



# The ways we say goodbye

**A study of 21st century funeral customs in the UK**

With an introduction by funeral historian Dr Julian Litten

The **co-operative** funeralcare  
Central England Co-operative

# Preface

When someone dies it can be difficult to know who to turn to for advice, especially if the family has never had to organise a funeral before.

As one of the leading Funeral Directors, we believe that families should have as much information as possible to help arrange a loved-one's funeral or to help plan ahead for their own.

Recent studies show that many families now see the funeral as a way of celebrating a loved-one's life rather than simply a mourning of their death. It can give families the opportunity to celebrate the uniqueness of the individual; their character, their personality, their passions and their interests.

Increasingly, families are arranging funerals to capture aspects of a person's life, with personalised floral arrangements, dress codes, coffins, music and cortege. By looking at the many different ways in which people say goodbye we hope to help you with you own choices and support you with your funeral arrangements.



*Funerals are now more about celebration than mourning. People want to celebrate the person's life rather than mourn their passing.”*

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# Introduction

Everyone is unique and everyone is special. Similarly, the same should apply to the funeral, whose rituals are one of Britain's most treasured customs. At a funeral, only one person is the focus of attention: the deceased. This alone is sufficient reason for each funeral to be, like that individual, unique in both concept and creation.

Long before the funeral of Princess Diana in 1997, people have been adding personal touches to the funerals of their relatives and friends. Indeed, one only has to think of the spectacular public funerals of the Duke of Marlborough in 1722, Horatio Nelson in 1806, the Duke of Wellington in 1852 and of Sir Winston Churchill in 1965 to appreciate the concept of individuality. Furthermore, choice of hymns, readings and music has been commonplace amongst most church-going families for many generations. Even the walking funerals of the 18th century, the sable-plumed horse-drawn cavalcades in Victorian times and the dignified mid-20th century motorised corteges were specifically tailored to fit their time and place.

It was the Victorians who introduced the concept of the garden cemetery, funeral transport and the individually-tailored funeral. The Edwardians continued this by embracing cremation in 1902 as an additional permutation of disposal of the dead. Consequently, we too should not be afraid to step aside of convention. Planning our funerals in advance, for example, is one way of lifting the burden from the shoulders of our relatives and friends.

As no two people are alike, there is no reason why every funeral has to be the same. The funeral is our one opportunity to publicly express our individuality. Whether we choose something traditional or out of the ordinary, its planning can bring much satisfaction and peace of mind.

In today's multi-cultural and increasingly secular society, new trends are constantly being added to our established customs. This is to be welcomed, for it is in this way that these traditions are allowed to develop. Never be afraid to seek advice from your Funeral Director; hundreds of others do, and they won't find your request in the least extraordinary.

**Dr Julian Litten**

Funeral Historian

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*Each funeral should be like that individual, unique in both concept and creation, from the traditional to the contemporary, or indeed a unique blend of both.”*

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# Funerals today

It is evident that today's funerals do still follow the practices associated with a traditional service. A recent study has shown that the content of funerals is changing – the choice of themes, words, music, coffin and hearse all reveal a pronounced move towards a ceremony which marks out the individual.

The study shows that funerals with religious content are still in the majority – however 'contemporary' and 'humanist' funerals are becoming more commonplace across the UK.

We predominantly arrange what can be classed as 'traditional' funerals. This means that they follow the established rites of a particular religion, generally including a service led by a recognised religious minister at an established place of worship (or on occasion, the funeral home), followed by burial or cremation.

Increasingly there are more 'contemporary' funerals, which often retain an element of religion, whether it be a hymn, a prayer, or the services of a minister of religion. However, there is a degree of personalisation and celebration of an individual's life which is often expressed through music, words, flowers or simply coffin decoration.

A percentage of funerals we arrange are what we have classed as 'humanist', which may be led by a humanist officiant, or family and friends of the deceased. These funeral ceremonies tend to focus exclusively on the deceased, celebrating their life, their personality and their achievements.

However, as we move towards more individual ceremonies, it becomes harder to categorise the distinctive types of funeral evident in the UK today. People are becoming more comfortable personalising funeral ceremonies and choosing the elements they wish to include, and which follow the wishes of their loved one.



