

COFFIN MAKING in the 1930s: A Unique Insight

A coffin board being lifted up to the workshop. ▲

Although many archive images exist of the funeral director directing funerals, few can be located that depict 'behind the scenes' activities. Recently, however, a set of photographs came to light depicting the task of coffin construction.

Dating from 1937, they show staff working in the premises of TH Ebbutt in Croydon. It's not known why they were taken, although it could have been for publicity reasons - as a new branch was opened during that year. Regardless of the circumstances, they provide a fascinating insight into a rarely captured aspect of the funeral director's work.

The firm John Ebbutt's was established as a carpenter and joiner in Orpington, Kent around 1712. By the mid-nineteenth century, the business was trading in Croydon as a builder, joiner and undertaker. Diversification followed, with Charles Ebbutt providing monumental masonry while HD Ebbutt managed the funerals. The company later became Thomas Ebbutt, then TH Ebbutt and the head office was at 89 High Street, in Croydon - with funeral branches opening over the years at Purley, Coulson, Selsdon, West Wickham and Wallington.

In 1937, when these photos were taken, the records show that Ebbutt's managed over 650 funerals. The firm had a wide range of oak and elm coffins that could be offered to clients. The type and thickness of the wood along with the style of furnishings, such as handles and nameplate, would have been the key distinguishing factors reflected in the cost of the funeral.

The firm had different names for their coffins with many derived from towns in north Surrey or London. The burial range included the Ewell, Kingswood and Tadworth, while those for cremation, such as the Woking and the Ilford, were linked to locations with crematoria (dating from 1885, Woking Crematorium was the first to open in the UK, while Ilford in 1904 was the second in London).

For some funerals a 'shell' would be constructed; this was an inner coffin in which the deceased would be



▲ Sawing the boards into rectangular planks. The boards would then be cut into the base, lid, sides and end pieces. The sides would then be kerfed to enable bending of the shoulders to give the coffin its distinctive shape. Kerfing would be achieved by cutting five or six grooves into the wood.

placed before being lifted into a more elaborate outer coffin complete with external furnishings such as handles and a nameplate. The use of a shell inside an outer coffin would almost exclusively have been used for burial rather than cremation.

The opening of Croydon Crematorium by the local council, in May 1937, coincided with these images being taken. Although the national preference for cremation was very modest (only 2.4% of deaths in Great Britain were followed by cremation in 1937), Ebbutt's were at the forefront of promoting this alternative to burial by taking a whole page advertisement in *Ward's Croydon Directory*. The text stated:

"On such an important matter as Cremation it is helpful to consult a firm of Undertakers whose experience can prove to be a real aid. The opening of the Croydon Cremation, which was erected by the Croydon Corporation, has resulted in many enquiries being made concerning Cremation, and Messrs. Thomas Ebbutt & Sons have



◀ Oak and elm coffin boards stored under cover for seasoning and drying. Strips of wood (or 'skids') would be placed between the boards to allow for ventilation.



▲ Planing the boards. Such equipment was marketed to funeral directors in the early part of the twentieth century, although by the 1930s the hand-held Skilsaw and other electrical items such as a planer would have been available.



▲ Securing a side panel to the base of the coffin.

made this service a special study. Their knowledge and guidance is at the disposal of all requiring to make use of this service, whether Cremation is contemplated in Croydon or in any part of the Country.”

Not only did they provide a range of coffins suitable for cremation, but wooden ashes caskets were also constructed.

During the twentieth century members of the Ebbutt family were very active in national and regional affairs of the National Association of Funeral Directors. RA Ebbutt was National President between 1951-52, while Thomas Hands Ebbutt occupied this position for two years from 1966. Both were twice President of the London Association of Funeral Directors.

TH Ebbutt merged with Ashton Funeral Service of Clapham, in July 1966, to become Ashton Ebbutt Holdings. It was later sold to Hodgson Holdings and it now part of Dignity PLC.

