

CEMETERY MANAGEMENT 1939-89

Early career history

Could you describe your early career, before you started working for a local authority.

How did you come to start working for a local authority?

At what stage did you start working within a cemetery/crematoria sphere?

Could you describe the first cemetery /crematoria 'set up' you first started work in?

How did you feel about working in that sector initially?

Career progression

How did your career progress, once you started working in the sector?

What was your first job as a supervisor/registrar in charge of a cemetery?

What was your job description?

Could you describe that first cemetery?

- staffing arrangements
- cemetery set up
- crematorium?
- management and reporting structure.

Describe what it was like to be a cemetery manager within a local authority.

- local authority commitment to training
- imputed professionalism
- attitude of departments you dealt with (eg Parks, Borough Engineers)

Did you feel that the job had a distinctive character?

Managing cemeteries: early history

How were cemeteries managed - who had overall strategic responsibility in your authority?

Tell me about the cemeteries you first had responsibility for - how if at all were they different to cemeteries now?

What were the big management issues you were dealing with?

Did you get involved with memorial clearance, lawn cemetery development?

Why did you/your authority favour the lawn aesthetic?

Public response to changes

Institute of Burial and Cremation Administration

What about the IBCA - when did you first become involved with the Institute?

- branch role?
- any national role?
- training for diploma
- teaching on diploma

Would you say the IBCA had a big influence on the way the sector developed?

Key changes in regulation and policy

What were you were the key changes in regulation that you had to deal with?

Were there any regulations that you felt should have changed, but didn't?

Changing funerary practice: an overview

Accounting for the shift towards cremation.

Any changes in the proportion of people:

- opting for limited memorial options eg Book of Remembrance
- traditional options (eg memorials with kerbsets)
- unpurchased/common graves
- purchased/private graves

Overall, do you think the public defined what happened, or were cemetery managers themselves defining funerary practice?

- any tension between the needs of bereaved and practicalities of management

In summary

Do you feel that cemetery management itself has developed *as a profession* over the period?

What do you feel were the biggest influences on changes to the way cemeteries were managed: alterations to local authority organisation/administration; development of cemetery management as a career/profession; changes in funerary practice?

End of Award Report

Burial Policy and the Management of Death in England, 1939-79

BACKGROUND

Both the history of death and sociology relating to mortality have been engaged in similar debates in characterising changes to burial culture in the twentieth century. At the heart of this debate is understanding the distinctive nature and chronology of a shift in attitudes that certainly took place in the fifty years that roughly span the 1920s/30s through to the 1970s/80s. This change became evident by the 1960s. Geoffrey Gorer's study showed a decline in what might be deemed essentially Victorian mourning practices, for example in the wearing of black, and the sequestration of the mourner for a specified period (Gorer, 1965). Gorer considered that new trends in funerary ritual reflected a modern societal imperative to obscure matters relating to mortality. The concomitant 'taboo' has been taken by many commentators as an over-arching assessment of death in the post-war period. Sociologists – principally Walter – have been engaged with an assessment of an 'end' to the taboo, and interest also has been taken in defining the characteristics of contemporary, postmodern funerary ritual (Walter, 1994; Hockey *et al.*, 2001).

Historiography on cemeteries has reflected the broader patterns of this debate, and has described a dichotomy contrasting the Victorian cemetery and its modern counterpart. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Victorian cemetery was reviewed largely within the Marxist historiographical tradition, in being interpreted as an institution that was significant in its ability to reproduce class inequalities (Parker Pearson, 1982). At that time there was no analogous reference to the modern cemetery. During the later 1980s and 1990s, as re-evaluation of Victorian material culture gathered pace, the nineteenth-century cemetery was 'rediscovered.' An associated rhetorical device was to decry the aesthetics of modern cemetery landscapes as sterile and unimaginative, reflecting a societal wish to disengage with the facts of mortality. This rhetoric has tended to stifle even recent cemetery research, which has questioned the ability of contemporary cemeteries to offer emotional consolation to the bereaved (Worpole, 2003).