*People do not just want religion spoken about – they want the person spoken about. They are making more of a day of it... more of an occasion.”*

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# Differences across the country

The study reveals that regional traditions in funeral ceremonies live on. These are most pronounced in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. England as a whole appears to have significantly fewer regional customs, perhaps because more parts of the the country are easily accessible. However, people in England do tend to wait longer between the death and the funeral than in other parts of the UK.

Regional traditions include the use of cords to lower the coffin in Scotland, families pinning cards to lamp posts to announce deaths in parts of Wales, and the 'lifts' in Northern Ireland, where the coffin is passed from hand to hand. The use of old customs also lives on – in some parts of England people place rosemary (the traditional herb of remembrance) on the coffin itself, or at the graveside.



*People have suddenly realised that they can have whatever they want, not just what Mr Smith down the road had.”*

# Flowers or donations?

Flowers are still usually present at today's funerals, commonly a spray or arrangement from the whole family or a personalised floral tribute.



*People still want to see flowers on top of the coffin; it's extremely rare that you'll get a funeral without them – even if it's only a single rose.”*

*Families increasingly want to take the flowers home with them now – they want arrangements that they can display in a vase or can be donated to their local hospital or their loved one's place of work.”*

Personalised floral tributes may take the form of specific words such as 'Mum' or 'Dad'. More unusual requests to our Funeral Directors have included flowers sculpted to represent a pint of Guinness, a cricket bat, a car and a pigeon. Personalised floral tributes are now seen at around one third of funerals.

Increasingly, mourners are being asked or are choosing to make donations to a specific charity in place of floral tributes. When this happens, the choice of charity often relates to the cause of death. Alternatively, one or more charities are selected which the deceased supported in life. Over half of all funerals we carry out now involve some sort of charitable giving.

# Letting others know

Traditional means of communicating the death and the funeral arrangements continue. For example, local papers are still favoured for both announcements and obituaries. In some areas it is customary to post sympathy notices as well as obituaries in the paper.

In some areas, the funeral arrangements are announced in shops and post offices – or on lamp posts, telegraph poles or in the window of the funeral home.

The internet is beginning to influence communications also. Newspaper websites are being used to announce the death and obituary to a loved one.

There is also an increase in people using social networking websites to let others know that someone has died or communicate the arrangements for the funeral.

Importantly, the internet is also bringing a new dimension to funeral ceremonies, where proceedings are broadcast live or recorded for family and friends unable to attend, who log-in via a secure password-protected website. A few crematoria and woodland burial grounds, including our own, have begun to offer live webcams as part of their service.



*In some areas, they put a black bow on the door of the house where the death occurred. This tends to happen in some of the country areas, but they're few and far between now."*

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# Dressing for the occasion

Dress and decoration are the most visible signs of change, whether it's the custom of wearing black to a funeral, dressing the deceased or decorating the coffin.

Black is still most commonly worn, but other colours are starting to appear. If no specific request is made regarding the colour of dress, then smart-casual or dark coloured clothes (navy blue, for example) are most commonly chosen.

Specific requests not to wear black are becoming more common, some funerals may even stipulate bright clothing for mourners. This is especially popular for funerals of younger people – for example, we've arranged funerals with a pink theme. Some families have also requested that Funeral Directors do not wear black or have asked that they wear a coloured tie.

## Dressing the deceased

Our study identifies that it has become popular to dress a loved one in their own clothes in as many as six in ten funerals. But there is a difference: what is worn is less likely to be everyday clothes and more likely to be chosen to reflect a hobby or job. Requests include wedding dresses, football strips, military uniforms, kilts and bikers' leathers. More unusual requests have included cyclists' lycra, fishermen's waders, divers' wet suits and even a clown outfit.

Sometimes, regrettably, clothing choices have to be turned down in cases of cremation as there are strict rules governing crematoria emissions.



*We have gone back to the older tradition of people being in their own clothes. But now they are in things like football kits and fishing gear.”*

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*The way that people  
dress has changed.  
In the old days it was  
black suits and black  
ties, whereas nowadays  
you get families  
wanting people not  
to wear black.”*

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# Choosing a coffin

'Personalised' coffins in different shapes, colours and materials are starting to appear more frequently. Picture coffins, or materials such as cardboard or willow are becoming more popular.



Willow coffin decorated with flowers.



Picture coffin with aeroplane design.



Football funeral coffin.



Traditional coffin.

