can be done for a loved one. It is wonderful to see how more people are talking and being pro-active in planning their funerals and are so much more aware of the environment. The importance of knowing they, as a family, are in control. Not the funeral director.

Maggie

I’ve been interested in death for as long as I can remember. It’s not about being sombre or morbid, but being able to be empathetic and respectful of people’s requests, whatever they may be. It’s much more rewarding than most people think – and it’s OK to have a sense of humour, in fact it’s an absolute necessity!

Clare

In my late teens I witnessed two horrific car accidents and their aftermath. At this point I realised that there might not be a tomorrow.

I care deeply for people and in my heart simply want to help everyone avoid unsuitable, formulaic funerals. Giving out information and enlightening people is really satisfying.



I think death,
like life is
wonderful

Poppy

I do it because I wanted to help people take creative control of their funerals. I believe we should all be able to have a meaningful funeral at an affordable cost. I want to help take some of the fear out of the process of visiting an undertaker - the stone-masonry in the window, all the black. I want to help people see that it doesn’t have to be that way.

Catherine

I strive to bring fairness to this industry. Is it right that families are having to shop around in a distressed state and in these difficult financial times? It gives me great pleasure when families realise they have got exactly the full service that they want but for half the price of a high street undertaker.

Cara

I work tirelessly and passionately to breakdown barriers, doors and false pomp in the world of funerals. This really does mean no closed doors, rather, informed support and honesty to assist people in all aspects of the funeral process that are important to them. This could be the collection of their loved one from hospital, to gently dressing the body, to carrying the coffin on the day of the ceremony.

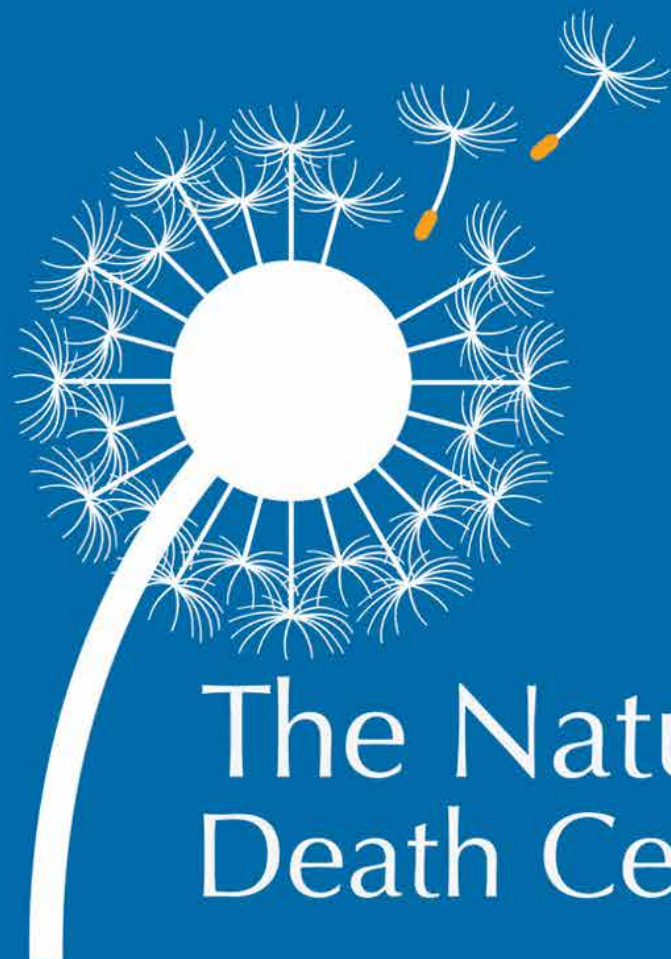
We don’t have different people taking on different roles, which means that the person there for you in the middle of the night, gently collecting your loved one, is likely to be the same woman who helps and supports you with the arrangement and on the day of the funeral.”

Tracey

Ever since I first stepped through a funeral director’s door as part of a work-experience placement while still at school, I KNEW that this was exactly what I wanted to do. I love the interaction with family members and the ongoing relationship which that process so often brings about.

You can find contact details for all these wonderful folk on the net or on the Natural Death Centre’s website. If you are an unmentioned super star then get in touch and I will see about featuring you in a later edition.

Don’t forget that if you have employed a funeral director in the last three years, please leave a review on Funeral Advisor.



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Forever Orange



Of course being me we weren't going to have a formulaic funeral at the local crematorium when my mother in law passed away. What we were faced with however was her death one week before Christmas in the same year that we lost one of our kids. It was going to be a tough Christmas anyway so the thought of Nana being left in the fridge throughout the Christmas and New year break meant that we had to pull out the stops and get things moving. This we achieved in four days.

My first call was to Al the manager at the South Downs Natural Burial Site. Although he was fully booked that week he knew that we would be pretty self sufficient so I managed to get a time in the morning when we would not clash with another family. We already have burial plots there so this saved us a trip to the site, to pick a spot and complete 'right of burial' paper work. Al got his grave diggers to work and everything was set – or so we thought.

I had had the 'F' conversation' with Dorothy a few years before, so thankfully we knew what she wanted, or more importantly didn't want. So my next call was to purchase a coffin.

Now, Nana had a thing about orange. Her clothes, jewellery and even shoes were most likely orange at any given time. So an orange coffin was the obvious choice. The lovely Steve at Sunset coffins delivered this personally and the evening before the funeral we snuck it into the front room in order for my 7 and 8 year olds to set

to work painting it with yellow sunflowers and a painted garland of forget-me-nots around the lid. We finished it off with multi coloured hand prints on the top, one from each of the grandchildren and us big kids too. These were each accompanied by a little written message from each of us. Mine thanked her for raising the best husband.