With regard to death in the twentieth century, many contentions have been proposed on the basis of limited study. The organisation of burial is an extremely eloquent strand of research, and can elucidate opinions and attitudes towards the corpse, the afterlife, commemoration and memorialisation. Managing the cemetery – a component of the wider administration of death – creates a discourse of 'conversations, behaviour, manuals of procedure, text books, death certificates and the like' (Prior, 1989, 200). Indeed, the very architecture of the cemetery 'gives expression to society's most fundamental beliefs about death and the hereafter' (*ibid.* 111). It is for this reason that a study of burial policy and management constitutes a valuable starting point for drawing together sources - oral, material and documentary – in order to reconstruct post-war death culture.

OBJECTIVES

The overall objectives of the research were to examine English attitudes towards death in the period 1939-79 by exploring changes in burial policy. There were three

subsidiary themes under this heading, which added complexity to the need to provide a basic narrative of change.

i. The development of burial policy in 'modern' society

During much of the twentieth century – indeed, until the mid-1960s – the disposal of the dead was dominated by the interment of full body remains. Interest in cremation was slow to develop in the years before the Second World War; however, cremation rates accelerated rapidly after the conflict ended. The managers of cemeteries within local authorities were faced with the task of accommodating this new method, and with criticism of the use of cemeteries that often had its basis in highly organised cremation propaganda campaigns.

ii. The impact of World War II on burial practice and policy

The advent of the Second World War brought a very immediate policy imperative: devising a strategy for dealing with the mass fatalities that were anticipated as being a consequence of aerial bombardment. At the beginning of the war, all local authorities that had responsibility for Air Raid Precaution had to adopt measures relating to 'Civilian Deaths due to War Operations.' The measures sanctioned interference with the highly personal, family matter of burial and funerary ritual.

iii. Professionalism and changes in burial policy

Commentators on the twentieth century management of death have recognised a Foucauldian arc, in which interventions by medical and other statutory professionals increase at the expense of traditional community and family based practices. For example, the rise of the professional funeral director has been described, with the contemporaneous decline in the use of the informal 'layer out' (Howarth, 1997; Adams, 1993). Alongside other officers within local authorities, cemetery managers reviewed their standing as professionals, and sought to increase the status of their work accordingly. The desire to appear 'professional' was often expressed through the exercising of control over the cemetery landscape, a measure that could introduce conflict with families over commemorative behaviour.

METHODS

The research envisaged a two-stage research method. The first comprised a study of socio-economic factors providing a context for the primary research. The second related to the development of burial policy at the local, national and professional levels.

Broad, cultural contexts: secondary sources

In retrospect, one of the difficulties in conducting the research has been the dearth of useful related secondary studies. As a consequence, little time was spent in this phase of the research although as writing continues it is probable that further incursions will be made into relevant literature. Hockey related a list of factors deemed valuable to a study of changing death ritual including religious belief and secularisation; social and geographic mobility; consumerism and environmentalism; and changing conceptions of home and hygiene (Hockey, 2001). In practice – and perhaps too far in retrospect - the areas where further secondary information was required related to aesthetics and modernity; developments in local government

organisation; a history of stone masonry; income and expenditure material; and very specifically a history of the cremation movement. This latter gap has only recently been filled with four new texts published on cremation and cremation history in late 2005.

Burial policy at the local, national and professional levels

In contrast to the sometimes patchy information available through secondary sources, the diversity and richness of primary material was in some cases overwhelming. Decisions had to be made to abandon or move on from particularly rich sources of information in order to meet broader research objectives, although there were some cases where there was perhaps less information available than was anticipated.

National

The research aimed to review debates on burial and cremation at a national level, and that took place within two easily searchable sources: *Hansard* and *The Times*. Both these sources proved to be less useful than might have been anticipated. There was limited debate relating to the passage of relevant legislation in *Hansard*, and the *Times* revealed little in the way of ongoing debate on any matter relating to disposal of the dead in the post-war period. News items tended to be restricted to the verbatim quotation of speeches by Lord Horder (of the Cremation Society) and the opening of crematoria. There was no associated editorial comment. There was some indication that reference to more popular 'tabloid' press may have proved to be more useful but it would have been much more time-consuming and expensive since this work would have to have been completed at the Newspaper Archive in Colindale.

