What are funeral directors like?

Most of us don't know anyone who's an undertaker nor do most of us ever think about undertakers until we have to go and see one. That's when we begin to wonder what they're going to be like. Are they soft-spoken, slightly creepy black-clad men with long waxy faces, wonky smiles and yellow teeth who live in gloom?

No, they're not. They're as normal as rice pudding, most of them. The best – and there are more of them than you might think – are some of the nicest and best people you could ever meet.

Why would anyone do it?

Why would anyone want to be a funeral director?

If you've always supposed you'd have to be weird or warped to be an undertaker you'd be exactly wrong. Weirdoes may be attracted to the trade—there are some—but they don't last. Emotionally needy people are drawn to it, too—those who feed off the grief of others. They don't last, either.

Some are born to it—those who go into the family business. These may, some of them, lack the zeal of their undertakerly ancestors, but they are seduced by attractive financial returns for comparatively little hard work. They can pay other people to do that.

Those not born into funeral directing, let's call them the vocational undertakers, are drawn to the work, most of them, not because they like being around dead bodies but because they like being around living people. That really is ninety per cent of their motivation. It is important work they do, helping the living through difficult times by looking after their dead.

They probably like putting on a bit of a show, too. The dressing-up bit can be a catch.

Of course, there are those who are just in it for the money. But it is difficult to get rich quick in undertaking. It takes years to build up a business. And most Brits reckon the only good funeral is a cheap one, so margins are small.

You don't need to be an academic high-flier to become a funeral director. There are few other jobs that could make many of them feel so important. It's not the sort of job that attracts middle class people, and most of them aren't.

Every day is different. There's variety. Every funeral is a drama. The hours aren't brilliant—you can be called out in the middle of the night—but, except in big cities, the work for most is not grindingly hard unless you work for one of the conglomerates, Dignity or Co-op Funeralcare. There is normally a lull in the summer and a busy patch after Christmas.

Do they actually care?

Most funeral directors can put on a good show. They can big up the empathy, switch on the sincerity, convince you they care. But what are they like when you're not looking?

Quite the reverse, some of them, those who have lost the heart for it and are simply going through the motions. It is easy to grow pompous, complacent, hardened or bored when you deal every day with clients who do not keep you on your toes, whom you can easily talk into buying the same funeral as everyone else. Busy urban funeral directors look after the bodies of all sorts of people

they know nothing of and may care nothing about. Behind the scenes their indifference may turn to negligence, coarseness, disrespect. This may come as no surprise and should serve as a warning.

In rural areas it is more likely that funeral directors will know the people they are looking after. Not only that, but their private and public behaviour are much better known. They maintain their good name in the community at their commercial peril.

Having said which, there are many funeral directors who adhere to a code of behaviour whose high standards might astonish you. Behind the scenes they treat their dead bodies with immaculate courtesy. They talk to them as they wash and dress them. They knock before going in to the chapel of rest. They carry coffins gently. They hold ashes' urns in both hands, never under one arm. They are exactly the same in public as in private. They have a strong sense of pride in their calling. This is the sort of funeral director you are looking for and which this website will help you to find.

Don't expect undertakers to be grief counsellors. Why should they be? If, as a nation, we are not good at handling death, it is not their responsibility to do something about that. We hire an undertaker to take care of the practicalities, not to take away the pain. Some do offer counselling as an expression of their commitment to care. You will make your own appraisal of their qualifications for doing so.

Do they have a sense of humour?

Reassuringly, almost all undertakers and their staff are much cheerier than you might think. Laughter is a very necessary safety valve for them. Remember, these are people who know what a quirky and sudden thing death is. They are reminded of it every day. They feel disturbed when someone their own age dies, just as you would be. They are deeply affected by the death of a child, just like you.

Because their work can sometimes be unpleasant—working for the coroner means stretchering out suicides, picking up long-dead derelicts from empty buildings—they tend to have an overdeveloped sense of humour. They can easily conceal their cheeriness beneath a pall of velvet sorrow. When you're not looking, their ribaldry would surprise and possibly delight you. Possibly not. Put a drink in their hands and they'll let down their hair with the best of them.

Dealing with death all day every day teaches you to keenly appreciate being alive.

Do they have an image problem?

Undertakers have an image problem, naturally – some, not all. They are the victims of popular attitudes to death. And in all cultures those who deal with the dead are shunned to a greater or lesser extent. The last question an undertaker wants to hear on holiday is "What do you do?"

Undertakers do a job which most people reckon to be unenviable—someone's got to do it—so they may be socially insecure. They know people giggle about them or dread them. They are a caste apart. Like priests, another caste, they like to attire themselves in archaic fancy dress. But whereas priests are an otherworldly caste, undertakers are ineluctably an underworldly caste. So they work hard to be thought of as respectable, professional folk, pillars of the community. And yet, while we happily shake hands with a doctor, less so with a lawyer, many of us probably wonder what's under an undertaker's fingernails. They carry round with them a little cloud of fear—you're bound to feel a frisson if someone points one out to you. Most of them are never going to be asked to open the church fete, judge a beauty pageant or open an old people's home. They like to do their bit for the community, though, and the old school sort can be relied on to sponsor bowls tournaments and

charity golf days – if it gives them the chance to flog a few pre-need funeral plans to their target market.

Like policemen, they tend to join the masons and may find socialising difficult.

Some, not all.

Is it good for them, all this grief?

