

Who's WEARING the Trousers?

How funeral uniforms for female funeral directors follow formality and function - not fashion

The uniform of a funeral director has always been steeped in ceremony and formality. For many decades a male-dominated profession, the uniform developed from clothing deemed appropriate for someone arranging funerals for nobility and Royalty during the reign of Elizabeth I, to the fashion for extravagant accessories in the early 19th Century, such as top hats with flowing hat bands, four-foot tiers of ostrich plumage, wide decorated sashes and starched collars, as well as the ubiquitous black tie.

Post-World War I, uniforms became more sober and practical - but retained their smart formality, a symbol of respect for the deceased

person and their family, as well as an illustration of the solemn ceremony of the event.

The first female directors in the UK took up their roles some thirty years ago, defining a unique and female way of delivering a service that had so long only been provided by men.

Carving out a niche in the profession did not simply extend to proving a woman was more than capable of doing the job, says Melanie Hunnaball, Group Marketing Director, Hunnaball Family Funeral Group in Suffolk - it was about redefining the role altogether. And that included what female funeral directors would wear.

For many female funeral directors, the uniform was a tailored and adapted version of the traditional male morning suit. However, for Melanie, it meant going back to the drawing board completely.

"When we started Ladies in Hats, back in the 1980s, female funeral directors were virtually non-existent in the UK, certainly in East Anglia. However, our business was growing and my husband Trevor needed my support - and wanted me at his side - so it was either roll up my sleeves and become a funeral director or resign myself to a backroom role.

"I chose the former and was incredibly lucky to have the mentoring and support of the wonderful Muriel



Hunnaball Family Funeral Group's Ladies in Hats

Grimmett Offley, the then President of the NAFD Coventry & District Funeral Directors' Guild and future President of the NAFD Midland Area Federation, who died a year ago at the age of 85.

"Muriel was a wonderful role model, always elegant and impeccably dressed. She remained in the funeral profession until the end of her life and, at her funeral, her son Graham so memorably described how: "She had an extraordinary ordinariness; she conducted herself with such grace and simplicity that mourners felt comforted and reassured. It was a type of secular ministry; unordained, yet authentic and powerful." Muriel's grace, elegance

and 'extraordinary ordinariness' inspired me. She taught me how to be a female funeral director in what was then very definitely still a man's world. My femininity was important to me and, as the idea for Ladies in Hats took shape, I was determined that we wouldn't be females dressed in male attire, we would neither look nor try to copy male funeral directors – we would be ladies, first and foremost.

"Our eight lady funeral directors are there to support the family - making sure everything happens as it should and attending to their every need. Feminine, elegant and authoritative, they oversee the funeral; they do not drive hearses, attend first calls



to remove deceased people or shoulder coffins. It costs us more as a business as we always send an additional male bearer to funerals where the ladies are conducting, for the physical tasks and we send male members of staff to removals, but this is our brand, it is company policy – always has been – and it is what our clients have come to expect and prefer.

“I actually have no strong view on trousers versus skirts, as long as the trousers are tailored and stylish, because for me it is about the overall impact and image as well as the specifics – but as a team we always wear dresses anyway – and hats and pearls!”

Over time, clothing options expanded to enable female funeral directors to opt for trousers, instead of skirts, given the nature of the role – particularly at the graveside.

This flexibility – not something that had been a feature of uniform requirements when the role was one only undertaken by men – has now been adapted into the majority of NAFD members’ uniform ranges, including that of Freeman Brothers, the firm of current NAFD President Abi Pattenden – and always with an eye to the overall company brand.

Says Abi: “We provide our female colleagues with options. One of my members of staff usually wears skirts for crematoria and trousers for burials, or if the weather is bad. My other female colleague who conducts does the same. I only wear skirts but that’s because so few pairs of trousers suit me.

“I think it’s most important that you look smart, presentable and professional. What you wear should fit in with the rest of the funeral team and fit properly. It also does need to be practical, so high heels and very tight skirts or jackets are a no-no. For me, it’s less about the specifics than the overall impact: it’s more important to look smart in trousers than scruffy in a skirt!”

For Jenny Gilbert though, of AJ Adkinson & Son, Leicestershire and the NAFD Midlands Area Federation President, trousers still don’t quite cut it for women in her traditional family business.

