

GREEN FUNERALS

Julian Atkinson of JC Atkinson, and Barry Floyd of Golden Leaves Funeral Plans, reflect on some of the issues and considerations relating to environmentally-friendly funerals.

Opinion

How green are coffin choices for cremations?

By Julian M Atkinson - JC Atkinson

A journalist writing a column on green funerals recently asked me what was the best coffin to use. He was slightly taken aback when I said that there wasn't much between them all! The conversation continued as I qualified my answer and the narrative contained some of the following.

START BY DEFINING 'GREEN'

The journalist responded: "eco-friendly, kinder to the environment." We agreed that this was a good place to start. I explained that I personally didn't like to use these terms and preferred 'greener' or "more friendly", although It would be better to avoid any such term and be precise with your claim or statement.

I explained how most of the coffins we made and sold shared very similar characteristics and all had a low impact on the environment, the carbon footprint varied but a figure <50kg CO₂e could be stated - a tiny number in comparison to our own lifetime carbon footprint. For example, an average car (Audi A4 BMW 3 series) will emit more CO₂ e on a 200-mile journey than the above.

How can I state this in terms of the environment? It is important to have a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) when considering such matters.

"Life-cycle assessment is a technique to assess environmental impacts associated with all the stages of a product's life from raw material extraction through materials processing, manufacture, distribution, use, repair and maintenance, and disposal or recycling."

Wikipedia

What does the letter 'e' after CO₂ mean? This is to show that it is not literally CO₂, but is used as a gathering unit. All greenhouse gases are considered in an assessment and the figure is expressed in CO₂e

JC Atkinson completed an LCA study on the various types of coffins we sold in 2008, and again in 2019. The changes were minor in the data, but the analysis was of interest to ourselves for product development - as the coffins tested also included different interiors and handle options.

EMISSIONS DURING THE CREMATION PROCESS

JC Atkinson further wanted to understand how our coffins behaved in the cremation process. As part of the 2019 review, we studied the cremation process in detail.

JC Atkinson has always understood that a coffin acts a secondary fuel. Many cremator operators have told us that a cremation with a wood coffin would use less gas at the end of the week than at the beginning. To consider this scientifically, we asked Giraffe Innovation to research and correctly quantify the LCA values for the different types of coffins we sell for cremation. I explained to the journalist how variations existed in the results, which were related to many different factors such as the type of coffin, the gender and weight of the person, the day of week* and time of day.

The journalist asked for the cremation emissions including Nitrous Oxide (NOX). I stated how NOX was not an emission that was currently required to be monitored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), but that the amounts were very small and most NOX came from the body, not the coffin.

Based upon a number of cremations on our Giraffe Innovation results and other global research, worst case NOX output per cremation was 1.56kg, best case 0.8kg. The breakdown between the components was as follows, worst case. The coffin worst case was fitted with Cremfilm, plastic handles and taffeta lining, the removal of these components lowered the cremation emissions, including NOX.

- Gas: 0.27kg - 17%
- Coffin: 0.36kg - 23%
- Body: 0.93kg - 60%

An amount of 1.56kg NOX is equivalent to driving a medium-sized (Audi A4 or BMW series 3) diesel car 525 miles or a petrol car 2,557 miles (DEFRA 2019 carbon reporting).

With an average of 0.8kgNOX, this would be equivalent to driving a medium sized (Audi A4 or BMW series 3) diesel car 270 miles or a petrol car 1,311 miles.

Best case includes the use of a solid wood coffin, wood handles and no plastic inside the coffin. The Gas emissions were also lower due to its contribution as a secondary fuel, the burning of the body in the cremation process.

WHAT WOULD I PERSONALLY RECOMMEND?

I described how the coffin not only carried out a role in safely containing and presenting the deceased person, but also could be chosen by a family for its looks or design, what it was made of, where it was made, how it was made and whether it could be personalised with names, poems, pictures or passions.

I described how Oasis Willow supported a community in Bangladesh and how a wool coffin made use of wool from local farms. Irish families likes to have an "Irish coffin" design as they were often repatriated to Ireland for burial, given that burial is more popular than cremation there. I recalled the answer I gave, in 2003, when Johnny Kennedy visited

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BASED UPON
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ON OUR
GIRAFFE
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WORST
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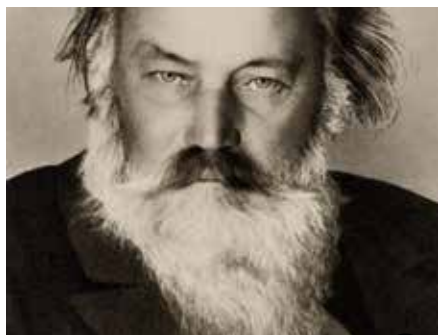
our factory to film his preparation for death. On our advice, he had a solid pine coffin with a baked bean can, whisky bottle and cigar symbols routed on the coffin sides and lid. The resulting programme, *The Boy whose Skin Fell Off*, became a BAFTA winning film and renowned documentary.