How we were nearly de-railed

Nana had been very poorly for a long time, she was in hospital when she died. We were starting to get a bit twitchy after two days of pursuing the doctor's certificate and being told that they were busy or it has to be a doctor who knew her. I can't go into too much detail as it horrifically transpires that there is to be an inquest. Lets just say the hospital itself has queried some treatment/care she received under its own roof! What we thought would be a straight forward certification and trip to the registry office had now turned into a coroner's case and delays that would mean cancelling the funeral.

We were so upset. I think I used the word incandescent at the time. However I managed to get the coroner's office on side, not only pleading for a limited post mortem, which they agreed to, but rushing the paperwork through, meaning that it was released the evening before the funeral! So it was all back on! This was a bit awkward with some of the relatives, on again, off again, etc etc

The next morning I drove to the hospital mortuary, as arranged. The most lovely young woman helped me to dress Dorothy – orange socks, skirt, blouse and beautiful tailored orange wool jacket. Finished off with orange lippy and a shell necklace. We lined the coffin with one of her own soft, whitney blankets – orange of course and wrapped this over her once I had placed a feather pillow and a few little gifts from the children in with her. There were three mortuary staff, all female, so helpful and supportive.

My 16 year old son had, understandably, not wanted to come in but waited with the estate car and helped load the coffin. Off we drove, Nana's final trip in the winter sunshine.

We had not really had time to think about engaging a celebrant. Instead we simply placed Nana in the middle of the gathering room at the burial site and sat round her in a circle. My husband thanked everyone for coming and followed a few notes he had made which gave the ceremony some structure. He invited those present to say some words and we played some of her favourite dance music by Frank Sinatra. It worked really well, it was respectful, intimate, personal, at times amusing and above all memorable. Somehow an hour had rushed by and we trundled off, down through the woods wheeling Nana on the replica Edwardian hand bier.

Her spot was stunning, just clipping the edge of a yew canopy. Tucked away in a little fold of the hill. Perfect. After a few more words, myself and the boys lowered her into the grave. We sprinkled some soil and posies of rosemary that her youngest grand-daughter had tied with a ribbon the evening before.



Walking back from the woods I happened to be adjacent to some old friends of the family, who I had not met before. Conventional in appearance I was worried that what we had arranged would be seen as too alternative

or strange. I tentatively enquired whether this was the most unconventional funeral they had ever attended. One of them turned to me and simply said "the best". Rosie-Inman-Cook





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Commissioned by Dying Matters, 'I Didn't Want That' is a poignant and powerful film highlighting the importance of making your end of life wishes clear.

Released as part of Dying Matters Awareness Week 2012, this carefully crafted short film was created to act as a stimulus for making end of life wishes clear and changing the way the nation thinks about death.

Featuring five scenarios, from choosing whether you wish to be resuscitated to making preparations for your pets, the film examines what can happen if you fail to make your wishes known.

The film, produced by pFlix Films, has high production values, a brilliant cast and a delicate touch. Among the highlights are undoubtedly scenes shot at Barnabas Church in East London, showing a flamboyant gay funeral – the last thing that the person who died would have asked for if they had talked about their wishes.

'I Didn't Want That' was released as research by ComRes for Dying Matters showed that less than a third of people have talked to someone about their end of life wishes and just over a quarter have asked a family member about theirs.

Sam Turner, Director of Public Engagement at the Dying Matters Coalition, commented: " 'I Didn't Want That' is a fantastic short film which will hopefully win over hearts and minds about the importance of talking to people about your end of life wishes. .."



talking about dying is rarely easy, but unless all of us feel more comfortable doing so we run the risk of not getting our wishes met and leaving a mess for those close to us



Sam Turner
Dying Matters Coalition



THROUGH A PRISM

Prickling and provocative, thoughtful and questioning extracts from 'Writing on Death', a Natural Death Centre publication.

The Natural Death Centre has long been at the heart of challenging the way that our society deals with dying and death.

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

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.

With a view to offering readers of More to Death some new perspectives, here are some extracts – or tasters – from the book:

FEEDING THE BONE ORCHARD

In Western culture, we sweep our dead under the carpet. We don't like to be reminded of our own mortality.

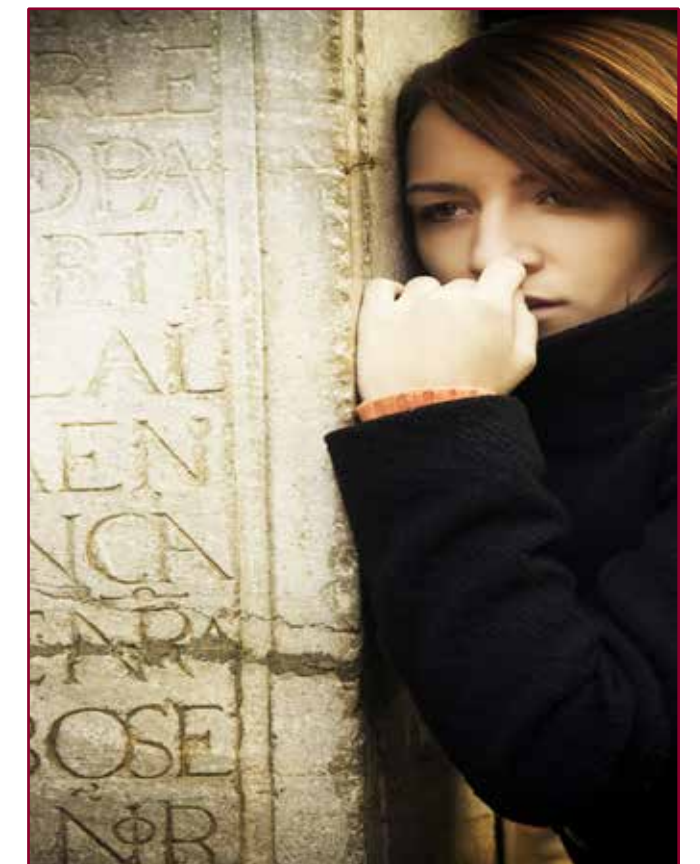
Our funerals tend to be quick and efficient conveyor belt affairs where the mortal remains of our loved ones are quietly shuffled off-stage through a beige curtain. The shell of Grandad's life is given one last spin around the room in a wooden box, before being ferried to the beyond by some anonymous furnace worker acting behind the scenes.

