

## Everything you ever wanted to know about coffins



*[Roger Fowle](#) based in Cambridgeshire makes willow coffins.  
You can go along and work alongside him if you want*

### Why are coffins so expensive?

The price you pay an undertaker for a coffin *may* be several times what the undertaker paid for it — a markup greater than you would expect of a retailer. A fair and businesslike retail markup is twice the trade price and you shouldn't quibble about that.

Until just a few years ago, undertakers 'buried' or disguised part of what they call their 'professional fee' in the cost of their coffins so, if you didn't buy their coffin, they'd be badly out of pocket.

Some still do, but most realise it makes them look bad. They now structure their fees so that, if you supply your own coffin, they won't lose out.

## A Good Funeral Guide factsheet

### Do undertakers offer the full range?

No. Most of them only have a limited range. Many will not tell you what else is available, either because they can't get such a good margin on it or because they can't be bothered. If you see something here that you like the look of, buy it direct if you can. If you can't, instruct your undertaker to get it for you. If, say, it's a wicker coffin you want, make absolutely sure your undertaker gets it from the firm that sells the one you like. There are lots of cheap versions out there with a flimsy, loose weave which offer your undertaker a bigger margin.



*Wicker / willow coffin by [Cath Pratley](#) based in Dorset. You can go and help her make it if you want*

### Why is there such a huge range?

British funerals are changing and becoming very creative, which explains why we enjoy a bigger choice of coffins than anywhere else in the world. The classic, wooden, 'toe-pincher' coffin is still the most popular, but many people find the new-look generation of coffins made from all sorts of materials – including willow, sea grass, banana leaves, cardboard – much softer and friendlier in appearance. They really do set the tone of the funeral.

The widest range of eco-coffins available on the market is sold by [Ecoffins](#). They have 37 different types made from all sorts of materials, and it's worth browsing their [website](#) to get some idea of the range there is out there. Other firms worth checking out for their range (but they won't sell to you direct) are [JC Atkinson](#), [Bradnam Joinery](#) and [JC Walwyn and Sons](#).

### Can you make your own?

If you want to make the coffin yourself, go ahead. You will, of course, need to be able to show that it is strong enough to do its job. Your coffin will need to be lined with a waterproof lining which will not create unacceptable emissions. The industry uses a product called Cremfilm. You can pay an undertaker to do this for you -- or get him to sell you some Cremfilm.

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### Who's the greenest of them all?

Almost all commercially produced coffins have passable green credentials, even coffins made from MDF.

Perhaps the greenest coffins of all are those made from willow in the UK. The material is indigenous and sustainable, the coffin miles minimal. Yet a coffin shipped from China by Ecoffins, they claim, no more fuel than a car journey of 4.63 miles. It all depends how you calculate it, perhaps

### Willow coffins

Willow (wicker) coffins vary in quality. Those made in the UK are mostly good. Those made in Eastern Europe or the Far East may not be. Beware bargain prices from certain internet sellers! If they're not approved by us, avoid.

Somerset Willow have a good range of high quality coffins but will not sell to you direct.

Musgrove Willow, harvested and woven in the Somerset Levels. **Will sell to you direct**. Go along and help them make it. Price: from £500 including name plaque, lining and delivery

Mawdesley Willow, woven in Lancashire. Will sell to you direct. The Mawdesley is harvested in Lancashire. They sell two coffins from willow harvested in Poland: the Elysium and the Oval. All good quality.

Earth to Heaven. Imported. Good quality. Will sell to you direct.



[Mawdesley](#) willow coffin

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### A shroud or a soft coffin

The **shroud** failed for many years to make a comeback, perhaps because people were put off by the way it leaves the outline of the body identifiable. But a shroud is honest, and at around £150, it's inexpensive and suitable for burial or cremation. You can get one from [Respect Everybody Shrouds](#) (illustrated below) -- call 01427 612992



An alternative to a shroud is a **soft coffin**. A soft coffin is something a bit like a shroud in principle, but something else altogether in practice.

- **Bellacouche** handmade to order a beautiful felted Leafcocoon, pictured below, which **greatly softens the outline of the body**. It is covered in a choice of leaf patterns. Nothing else is needed, i.e. no liner. Absorbent materials (all recycled and natural of course) are hidden inside the felt-encased wooden base, and six strong handles take the weight. There is a shroud inside, with an adjustable cocoon over this, and a detachable decorated cover which can be kept as a keepsake, or buried with the body. Visit: [www.bellacouche.com](http://www.bellacouche.com). Bellacouche also make a child cocoon. Ring: Yuli Somme on 01647 432155. Buy direct: £885. See another photo on our blog [here](#). Winner of the Good Funeral Award 2013 for Best Coffin Supplier.



