How Green is My Funeral?

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When I first introduced the concept of woodland burial in Cumbria in 1989, global warming and carbon footprints had yet to be recognised. The scheme was originally intended for people who had expressed a need for an alternative to conventional cemeteries and cremation e.g. back garden burials. A secondary appeal was that native woodland would be created thereby providing wildlife habitats, especially for the diminishing red squirrel. As woodland burial evolved to become natural burial, being buried under a tree or wildflowers became, for some, a personal statement in support of the environment and their opposition to the problems of conventional burial and cremation.

I did not envisage the extent of this conflict and always saw a natural burial site as complimentary to conventional cemeteries and crematoria. This was because the land is not available for natural burial in most urban areas. As evidence of this, the majority of natural burial sites are located out in the countryside, possibly causing polluting road miles when travelling to the funeral, and on subsequent, frequent, bereavement visits. The question needs to be asked as to whether, on balance, this could be as environmentally damaging as cremation.

In reality, this dilemma may be avoided with some natural burials because the bereaved choose not to revisit the grave site after the funeral as it is not perceived as a shrine in the same way as a grave or cremation memorial. If they also reject embalming, choose an eco coffin and oppose the use of air freighted flowers then accrued benefits after accounting for road miles to the site, might still be better for the environment.

Nonetheless, I have always felt that grave re-use, and reclaimed graves (the latter currently legal only in London) in a local cemetery could be seen as a relatively green option. This is because the cortege could conceivably walk to the cemetery for the funeral and all subsequent grieving visits could be on foot. As a funeral free of road miles this could be a far greener option than a natural burial located at some distance. I have experienced over the years, a number of 'walking' funerals, the hearse excepted. Such graves could offer a lower carbon footprint than natural burial providing an eco coffin and other aspects commonly part of a natural burial were also utilised.

Over recent months I have spoken with people from the UK, New Zealand and America who are researching natural burial and green funerals generally. They seemed to assume that natural burial sites were the only green option and as they lacked the in-depth knowledge of funerals, they failed to appreciate the individual impact of each component on the environment. Subsequently, musing over these problems, I recognised that the challenge was to put these issues down on paper in such a way that they could be more easily understood by a lay person. I also felt it essential to account for all carbon and waste costs as well as harmful emissions in order that all funerals could be assessed without the intrusion of prejudice for or against any particular form of disposal.

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How Green is My Funeral? concluded

A simple score sheet has been drawn up which is reproduced opposite. The topics involved in arranging a funeral are listed vertically starting at the top with embalming. By scoring each topic to left or right a minus or plus score is recorded. When choosing either burial or cremation, a further nine other components of a funeral are listed. This enables a total score of -100 for the worst case scenario and +100 for the most environmentally aware. Needless to say, -100 is only possible by arranging a conventional, polluting cremation, and +100 by arranging an ecologically sound natural burial. These high or low scores are less important than the real purpose of the exercise. This is to enable people to move away from a minus score towards a plus score by recognising that all ten components will influence the impact of their funeral, and if any one of these is 'greened' they help the environment in some small way.

Even though a conventional cremation scores very poorly its environmental impact can be significantly reduced. A cremation score of +30 can be attained if embalming is rejected and an eco coffin used. This score also requires a collection for charity in lieu of floral tributes, choosing a Book of Remembrance memorial and limiting road miles. With similar components, a reused grave in the middle of a city can attain +60.

It might be assumed that where the bereaved choose natural burial they will automatically exceed these scores, but that is not necessarily the case. If the various components of a natural burial are not green the score can be quite low. For instance, if embalming is used together with a chipboard coffin, air freighted flowers, at a site over 20 miles from the home, with a stone memorial and high road miles, the natural burial score can dip to -50. In such cases a cremation could have less impact on the environment. This, I believe, shows that the score sheet removes the opportunity for bias and helps focus the mind on making meaningful decisions.

I am, though, concerned that with regard to conventional burial, and especially grave re-use, the bereaved are not presented with a level playing field. This is because the general standard of crematoria and natural burial grounds is good, whilst conventional cemeteries, especially the Victorian burial plots where grave re-use will occur, are often so poor with their derelict memorials and roads, and lack of trees. If the standards in a local cemetery are this poor, the opportunity to create a low road mile funeral that could challenge an attractive natural burial site is not realistic. This suggests that authorities intending to pursue grave re-use, as an ideal environmental and social policy, should be putting together a strategy to raise standards now, as it cannot be achieved overnight.