There was some compensation in the availability of material at the National Archives at Kew. Indeed, there was insufficient time to exhaust the records relating to policy on disposal of the dead that was spread over a wide range of governmental department archives. However, time was taken to interrogate available documentation relating to emergency measures for civilian war deaths. It is clear that further substantial primary material relating to death in the period of the Second World War is available, and would merit extended study.

Local

Local studies were completed at Hull, Leeds, York and Bradford with regard to reviewing documents on burial and cremation-related matters. In all places, detailed archives were available on the war period, and proved to be sufficient in themselves to complete a monograph on emergency measures. However, material relating to management in the post-war period was patchy and did not amount to coherent narratives. Better information on service delivery at a local level became available through the oral interviews (see below).

Professional

By far the richest source of information was material relating to cemetery management directly. The (now named) Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management was highly organised. The Institute held an annual conference, which was organised jointly with the Federation of Burial Authorities. After each conference, a detailed report recorded – verbatim – the papers given, questions at the end of each paper, and (when they were held) 'Brains Trust'-style question and answer

sessions. This material essentially represented the industry talking 'to itself' and debating issues that were of immediate relevance. Matters included the principals and procedures relating to the introduction of lawn cemeteries; the status of cemetery management within local authorities; the devising of new rituals relating to cremation; and associated matters such as town planning, local government finance, and difficulties with labour shortages. Supplementary material was available in the quarterly *Journal* which reported on branch meetings of the Institute, reproduced talks, 'reviewed' cemeteries and crematoria, and provided some editorial comment on related matters.

In addition, oral history interviews were completed with nine cemetery managers. The interviewees were contacted through the membership secretary of the Institute, and were chosen to represent a range of experiences. Many of those interviewed came into post either before or immediately after the Second World War. The interview traced the respondents' career path, and elicited opinion on funerary practices in the period before 1979. The interviews were also useful in reflecting the experience of working within a local authority more generally. The material is particularly detailed and will inform writing on professionalisation and cemetery management.

FINDINGS

There are two principal outcomes from the research. The first is the formulation of a basic narrative relating to burial policy in the period 1939-79 as is evident in the material collected. The second relates to the elucidation of key themes within the research objectives. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

A basic narrative of burial policy

By the beginning of the Second World War, cemetery provision in England had settled into a system of multiple providers. A statutory responsibility for providing cemeteries had never been established, and in 1939 larger local authorities (such as municipal councils) and smaller town and parish councils had sites. In addition, burial boards were still in operation, and could include some very high-profile organisations such as the Headingley-cum-Burley Burial Board at Leeds, which was for much of this period viewed as a centre of high repute, and was run by Walter Pearson who had a substantial impact on the profession. The National Association of Cemetery Superintendents had been created in 1913 to further the interests of its members, and principally promote good practice in the administrative aspects of cemetery managers. The Association was, very early in its history, concerned to promote the status of cemetery management.

In 1902 the Cremation Act belatedly legalised the practice of cremation, although crematoria had already been built in Woking, Manchester and Glasgow (Jalland, 1999). Interest in this new form of disposal was slow in forming. However, the inter-war period saw continued and substantial investment by the Cremation Society in widespread propaganda, which contrasted the modern hygienic nature of cremation with burial which, it was claimed, was excessive in its land use and carried public health consequences through possible contamination of the water supply. In 1918, crematoria in Great Britain numbered fourteen, and carried out 0.3 per cent of all disposals. By 1939, 54 crematoria had been opened, and 3.5 per cent of disposals were cremations. The ownership and management of crematoria in the very early years was dominated by the activity of groups of local cremationists lobbying to set up facilities in their area, as was the case in, for example, Liverpool and Darlington

(1896 and 1901 respectively). The first municipal crematorium was set up in Hull in 1901 and more followed in 1902 (City of London) and 1905 (Leeds, Sheffield, Bradford). However, a close relationship remained between the Cremation Society and crematorium management. In 1923, the Federation of Cremation Authorities was established following a joint conference between cremation authorities and the Cremation Society. The Federation was essentially the 'executive' arm of the Society, working to ensure that day-to-day management of crematoria took place according to Society precepts, and taking an active role in promoting cremation.