// there is little comfort to be found in a modern crematorium //

The body that he loved in, the body he managed to pull through a world war with only a bullet wound and crushed finger, the body that he took his wife dancing in on their anniversary every year, is filed away and processed through the system with a minimum of fuss. The salient points of his life are hurriedly summarised in a ten-minute sermon by a vicar who never knew him or shared a drink with him in life. We go down the pub and drink a glass of whisky in remembrance, then we change out of our black mourning suits and are encouraged not to think about any of it. He's dead and gone and the past is in the past. No point dwelling on it; no sense in being morbid. So we put it all away somewhere and get on about our business. What else is there to do?

Our culture is not very well equipped for processing the trauma of death and bereavement. Our funerary rites don't even begin to give us a set of tools for dealing with the enormity of having someone so pivotal to our understanding of the world taken from us. There is little comfort to be found in the modern crematorium, and sixteen cups of sugary tea are not going to fill the gaping hole left by the loss of someone close to you.

Some of us take up religious beliefs as a way of coming to terms with the death process, and adopt vague, second-hand notions of an afterlife that couldn't possibly be proven one way or another. Others take it a step further and invest belief in spiritualists, handing over money to spirit mediums who claim to be able to put you back in contact with your Auntie Doris or Uncle Robert from beyond the grave. While others find their comfort in atheism, cutting through the conjecture and make-believe to find some peace and resolution in the finality of the grave. We're all going to be just dirt in the ground..."



Stephen Grasso is a Newcastle-born witch doctor, a practitioner of modern occultism and a music obsessive. His description of the new rituals that he is evolving and how he places them firmly within a global tradition of ancestor worship is of particular interest to all whose religious palate has become dulled by increasingly meaningless gestures.

Stephen's beliefs about where we come from, the debt we owe to our forebears and how we should honour that debt are deeply respectful, and as relevant to the conventionally sacred as to the secular.

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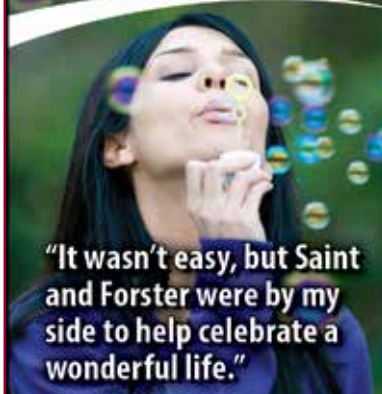
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Leave them Laughing

In December of 2007, I was diagnosed with a fatal, debilitating, and incurable illness; amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Shortly after this diagnosis, I began a fascinating experiment; could I accept with as little regret as possible the fact that I was dying while simultaneously falling madly in love with life? After all, don't we miss the things we love the most? How can losing a life so treasured be something to embrace rather than resist? Luckily for me, ALS parcels out death in tiny packages. Motor neurons gradually die, starving the muscles and resulting in complete loss of bodily function.

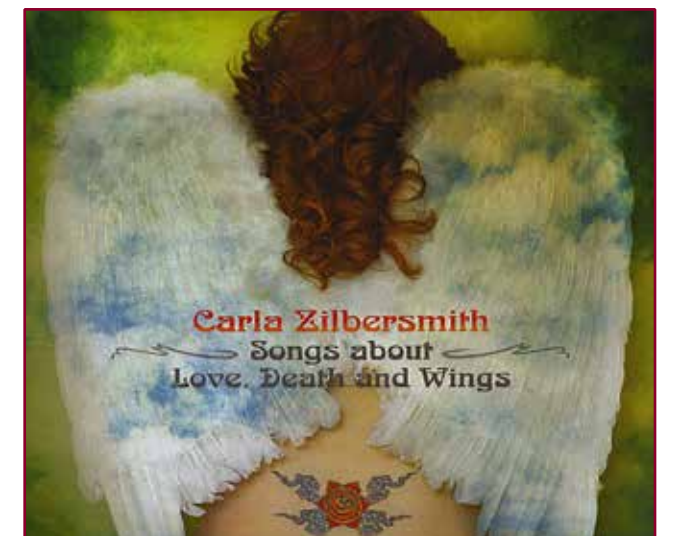
In my case, I first lost the use of my legs and one hand. I walked with a cane. I fell down and broke bones. I could no longer buckle a shoe or a bra strap. Soon, the falls became increasingly violent. I would fall backwards like Wile E. Coyote after the Road Runner dropped a piano on his head. (I know this is not a scientific account; however, 'cartoonish' is the most accurate way to describe the way in which one falls as a result of ALS.) These falls eventually led to my permanent incarceration in a wheelchair.

Death by tiny death, I absorbed each blow and prepared for the next one. As far as I was concerned, I was taking hits like Muhammed Ali, playing rope-a-dope with ALS. I believed I would ultimately rain pain down on this motherfucking disease by refusing to let it kill my spirit. This was, perhaps, a tad optimistic on my part. Soon, I could no longer dress myself, get myself on the toilet, or feed myself. Now, I can only eat blended foods, and I'm on more drugs than John Belushi, Janis Joplin, and Heath Ledger combined. My speech is rapidly deteriorating as the muscles in my mouth lose the battle to ALS. I'm in hospice and I will most likely die within months, maybe weeks.