## Decorating the coffin

Photographs of the loved one are sometimes placed on or beside the coffin. It has also been known for a montage of photographs to be arranged and displayed during the funeral service.

The coffin may also be painted or decorated with flowers, images, flags or even clothing – for example, tartans are popular in Scotland. More unusual examples have included paintings of a Lancaster Bomber, a Tardis and a yacht. Sometimes messages from the family or friends are also written on the coffin itself.

## Mementos inside the coffin

People may also wish to place mementos inside the coffin, such as pipes and cigarettes, bottles of whisky, photographs, wedding rings, watches, spectacles and mobile phones. However, legislation affecting crematoria emissions means that we may have to remove some items before the cremation and return them to the family.



*There are more people asking for wicker coffins now. It is still not a lot, but certainly more than it used to be.”*



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*There are a lot of different materials that coffins can be made from. We have organised funerals with bamboo and banana leaf coffins... there are also more coffins being made out of recycled materials.”*

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# Carrying the coffin

Historically, before hearses were commonplace, bearers were needed to carry the coffin from the ceremony to the graveside.

As transportation has evolved through the ages, the role of the pallbearer has become more historical than functional. It used to be the norm in many parts of the country for the Funeral Directors' and Pall Bearers to carry the coffin on their shoulders, with the Funeral Director walking a few paces in front – now people increasingly want to carry the coffin themselves where possible. Many consider it a mark of respect for family and friends to bear the coffin, whether carrying the coffin or bearing it on their shoulders.

Family and friends can sometimes be denied this simple homage when local regulations specify that only professional bearers should carry the coffin. Your Funeral Director will be able to provide advice and guidance if you wish to carry the coffin of your loved one.



*Family members like to carry their loved one's coffin, that's happening more and more... they like a bit more involvement."*

*One lady recently requested bearers to all wear Liverpool shirts... they looked quite nice actually because it was like they were all wearing a uniform."*

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*People are making more individual gestures with the coffin nowadays... they do things like line up either side of the church aisle as the coffin is being carried out.”*

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# Woodland funerals

Study has shown that Woodland burial grounds are becoming more popular with those who are looking for an alternative to traditional cemeteries or graveyards. There are currently over 220 woodland burial grounds across the UK and these numbers continue to grow.

Woodland burial grounds are natural settings such as meadows or wooded areas which can offer more beautiful, tranquil resting places. They tend to involve the planting of a natural memorial, such as a tree and the placing of a simple wooden or bronze plaque instead of a traditional headstone. There is also a focus on preserving the natural beauty of the environment and encouraging native wildlife and flowers.

Woodland Burial Grounds offer a complete funeral service, working alongside families to organise personalised and unique woodland funerals. Services can be held in specially built service centres within beautiful grounds that offer either burial, cremated remains scattering or burial of cremated remains.\*



*People are more aware of environmental issues and are actively recycling. It's likely we will see more people choosing woodland burials and environmentally friendly coffins.”*

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## Environmental considerations

As society becomes more aware of environmental issues, we are likely to see an increase in the number of people wanting to arrange funerals, which have a low impact on the environment. Requests for more environmentally friendly coffins manufactured from recycled or responsibly sourced materials are still very much in their infancy but are set to grow.

Coffins accredited by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) are now available, using wood from trees grown in responsibly managed forests.

Materials such as FSC certified paper, Banana Leaf, water-based glue and fast-growing natural willow are increasingly being used to make coffins. Cremated remains caskets and urns are also available in recycled, biodegradable and sustainable materials. There is even the option of having the funeral gown for the deceased made from 100% natural cotton.



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*People sometimes ask  
about woodland or  
meadow-side burial  
grounds because they  
feel it would be in keeping  
with the personality of  
the deceased... ‘dad  
would have wanted  
a green field’...”*

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# The funeral procession

The cortege – the traditional funeral procession, whether on foot or otherwise – is still popular. But our study shows that this is also becoming personalised.

This may be in the planning of the route the cortege is to follow. For example, on the way to the ceremony the cortege may pass a local cricket club, the place where the deceased worked, or another specific location significant to them.

The funeral vehicles chosen may also reflect the life of the deceased. Horse-drawn hearses are popular, including colourful flower displays to adorn the roof of the hearse. In today's funeral processions we've also organised tractors, fire engines, lorries, milk floats, motorbikes – and even pink Cadillacs. These options all reflect a wish to celebrate the person's life, but in the majority of occasions a traditional hearse is still preferred.

