



From Institute to Association The Formative Years of the British Undertakers' Association

By Brian Parsons

Introduction

Founded in 1905 as The British Undertakers' Association, The National Association of Funeral Directors, as it has been known since 1935, is one of a number of organizations that has appeared over the last three hundred years to represent those responsible for managing the disposal of the dead. The first such institution The Upholders Company emerged in the early eighteenth century and was closely followed by The United Company of Undertakers. However, the need for a national organization became apparent during the nineteenth century. This history traces the events leading up to the founding of the British Undertakers' Association.



Background

The nineteenth century was a period of considerable development in respect of matters concerning disposal of the dead. During the 1830s the proprietary cemeteries severed the monopoly that the Established church possessed over burial provision whilst legislation to regulate burial grounds, the registration of death, the work of the coroner, exhumation and the bequeathal of bodies for dissection had also been introduced. Whilst the mid-1880s saw the emergence of cremation there was much concern over premature burial and inadequacies in death certification. Furthermore, there was increasing pressure to reform the manner in which funerals were carried out.



The growth of the undertaking trade occurred in parallel with these developments, a fact largely attributable to the population expansion especially in urban areas. There were attempts by members of the trade to establish a collective voice for the industry in 1870 and again twenty years later, but with no regulation, the alleged mismanagement of burial club funds and the social resistance to anything less than ostentatious funeral display, the attempts failed.

However, around 1894, a group of London undertakers rallied together as a result of the need to defend twelve members of the trade against a libel action brought about by a coroner's officer. By 1898 meetings were taking place on a semi-regular basis, and in July a gathering was held to formally establish The British Institute of Undertakers.

The British Institute of Undertakers (BIU)

Information about the formation of the BIU is limited. Despite the appointment of a chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, treasurer, trustees and members of the council the BIU was without a president and vice-president. There was, however, modest enthusiasm and at a meeting in October 1898 a paper was read on the future of the Institute. The speaker was a Marylebone undertaker who would play an important part in the organizational development of the industry until his death in 1933: Henry Sherry. He spoke of the need for an association which '...should watch over the interests of the trade, and which...would earn the respect of municipal and governing bodies'. The issue of registration of undertakers was discussed at this meeting before a motion resolved to the effect, 'That the BIU do all in its power to petition or otherwise to get parliament to make some form of compulsory registration.' Present at the meeting were a number of undertakers whose identities can still be found in the capital: Walter Uden, H Nodes, FA Albin and Henry Kellaway.



During 1899, Henry Smith of Battersea was elected president of the Institute. At the annual general meeting in August it was noted that the Institute's council had met 23 times in the past year. But despite claiming to be '...recognised as the central authority of the undertaking profession' it had achieved little.

Dialogue had been commenced with undertakers in Leeds and Liverpool to form branch associations and, again, Henry Sherry spoke of the future for the BIU while looking to the rise of undertaking associations in America as the model for gaining recognition. At a meeting in November he urged members to '...follow their cousins across the water....organize, educate, legislate.' He also believed that professional development would come through advocating sanitary practices. The Institute did have another dimension as in July 1899 many members enjoyed an outing by train to Henley.

At the beginning of 1900 a BIU conference was planned to take place in Birmingham, but by July this had been postponed; it would appear that the Institute was floundering. The comment was made: 'It is a lamentable fact that those who have been endeavouring to make non-MBIU's believe that a mighty power was rising up among them should have been confronted by such humiliating failure. We had thought that long ere this, according to its own gospel, that the BIU would have reconciled the trade unto itself. But it had not proved to be, and even those of its rank and file seem to be either lagging or falling out.' Skirmishes with the editor of *The Undertakers' Journal* and Henry Sherry about criticisms of inactivity detracted from identifying what the BIU was achieving. Despite a restricting being proposed, by December 1900 it had been shelved.

In parallel with this decline, an important development occurred and it would be the success of this venture which would herald the emergence of a new organization. The visit to London by Professor Charles Renouard of New York to run a free course of 'Lectures and Demonstrations of Embalming' during August caught the interest of many undertakers. Attended by representatives from most of the well-known London firms this event was described as a 'phenomenal success' and a further course was held in December led by Professor Felix A Sullivan. Through recognition of its sanitary benefits and by giving undertakers technical skills, embalming provided a strong basis for collaboration. With Professor

Renouard's encouragement the opportunity to unite was fostered. A meeting of embalmers was called and in November 1900 the British Embalmers' Society was formed, with Henry Sherry as the chairman.

The British Embalmers' Society (BES)

With a primary objective to '...encourage the practice of modern embalming, sanitation and care of the dead in the British Isles' membership of The BES was through examination; the letters MBES could be appended behind a member's name. Throughout the remainder of 1900 and 1901 Professor Sullivan ran embalming classes in cities in the UK; this was the most pro-active way of recruiting members into the BES and a branch was formed in Manchester. Mid-way through 1901 it was reported that the Society had unsuccessfully attempted to get a Board of Trade licence; there was a second attempt in 1903 with a similar outcome. During 1903 national meetings were held, but it was noted that instruction classes delivered by Professor Sullivan had ceased; it was up to the BES to maintain the mantle of embalming education.