However, during the inter-war period, burial remained by far the majority method of disposal, and the continued popular attachment to interment – often termed 'sentimental' during debate on the issue – could not be underestimated. Fortunately, cemetery managers were not generally resistant to cremation. Indeed, from 1932 the Association usually held its annual conference jointly with the British Federation of Cremation Authorities, and in 1933 changed its name to accommodate Cemetery *and* Crematorium Superintendents. Furthermore, it was clear that the cremation movement needed the full co-operation of the cemetery profession in order to advance its case. During much of the first half of the twentieth century, local authorities found the cost of crematoria building prohibitive and – in the early years certainly – considered them a risky venture in terms of public demand. A means of mitigating the risk was to build crematoria within existing cemeteries. This strategy reduced costs since the land was already in authority ownership, and would mitigate the 'strangeness' of this new form of disposal by offering its provision in a familiar context. The vast majority of the early municipal crematoria were built within existing, long-standing cemeteries.

An understanding of the history of the lawn cemetery aesthetic perforce rests on *definition*. There was perhaps only one instance in the pre-war period of a local authority seeking to open a purely lawned cemetery: this was the Saffron Hill Cemetery in Leicester in 1929. However, indications are that this move was so unpopular locally that the authority had to revise its policy. The authority had in all probability aimed to establish a cemetery where monument size was restricted, body mounds were not allowed and the use of kerbsets was prohibited. These latter two features had created substantial difficulties for managers seeking to reduce the complexity and expense of keeping the grass short. The failure of Saffron Hill Cemetery was of minor consideration in the history of lawn cemetery, since for the most part this landscape style was introduced through gradual, piecemeal measures. In the early period, lawn cemetery areas were created through changes to existing cemetery landscapes – levelling mounds and removing excessive grave furniture. The laying out of lawned extensions and new cemeteries set out on the lawn principle were became commonplace only after the Second World War.

There were a number of factors that pushed for the introduction of the lawn cemetery. First, there was dissatisfaction with the maintenance standards in existing Victorian cemeteries. These landscapes were nothing less than chaotic, a situation exacerbated by the tradition of leaving sometimes two or more glassed 'immortelles' – domed ceramic flowers – on the grave. Second, the studied individuality of Victorian memorial design, created an aesthetic that was deemed increasingly archaic in the 'modern' world, where shifts in design began to favour clean lines and brisk uniformity. Third, Victorian expenditure was thought to be insincere and status-obsessed, reflecting more a culture of class divide than a genuine response to the death of a loved one. Finally, the merits of a simpler, less ostentatiously individual approach had been underlined by the deliberately egalitarian design of war cemeteries. The work of the Imperial War Graves Commission was widely admired,

and there was a strong connection between the IWGC and the cemetery management profession.

By the advent of the Second World War, an appreciation of the merits of lawn sections was widespread. Strong cremation propaganda had induced local authorities to review cemetery maintenance policies, so that new crematoria located within what had been Victorian sites would not look so far out of place. A new ideal was considered to be something similar to a garden of remembrance, where there would be limited evidence of individual graves in a controlled garden setting, and where the natural features would be so orchestrated as to create a feeling of serenity.

In February 1939, the Government published the Ministry of Health Circular 1779, which directed those local authorities with a responsibility for Air Raid Precautions to take special measures to secure emergency burial provision. Although it was anticipated that the majority of deaths would be dealt with by the family and be interred in existing family graves, provision was to be made in the event of mass casualties, and in instances where victims had no family to arrange a funeral. A close review of local responses to and implementation of the provisions demonstrated conflict between the desire of the State to limit the resources – both labour and materials – afforded to burial of the victims of bombardment, and political imperatives to present civilian deaths as 'heroic'. Further tension was evident in the unwillingness of some local authorities to implement regulations that called for the use of shrouds in place of coffins, and mass burial trenches. As experience of bombardment intensified during the Blitz months, the Government increased the pressure on authorities to submit to the regulations. In some locations where experience of air raids was particularly heavy – including parts of London, Hull, Sheffield, Coventry, and Liverpool – mass public funerals were arranged. The public funerals made full use of the Union Jack, which was often draped over the coffins and at the grave, and processions including military and civic personnel. However, despite the patriotic rhetoric the burials bore too many reminders of the hated pauper funeral, with its anonymous interment in mass graves. After the war, some pressure was placed on the Government to pay for memorials at the site of massed civilian graves, and limited funds were finally made available in 1948. By this time, however, the desire to remember the war had diminished.

