

FOCUS ON FLEETS AND FUEL ECONOMY

With green being the new black, and funeral director firms across the United Kingdom looking for ways to offset their carbon footprint, plenty of focus has been on funeral vehicles and the move towards greater fuel efficiency. The current fuel crisis has given these developments an additional urgency and dimension.

News feeds are increasingly populated with firms announcing the arrival of electric or hybrid fleets, with companies reporting that consumer choice is already pointing firmly at the green agenda.

While some companies have already begun the transition, for those considering phasing out diesel or petrol vehicles in the near future, manufacturer Coleman Milne has some advice.

As all funeral vehicles are converted from standard road cars that need significant modifications to achieve the size, presence, aesthetics and weight-carrying capacity required for a hearse or limousine, careful selection of the correct base vehicle to build upon is essential, the company said, pointing to the Mercedes plug-in hybrid hearse, which has been built, tested and has proved successful on the road.

A spokesman said the Mercedes is likely to be the last in the line of fossil fuel-dependent funeral fleets, with emerging technology providing a stepping-stone to all future carbon neutral offerings, but will set the benchmark for electric vehicle operation and useability.

The rapidly expanding market of new battery-powered cars has been halted, first by the COVID-19 pandemic - which led to a global shortage of semiconductors - and now the war in Ukraine, which has seen a huge slowdown in the supply of important components exported from the country.

The British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association said recently that long lead times and increased maintenance costs of

existing older fleets is impacting the industry hard. Fleets and business registrations have fallen by one third; the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders said that new car registrations in the fleet and business sector in March were down 32% on the same month last year.

There are also concerns about the charging infrastructure and whether that can keep up with demand. The Government recently announced a new target to increase the number of electric car chargers more than ten times to 300,000 by 2030, after heavy criticism that the rollout of public infrastructure is too slow to match rapid growth in sales.

Coleman Milne said it had “already made solid headway, learned valuable lessons and mastered new techniques” on the road to full EV as standard, including the Mondeo based Re-gen hybrid Norwood and Rosedale range, followed by the Mercedes Plug-in hybrid and the UK’s first fully electric full-size hearse, the Tesla Model S based Whisper hearse.

“We are already working with our R&D team as never before, and nothing is off the table,” said Graham Clow, Coleman Milne National Sales Manager.

Which is, of course, good news for funeral firms. Mark Potts, Head of Operational Support at Funeral Partners, said transport was a key priority, hence the introduction of brand-new electric hearses into the company’s fleet, with three new vehicles due to be trialled in Birmingham, Torquay and Belfast.

He said: “We’re always looking at ways to reduce our carbon footprint while giving families more choices. The introduction of electric hearses achieves both and lays the foundations for a wider transition to electric vehicles as part of a five-year plan.”

The Wilcox Limousines Nissan LEAF hearse will debut at W H Painter Funeral Directors in Birmingham, James Brown & Sons Funeral Directors in Belfast and Torbay & District Funeral Service in Torquay. In the future, Funeral Partners aims to have an electric vehicle based in every region of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland for branches to use.

As well as giving families more choice, electric hearses will give Funeral Partners’ funeral homes the opportunity to install charging stations and benefit from the various government grants available.



▲ Coleman Milne hybrid Mercedes.

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MARK POTTS, HEAD OF OPERATIONAL SUPPORT AT FUNERAL PARTNERS

Adds Mark: "I've already spoken to some funeral homes that are interested in the Government's Workplace Charging Scheme, which supports up-front costs associated with purchasing and installing electric vehicle charge points."

Funeral Partners, he said, had also invested heavily in reducing the age profile of its more than 400 petrol and diesel vehicles to increase fuel efficiency and reduce carbon emissions, investing around £3 million across the last two years on fleets.

Mark said: "We're taking a very targeted approach by focusing on vehicles with high mileage, such as our Mercedes Vito and Ford Tourneo vans, to seek efficiencies and reduce the impact on the environment."

He added that the company was looking forward to receiving feedback from clients and teams when the three Nissan LEAF hearse vehicles arrive.

While increasing numbers of funeral firms are adding electric and hybrid vehicles to their fleets, for Wilcox Limousines, the days of fully electric fleets of five-door hearses and limousines may still be years off due to weight restrictions.

Louis Wilcox, Sales Director for Wilcox, said: "Fully electric vehicles will be limited to three-door hearses and no limousines, while weight is an issue. For the foreseeable future five-door hearses and limousines will be restricted to petrol hybrid, petrol or diesel. We are seeing no uptake on hybrid diesel due to the obvious contradiction in clean air using a diesel engine and so will never offer diesel hybrid options. However, we are seeing a huge uptake on the three-door fully electric Nissan due to the price of £109,950."