While the BES was expanding, however, the BIU appeared to be inactive. By March 1902, Henry Sherry had described the Institute as having 'fallen asleep' and wished that The BES '...would extend its sphere of labour to a fostering of the funeral interest of the profession.' Again, he restated the need for a cohesive voice - 'That there is to-day as great, if not a greater need for unity in the undertaking trade, no one who reasonably reviews the existing conditions can deny. When one thinks of such matters as...so-called 'Funeral Reform';...'Premature Burial';...the coroner's officer;...that clerical adversary, the cemetery chaplain...the all too officious cemetery official, one is at once convinced of the need of unity...' Furthermore, commission payments for burials in parochial cemeteries had been stopped and a coroner in south London had actively prevented bodies being kept on undertaker's premises as he believed them to be '...insanitary and unfit for reception of the dead...'. The Government's Commission on Death Certification was also meeting at this time; undertakers believed that they should have an input but the absence of a unified voice impeded this. Nevertheless, in 1904 the BES passed a resolution to organize a deputation to the Prime Minister. At this time there were an estimated 10,000 undertakers in the UK.

When interviewed about the BIU in March 1904, Henry Sherry finally admitted, 'That body has gone to sleep, but should wake up, if it only for the purpose of picking up the scattered threads, and completing the making of that cord which was intended to bind together all the Undertakers of this kingdom in one common organization.' He noted the strength of the northern association and thought that with the BES a national body could be achieved.

Local Funeral Furnishers' Associations

Early in 1903 the North of England Funeral Undertakers' Association was formed in Manchester. Its president was Joseph Chapleo with James Broome as the secretary. Membership stood at 25, which had increased to 40 by January the following year. An interview with James Broome revealed that the objectives of the Association were to protect the interests of undertakers, rectifying grievances and increase the efficiency of members through ensuring they receive '...some personal benefit...by being enlightened on trade topics.' A benevolent fund was also to be established.

The success enjoyed in the north of England clearly enthused undertakers in London. In March 1904 a gathering presided over by James Hurry formed the Metropolitan Funeral Furnishers' Association. Its objective was, 'To establish in the Metropolitan area an association open to master undertakers and funeral carriage proprietors, monumental masons and members of allied trades, for the purpose of improving the conditions of the trade; to watch municipal, hospital, cemetery, local and similar authorities in the interest of the trade.' At a well-attended meeting two months later, William Knox was elected president, James Hurry as vice-chairman and Henry Kellaway as secretary. One of the motions advanced was the adoption of a minimum charge for funerals.

Joseph Chapleo was heartened at this development and wrote, 'I marvel with you at the apathy and indifference that has hitherto been shown with you in the interests of the undertaking trade. I sincerely hope, now that our London friends have put their shoulder to the wheel, that they will not rest contented until they have made one of the strongest trade associations in the United Kingdom.'

In July the North of England Funeral Undertakers' Association announced that an 'Undertakers' Convention and Funeral Trades Exhibition' would be held in September at the Co-operative Hall in Manchester. Suppliers of coffins, furnishings, linings, memorial cards, trestles and artificial wreaths signed up to exhibit alongside carriage builders, suppliers of embalming fluids and instrument and sundry manufacturers. Many undertakers, like George Meredith of Stockport, believed that the convention would lead to the trade uniting. Just prior to the Manchester Convention, it was announced that a Liverpool Association had been formed with Elliot Waugh as president and Charles Porter as the secretary.

The leading presentation at the convention which captured the attention of the assembled was given by Henry Sherry and entitled 'The need of a National Association of Undertakers.' He analysed the phase '...elevation of our status...' by suggesting that the progress made by American colleagues be a model to follow. He also advocated the need for legislation to licence qualified undertakers.

Following the first trade exhibition, manufacturers hailed the event as a success. Ingall, Parsons, Clive & Co had '...no hesitation in pronouncing the exhibition a complete success' and said the idea should be repeated. James Broome asked the pertinent question, 'What of the future...?' Henry Sherry proposed that the BES annual meeting in May 1905 be arranged with the Funeral Furnishers' Association and a convention also be held. In the meantime, the existing associations – London, Liverpool, Hull and the North of England - continued to meet regularly.

The last contribution to the debate was a paper delivered to the Liverpool Association in November by Charles Porter who spoke of 'The Advantages of Association.' Quoting from scripture, the poet Pope, Shakespeare and Aurelius, Porter expressed a realistic objective - '*Rivalry there must be. Competition there must be*; but where the Association will help is, not in restricting the rights of any individual member, but in adopting safeguards and preventatives of those things which are really and truly injurious to the best interests of the business in general, and of each individual member in particular.'

The British Undertakers' Association (BUA)

With much discussion about a London convention, it was observed that, '...one thing is certain: the undertakers of Great Britain never had such a pregnant chance before them as they have today. The ball is at their feet...We know they want to raise the status of the trade and to rid it of many evils and anomalies....We see the result in the associations that are springing up on every side. And the movement is spreading. During 1904 the progress has been enormous. Who shall say what it will be in the current year?'