A series of little deaths, each of them a rehearsal for my grand finale. This seems to be an appropriate way to view this process, since all my life, I have been a performer....."

Carla Zilbersmith was an actress, theatre director, singer and comedienne, mother to her teenage son Maclen ('the only one I know of') who was diagnosed on 26 December 2007 with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, or Motor Neurone Disease as it is known in the UK.

Her hilarious, brave and foulmouthed blog 'Carl-amuses' which documented her short, one-sided battle with this most awful of diseases. <http://carlamuses.blogspot.co.uk>



“

death by tiny death,
I absorbed
each blow

”

Carla Zilbersmith passed away on
May 17th 2010, aged 47 years.

Saying goodbye to OSCAR

Jane Stevens is a mother, a wife and an artist. Jane's first-born son Oscar died on the cusp of manhood, having lived his whole young life with a congenital heart condition. Jane's essay describes Oscar's life and death and his funeral with honesty and dignity, and offers a picture of a life beyond grief so often missing from accounts of the death of a child.

I was lucky that my husband in his grief was able to focus on saying goodbye to Oscar.

Where he found the strength to think and research I do not know, but I remain ever indebted with love and admiration for his clear-sightedness when he could barely speak.

He found undertakers who could have been my family, certainly very good friends. They seemed to understand us, and rather than bring a process to us that others have followed, they brought ideas, and with that, healing

They collected Oscar from the hospital and I did not want to see him again.

I had made my farewells while he was still just warm and I had no desire to see him again cold and dead. Gently, so gently, they asked me to reconsider and when Jon said he was going to go, I went too, with reservations. How wrong I was!

Our beautiful, beautiful boy lay in a casket for kings, woven from willow, looking as he had. He did look like he was sleeping, which was scary, but oddly reassuring, and we spent a long time together or alone in turns talking to him and making our final farewells. Jon made life-changing promises to him, and seems to be keeping them. The last leaving was hard, too hard, and we found we kept needing to return. It was suggested that we close the casket, and so by gently wrapping him and closing the lid we were able to finally say goodbye and let go....."

'Writing on Death' is included in the three-book set of The Fifth Edition of The Natural Death Handbook, available from The Natural Death Centre www.naturaldeath.org.uk priced at £24 inc P&P

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Ways to Remember



At the Natural Death Centre we get contacted fairly regularly by organisations and companies offering new and modern ways to memorialise and celebrate the lives of those lost.

As a charity, we have always focused on the essentials: the disposal, the funeral director, the coffin, the ability to organise directly etc. We have shied away from 'products' that we see as extras or add-ons, additional expense for families beyond the 'must do'.

However there are many ideas and products that are essentially valid and worthy offerings so in this edition we thought that we would introduce some of them:

MuchLoved

has pioneered the introduction of online memorials in the UK and has created a beautiful and respectful service which can be of great support to the bereaved. Families can easily personalise and update their memorials. As a registered charity their ethos is both appropriate and sensitive and we are delighted to support and recommend their tribute service.

Forget Me Not Book

Is a company offering a free to use web based service. You can create an online memory book of stories and photos about someone close to you; living or dead. Invite family and friends to add to this and share in the enjoyment of retelling and reliving memories together. Stories can be stored indefinitely and viewed online or printed off for those without a computer.

A Giving Tribute

A company set up by Liz Mowatt, 'A Giving Tribute' provides tribute cards that can be filled in on-line by family members, colleagues and friends in the days leading up to a funeral. These written memories and photos are mounted in a special display and placed at the funeral. The cost is just £96 for an unlimited number of cards. The cards can later be mounted in a Memory Book to share with others and keep for future generations, safekeeping photos and thoughts about the deceased, written by those who knew them.

The Woodland Trust

Runs a Woodland Dedication scheme where individuals can have an area of woodland dedicated to them.

There are over 700 woods to choose from across the UK, and costs start from a donation of £250 for a dedication of a quarter of an acre, £1000 for a dedication of an acre, and £3,000 for a dedication

of an acre grove with a bench. Each woodland area is dedicated only once, making the memorial truly unique and exclusive to the individual. Each dedication comes with a personalised certificate, a map outlining the area, information about the wood's history and wildlife, plus a picture of the chosen spot.

Each wood can be visited for free and the trust allows the option of group funds, an excellent way for a number of people to contribute to a single woodland dedication

Memories UK Ltd

Provide life-story slideshows on DVD: These can be viewed at a funeral, memorial service or wake, either as part of a service or running in the background, on a loop.

At a wake or get together the slideshows prompt conversations and evoke memories by illustrating the dead person's life using the best photos that are available about them; maybe including some taken by that person. They can be ordered into a storyline; growing up, holidays, pets, hobbies, etc. Favourite music can be added in the background and families could consider making DVD copies of the slideshow to hand out as a memento.

Anne Forrest the owner of the company also offers free advice on how to put these compilations together yourself - contact 01962 855575, or email af@memories-unlimited.co.uk

Another fantastic use of her DVDs is in the care of dementia patients, a visual aide-mémoire for them, providing some familiarity and comfort.

The National Forest Company

Leads the creation of The National Forest, a new, wooded landscape for the nation across 200 square miles of central England. The National Forest Company was established by the Government in April 1995.

It is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). A tree costs £25 and a personalised certificate template can be filled in on line and printed off.

Contemporary Memorials

Kate Semple at Elysium Memorials is passionate about creating memorials for the home and garden using natural materials.

Stone, wood and glass are tastefully and sensitively used to create an incredibly personal tribute to your loved one.