Finally, I can appreciate how any attempt to measure funeral components such as grieving waste can potentially upset the bereaved and, no doubt, attract adverse attention from the media. Nonetheless, the waste at cemeteries, natural burial grounds and crematoria is not to be ignored. It costs large sums to dispose of, and as it contains considerable green material, soil from pots, turf and other waste which rots, it is a major source of methane in landfill. Dare I say that it is the old who represent our principal visitors and they are often the least aware of these issues? I have also deliberately avoided the age old problem of whether we should enforce compliance on these issues.

In the past few decades we have moved away from prescribing through regulations and have allowed people greater choice and freedom. Is this compatible with caring for the environment? I leave that decision to you bearing in mind that each of us has a personal responsibility, even when disposing of our bodies. The funeral director who operates a natural burial site in the Isle of Wight summed it up beautifully in his site brochure "Leave this world a better place".

Assessing the Environmental Impact of a Funeral

LESS ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY LESS SUSTAINABLE AND MORE INTENSIVE			*MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY MORE SUSTAINABLE AND LESS INTENSIVE*	
-10	**-5**	**SCORE**	**+5**	**+10**
Using formaldehyde base	Using seaweed extract (still requires the unacceptable disposal of 4 litres of blood down the public sewer)	**EMBALMING (often called hygienic treatment)**	No embalming, body refrigeration over 5 days prior to disposal	No embalming and body refrigeration up to 5 days prior to disposal
American casket/coffin made of rainforest timber or metal	Conventional i.e in chipboard / MDF plastic handles, etc	**CHOICE OF COFFIN**	In cardboard, bamboo or other non locally produced material	In locally made wicker, papier-mache, wood from sustainable source, FSC certified (not chipboard / MDF) etc.
Air freighted flowers in plastic frames with oasis	Air freighted flowers with recyclable frames & all green material composted	**FLORAL TRIBUTES**	Locally produced flowers in recyclable frames & with all green material composted	No wreaths and/or money donated to charity or use of garden flowers with no frames & all green material composted
	Deep burial/ or in clay or peat soils or within the water table creating anaerobic conditions & potential for water pollution and/or methane emissions	**BURIAL**	Burial in re-used or reclaimed grave. Burial in natural burial site where grass is intensively mown	Burial in natural burial site that accords with best practice e.g biannual mowing
Same day cremation in conventional chipboard/mdf coffin resulting in maximum emissions	Emissions reduced 50% by using eco coffin/waste metal recycled	**CREMATION**	No score as cremation not sustainable in view of proven harmful emissions of mercury, furans, dioxins, etc.	
Conventional cremation with inefficient cremator	Cremation with staffing shifts & coffins held up to 48 hours to reduce fuel consumption	**FINITE ENERGY USE ON DISPOSAL OF BODY**	Burial using mini-digger	Burial where grave is hand dug
Funeral over 20 miles from home	Funeral within 20 miles of home	**ROAD MILES ON FUNERAL**	Funeral within 10 miles of home	Funeral within 5 miles of home
In stone cut & shipped from India or other foreign source	In stone from UK source	**MEMORIAL**	In recycled stone (old memorial?) or wood from sustainable source	No memorial, or made of paper, vellum, leather, etc. or in electronic form
Visits +300 times p.a. to leave air freighted flowers, plastic pots & flowers, peat, etc.	Regular visitor, say 150 times p.a. to leave air freighted flowers, plastic pots, peat, etc.	**GRIEVING WASTE**	Regular visits to site but uses uk grown flowers & other green products and/or recycles all waste	Low or no visits to site after a bereavement or never leaves tributes
Visits +300 times per year	Regular visitor, say 150 times each year	**GRIEVING ROAD MILES**	Infrequent visits, say 6 times each year	No subsequent visits to site or always walks to site
Intensive mowing and high level of horticultural operations, bedding, no conservation areas	Less intensive with some conservation & native planting, etc.	**SITE MANAGEMENT**	Some conservation, tree planting and limited intensive mowing	Site managed under ecological management plan, no chipboard/mdf or embalming chemicals, or herbicides etc