In March 1905 the proposal of a London convention was the main item on the agenda of the London Funeral Furnishers' Association meeting. Manufacturers expressed support, as did the BES. Furthermore, members of the London Association had agreed to underwrite the cost of the convention. James Broome urged discussion on the formation of a National Association of Funeral Furnishers immediately after the London convention; Henry Sherry similarly outlined a possible constitution of a National Union of Associated Undertakers. He stated that one of the first tasks for the national organization would be to watch the Bill of 'The Society of Prevention of Premature Burial' and to ensure that undertaker's interests were looked after. By this time there were eight undertakers' associations and four branches of the BES.

With the formation of committees to deal with the exhibition, the convention and entertainment, the date for event was announced as the 7-9 June; the venue would be the Great Hall of the Northampton Institute in Clerkenwell. In parallel with the developments, Henry Sherry proposed winding up the BIU.

Finally, at 2pm on Wednesday 7 June 1905, and after prayers by the Chaplain of Kensal Green Cemetery, William Knox called upon James T Slater to open the Exhibition and Convention. Mr Slater of Bedford, Sons & Slater coffin manufacturers of Farringdon Street was one of the oldest undertakers in London, having commenced his apprenticeship in 1841 with a firm in Fetter Lane. A tour of the 33 exhibitors' stands then followed. In the evening Charles Porter from Liverpool read a paper on 'How to Form a Funeral Furnishers' Association' in which he spoke of the role of officials, committees, the administration, objectives, rules, regulations and bye-laws.

The following evening two papers were given. The first, entitled 'The Hygiene of the Death Chamber' by Dr A Wynter Blyth, while in the second Henry Sherry outlined his vision of 'A National Organization of Undertakers.' He suggested a name (the British Undertakers' Association) and its possible objectives; he also proposed an annual convention, the publication of a yearbook, and the formation of a legislative or parliamentary sub-committee. The resolution of the convention was overwhelmingly to form a national association. On the Friday evening a banquet was held at the Holborn Restaurant. But there was still much work ahead.

At a meeting of the London Funeral Furnishers' Association the following month it was revealed that the exhibition had made a modest surplus; this would be used as a basis for the national benevolent fund. Letters extolling the success of the exhibition were read; those from the secretaries of the Liverpool and Preston Associations urged a meeting to discuss a national organization.

On 27 July, Thomas Ellithorn of Preston called a meeting at the Midland Institute in Birmingham to discuss the formation of a national association. Many attended, but the debate that followed largely concerned funeral pricing; caution was, however, voiced at letting the association solely focus on raising prices. Later the same evening delegates from the local associations met at the Midland Hotel to draw up the constitution and bye-laws of a national association.



With Henry Sherry voted to take the chair, the meeting dealt with a number of matters; the most important was the name of the organization. Four names were tabled: the British Undertakers' Alliance, the National Federation of Undertakers, the National Institute of Undertakers, and the National Association of Undertakers. Mr Hurry was asked the name of the 'American Central Organization' to which he replied: 'National Association of Funeral Directors.'

Debate around the words 'British', 'National' and 'Federation' finally concluded with the adoption of the British Undertakers' Association. The objectives of the Association were also discussed.

Not all business was settled and at a meeting on 27 October the collective name for local associations was decided upon; these were to become 'centres', such as the 'Manchester Centre of the BUA'. Objectives were settled at this meeting. The first nine were:

1. To unite all existing local undertakers' Associations, and to promote the formation of other branches in the different parts of the British Isles.
2. To raise the tone and status of the calling and to promote the general education of its members in trade matters.
3. To watch over legislative measure which may affect or tend to affect, the best interests of members of the Association.
4. To advise associated branches in matters of local difficulty.
5. To work for and endeavour to obtain, registration, so as to put the calling on the basis of a profession.
6. To organize conventions, at which propositions for the advancement of the interests of undertakers may be brought forward and discussed.
7. To aid all influences calculated to increase the usefulness and improve the recognition and the utility of undertaking as a profession, and to incorporate reforms wherever necessary.
8. To arrange for lectures on educational subjects for the benefit of various branches.
9. The Association shall consist of all affiliated Associations, which shall be represented by delegates.

The remaining objects were essentially 'rules' and largely concerned the administration of the Association. Henry Sherry was elected as first president of Association with John Bye of Manchester as vice-president, James Broome as honorary secretary and Thomas Ellithorn as treasurer. In December two further local associations, Oldham and Blackburn, were formed. Finally, the BIU was dissolved and funds of just over £27 were transferred to the London Funeral Furnishers' Association's Benevolent Fund.

Responsibility for steering the fledgling BUA through its first year and indeed beyond became the task ahead for Henry Sherry and his colleagues. It was admirably fulfilled as, over the next few years, further local associations were formed, joint meetings were held with the BES and a Code of Ethics devised in 1908. With this progress came an increase in membership.

Henry Sherry died in December 1933. Under a heading 'Father of The British Undertakers' Association' his obituary paid tribute to this extraordinary leader and stalwart of funeral service:

'When the history of the industry comes to be written the name of Henry A Sherry will stand out as a pioneer in the organizations that were started and the eventual inauguration and building up on the present British Undertakers' Association.'

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