A funeral director's working day is awash with tears. Every day. How on earth do they cope?

Some disengage and just focus on the practicalities.

But most funeral directors find it hard not to make some kind of human connection and, once they've established some sort of rapport with their clients, they're bound to have a feeling for what's happened to them. Those who are emotionally mature can absorb the grief of others, then let it pass. This, they say, is the way the world is, and they accept that.

Does the ever-accumulating burden of misery ever get too much? The rate of emotional burn-out in the industry is low compared with vets, dentists, doctors and others in caring professions but it happens of course. They're not overly prone to become drunks or suicides. In this bitchiest of professions, undertaker friends are very good at looking out for each other.

This is how Rupert and Claire Callender of the Green Funeral Company cope: *"Engage with it, let it in, feel it and then let it out again. We don't have formal supervision, but we talk, and often cry. And sometimes we dance all night. We've not gone mad yet."*

Do undertakers prey on the bereaved?

While other providers of goods and services dance to the tune of their clients, buyers of funerals tend to be tuneless. If undertakers miss out on this vital, bracing discipline of the market, the demanding, pernickety client, it is none of their fault. If they give the impression that they know best, it's because they usually do.

Yes, of course they look at your postcode and work out what they reckon you can afford. Of course they'll sell you anything they think you can pay for. At the same time, they'll try and talk you out of buying anything they think you can't afford because they need you to be able to pay them.

There's a widespread public feeling that it is wrong to make money from the bereaved. A great many undertakers would agree. The last thing most people want to buy is a funeral.

It depends on how you look at it. If you think of a funeral as an invidious necessity, it's going to be too expensive whatever its price.

But if you think of a funeral as a precious gift to the person who has died, you will find that much of the merchandise and most of the service is charged at a fair commercial rate.

How much do they earn?

Family and independent funeral directors are, if they're halfway competent, comfortably off. Vocational undertakers who work for chains of funeral directors or one of the conglomerates, Dignity or the Co-op, take home a lot less—all of them less than £25,000 a year, some a lot less than that. The profits of funerals are rarely distributed among wage slaves.

The brightest and most enterprising vocational funeral directors bravely set up on their own. Because they are motivated by a love of what they do and a desire to serve, rather than make pots of money, many of them keep their charges very low—lower than they ought.

Why do they dress up like that?

When it comes to funerals, most people prefer the traditional look. Most funeral directors revere tradition too. Nothing defines this better than their love of Victorian fancy dress. It makes them feel important, of course. And some of them do decidedly look splendid. Or odd. Or ridiculously anachronistic. You will have your own view.

There are aspects of the ceremonial, walking in front of the hearse, for example (paging it, they call it), which are undoubtedly magnificent if that's what you like, but not if carried off by an unimpressive physical specimen with bad hair, flat feet and an unconvincingly arranged facial rictus. So: ten out of ten to those undertakers who rise to the occasion. We just hope they ask they ask families first if this is what they want. Sometimes you wonder who the funeral is all about—the person who has died or the undertaker.

It's all done in the cause of dignity, for sure, dignity being that version of respect we reserve for the old, the dying and the dead. There's an element of theatre, of course. Bad funeral directors ham it up by being pompous or obsequious; good ones simply allow their behaviour to be informed by the sense of occasion and take their cue from the behaviour of the mourners.

Funeral directors and their staff who favour deep black formal attire defend it by calling it uniform. They may also be aware that, if their clothing is forbidding and even shudder-making, it's a power statement. It bigs up their mystique. It would be good to see more of them with the confidence and good sense to dress approachably at least when they are interviewing clients. Many of the best new funeral directors dress down, recognising the importance of levelling with people.

What else turns them on?

Most undertakers dote on their swanky limousines and their glossy hearses. They renew them whenever they can afford to – at their clients' expense, of course. They measure their business success by the size and marque of their vehicles and exult in the envy of their fellow undertakers.

There's not necessarily much client focus here. Or is there? Most people never get the chance to ride in such magnificence. If it's all part of doing things properly, bring 'em on. If it's not your style, or if you're so grief-stricken you're unlikely to notice, it seems a bit of a waste.

Why are they always men?

Funeral directors are traditionally male. Correction. Were. The women are coming and it's a welcome sight.

When it was the custom to keep dead people at home it was women, often midwives, who laid them out, talked to the family, told them what they needed to know and offered a sympathetic shoulder to cry on. They counted for much more than the undertaker. But as more and more people died in hospital, and fewer families wanted a corpse brought home to their front room, the layers-out lost their role.

Male dominance relegated women to lesser roles. This lives on. Today, many funeral directors employ female arrangers to interview families and deal with the admin. The male funeral director may not see the family at all until the day of the funeral, and the arranger, the person you have spent all your time with, if she wants to attend the funeral, will most likely be told she can't.

The growing influence of women is tending to dissolve the focus on the material side of funerals – the limos, the top hats, the rigid formalities, the reverence for tradition. Women are not necessarily emotionally more intelligent than men but they usually are and they often present a welcome softer side. Theirs is a complementary influence and it's badly needed.

Are funeral directors really like this?

Funeral directors are not all alike and very few would agree with this description of them, which is full of generalisations. "That's not me," they'd say, "though, yes, there are a heck of a lot who *are* like that."

As in any line of work there is a spectrum of quality. The best—and the worst—are often those who are regarded by other undertakers as "not one of us".

ENDS