



Green is the new black

More and more funerals are changing colour from black to green, with increasing numbers of people opting to celebrate the end of life in what they consider to be a more holistic, environmental way.

It's a subject that has been regularly covered in *Funeral Director Monthly*, but what does 2014 hold for the environmentally-conscious funeral?

A new survey by Opinion Matters indicates that more than 40% of UK adults over the age of fifty want to be buried - or have their ashes scattered -

As well as the significant shift away from traditional cemeteries, the research also found that 32% of those surveyed nationally wanted an environmentally-friendly service.

The movement towards natural burials began, and was pioneered, in the UK and has gained significant impetus

ground in the UK was created in 1993, at Carlisle Cemetery, and there are now nearly 300 dedicated natural burial grounds nationwide.

A key consideration is that bodies are not cremated. Instead, people opt for burial within a site serving a conservation purpose and which creates an environment that is not visually definable as a burial ground.

As the *Good Funeral Guide* describes - "It is not the grave that commemorates the life lived, it is the entire site."

One of the other main considerations is the preparation of the body, which should be prepared without chemical preservatives or disinfectants such as embalming fluid as they destroy the microbial decomposers that break the body down.

Features from previous editions of *Funeral Director*

Monthly on issues such as the environmental considerations regarding formaldehyde and the carbon footprint of a funeral are available on the NAFD website within the members-only section.

As readers will know from the *Supply & Demand* feature of this magazine, there are extensive ranges of biodegradable coffins now available - from wood, wool, cardboard, wicker and bamboo, amongst other materials - and, more recently, natural cotton shrouds have become popular amongst people seeking a more natural way too.

In 2014 it is likely we will see a resolution of issues that have arisen surrounding the use of some of these newer types of coffins for cremation, with some crematoria currently refusing to accept certain types of coffins (such as those made from seagrass) due to alleged residue they leave within the cremator.



in the countryside or in a natural woodland setting, rather than opting for a typical graveyard.

in recent years as the wider environmental movement has grown. The first woodland burial

In one particular case at Robin Hood Cemetery and Crematorium in Solihull, a decision was made to ban some eco-coffins. At the time, Gordon Hull, Head of Bereavement Services at Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, informed local funeral firms that caskets made of organic material such as banana leaf, water hyacinth or recycled paper should be barred. He further warned that, if funeral firms did not check the caskets before the service, *"We may be placed in a position whereby we may have to refuse the coffin at the point of entry into the chapel."*

The Funeral Furnishing Manufacturers Association is working with the NAFD and Local Authorities to establish the validity of some of these claims and develop a set of guidelines on the materials suitable and approved for use in the manufacture of coffins designed for cremations.



A burial vault or outer burial container is avoided to ensure that the body has contact with soil. The grave is dug shallow enough to allow microbial activity similar to that found in composting.

With regard to the grave at a 'green' funeral, a burial vault or outer burial container is avoided to ensure that the body has contact with soil. The grave is dug shallow enough to allow microbial activity similar to that found in composting. Natural burials can take place both on private land, even in one's own garden and in any cemetery that will accommodate the vault-free technique.

Just over half of the natural burial sites are run by Local Authorities, the remainder being run by landowners such as farmers, charitable trusts and both commercial and non-profit organisations such as NAFD

member GreenAcres Woodland Burials.

A wide variety of land management techniques, such as sustainable agriculture, restoration ecology, habitat conservation projects and permaculture may also be used to maintain the burial area in perpetuity. Landscaping methods may accelerate or slow down the decomposition rate of bodies, depending on the soil system, and the whole system is aligned in the recognition that the body is an organic entity that can be returned to the land and earth in a more gentle way.

In addition, natural burial sites

usually encourage the area to remain as unspoilt as possible and do not allow headstones or statues, rather encouraging trees and plants to be used to mark someone's passing.

A green funeral may take more planning and thought ahead of time but continues to grow as an affordable and desirable option for many people who want to leave a natural legacy behind after death.

The NAFD Environmental Advisory Group

The NAFD established the Environmental Advisory Group three years ago to help support funeral sector-related businesses to be more environmentally aware in their practices. The group meets on a bi-annual basis and is made up of a cross section of representatives from across the funeral sector.

The aim of the Group is to provide members with the information they need to help them to be both more environmentally friendly and also to provide customers with informed choices about the options available to them when a friend or family member passes away.

The Group not only provides information on emerging trends in burial practices, such as woodland burials and more environmentally friendly coffins such as wicker coffins and shrouds, but also provides information on how businesses can be more environmentally-focused in the day-to-day running of their companies.

For the year ahead the focus of the Group is to:-

- continue to raise awareness of the importance of the environment within the funeral sector;
- encourage members of the NAFD to share their own good practice with other members to help support and show how they have adopted environmentally friendly measures;
- communicate and advise members on how their businesses can be more 'green' through a quarterly Environment and Sustainability section in *Funeral Director Monthly*.