

Woodland burials... a natural end

Dr Hannah Rumble sheds some light on Woodland burials, a natural end more in tune with the cycles of life and death.

Admittedly, many of us don't like to discuss death. So, let me bring in a touch of nature to soften the topic just a little! Currently about 207 natural burial sites can be found in Britain, mostly located in England. 1993 saw the first natural burial provision at Carlisle cemetery which now exists in many countries throughout the world, all following Britain's example. Generically referred to as 'natural', 'green' or 'woodland' burial, the difference between a natural burial ground and a conventional place of burial starts with the corpse not being embalmed. A shroud or biodegradable coffin (of which there are many and varied types) is used and placed in a grave that is unmarked. If any grave marker is used it is usually biodegradable also. But, whilst natural burial is defined by what happens below ground, it is what happens above ground that sets the image of natural burial provision: from wild flower meadows to establishing woodland or small copses in rural settings. Whatever the season, nature can touch us like nothing else: a fact that is capitalised upon in natural burial provision and by the bereaved.

ecological conservation

Natural burial grounds are places of burial, but they are also established as places deemed to contribute to ecological conservation for the benefit of the living. What makes natural burial so attractive for those who choose it, is the fact that a natural burial site has more than just a mortuary purpose. This is encapsulated in some providers' ambitions for making natural burial sites protected ecological places to be managed by environmental or wildlife trusts, once these burial sites become full.

Some natural burial grounds also successfully act as a contemporary therapeutic landscape for mourners, because the visible presence of the dead is often minimal in comparison to a cemetery or crematorium. This creates the opportunity for

the bereaved to visit the natural burial ground without the sole purpose of grave visiting. Rather, people can simply walk around the burial ground, walk their dog, go bird spotting, have a picnic or read, as many often do.

I have certainly found during my research that natural burial is an attractive new option for a mobile society, in which many people feel they have a diminished sense of belonging to a particular place. For those painfully aware that their next of kin is widely dispersed, natural burial sites often make sense as it takes away the obligation of headstone maintenance and grave visiting. Moreover, be it a woodland setting, a former set-aside arable field developed into an overgrown meadow, or a copse surrounded by landscape vistas, a defining characteristic is that these sites 'naturalise' what is essentially a burial ground. It is this fact, coupled with being buried without the obligations that come with a headstone or marked grave, which fosters natural burial's popular appeal. Moreover, there is a pervasive view shared by those who choose natural burial that this is a more pleasant and cathartic place for the bereaved to visit, should they choose to do so.

healing and renewal

Winter weather can bring its challenges for visits however, due to the effects of the season upon the landscape. Leaves fall from trees, as do visitor numbers to natural burial grounds. The reason being that regardless of the season, a traditional cemetery always has something to distract a visitor, in addition to the natural landscape (e.g. headstones, memorabilia, and plastic flowers); whereas there can be very little to observe in a natural burial site in winter. Natural burial harnesses pre-existing cultural ideas linking 'nature' with healing and renewal. The focus is the propagation of new life, which although it is difficult to see or feel when out and about in winter, it is still occurring below the soil. The comfort and security offered by 'nature' to bereaved visitors at a natural burial site resides in the symbolic potential of woodland, flowers and trees. Especially, as they generate life



from their own decay. It is this dynamic potential for renewal that captures the imaginations of natural burial supporters.

Conceptually at least, natural burial is another example of our imaginative creativity in dealing with the changes and insecurities posed by death. By mirroring the qualities bestowed upon woodland and trees, a corpse placed in a biodegradable coffin in a natural burial site symbolically propagates life from its decomposition. Ultimately natural burial grounds are places where life is given to death. "It's a comfort," a widow I met at her husband's natural burial claims. "It's the continuity of seeing things go on," she points out, "you know, it makes dying just like leaves falling off a tree. It's all...circular...isn't it?"...

Dr Hannah Rumble is the co-author of *Natural Burial: Traditional - Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation*, which has just been published by Continuum and she teaches in the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath. www.drhannahrumble.com

further information...

For independent funeral advice on dealing with death naturally, visit: www.naturaldeath.org.uk

The Association of Natural Burial Grounds (ANBG) have a list of natural burial sites which are run in line with their code of conduct. To find out more visit: www.naturaldeath.co.uk/anbg

If you're looking for a greener approach to grievance, the Association of Green Funeral Directors can help: www.greenfd.org.uk

Why not use willow? There are eco-friendly coffin options to explore: www.winterwillow.org.uk

A full list of registered natural burial woodlands and meadows can be found on googlemaps.



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