Responding to the changing ways in which people are choosing to celebrate a life, rather than mourn a loss, this Somerset based company produces exclusively British artisan made contemporary memorials. www.elysiummemorials.com

SILENT CITIES



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INTERVIEW

More to Death asked Jeane Trend-Hill - photographer, author, artist, actress and bone fide 'Lady' - to explain how she became so interested in cemeteries and monuments.

'My obsession with cemeteries began when, as a young child, I visited deceased family members with my parents. It was the thing we did one Sunday each month, taking flowers and tidying the graves. Whilst the adults chatted, I would wander off and look in amazement at the angels, doves and crosses. I have always been struck by their beauty and as I got older I began photographing them, purely for my own enjoyment. I started showing the photos to other people who said I should do a book. With a (then) full time Civil Service job as a fraud investigator, there was never enough time to take more photos and get something together properly. However, when I left that job I began writing articles and taking photographs full time and Silent Cities was born.

JEANE TREND-HILL

Why Silent Cities?

It came about when I visited the huge Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris for the first time in 2006. I stood at the highest point overlooking thousands of monuments to take in the amazing sight. I said to my husband "It looks like a city, a silent city", and the name just stuck.

I now use the name for the books, calendars and prints I sell through my website and at various cemetery open days. People tell me I show the beautiful side of cemeteries and help to make death a little less scary, which in my opinion can only be a good thing.

I also became involved with the restoration of monuments that may otherwise be lost to reclamation or the elements. One of my projects is Arthur Beresford Pite (1861 – 1934) an architect who designed the building I worked in for many years. He is buried in West Norwood cemetery, South London and his grave has sustained much damage. The



copper plaques with names and inscriptions are missing and part of the grave is suffering from subsidence and is tipping forwards. I am raising funds to restore the grave and recently installed a small plaque so that people can see who the grave is for. I also wrote a small book about my time in Arthur's building and some of the stories about it - 'Arthur has left the buildings.' Profits from the sale of books will be donated to the restoration fund. I have a website about Pite at: www.abpите.silent-cities.com

I am fascinated by mausolea and beautiful memorials, particularly angels. The carving is amazing and their faces seem so real. When I started photographing them it soon became obvious that particular designs cropped up again and again. Angels holding on to crosses, angels scattering petals, angels with wings outstretched looking towards heaven etc. The more weathered they were, the more lifelike they appeared. I prefer the Victorian ones, which have a certain crumbling quality about them. Most of the modern angels seem too clean and white for my taste. Stone masons never carved angels with tears, but some of their rain battered faces appeared to make them look as though they are crying. **Did you also know that an angel holding up two fingers usually denotes a member of the clergy is buried beneath?**

Nothing was too much trouble, all wonderful. Such compassionate staff, lovely people. The whole experience, whilst sad, was so personal, positive, peaceful and truly uplifting

Informative, flexible and supportive from our first conversation. Jo Vassie also proved to be consistently thoughtful and considerate.a true reflection of her dedication to natural burials

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I am often asked about the symbols on tombstones and what they mean; here are some of the more common ones:

ANCHOR: Hope, an early Christian symbol.

CHAIR: Commonly known as a vacant chair left by the deceased and often for a child or an unmarried woman.

COLUMN: A broken column signifies mortality, the support of life being broken. This was often used when a male, the head of the family had died.

HANDS: When clasped are a symbol of farewell – 'Until we meet again'. If you look closely they will often be a man and a woman's hands.

HOURGLASS: The traditional symbol of Father Time, time running out.

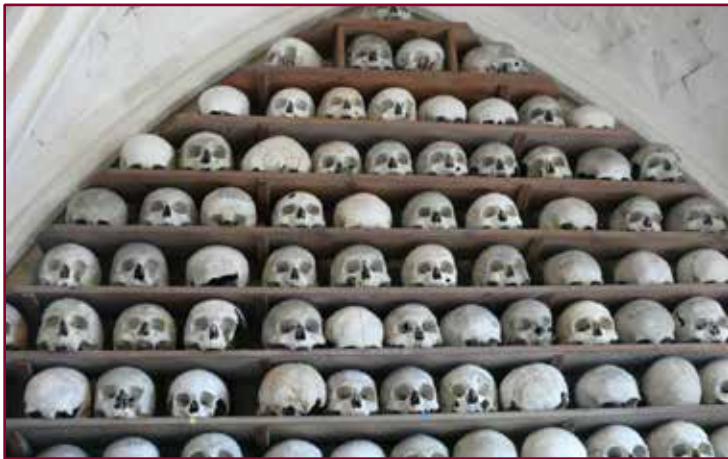
OBELISK: Eternal life and an Egyptian sun-worshipping symbol.

PHOENIX: Resurrection.

SKULL: Mortality, very popular in the late 1700s/early 1800s.

SNAKE: With its tail in its mouth known as an Ouroboros, meaning eternity.

TORCH: An upturned torch means a life extinguished.



My favourite cemeteries are Highgate and Kensal Green in London, the Necropolis in Glasgow and Pere Lachaise in Paris. Each has its own distinct atmosphere. Highgate is wild, romantic and gothic. Kensal Green has many wonderful majestic memorials. The Necropolis is wonderfully eerie no matter what time of day you visit and Pere Lachaise is breathtaking with many of the vaults actually open so you can peek inside.



I found the huge mausoleums were like miniature houses adorned with decorative features sometimes giving a glimpse into the life of its occupant. The first mausoleums of modern times were primitive, but with the arrival of Christianity things changed. Parish churches offered sites for burial and the memorials reflected the status of the deceased. Some of the earliest British mausolea are found in Scottish graveyards in the late 1600s. In England, freestanding mausolea did not appear until around the mid eighteenth century.

My office houses my funerary collection. I have a great interest in burial rites and collect 19th century mourning cards and Victorian mourning jewellery. I find it a fascinating insight into a bygone era.

