

A different funeral

This article is not so much about funerals in general. Nor is it intended to be morbid, but to be dispassionate and down to earth, specifically about the growing trend towards natural, Woodland burials. It is not intended to upset anyone. Woodland burials are increasingly favoured as a “green” alternative. I will stand up and be counted here and declare, “I am not a green”, but I do like the principle of Woodland burials. If you are at a difficult stage in your life, you may prefer to find another time to read this article.

I have some experience of Woodland burials as my late wife is buried in one, also my last resting place will be beside her, all bought and paid for by ourselves, leaving no funeral expenses for the family.

Have you arranged your funeral? It's not such a bad idea you know, given the rising costs of not being able to take it with you. But I'm not going to brow-beat you about that: pre-payment for your funeral is a matter of personal choice. But you know which side of that fence I'm on.

One of the first things that strikes you about Woodlands, is they don't call them cemeteries, most are known as burial grounds, which while accurate, can leave a slight feeling of medieval plague pits, which is unfortunate as nothing could be further from the truth.

Poet Pam Ayres – I'm sure some of you will remember her – wrote this in favour of Woodland burials, which comfortably sums up the ethos.

*Don't lay me in some gloomy churchyard shaded by a wall
Where the dust of ancient bones has spread a dryness over all.
Lay me in some leafy loam where, sheltered from the cold.
Little seeds investigate and tender leaves unfold.
There kindly and affectionately plant a native tree
To grow resplendent before God and hold some part of me.
The roots will not disturb me as they wend their peaceful way
To build the fine and bountiful from closure and decay,
To seek their small requirements so that when their work is done
I'll be tall and standing strongly in the beauty of the sun.*

My late wife and I, over our forty-four years of marriage occasionally discussed our departure from this world. The general plan for years was for cremation. Then one day we were watching a TV documentary about the mechanics of cremation, my wife leaned over to me and said “I don't want to be cremated any more”. For some time, I had been thinking on and off about Woodland burials, not obsessively, or very often, but as we regularly passed direction signs for one when out driving, I began to take a loose interest in the genre. I had though never mentioned it to my wife, so this seemed the ideal time to bring it up.

On balance, my wife was not really convinced, but agreed that we could look into it in greater depth. We decided the best approach was to travel around a bit and look at some of the nearby Woodland sites; compared to cemeteries there are not that many. It didn't take too long before my wife became as, or more enthusiastic than I was. A decision was made that this was what we wanted. It only remained to select the site that attracted us the most.

We looked at Woodland burial grounds as far away as near Christchurch in Hampshire, and as near as Garston Crematorium which has a small Woodland area, which neither of us fancied.

I was doing a web search when I came across the St Albans Trust. That, I said, can't be too far away. How wrong can you be? The postcode was plugged into the satnav, not thinking at the time it didn't seem very familiar for this area. We jumped in the car, and three hours later (we did stop for lunch) we ended up in a delightful rural Bedfordshire village some distance from Bedford itself.

Our first reaction was that it was too far away, that was before we entered the site, to find the most beautiful, peaceful, tranquil place we could ever have imagined. On that occasion all that could be heard was the breeze rustling the tall tree tops. It took around half-hour or so of looking round at the diverse and plentiful trees and numerous small burial area copses for us to look at one another, smile, and say almost together "this is where we want to be". It must be explained that the St Albans Trust has absolutely nothing to do with the city of St Albans, they only share the same name.

From that visit on, visits to meet the administrator were arranged, choosing where in the grounds we would like to be, finalising and leaving a deposit. We never regretted it, we very quickly paid the full amount, retaining the "ownership" of the plots for eighty years. Since we were then in our early seventies, that wasn't going to be a problem. Very sadly, it was not expected that one of the plots was destined to be used quite so soon afterwards.

We were happy, but then the issue of selling the unconventional to our family raised its head. We were fortunate as they were mainly supportive. I have however heard of some family disagreements, when family members had totally different ideas of what a funeral should be. If it could be that if there are likely strong feelings against a Woodlands burial it would probably be better to try and discuss it with them first. But in the end, it is your funeral.

Most Woodland burial grounds are non-denominational or discriminatory, many have very relaxed rules about the conduct of funerals, or the modes of transport, - as an aside, the one we use likes to show in its brochure a photograph of a fire-engine being used to transport the coffin of a fireman. An (extremely well behaved) chapter of Hells Angels carried a coffin on a side-car, and provided their own pall bearers (a lot of rubbish is talked about Hells Angels, many are great supporters of charities and local support groups, but that is for another article). Of course, most Woodland burials are conducted just like any other funeral. Many friends and family visitors to the grounds bring young family, it is not unusual to find ball games going on in the open spaces. Most do not ban dogs, local people often walk their dogs in the grounds.

It is though the peace and tranquillity of the natural surroundings that is the biggest attraction, some visitors bring camping chairs, sitting reading or contemplating alongside their late loved ones, some even bring packed lunches. Being a Woodland, it can be a bird-spotters paradise, in the peace and quiet sometimes small animals can be seen wandering around, there are no fences to discourage them. The surroundings are left to be as natural as possible, you will find no manicured lawns or neat straight rows of headstones and memorials. Woodland burial ground management and ground staff pride themselves on creating a natural but, environmentally managed facility. Grass cutting does

take place to make walking around easier and prevent over-growth, but to a level best described as rough-cut.

But like any cemetery, there are rules about what you can do in a Woodlands burial ground. Everything that is left in or on the ground has to be bio-degradable, this includes coffins. Standard wood coffins are not allowed, most modern coffins in spite of appearances are made from MDF, which does not degrade well. Other options available can be from materials such as cardboard, wicker and even papier mache.

Stone and granite memorials are not allowed. It is recommended that oak memorial posts can be used, carved with any inscription you wish. Because in time the graves are levelled off and grassed over bulb plants such as daffodils and tulips are not allowed, as the mowing will have a real tendency to propagate them over wide areas. Bamboo pots buried alongside graves are used for fresh flowers, these can also be laid on graves. Some sites allow wild flowers to be grown from an approved list. Artificial flowers are not permitted. Other memorial options are oak benches that can also be carved with family names and epitaphs, small tree dedication plaques can be placed by selected trees.

At Christmas times the rules are relaxed. Wreaths and other adornments can be laid on graves, or tied on to a memorial post if there is one, it is hoped that natural products are used, it is not though unheard of to see battery operated lights on small artificial Christmas trees. Wooden wind chimes hanging from nearby trees are quite common. It is asked, that these are removed by Epiphany, if not they will be taken away by staff. Real Christmas trees planted on or near graves are not permitted.

This has been a very personal coverage of a personal situation, that I am happy to have shared here with anyone who's interested. It wasn't meant to be an advert for the St Albans Trust, but its inclusion is important to the story. If it has made you aware of Woodland burials and funerals, and pricked your interest then, this article has done its job.

For those still favouring cremation, it is possible to have ashes interred in some Woodland burial grounds, remaining still within the necessary bio-degradable containers. But ash scattering is not permitted during funerals.

If you are interested there is lots more information online, you need only Google Woodland burial grounds, I can though provide you with some web addresses if required, please let me know.

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