During the years following the war, further effort was given to alterations of cemetery landscapes: indeed, the lawn cemetery had become the standard to which all managers aspired. There was also a rapid growth in demand for cremation. Between 1945 and 1950 in England and Wales, the proportion of deaths that led to cremations more than doubled (from 7.8 per cent to 15.9 per cent of disposals), although the number of crematoria remained the same, at 58. The freeing up of loans and funding for local authorities to build crematoria from the early 1950s led to the building of 126 new crematoria. The task of cemetery management had become inextricably linked to that of crematoria superintendence, and within the profession the highest status was afforded officers whose remit covered both forms of disposal. From the 1950s, the rationale for continuing to offer burial provision became lost as the profession began to build its status around cremation. This highly technical activity, with its requirement to build expensive plant and the concomitant creation of modern, smart gardens of remembrance, could attract a degree of civic pride that had been lost in the deterioration of the older Victorian cemetery landscapes. Indeed, it was increasingly the case that these sites were deemed problematic.

The period from the 1960s through to the early 1980s saw the decline and closure of what had been high-status, previously joint-stock company cemeteries. Over the years, as their income had declined, the standards of maintenance had failed and in a number of instances local authorities had become obliged to purchase the sites and effect some measure of improvement. Policy responses generally reflected the overall tendency to 'tidy' away memorials and introduce wider lawned sections. These cemeteries were to be reinvented as park areas, with evidence of their burial function – as far as possible – removed. In 1977, the Local Authorities Cemeteries Order introduced regulations to facilitate the removal of memorials and kerbsets. As with much burial legislation, the statute followed rather than led trends in cemetery development, as many authorities had already sought local acts permitting the clearance of grave furniture.

Some themes

The history of burial policy in the second half of the twentieth century adds substantially to an understanding of twentieth century death culture. In the interwar period, the lawn cemetery represented an understated, stoic, and emotionally even response to mortality. However, this rationale was much less evident in the postwar period, and it may be that the inexorable rise in cremation rates undermined the desire to consider idealised cemetery design in any great detail. This shift in the method of disposal makes commentary on societal views of the centrality of the corpse to funerary ritual. The lawn cemetery minimised any reminder of the physical presence of the dead; the later development of the 'memorial lawn' – a cemetery in which only horizontal plaques were allowed – constituted an even more extreme attempt to eliminate death from the landscape. It is important to note, however, that this latter development was widely resisted by the public and very few such landscapes survive in the UK. Despite a high level of interest in cremation, and despite restrictions in cemetery practice, the grave continued to carry emotional significance for many bereaved people, perhaps more so as the lawn cemetery made the private grave, for the first time, affordable to families on lower incomes.

Changes in the technicalities relating to disposal of the dead introduced the need to invent new funerary rituals. The cemetery and crematorium manager was a key agent in this process. It is important to note that the relationship between cemetery and crematorium managers and the public they served was exceptionally close. Managers frequently commented on their own profession as being more attuned to a vocation. Many worked in offices located in a cemetery or crematorium: frequent attendance at funerals was common, and managers often took time to walk bereaved people around the site as they chose a burial location. Giving consolation to people at a highly stressful and emotional time was integral to the work of the superintendent; further, managers tended to forge ongoing relationships with bereaved people who regularly revisited graves, perhaps for decades after the death. These municipal officers had the capacity both to reflect and to guide funerary practice. Cremation required the wholesale invention of ritual activities - for example, in the construction and use of space within cremation chapels, in the final disposal of cremated remains, and in memorial practice in both Gardens of Remembrance and Books of Remembrance. From the 1930s onwards, and particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, the industry exercised a high degree of professionalized control over funerary behaviour.