The journalist asked me how you could have a 'greener funeral' if it was not the coffin? I affirmed that it was the coffin, as it was also symbolic. A person caring for the environment may choose a hand-made willow woven coffin because, in comparison to a traditional manufactured and polished coffin, it looked softer and more natural. Desire was, therefore, satisfied on an emotional need - but, don't be mistaken, as they haven't saved the planet as the LCA CO2e numbers are very similar for all types.

Finally, we discussed the funeral and the funeral director's role in guiding choices. An arranger's role is just that - and could include correct knowledge about the environmental impact of the various funeral activities and it would do so with care to ensure 'green' claims are correctly represented.

So, for me, what I would choose is our "Brighton", a solid pine coffin with no plastic interior and wood handles. With regard to the funeral impact on the environment, I would consider the venue's location and ask the mourners to share cars or use public transport. Oh, and definitely leave the diesel car at home!

**Due to the stored latent heat of the furnace brick lining being greater at the end of the day/ week).*



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Are green funeral plans the way forward?

By Barry Floyd - Managing Director, Golden Leaves Funeral Plans

A growing number of businesses are making changes to become more sustainable and thinking about the effect their industry sector is having on the environment. But what about the funeral industry?

“INTRODUCING CUSTOMERS TO ‘GREEN’ PLANS DOESN’T MEAN BUSINESS WILL BE LOST. IF A CUSTOMER REALLY CARES ABOUT THEIR IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT, THEY WILL SHOP AROUND UNTIL THEY FIND SOMETHING SUITABLE, SO IT MAKES GOOD BUSINESS SENSE TO HAVE OPTIONS.”

Sustainability and protecting the environment is a regular news item and, in recent months, the news has been loaded with devastating natural disasters and the young Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg rallying a whole new demographic of followers.

With this worldwide trend towards social consciousness, are people now thinking more carefully about their end-of-life plans and the legacy they want to leave to the next generation? How can the funeral sector tap into this and support customers in choosing ‘greener’ plans?

Golden Leaves Funeral Plans is the first and only UK-wide provider to introduce ‘green’ plans to the market. It is now possible to arrange a ‘green’ funeral in the UK and customers can take comfort in the knowledge that every aspect has been carefully considered to minimise the impact the funeral will have on the environment.

There are a number of factors to consider when considering a ‘green’ funeral and it will all depend on how ‘green’ your customer really wants to go. Making even one ‘green’ decision will make a difference and will make a positive statement of intent to help preserve the world in which we live.

From a business perspective, having ‘green’ plans to offer is a way of showing that the funeral

planning sector is starting to make environmental inroads as each plan sold will contribute to make a significant difference in the long run. It also offers customers something more relatable and will be helping to answer inevitable questions on how they can make their funeral, or that of a loved one, ‘greener’.

A TRULY ‘GREEN’ FUNERAL IS FAR MORE THAN JUST AN ECO COFFIN

The Golden Leaves ‘green’ plans are designed in such a way that they have items within each of them that offset the carbon footprint of a traditional funeral. They use natural biodegradable coffins that have a minimal impact on the environment - whether cremated or buried. Customers can take their ‘green’ funeral a step further too, and opt to leave a natural memorial, plant a tree or donate to conservation projects.

The plans include additional options for eco coffins, carbon rebalancing, woodland conservation and rain forest protection, as well as charitable ecological projects that will provide a community legacy for future generations.

The financial structure and investment vehicle are also fully ‘green’, with the funds held securely within an independently managed Green Trust

which has been specifically selected to invest in education, solar power, renewable energy, etc, all good for the planet and sustainability. Going the full mile, the brochures are produced on fully biodegradable recycled paper with environmentally kind inks.

By pre-buying from this suite of plans, customers are leaving a legacy of care to their families and the environment due to the way the money is being invested.

Introducing customers to ‘green’ plans doesn’t mean business will be lost. If a customer really cares about their impact on the environment, they will shop around until they find something suitable, so it makes good business sense to have options.

Environmentally-friendly plans demonstrate how the nature of a traditional funeral need not undergo dramatic changes to facilitate a ‘greener’ approach. Due to the changing mindset of customers, it is time to start considering how their needs can be met, potentially attract new customers and take some ethical responsibility.

You may also attract a younger generation who are increasingly more open-minded about talking about end-of-life plans and have the protection of the environment at heart.

www.goldenleaves.com

“FUNERAL DIRECTORS HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE IN THE CLIMATE DEBATE. THE GENERATION WE ARE BURYING WERE THE FIRST TO HAVE AIR TRAVEL, CENTRAL HEATING AND WIDE ACCESS TO CARS. THE GENERATION BURYING THEM ARE HAVING TO CHANGE THEIR LIFESTYLES IN RESPONSE.”

– Stephen Cousins, Brahms Electric Hearses

Next month, *Funeral Director Monthly* looks at how fleet manufacturers are responding to the greener funerals debate and the impending launch of Ultra Low Emissions Zones in UK cities.