I currently have around 500 mourning cards, some of which are very rare. There are two parts to the collection, 1860-1897 and 1905-1925 which include soldiers from the 1914-1918 war. Many of the rarer ones have black and silver engraving; others are like fold-out letters and many are conventional white cards with black borders. They were usually embossed with traditional symbols of grief such as an inverted torch, weeping willow trees, a broken column or angels and were intended as reminders of the dead so that the recipient would pray for the deceased. The card contained the name and age of the dead person as well as the date and place of burial. They did not tend to include a photograph until later years.



JEANE TREND-HILL

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With growing concern for the environment, Natural Burials are an increasingly popular and affordable choice and compare favourably to the costs of a traditional cremation or cemetery burial.

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so in the eye of nature let them die"

William Wordsworth 1888

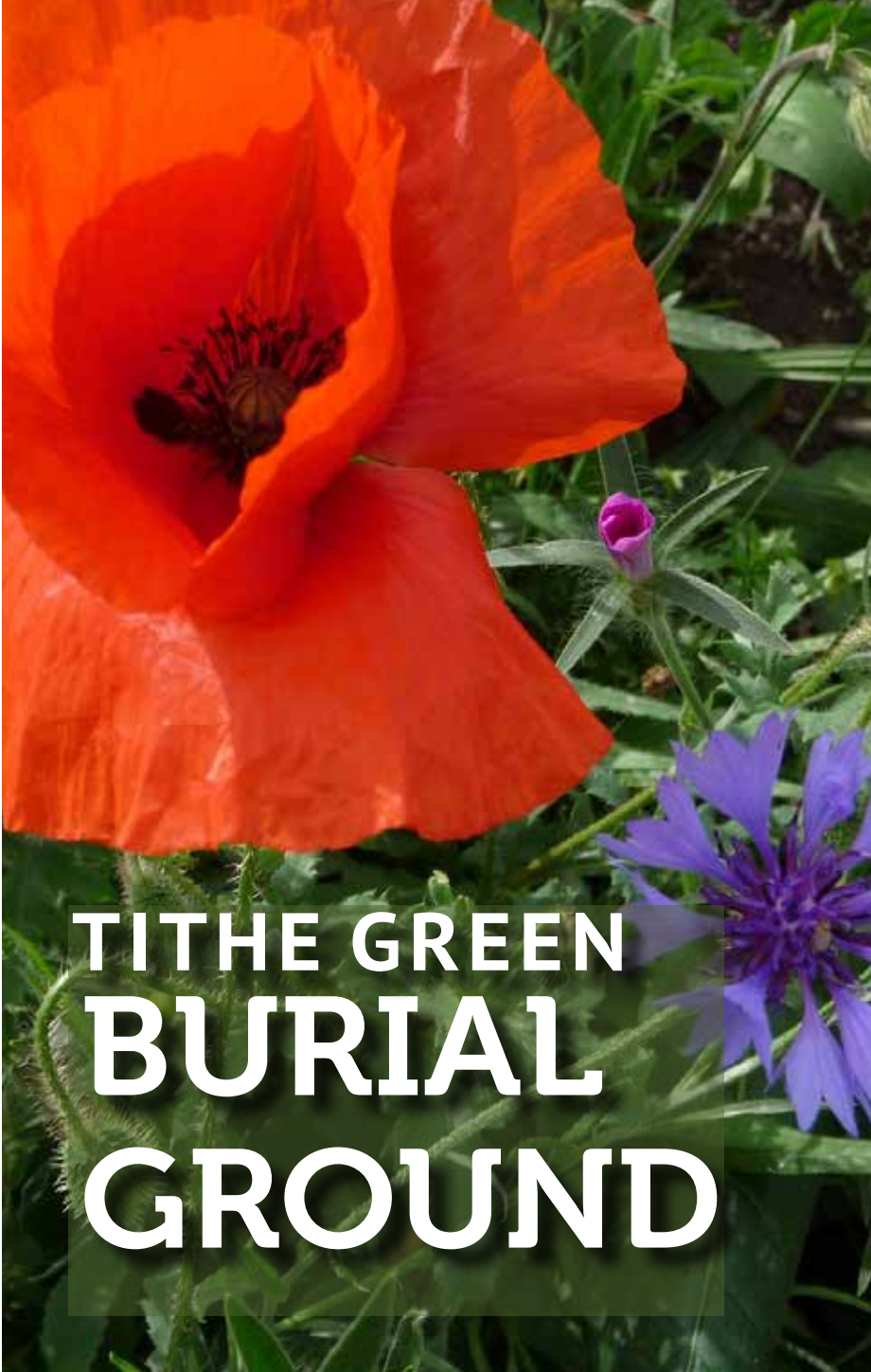
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TITHE GREEN BURIAL GROUND

In this article we ask Steve Barnes the manager of Tithe Green Natural Burial site in Nottinghamshire why it has taken 13 years for his site to join the Association of Natural Burial Grounds.



bring it back to its original concept of being a 'natural' burial ground and a haven for wild flowers and wildlife...



Tithe Green Burial Ground, is privately owned by Oxton Estate and was first opened in 1999. It is approximately 9 miles north of Nottingham City, near to the villages of Calverton and Oxton and is part of historic Sherwood Forest. The site comprises approximately 36 acres (of which about 8 acres is currently in use) and is being developed to include both wild flower meadows and woodland areas for burial.

Tithe Green was initially managed by the Oxton Estate farm manager, but by 2010 the site had become much busier and the owners decided that it had reached a stage whereby it required a dedicated manager who could concentrate fully on the site and its future development. I applied for the job and started as the manager in March 2010. By this time the Burial Ground had unfortunately become prey to a certain level of inappropriate memorialisation, which was beginning to detract from the beautiful and peaceful site originally intended. Families and visitors had begun the practice of placing vases in the ground to hold flowers as well as leaving various trinkets both on graves and hanging from a small number of memorial trees. Part of my remit when I first started at Tithe Green was to bring it back to its original concept of being a 'natural' burial ground and a haven for wild flowers and wildlife.

