

FLEXIBLE FLEETS

MEET THE NEEDS OF MODERN FUNERALS

This month, *Funeral Director Monthly* talks to some of the key NAFD funeral fleet suppliers to find out what 2018 has in store in terms of new vehicle releases, design and service innovations, as well as fleets for both hire and purchase, and how the profession can meet the changing demands placed on fleet owners when it comes to clean air regulations.

WILCOX GOES FROM DOOR-TO-DOOR TO DIGITAL

Paul Wilcox, Chief Executive of Wilcox Limousines, looks back at how his father built the firm and how his sales technique compares to today's innovative new approaches, as the firm celebrates its 70th year in business with attractive, new, contract hire/leasing options available.

Paul says: "My Father, Bill Wilcox, started Wilcox Limousines in 1958, going door-to-door, funeral director to funeral director, selling the cars – after all they speak for themselves!

"However, in recent years, we have developed several new innovative ways for both showcasing our wonderful vehicles and how we sell them.

"Firstly, was the launch of the first ever 'video brochure' of our new Ford Tourneo Hearsette® - we launched the new vehicle via our website, social media, trade magazines such as the FDM and email marketing. This was an outstanding success; due to people being able to see the functionality of the vehicle, by video, we were able to successfully launch and sell the vehicle all online – a true breakthrough using modern technology at its best!

"Our other recent innovation has been to offer all our new vehicles on 'contract hire/leasing' – until recently we offered outright purchases, straight financing and finance options, similar to a PCP.

"The benefits of contract hire/leasing is that the client firm is not using its own money, but that of the contract hire company. There are other benefits too. Contract hire includes maintenance, leasing does not. This has, of course, always been available from leasing companies; however, for various reasons, the terms have not been competitive enough for financially-intelligent funeral directors to take this route."

The Wilcox Jaguar XJ Aluminium Hearse



The Ford Tourneo Hearsette®



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IS IT TIME TO SWITCH ON TO ELECTRIC HEARSEs?

From 2040, the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans will be banned in the UK. If that seems like a long way off, news that Oxford and London are introducing zero/ultra-low emission zones - where all but the most recent diesels and electric-powered vehicles will either be banned, or will have pay to enter progressively larger areas of the centre of the city – suggests that the imperative to consider alternative forms of vehicle power may be closer at hand.

With all major UK cities breaching the legal limits on air quality and UK air pollution-related deaths reaching 40,000 per year, it's likely that most UK cities will follow Oxford and London's lead in some way.

Recent years has seen massive investment into public charging points, as well as government subsidies to encourage electric vehicle purchase. Until recently though, battery life has held back many commercial or long distance personal users. However, technological improvements also mean that electric vehicles are now comfortably capable of performing to the level required by most funeral firms and there's perhaps never been a better time for businesses to consider adding an electric vehicle to their fleet. *Funeral Director Monthly* spoke to Coleman Milne and Brahms Electric Hearses about their work to develop fully electric and hybrid fleets for the funeral profession.

Steven Cousins, of Brahms Electric Vehicles, believes that this year will be a tipping point for the profession. As he puts it: "2018 is the year to get to grips with the big issues that the arrival of electric vehicles raises in our industry."

For Steven, electric hearses are not just about delivering the important environmental benefits, there are also broader cultural benefits. A recent survey of users of their hearses showed that families appreciated not only the opportunity to have a 'greener' final journey for their loved one, but that the hearses were also more intimate and less formal which was appreciated by some families. Brahms has called this the 'gentle' funeral solution.

He said: "At Brahms, we aim to help this transformation of the industry by keeping costs as low as possible so that electric hearses are truly affordable. Brahms hearses are roughly half the price of conventional diesel and petrol vehicles. Lowering costs is also important to that other strand of concern in the industry, that of the rising prices of funerals, and this is where we can help both on running costs as well as purchase price."

"We are also launching a wide range of new accessories for 2018, including the ability to carry more flowers, to carry puts and a bier under the lengthy 2.54m coffin deck. New fitments allow a combined hearse and removal vehicle option too."

Also new for 2018 is a service which puts bereaved people in contact with the nearest funeral director offering an electric hearse or, for funeral directors, a search facility to help them hire one in when required.

Coleman Milne has also been exploring the potential of electrical technology for a while now. Graham Clow, Sales Manager at Coleman Milne, confirms that they have done some preliminary work with a view to converting the new Mercedes E Class, which is available as a petrol/hybrid model, into a funeral vehicle.