*Oh crikey the
vent in my
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“It’s fair to say as a business, tradition and formality (especially in what we wear) is a strong part of how we operate,” says Jenny. “All our bearers wear tailcoats – not just conductors – which I now understand is rare.

“When conducting a funeral, I would not consider wearing trousers as an option. It’s not really a case of being feminine or not (although my pet

hate is the apparent pre-occupation with women dressing or behaving like a man – top hats, canes...) it’s simply about meeting the same level of formality as the rest of the staff. Somehow a trouser suit (however well-fitting and stylish) just doesn’t seem to hit the mark.

“From time to time I might get asked to wear a particular colour, or lose the jacket and it feels quite strange to carry out the same role without the uniform that I so strongly associate with it. I recently conducted my mother-in-law’s funeral in a coral coloured dress and it felt like I somehow lost my presence or authority in terms of managing people at the funeral.

“I’m the first to admit to being fussy, but our mantra has always been that what you look like on ceremony is one of the strongest marketing tools you can have.

“Things get difficult in winter for burials, particularly in rural burial grounds or some of the natural burial grounds. For me the most difficult task to balance appearance with practicality is interring remains.

“Bending low enough to place a casket in a grave, whilst balancing on heels (that you’re more likely to wear with a skirt) is not a stable place to be, and often feels like you have every chance of going head first into the grave. I developed a strategy of taking a velvet cushion and putting one knee down to steady myself, but that can be tricky. Flat shoes and trousers are probably your most practical option for this and, given the usual low key nature of it, you can usually balance

appearance well enough. But, again, in my view there's somehow something traditionally more formal about wearing heels than flat shoes. For times where I know there's no cemetery or churchyard involvement I wear court shoes, but immediately default to wedge heel shoes rather than sink into the grass.

"For 'non-ceremonial' tasks such as transferring deceased people, I think smart trousers are acceptable. It can be hard enough to make sure you're contributing equally with your colleague and carrying out often strenuous physical tasks with a precious load without the added

true in the USA where there's plenty of debate online about what female funeral directors should wear – with one US-based funeral director revealing that many American funeral homes require female staff to wear skirts and, such is the level of debate, there was a seminar on dress and decorum for funeral directors dominating discussion at a large state convention recently!

Here in the UK, several decades after the introduction of female funeral directors, leading uniform manufacturers such as Brook York and Lyn Oakes have developed a wide range of uniforms, with

Lyn Oakes, the eponymous outfitters, which launched around the same time as the arrival of female funeral directors, has adapted its bespoke funeral tailoring options as funeral firms have opted to invest in image, quality products and durable designs that set them apart from competitors.

This demand has seen many funeral directors come away from the traditional black jacket and striped trouser look in search for alternative options to create their own identity. Freeman Brothers in Sussex is one such example of this – wearing smart navy blue. Another is Howard Hodgson & Son in Birmingham which, in the past few decades, has switched to grey suits with blue and grey striped ties.

According to Lyn Oakes, the way in which the uniform is worn has evolved to more tailored styles, such as tapered trousers and fitted jackets with flattering slant pockets for a modern take on a classic look. "Not only does a strong uniform serve a practical purpose for the wearer, advancing the uniforms can unite a work force, emit professionalism and be the unsung hero of marketing," it says.

However, one thing that Lyn Oakes is clear about is that it is formality and function that guide the uniform of a funeral director – whether female or male – not fast fashion and the current 'throw-away culture.'

"As a resilient industry, the funeral trade and funeral wear demand a consistent supply of uniforms that will stand up to the job and test of time. With this in mind, Lyn Oakes garments remain classic uniform staples that nod to the times in which we live, with a subtle acknowledgement to fashion trends."



NAFD Midlands Area Federation
President Jenny Gilbert and her
father, Fraser

complication of thinking 'oh crikey the vent in my skirt just won't stretch that far...and now it's split'."

What is clear is that there is now plenty of choice for the female funeral directors of the UK to make sure they have the uniform they need for their role. The same may not be quite so

bespoke options including skirts, trousers and shift dresses – as well as a range of jackets including frock coat, tailcoat and riding jacket styles – tailored specifically to the needs of female funeral directors and the brand values of the businesses they represent.

Funeral couture contacts

For further information about NAFD Supplier members providing uniforms and workwear, please contact:

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