## Paging the funeral

Paging the funeral dates back to medieval England when the College of Arms arranged funerals for all the nobility within their trade, and the Head of the College of Arms would walk in front of the cortege as a mark of respect to the deceased. Also, walking was the only way to reach the burial ground in the past, so the undertaker would lead the way in front of a hand-bier, which evolved into a wheeled bier, through to a modern day motor hearse.

Nowadays, the Funeral Director would tend to page the funeral just a short distance, then would continue the drive slowly as a mark of respect and to allow the rest of the cortege to remain together. Very occasionally, walking funerals are performed where family and friends take it in turns to bear the coffin.



A Land Rover hearse provides a unique way to personalise the funeral of a Land Rover enthusiast.



A procession of cyclists creates a unique funeral cortege for a cycling fanatic.



A lorry carrying a loved one for their final journey.



An authentic motorcycle hearse can provide a fitting farewell for a loved one.



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*Sometimes they will ask you to wait a couple of minutes outside the British Legion or their pub and for a lot of the older generation who stayed in a nursing home, their family will often request we go past where they used to live.”*

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*He was a milkman and they wanted him to go on the milk float.”*

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*We carried out a funeral which had a pink coffin, pink hearse, silver limousines and tinsel in the hearse.”*

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# Music and words

If dress and decoration is the most visible sign of change, then choice of music is the most audible. Many people now express a preference for personal favourites or contemporary songs.

Often the music chosen by the family – or specified by the person to be played at their funeral – is light-hearted, often even humorous. The inclusion of religious music is on the decline.

For example, people are increasingly choosing:

- Songs the family associate with the person; such as My Way, Angels, Wind Beneath My Wings, Simply The Best, Danny Boy, If Tomorrow Never Comes, and You Say It Best.
- Music which reflects the person's hobbies; such as themes from Channel 4 horse racing, Countdown and Match of the Day.
- Live music; such as bagpipes, Spanish guitars and jazz bands.

For those wanting personalised music, it is important that music choices be shared with the person leading the funeral beforehand, out of courtesy and to avoid disappointment.

Although many churches and crematoria allow contemporary music, in some instances they may not permit CDs to be played, insisting on organ music. Your Funeral Director will be able to provide advice and guidance about this.

## Speeches and eulogies

When it comes to speeches, the eulogy continues to thrive. In the past this would have been delivered by the religious officiant in the church or chapel, a practice that continues in more traditional funerals.

However, one third of funerals now involve some form of personal input from the people present. Family, friends and work colleagues often speak about the person's life, read poems they may have written, or read out a letter written by the deceased themselves. Although, it must be remembered that sometimes the emotion of the occasion can be too much for some people.\*\*

## Orders of service

In the past, orders of service showed only the name of the person, their date of birth and death and the words of hymns to be sung. Now many include photographs, poetry or stories about the deceased and explicitly refer to the ceremony as a 'celebration' of their life.

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\*\*The Co-operative Funeralcare have published a guide to eulogies called Well Chosen Words, with a preface by the former Poet Laureate, Sir Andrew Motion. Ask your Funeral Director for your free copy.



*I arranged a funeral for an entertainer who died, and when we went to the crematorium they were playing a recording of him singing 'My Way' through the speakers."*

*I think initially people didn't want to step out of the traditional thing, but when you say 'you can have whatever you want', they say 'well he liked this and he liked that, he liked a bit of rock and roll'."*



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*Outdoor services are becoming more popular – people want to have poetry, readings and music outside with nature.”*

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# At the graveside

In no other aspect of the funeral is the contrast between old and new more striking than what happens at the graveside.

The custom of throwing soil or rose petals into the grave lives on throughout the UK, but at the same time, across the country there is a growth in new graveside rituals. These include live music, firework displays, flypasts and the release of balloons, bubbles or doves. Almost anything goes, budget and local regulations permitting.

In some religions, it is custom for men only to be present at the graveside. This custom, although less frequent, is still observed in some areas today.



*Just recently we had a father and son playing musical instruments at the graveside. They played a jazz tune as the deceased was being lowered.”*

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Flowers or petals can be scattered at the graveside.



A balloon, signed by friends, released as part of a funeral ceremony.



Musical instruments played at the graveside can be touching and uplifting.