Shortly after starting as the manager at Tithe Green, I attended the first UK Natural Burial Conference at Sheffield University in March 2010. It was a very informative day and it was at this conference where I heard of the ANBG. I also found that Tithe Green wasn't the only Burial Ground having issues with memorialisation! I decided at this time that, after learning how to contend with the day to day running of a Natural Burial Ground and getting on with the task of converting 11 years of paper records to an electronic database, I would also need to focus on bringing Tithe Green back to a more natural state by reducing the current type of memorialisation, before applying to the ANBG for membership.

In order to make the changes as delicately as possible, I initially started out by just talking to as many visitors to the Burial Ground as I could come across, introducing myself as the new manager and informing them where the Burial Ground was intending to go and how together we would be able to achieve this by such things as reducing inappropriate memorialisation, amongst other measures. We would actively encourage the planting of wild flowers in and around the graves as an alternative and Oxton Estate would also plant wild flowers and bulbs each year in areas where there were no graves. The word subsequently began to spread and I found that a few people were then approaching me to discuss the changes and even ask what flowers they might plant etc.

We also remodelled the car park, creating a small bank which we seeded with wild flower and grass seed and installed a notice board where we displayed the Burial Ground Terms and Conditions, along with other 'seasonal' notices. Throughout the spring and summer the bank in the car park came to life with some amazing wild flowers and this then became very much of a focal point convincing people of the benefits of what we were trying to achieve.

In April 2011 a request was placed in the notice board asking that vases, ornaments, toys, baskets etc. be removed from the Burial Ground by June, after which time remaining items would be stored for collection. Surprisingly there was very little objection to the de-memorialisation with only two families wanting to take the matter further and eventually an agreement was reached. After June all the remaining objects were removed and retained but nothing was ever collected. (There was a small amount of recurrence with vases etc., but having left the notice in the notice board for the remainder of the year and having removed anything I came across, this has now reduced to practically nothing.) The end result is that we now receive more 'positive' feedback about the Burial Ground than we have ever had before.

Over the last two years we have operated a Christmas 'amnesty' for wreaths and other discreet memorialisation. We publish a date in the Burial Ground notice board when we intend to remove such items and this allows us to carry out a full clear up of the site including any inappropriate items that may have been placed throughout the year which we have missed. During the clear up in January this year there have been almost no other items found.



We have also recently re-designed our website, bringing it much more up to date and including such things as a photograph gallery, latest news and testimonial pages as well as printable application forms for use by both Funeral Directors and families. Again, this has received positive feedback from those visiting the website.

The site never stands still and there are always challenges thrown at us by 'Mother Nature', but we are now happy that Tithe Green is on the right path. Following the positive experience with encouraging people to memorialise differently, the Christmas amnesty, new website and other improvements, we now feel that the time is right to be a candidate for membership of the Association of Natural Burial Grounds. We are proud of how Tithe Green has developed in recent years and are constantly looking at ways to improve the site for the years to come.

Although it has taken 13 years for Tithe Green to join the merry band at the ANBG, I am sure we will now be able to make a positive contribution and look forward to a enjoying a good relationship with our new friends.

When I started at Tithe Green, I found the prospect of dealing with funerals a daunting one and was initially without doubt, very nervous. I believe it is extremely important to get everything right for family and friends, both at the funeral and afterwards and to always be considerate of their grieving. As I have gained experience, I feel that I am now much more confident in providing this.

I very much enjoy just chatting to people on site, which I know can be of great comfort and have listened, with interest, to all manner of stories about people buried here. I have found that often just to be there, to listen to someone when they are at a low point, is an essential part of managing the Burial Ground.

All of this provides me with a high level of job satisfaction and of course the Burial Ground itself is a beautiful and peaceful place to spend time. I hope that I will be able to continue to grow in my role and provide a service worthy of the people who visit and those who are visited.

Steve Barnes

e-mail: burialground@oxtonestate.com
website: www.woodlandburialoxton.co.uk

The ANBG looks forward to receiving Steve's customers' feedback forms and putting them into the melting pot at the next round of the People's awards.



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SIXTY SECONDS

'ONE MINUTE LONGER, AND WE BOTH WOULD HAVE DIED'

In this incredibly personal and frank account, the NDC's chairman Fran Hall explores and reveals the effects of shock from an almost deadly event.

Writing this statement over four months later, I can instantly feel fingers of fear creeping up my spine at the reality of those words.

On November 3rd 2012, I was within 60 seconds of dying in my bed. Our flat was on fire, but I was in such a deep sleep that the smoke alarm didn't wake me. If I had been on my own that night, I would have been carried out of the flat in a body bag, collected by whichever funeral director had been appointed by the coroner to deal with sudden deaths in the area. The choking black toxic smoke would have suffocated me in my sleep within seconds and I would have known nothing about it.

Instead, Steve, my partner, saved my life. He had fallen asleep after me, and had been woken by the smoke alarm. Jumping out of bed, he had instantly seen flames in the living room of our third floor rented flat that we had just finished moving into the day before. He went towards the fire that had taken hold of the curtains around the window above the storage heater, intending to try and put it out, but in the few seconds that it took to cross the room, the

thick smoke made it impossible to see his hand in front of his face.

He groped his way back along the wall to the doorway, then lunged towards the front door to get some air in his lungs so that he could shout to wake me. The door slammed shut behind him. He was outside. I was asleep.

The flat was on fire.