It's not just on four wheels where the funeral fleet is evolving. Marian Sinclair, who runs Motorcycle Funerals, said while there had been some resistance from customers about going green, as the roar of the motorcycle's engines were part of what made the



ceremonies so special - she was looking at electric options.

"We are looking at introducing an electric bike, but there are some important considerations," she said. "They are double the price and bikers don't really like them that much as bikers like the noise; that's what makes them so special. I don't know whether they will take off or not, but we need to have one added to the fleet."

Marian took over the running of Motorcycle Funerals after her husband Paul Sinclair, a very popular figure in NAFD circles, passed away in 2019. She said the company was hit hard in the early days of the pandemic but were recovering to pre-COVID levels.

She said: "To start with we had loads of cancellations because people weren't being allowed to go to funerals, and their attitude was 'if we can't be there, there's not much point in having a motorcycle funeral'.

"Then that changed and people were coming to us saying that if they could not spend much on other aspects of a funeral, because of the restrictions, we want to spend extra money on something special."

The company has 14 bikes in its fleet, including its ever-popular Triumph Bonneville original hearse and sidecar and famed Harley Davidson Road King.

"Paul has left an amazing legacy," said Marian. "Our passion is to serve people and motorcycles are something a little different. If we can do something that, even in a moment of grief, can help put a smile on a family's face or help take that edge of grief off - well, that's why we're here."



The new electric hearse joining the Funeral Partners fleet. ▲

MAXIMISING THE FUEL EFFICIENCY OF YOUR FLEET

If you want to improve the fuel economy of your funeral vehicle fleet, the easiest and most effective way is to change your driving habits. Here, the Wilcox Limousine team members provide some recommendations on increasing fuel efficiency.

1. Regular Diagnostics checks

Over time sensors that monitor the air-fuel mixtures can lose sensitivity.

2. Check the ignition coils

Eventually, some ignition coils can become inefficient, and replacing them will improve your fuel efficiency.

3. Check your tyres

Under-inflated or misaligned tyres add friction which the vehicle must overcome by using more fuel. Regularly checking your tyre pressure and wheel alignment prevents this.

4. Lose weight

Remove unnecessary objects from the vehicle to reduce resistance. All Wilcox's new products have been designed and engineered using lightweight technology to reduce the weight of the conversion.

5. Adapt your driving style

Altering your driving style lowers fuel consumption. Here are four changes you can make:

- Accelerate gently - the harder you accelerate the more fuel you use.
- Maintain a steady speed - when your speed drops and then surges you use more fuel.
- Anticipate traffic - this will help you maintain a steady speed.
- Avoid high speeds - vehicles are most efficient at 30-50 MPH.

WHAT DOES THE INCREASE IN FUEL PRICES MEAN FOR THE FUNERAL SECTOR?

The Wilcox team did some calculations based on 200 funerals per annum, each taking a 25-mile journey - and worked out the average cost of petrol, per funeral, for each model in the Wilcox range:

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

£14.98 per funeral based on the cost of Petrol at **£1.65 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£1.67 P/Litre**

£18.15 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£2.00 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£2.10 P/Litre**

XF PETROL 2.0 LITRE, 23 MPG

£11.73 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£1.65 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£1.67 P/Litre**

£14.21 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£2.00 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£2.10 P/Litre**

XF Diesel 2.0 Litre, 36 mpg

£7.58 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£1.65 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£1.67 P/Litre**

£9.53 Per Funeral, Based on the cost of Petrol at **£2.00 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£2.10 P/Litre**

XJ 3.0 LITRE DIESEL, 27 MPG

£10.10 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£1.65 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£1.67 P/Litre**

£12.71 Per Funeral, Based on the cost of Petrol at **£2.00 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£2.10 P/Litre**

VOLVO DIESEL S90, 34 MPG

£8.03 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£1.65 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£1.67 P/Litre**

£10.09 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£2.00 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£2.10 P/Litre**

MERCEDES E CLASS DIESEL 2.0 LITRE, 36 MPG

£7.58 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£1.65 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£1.67 P/Litre**

£9.53 Per Funeral, Based on the cost of Petrol at **£2.00 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£2.10 P/Litre**

MERCEDES E 300E (PETROL PLUG IN HYBRID), 134.5 mpg

£2.00 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£1.65 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£1.67 P/Litre**

£2.43 Per Funeral, based on the cost of Petrol at **£2.00 P/Litre** and Diesel at **£2.10 P/Litre**