"We do believe that we could convert the new Mercedes E 213 Petrol/Hybrid into a hearse and, yes, I mean a proper hearse. It may well need to have some slight tweaks to ensure that the weight issues are at a safe operating level, but we think that we could produce a Classic Style Mercedes Hearse using our beautiful new 213 design.

"It would need to be a single deck, which means no underdeck coffin storage, although there would be room for the essential trestles and folding trolley. The weight limits would allow for a single bearer seat on the near-side, but not on the off-side. Instead, the off-side rear door



The striking Mercedes E Class from Coleman Milne

would access a small storage area. The front driver and passenger seats would afford all the usual luxury of the Mercedes E 213, with heated leather seats, Sat-nav, etc."

"Due to the increased weight of the base vehicle we don't believe it could be converted into a limousine at this time," adds Graham. "There will probably need to be a further step forward in battery technology or the electric drive motors to allow sufficient weight capacity for the conversion and the increased passenger loading of a limousine.

"The complexity of modern cars will always throw up new challenges, and the new Mercedes is no exception. As we come to terms with these technologies we are offered up a further step in to the future. Coleman Milne firmly believes that this could offer a solution to those operating in a big city who want to be seen as having class-leading green credentials.

"As with all major steps into the future, this will come at a premium. We would expect an on-the-road price of around £140,000, although this is substantially below the reputed £225,000 for a Low Line European converted offering. If you are interested in the potential of a proper hybrid hearse, please contact Graham Clow at Coleman Milne. We can make it work together."

Fuel efficiency across all models remains important to Coleman Milne although, for NAFD members looking for a build slot for 2018, they will need to move fast. Graham adds: "If you are happy to have the best looking, most fuel-efficient vehicles, with class leading Euro 6 emissions, you can still have the new Mercedes E Class hearse or limousine from Coleman Milne at the sector-leading price, but be aware that our build slots are going fast."



The loss of a cyclist. Brahms electric hearse and cyclist's coffin. Photo courtesy of Full Circle Funerals, Otley.

PERSONALISED FUNERALS HELP BUILD VEHICLE HIRE MARKET



Part of the A. W. Lymn Phantom VII fleet

A funeral vehicle fleet is a significant investment for many NAFD members, and one that is central to the service they offer to families. However, the level of investment required is not possible for all funeral firms and, with clients increasingly requesting highly personalised funerals with specific types of vehicles, there is often a request for a particular type of vehicle, leaving even the largest fleet operator in need of a helping hand too. As a consequence, there is a thriving vehicle hire sector for the profession.

Funeral Director Monthly spoke to three firms, Green's Carriage Masters, A.W. Lymn The Family Funeral Service and Bramley's Independent Funeral directors of Goldthorpe, all offering a very distinct service to funeral directors.

Four years ago, A. W. Lymn The Family Funeral Service, based in Nottingham, could boast the only Rolls-Royce Phantom VII hearse available to hire in the world. This is no longer true as, since 2017, they have added three new Phantom VIII hearses to the fleet, all of which are available for hire.

A. W. Lymn, which is still owned and managed by the Lymn Rose family, is by no means content with four of these hearses, which

are custom built with bespoke alterations by Italian company Biemme Special Cars, and Group CEO Nigel Lymn Rose and Managing Director Matthew Lymn Rose are hoping to collect a fifth hearse later this month.

Matthew said: "We are always looking for new vehicles to improve our already extensive fleet of Rolls-Royce Phantom VII Luxury limousines, vintage Rolls-Royces and London Routemaster Bus.

"When I looked at the Rolls-Royce, which is currently being converted, it was clear that it would not be suitable as a funeral passenger vehicle due to the large champagne cooler in the back middle seat. It would, however, make an excellent chassis for a hearse. Once we collected the vehicle, the previous owner's name on the log book was familiar and explained the cooler! Without giving too much away, the car certainly has the 'X Factor'."

The hearses are all finished in silver with a front interior of black leather, piano black veneers and matching black carpets. The coffin compartment showcases beautifully polished stainless steel, crystal glass, fine leather and illuminated highlighting which gives a modern feel to each vehicle.