I heard his voice shouting my name through the fog of sleep and opened my eyes into pitch-black darkness – he had forced the door with his shoulder and was shouting desperately to wake me. I remember staggering out of the bed and stumbling against the wardrobes trying to take a breath, the air was searing hot and acrid, and burned my throat as I gasped for oxygen, covering my mouth and nose with my hands to try and protect myself. Somehow I managed to inhale enough to shout back that I didn't know where he was, and he just kept saying "come to my voice, come to my voice" – we were calling each other and trying to breathe and trying to feel for each other in the blackness of the smoke – and then he grabbed my arm and dragged me to the door and threw me out onto the landing.

“

the clock melted at 10.30pm

”



“

I was in such a deep sleep that the smoke alarm didn't wake me

”

Somehow I'd cut myself, there was blood and smoke and flames and we were crying and coughing and gasping for air, and stumbling and falling down the stairs, both naked and covered in soot. And then we finally got to the ground floor and there were people with terrified faces, everyone shouting and panicking, someone had called the fire brigade, someone gave me a coat, we were outside in the November night air and ambulances came and fire engines and police and we were being helped onto stretchers and covered with blankets and given oxygen.



We escaped with our lives. Literally, just our lives we had nothing else, not even clothes to cover ourselves. But none of that mattered actually. Steve was badly affected by the smoke, and was taken straight to Intensive Care. I was much luckier, I had had far less exposure than him; both his eyes and his lungs were damaged from the minutes he had spent trying to put out the fire and then rescuing me. I was kept on a ward overnight and then discharged, whereas he was to spend the next week in ITU and then on the Burns Unit being treated for severe internal burn injuries.



I think I was probably in shock for a long time, possibly weeks – I'm pretty sure I shouldn't have been driving, although I had to. Steve was in Stoke Mandeville hospital, and I went and stayed with my children some 20 miles away, but I had an overwhelming need to just be with him as much as I could. It was so scary. Everything in our lives had changed in an instant, and although he was in a bad way, just being with him made me feel safe in a world where suddenly nothing was safe anymore.

Looking back, I think that is the most abiding memory of the time immediately afterwards – being scared. I have never been scared before in my life, but suddenly I felt fearful all the time. Nothing felt secure, I felt anxious in a way I'd never felt, about nothing in particular, but yet about absolutely everything. The world that had always been predictable and familiar had suddenly shifted and I felt vulnerable and afraid.



FFor both of us, the psychological and associated physiological after-effects of surviving such a close brush with death were quite profound. In the hours and days immediately after escaping the fire, Steve experienced continual flashbacks. He re-lived the minutes he had spent trying to get to me over and over, startling himself awake as he fell asleep with a racing heart and an overwhelming panic. He explained it like a film looping and looping in his head, the helplessness and horror as vivid as when he had been trying to find me in the blackness. It was only after a session with a friend who had trained in Matrix Reimprinting, an advanced form of EFT, that these disturbing episodes subsided.

For weeks, we both were hyper sensitive to stimuli; loud noise, too many people, too much going on around us - supermarkets were overwhelming for me initially, it was as if my brain couldn't process all the 'stuff', all the choices, all the people around me. Gradually this eased, and we were able to resume normal activities and start to socialise again, but every now and then the feelings recurred unexpectedly.

Just a mention of a fire on the news, or the sight or particularly the smell of smoke triggered a flashback to the fear and would set my heart racing.

Nightmares came and went - both of us found our sleep patterns were disturbed and our ability to concentrate was diminished. We were both tired all the time, for weeks, months, but gradually the other symptoms abated. The psychologist attached to the Burns Unit had advised us that everything we were experiencing immediately after the event was quite normal, but if symptoms continued for a few months then it would be considered post traumatic stress disorder and would need clinical intervention. For the first month after leaving hospital, the insurance company put us up in a hotel. It was like being in a little bubble, which was exactly what we needed, we didn't have to shop or cook or keep house, we just had to adjust to the shock of what had happened and gradually pick up the pieces of normal life again. We stayed very small for that month, not really seeing anyone or doing anything that was demanding, just eating and resting and talking.

We used all kinds of positive therapies - homeopathy, nutritional therapy, aromatherapy, Rescue Remedy - the feelings and fears that we were experiencing were so alien to both of us, I was willing to try anything to help us both return to a balanced and familiar state of being.

We both knew it would take time, but neither of us are particularly patient beings - I think we expected to cope with this as we have both coped with many traumas in the past, (Steve is a former police officer, I am a funeral director, so neither of us were unfamiliar with tragic events or the consequences of them) yet this time it was different. We weren't the capable professionals dealing with shocked and frightened victims or survivors, we were the ones whose lives had been thrown into chaos.

Slowly, life has begun to feel normal again, but it's a different normal. We are different people now, immeasurably but imperceptibly changed by what almost happened - and by what did happen. We almost died - and we survived a fire. How could things not be changed?

I think for me the biggest thing has been a profound new awareness of the fragility of life. You would think that my working as a funeral director - spending each day with the dead and with those who have been left bereft and bereaved - would have meant I knew how delicately balanced life and death are, and I did. I knew it in an abstract way, in a second hand way. I thought that I was comfortable with the fact of my own mortality, facing death full on every day as I lifted and carried bodies, washed and dressed stillborn babies, listened to bereaved people in the bewilderment of grief - death was familiar, normal, inevitable. But it wasn't my death; it was someone else's. Now, I truly know how little separates us from the grave.

I hope that I can hold onto this awareness - it's so easy to slip back into the usual grumbling about the cost of living, the weather, family tiffs, petrol prices - all of the irritations that prod us along on a daily basis. I want to always be able to tap back into that huge elation at simply still being alive that flooded through me looking up at the charred window of what had been our living room. Life is good.

Fran Hall

 **The Arbory Trust**
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