Brass band playing outside in the church grounds.

# A lasting memory

The cremated remains of a loved one can either be scattered, buried or kept by friends and family – but where they are scattered and how they are stored is changing.

For those who decide to keep the cremated remains, there are an increasing amount of options available. Alongside keeping cremated remains in an urn, people are also choosing to enclose cremated remains in jewellery, to keep cremated remains inside keepsake ornaments or to create a remembrance plot in their own garden.

When it comes to scattering cremated remains, people are giving more thought to the choice of location, looking to make a connection between the place and the person. Cremated remains are often scattered in private ceremonies involving family and friends, and more people are choosing woodland areas or beauty spots with some personal meaning to the deceased.

Although there is nothing in the Cremation Act 1930 to restrict people from scattering cremated remains, official advice is not to scatter on private land without the owner's permission. Some church regulations also prohibit the scattering of cremated remains in the churchyard, although many have arrangements for burying cremated remains instead. Scattering cremated remains in designated locations at sea is legal and can be common among fishing communities.



Memorial benches are becoming increasingly available in crematoria and woodland burial grounds.



Traditional headstones are still a popular way to commemorate a loved one.



A memorial tree planted within a natural setting.

A photograph of a wooden park bench in a park during autumn. The ground is covered in fallen yellow and orange leaves. In the background, there are trees with vibrant autumn foliage. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Wanting to mark the presence of a loved one with a headstone or memorial is still very common. Some crematoria have embraced change and now offer a larger range of memorial options for family and friends to choose from. There has also been an increase in the popularity of planting or sponsoring memorial trees over recent years, which can be seen as a more natural alternative to traditional memorials.

The internet is also changing the way that people remember their loved ones, with 'virtual' memorials becoming more and more popular. A website in memory of the person, often personalised with music, pictures and videos, allows friends and family to contribute with messages and updates. These sites may be DIY or hosted by a specialist firm or charity.



*There has been a big increase in memorials – crematoria and cemeteries are now actually providing more and more options, small graves, trees, benches, plaques, ...”*

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# Conclusion

Without any doubt, funeral customs in the UK are changing. It's a slow but steady process.

The bereaved are starting to know more about the options that are available to them and are more willing to exercise their right to personalise a funeral.

Constraints on what may be offered do remain, whether they are imposed by law, religious or local authorities. However, our study shows that the bereaved now have much greater freedom than in the past to do something different and special in celebrating the uniqueness of their loved one.

# Contacts

For details of your nearest funeral home please contact:

*Client Relations*

Tel: 0800 454 552

Website: [www.centralengland.coop](http://www.centralengland.coop)

*Funeral Plan enquiries*

Tel: 0800 454 552

Other useful contacts:

*The Co-operative Legal Services –  
Probate & Estate Administration*

Tel: 0800 603 5558

Website: [www.co-operative.co.uk/legalservices](http://www.co-operative.co.uk/legalservices)

*Department of Social Security/  
Department for Work and Pensions*

Tel: 020 7712 2171

Website: [www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk)

*Cruse Bereavement Care*

Tel: 020 8940 4818

Website: [www.crusebereavement.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavement.org.uk)

*The National Association of Funeral Directors*  
618 Warwick Road, Solihull, West Midlands B91 1AA.

Tel: 0121 711 1636

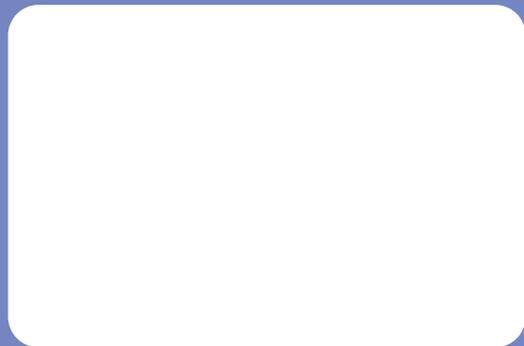
Website: [www.nafd.org.uk](http://www.nafd.org.uk)

# Our promise

We are here to help you with the highest level of individual care, informed guidance and support at your time of need.



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**Registered Office:** Central House, Hermes Road, Lichfield, Staffordshire, WS13 6RH 01543 414140  
Funeral care line on 0800 454 552 All information is correct at the time of publication

The **co-operative** funeralcare



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IN PEOPLE**