Green's new fleet of Jaguars



The distinctive 'Wavy Jack' hearse from Green's Carriage Masters

The practical design means each hearse can accommodate any size coffin or casket, including a large spray of flowers, on a low level deck. The vehicles feature an automated rear door and coffin platform that opens and closes silently, a portable microphone which is part of a highly sophisticated sound system, and the ability to allow funeral services and music to be amplified in any outdoor location.

Any of A W Lymn's hearses, along with 19 identical Roll-Royce Phantom VII Luxury limousines, are available to hire anywhere in the country.

New to the hire market is Rainbow Funerals, operated by Bramley's Independent Funeral Directors, which offers a distinctive rainbow-coloured hearse.

Funeral Director Matthew Fullerton says: "Whilst working in the funeral industry, over the past six years I have noticed a gradual shift. Families are moving away from the all-black funeral towards a more colourful 'celebration of life' style of send-off. Funerals we arrange nowadays seem to focus more on the life and memories of the deceased person, rather than mourning the loss and saying prayers for eternal life.

"Funerals are becoming more colourful occasions too. We see many families dressing in their loved one's favourite colour, as opposed to head-to-toe in black.

"Our main priority as funeral directors is to carry out the wishes of a family perfectly. Everyone likes to have choice, and that's why we created Rainbow Funerals. The business was launched in June 2017 and, since then, our rainbow hearse has been seen on a number of services in our part of south Yorkshire.

"The response has been overwhelmingly positive. 'WOW', 'that's amazing' and 'isn't that beautiful' are the comments we hear the most as we arrive at a family's house in the rainbow hearse. One family said to us following the funeral of their mum: 'The rainbow hearse was absolutely the only way she would've wanted to go.'

"With such positive feedback, and so much interest already, it made sense to us to offer the rainbow hearse for hire to other funeral directors across the UK so that more families can give their loved one a unique and colourful send off. We aim to make the dark days brighter and, whilst being colourful and bright, we also provide a service that remains respectful and dignified, with well trained and courteous drivers."

Matthew concludes: "Our aim is to provide something different for those who lived a colourful life. A unique service for those who want a brighter alternative to the traditional black hearse. Our goal for 2018 is to expand our business and provide our service to more families to enable them to give their loved one a funeral fitting of their character."



The distinctive Rainbow Funerals hearse

Green's Carriage Masters, based in London and the South-East, supports the UK funeral profession with a wide range of current and alternative fleets with professional staff.

The family-owned business offers a wide range of vehicles, including Jaguars, Daimlers and Mercedes, fleets in black, white or silver, horse-drawn carriages, vehicles with disabled access and many more. The firm recently welcomed a new Jaguar XJ hearse and three limousines into the Green's portfolio, which are already proving hugely popular.

But it is, perhaps, for their more unusual vehicles that Green's is best known. Explains Martin Green: "We reacted to industry requests to supply silver and white fleets to accommodate a public demand and, cheekily, we have added a 'hot pink' hearse, leopard print hearse, our lovely 'wavy jack' hearse and a Harley Davidson bike too.

"Green's believes in providing the whole package. We dispatch complete crews with vehicles in London, the Home Counties and beyond! We can boast a fleet of over 60 vehicles and maintain these to the highest standard. Our pallbearers and conductors are immaculately uniformed and totally professional. Support vehicles include a first-call ambulance (with a 24-hour 2-man crew, and cold room storage) and a black disability vehicle for wheelchair-bound mourners.

"We hope funeral arrangers will use our current photography on the website to share with their clients during the planning stages. We welcome new ideas for alternative fleets and concepts, and try to be at the forefront of these ourselves by maintaining a very close relationship with our trade clients. We believe that, whilst keeping up with ever-changing demand and trends within the industry, our USP is to have total allegiance to the funeral trade."

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

GREEN'S CARRIAGE MASTERS

www.greenscarriages.co.uk
greenscarriages@aol.com
 020 8695 9500

RAINBOW FUNERALS

www.Rainbowfunerals.co.uk
 01709259416 or 07818707175

A. W. LYMN

www.lymn.co.uk
opsmanager@lymn.co.uk
 0115 941 4101 extension 131

WILCOX LIMOUSINES

www.limousines.co.uk
 01753 480 600
Enquiries@wilcox.uk

COLEMAN MILNE

www.coleman-milne.co.uk
 01942 815600
info@coleman-milne.co.uk

BRAHMS ELECTRIC VEHICLES

www.brahmselectricvehicles.co.uk
 01536 384261
Electric@BrahmsElectricVehicles.co.uk