Soft coffin by [Bellacouche](#)

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### A plain pine coffin

The Honest Coffin is handmade from sustainable larch and oak. Very durable. No chemicals, no polish, no stain. No screws, either, only oak dowels.



*The plain pine Honest Coffin*

The Feet First coffin is made from locally grown wood using mostly hand tools. No chemicals, formaldehyde-free glue, no metal fasteners – even the beeswax is home-made.



*The plain pine Feet First coffin*

### Cardboard

A cardboard coffin ought to be the cheapest you can get, you might think, but actually the manufacturing cost of cardboard makes the price pretty much what you would pay for a 'veneered' coffin made from MDF. People who go for cardboard are really making a lifestyle – or deathstyle –

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statement. It is the last word in simplicity. Some may reckon it an outrageous choice, either in a good or a bad way. White or brown cardboard is good for decoration. You can paint it, draw on it, write messages on it. You can get the children to decorate their Nan's cardboard coffin – but beware: children like to use lots of red and this can give a misleading impression. Most funeral directors now stock cardboard coffins but a great many, hating them, will cast doubt on their load-bearing capability and even their ability to withstand rain. This is nonsense, so dig your heels in. Some undertakers are able, if you want, to put a cardboard coffin inside a re-usable coffin (called coffin cover) just for the funeral. An alternative is to drape the coffin with fabric of some sort – a pall. Beware cheap imports!

See what a cardboard coffin looks like at:

- [Greenfield coffins](#). Up to 100% biodegradable cardboard made from 70 per cent post-consumer waste. Any design of your choice. Will sell to you direct: range starts at £81. Can carry 23 stone.



*Cardboard coffin from [Greenfield](#)*

## Wool

Made in Yorkshire from Dorset Horn sheep's wool over a cardboard frame. Hemmed with blanket stitch.

- [www.naturallegacy.co.uk](http://www.naturallegacy.co.uk) Available only through a funeral director. Distributor: [JC Atkinson](#).



*Woolen coffin*

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### Pebble coffin

A coffin you can lie in 'in a peaceful, curled up, sleeping position'. Still being developed as of 11.2014.

- <http://pebblewoodcoffins.co.uk/>



### Bamboo or wild pineapple

- [www.ecoffins.co.uk](http://www.ecoffins.co.uk). Will sell to you direct.

### Cocostick and paper

Designed and imported by Somerset Willow. Cocostick coffins are made from the stems of coconut leaves. Paper coffins are made from spun paper woven around a rigid frame.

- [www.naturalwovencoffins.co.uk](http://www.naturalwovencoffins.co.uk) (will not sell direct)

### Banana leaf or water hyacinth

- [www.daisycoffins.com](http://www.daisycoffins.com) (will not sell direct)

### Seagrass

- [www.ftp-eco-coffins.co.uk](http://www.ftp-eco-coffins.co.uk). Will sell to you direct. Good range of eco-coffins.

### Ecopod

Revolutionary shape. Made from recycled paper. Come in gorgeous colours

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- [www.ecopod.co.uk](http://www.ecopod.co.uk). Will sell to you direct.

### Curve coffin

A solid wood coffin with an attractive curved profile that makes it quite different in looks to traditional box coffins. Hand Made in Kent using only woods from managed sources and other natural materials, the Curve is “as friendly to the environment as we could possibly make it.” The Curve is available in a number of artistic, hand painted designs or a natural wood finish which is suitable for home decoration. Price start from £450 plus delivery. Buy direct [here](#).



Curve coffin

### Picture coffins

Cardboard or wood decorated with any scene or picture you like:

- [www.greenfieldcreations.co.uk](http://www.greenfieldcreations.co.uk). Will sell direct to the public. Cardboard from £214; wooden from £490.
- [www.colourfulcoffins.com](http://www.colourfulcoffins.com). The same service as Greenfield. Will not sell direct.



Picture coffin from Greenfield Creations



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### Flat pack coffins

Self assembly, plain pine - a simple classic:

- [www.eco-coffins.com](http://www.eco-coffins.com)

### Crazy Coffins

Bespoke coffins in all sorts of wonderful shapes:

- [www.crazycoffins.co.uk](http://www.crazycoffins.co.uk)
- [www.eshopafrica.com](http://www.eshopafrica.com)



[Crazy coffin](#)

### American caskets

- [www.caskets.co.uk](http://www.caskets.co.uk)



### Bookcase coffin



Finally, if you'd like to buy your own coffin now and enjoy it till you need it, have a look at William Warren's bookcase coffin. Yes, it's a bookcase which can be reassembled as a coffin when you conk out. Go to his website, type in your size and download instructions for making it. Materials will cost around £30 for pine, more for posher woods. William, the last of the altruists, charges nothing for the download. A lovely man.

- <http://www.williamwarren.co.uk/2009/10/shelves-for-life/>
- [Greenfield](#) also make a bookcase coffin.