In broad overview terms, it is possible to state that a significant shifts in attitude towards death took place and developed in the years 1939-79. Although changes in trends were evident in the inter-war period, these accelerated rapidly in the decades

immediately following the Second World War. Indeed, it is possible that the impact of the Second World War on attitudes towards death has been largely under-estimated. The inter-war period can be characterized largely in terms of a *continuation* of burial tradition: after death, it was still commonplace for the body to be kept at home until the time of the funeral; the ongoing use of horse-drawn hearses meant that funerals progressed through the streets slowly and highly visibly; burial was by far the dominant means of disposing of the dead; the majority of families aimed to mark their graves using some kind of memorial – the mass-production of memorials and their simpler design increased their affordability for many families; and visits to the cemetery were a well-established routine: hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors poured through the gates at weekends. However, the culture of death had begun to be challenged by elite commentators who were particularly critical of Victorian funerary practice. The Second World War accelerated change. The desire to deal with funerary matters *communally* had diminished substantially; and unease with the physicality of death had created a distance between the family and the corpse.

ACTIVITIES

Findings from the research have been disseminated at conferences and seminars, and also through the various formal and informal cemetery networks in which the Principal Investigator is involved. In terms of conferences, papers have been presented to the principal conference on death, dying and disposal which includes academics from a wide range of disciplines (*The Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal*, Bath, 2005); to historians specialising in death-related subjects (*A Day of Death*, York, 2005); practitioners (Annual Conference of the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Managers, Harrogate 2004 and 2005); and the Society for Historic Archaeology (A principally US conference, relocated to York in 2005). A further paper has been accepted by the British Sociological Association for presentation in its annual conference in 2006.

The Principal Investigator is fully engaged with a number of key networks that draw together civil servants, local authority practitioners, academics and conservation bodies on the issue of cemeteries. A further useful connection has been serving as a member of the advisory group to the ESRC-funded project 'Where have all the ashes gone?', based at the University of Sheffield. Since the start of the project, findings relating to the research have been steadily disseminated through those networks.

OUTPUTS

There have so far been two principal written outputs, plus some subsidiary smaller articles in specialist journals. 'Managing "Civilian War Deaths due to War Operations": Some Experiences in Yorkshire' was published by *Twentieth Century British History* in 2004. 'Lawn cemeteries: the emergence of a new landscape of death' will be published in *Urban History* in May 2006. Additional writing has included 'Managing "Civilian Deaths due to War Operations"' in *History Today*, February 2005, and 'Managing "Civilian Deaths due to War Operations": the lessons of World War II' in *The Journal of the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management* in Spring 2005. A further and key output has been written revisions to English Heritage material relating to cemetery conservation: a revised *Paradise Preserved* by English Heritage will be published in 2006; in addition, an English Heritage *Technical Advice Note* also reflects findings from the work.

IMPACTS

In terms of impact, it is clear that the research has considerably expanded an understanding of the meanings of the lawn cemetery, and underlined the need to protect this landscape style. The research fed fully into the production of the Conservation Management Plan for the City of London Cemetery, which aims to provide a template for management plans by other authorities. In establishing a rationale for the lawn cemetery, the research led towards a fuller appreciation of the value of this landscape type and its place in the history of cemetery development.

FUTURE RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The research has established a number of future research priorities, in revealing as yet untapped sources of material, and themes for future research. The research priorities touch on largely historical subjects. The priorities have been ordered under two headings.

Cemetery and cremation history

- * There is a need for further work linking the histories of burial and cremation in the post-war period, to review the considerable material on cremation held at the University of Durham.
- * In particular, there has been little work on the cremation 'Code of Practice' which set an ethical standard for the profession, and which has been subject to a number of shifts in interpretation and practice.
- * Further work needs to be completed on the demographics and economics relating to the use of the lawn cemetery, to test whether it did indeed introduce a 'democratic,' egalitarian option, in being an affordable means of disposal.

Death history

- * Themes for further study should include the impact of the prospect of atomic war on attitudes towards death in the post-war period. It is possible that the Cold War had a greater effect on attitudes towards mortality than the Second World War itself.
- * Searches need to take place to establish any sources for oral histories of funerary activity in the post-war period.
- * Study of death in the postwar period should encompass 'populist' material, such as tabloid newspapers.

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