Brian Parsons is the author of *The Undertaker at Work: 1900-1950* (www.brianparsons.org.uk)

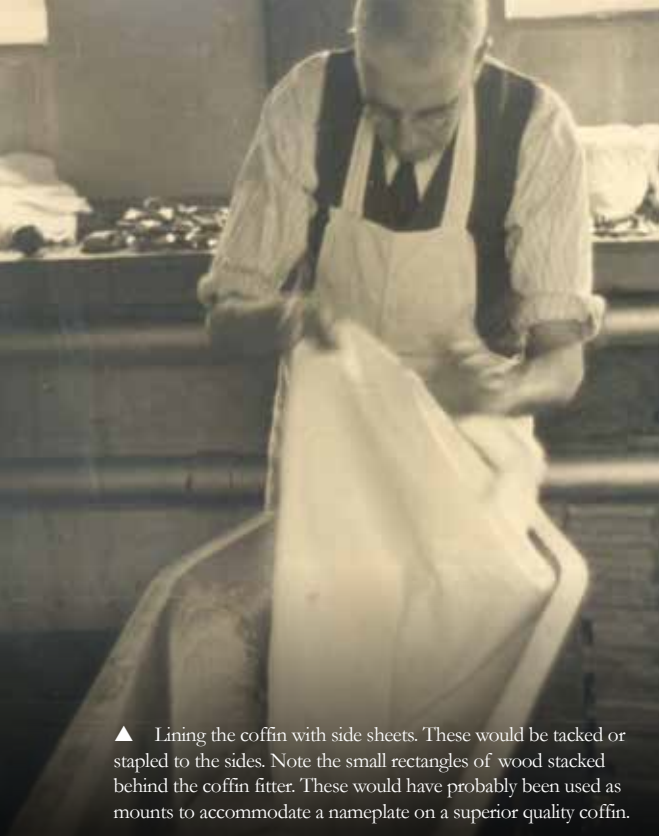
Planing the side of the coffin. ▼



▲ Spray varnishing the coffin. Using such technology in 1937 would have been considered very modern.



▲ Drilling a hole into the rim of the coffin to enable the lid to be secured. According to the type of coffin either two or three pairs of holes would be drilled. By this stage in the construction the coffin would have been pitched or sealed with hot wax to prevent any leakage from the deceased.



1907. PRICE OF COFFINS TO THE TRADE.

Upon receipt of this List please destroy any previous one.

		COST PRICE		REMARKS	PRICE	REMARKS
		£	s			
UNFINISHED	JOHN BROS.			Coffin for Child, 11 months old, under 4 years old, natural wood, stained, finished in black, lid decorated with silver, lined with natural veneers	0	13 6
	FAIRBANKS			As above, but with silver lining	0	15 0
	CHERRILL			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, moulded, lined and stained as Fairbank	0	1 6
UNFINISHED	SMILEY			For every size in size, chest one year	0	1 6
	WHITELY & CO.			For Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, moulded for lining	1	12 0
	POWERS			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, moulded for lining	2	5 0
ELDER	WOODCOCK			Polished Oak Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, moulded for lining, lined with natural veneers	2	5 0
	GOUGHMAN			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, moulded for lining, lined with natural veneers	1	10 3
	RUTFIELD			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, lined with natural veneers	2	9 0
VARNISHED	FAIRBANKS			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, lined with natural veneers	2	10 0
	TATFORTH			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, lined with natural veneers	2	10 0
	GAYTOR			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, lined with natural veneers	2	10 0
UNFINISHED	MURRAY			Chest finished as above	3	0 0
	HOOLEY			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, lined with natural veneers	2	10 0
	CHIFFIN			Chest finished as above	3	0 0
POLISHED OAK	CHIFFIN			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, lined with natural veneers	2	10 0
	CHIFFIN			Chest finished as above	3	0 0
	CHIFFIN			Polished Elm Coffin, 6 plinth and cap, lined with natural veneers	2	10 0
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TH Ebbutt's advertisement in *Ward's Croydon Directory*, 1937. Not the date of establishment. ▼

