

Information on Coffins and Alternatives

INFORMATION

The dead have been buried in a variety of ways over the centuries. In pre-Christian times, the body may have been naked and laid in a stone “cist”. Progressively, a desire to cover the body and prevent it coming into contact with the soil developed. The wealthy moved towards wood and even metal coffins, leaving the poor to shrouds. For a long period, the government decreed that wool be used in order to help the wool trade. The poor could have their bodies placed in the parish coffin, which was carried to the graveside, where the body was removed and lowered into the grave. The same coffin was re-used in this way for decades.

The Victorian period saw the general use of individual and privately purchased coffins, made in oak and elm and often heavily ornamented. As hardwoods became more expensive, cheaper materials superseded them.

The standard coffin currently used by funeral directors is made of chipboard with a good quality veneer, which effectively makes the coffin appear that it has been constructed from solid wood.

The nameplate, handles and inner linings are all made of artificial materials, mainly plastic. These coffins are used for both burial and cremation. It is evident that many people perceive these coffins as composed of real wood, and the plastic handles as metal.

When used for cremation, chipboard coffins, MDF mouldings and plastic fittings cause the majority of the small amount of pollutant emissions that arise. It must be also appreciated that the manufacture of chipboard uses formaldehyde, which is not considered to be environmentally friendly. Coffins of wood and other natural material such as bamboo and wicker are available.

Many comments are made about coffins, which demonstrate that the public are uninformed about these issues. Consequently, it is suggested that crematoria are cremating, and thereby wasting, vast quantities of “wood”. As explained above, the wood is, in most cases, chipboard.

It has been suggested in some quarters that a “re-usable” coffin could be used for cremation and burial. This is a return to the Parish coffin concept mentioned above but it would now offer important environmental and cost benefits. A product to fulfil this need is currently being developed. This would consist of an attractive outer casket, which would contain a bio-degradable cardboard coffin. This coffin would be withdrawn from the outer casket following the funeral ceremony and cremated or buried. At no time would the coffin or the body be disturbed. The outer casket would be repeatedly used in this way.

The reason why a re-usable option has not previously been developed is unclear. In the past, professionals in the funeral business have suggested that such schemes are undignified, lack commercial viability, or that there is no “demand”. These comments are rarely substantiated and generally reflect personal opinion.

Islington and Camden Cemetery Services can provide information of the choices of coffins and alternatives available in order that a choice can be made based on your own particular needs and beliefs.

The coffin is probably the most symbolic and central item of the funeral. It can be the final and most telling statement after a person has died. Unless a choice of coffin or alternative is easily available, the deceased and bereaved are unable to express their needs or philosophy. The choice should allow for a range of containers from the ostentatious through to the simple. The ostentatious could include a coffin crafted in the shape of a car for a motor enthusiast, or hand carved in natural wood by a joiner, to last a few hundred years in the soil.

The bereaved have the right to choose from a selection of coffins ranging from American style caskets and ornate coffins to those made of wicker or cardboard.

The coffin, of any type, can be personalised to reflect personal interests e.g. gardener, fisherman or

football fan. The artistic options are individual; require skills and time, all elements that are generally missing with the current funeral arrangements. A wider range of coffins is becoming apparent and is indicative of changing attitudes to the needs of the bereaved.

Other options have developed in recent years. In 1994, three manufacturers of biodegradable (cardboard) coffins arose and some funeral directors, crematoria (and potentially cemeteries) are offering these products. This move was in response to the environmental burial schemes opening around the country, although these coffins were quickly utilised for traditional burial and cremation. Since 1994, many more suppliers of alternatives such as wicker and bamboo coffins have emerged. Little research has been done, although findings in Europe suggest that "cardboard" coffins offer a significant reduction in pollutant emissions arising from cremation, which could be due to the fact that no plastic is used in the construction. In addition, the cardboard coffin may reduce what many people see as the waste of resources, due to cremating standard coffins. This benefit has yet to be proven, and would probably require evidence of low wood pulp and high recycled paper content in the cardboard used. Nonetheless, the cardboard coffin immediately offered the advantages of wider choice, lower cost and bio-degradable benefits when used for burial. Most cardboard coffins are rigid, carry well and retain any potential leakage of body or embalming fluid that may arise. Charter members are encouraged to avoid a design that could allow leakage of body fluid.

Some people rapidly labelled cardboard coffins "cheap" and lacking in "dignity". This, of course, is a matter of opinion and where a person requires ostentation, the cardboard coffin is not an option. The word dignity is defined as "true worth" and where a person has a belief in protecting the environment, or in having a humble or modest funeral, then the cardboard coffin has true worth to that person, and they should be given the choice. An added advantage is that cardboard coffins can be painted attractively, or personalised, by an artist or by the family themselves. Paint can be extremely flammable and some crematoria may restrict this option, because of flashback when the coffin is charged into the cremator.

It is worth noting that water based paint does not pose this problem. Also, where the box shape, or cardboard finish is felt to be upsetting visually, it is a simple matter to cover the coffin with a pall. This is a velvet type cloth, often with a gold braid edge, traditionally used in the past to cover coffins. These are often available from funeral directors or may

be provided by crematoria or cemeteries, for use at a funeral. Alternatively, home made palls, patchwork quilts or similar could be used, provided they are large enough.

Another recently developed “green” option is the burial shroud. This consists of a board, upon which the body is laid, the whole being wrapped in a large piece of woven, soft, wool cloth. The shroud is sold with black, pure cotton ropes which are attached and used by four or six bearers. The shroud is suitable for all forms of burial, but not for cremation. Wool is not mandatory and any natural material could be used.

If you are arranging a funeral and you are unable to obtain a coffin, we can advise suppliers of bio-degradable coffins.

If you wish to make your own coffin or container, we can advise on suitable materials, design and dimensions. Other materials that are bio-degradable may be ideal for containing a body. Plaited willow, bamboo or straw are possibilities.

As a rule, coffins for burial should be constructed to the smallest size possible, as this reduces the size of the grave excavation and improves safety margins. Smaller and thereby lighter coffins also reduce the weight carried by the bearers, which may reduce physical risks posed by manual handling. For cremation, the design, construction and materials used in the coffin must be such that it minimises possible emissions of pollutants and the use of fossil fuels. It is important to note that the manufacturer of a coffin, whether a commercial concern or a private individual, has a “duty of care” to those who will subsequently be involved with it. Obviously, it is necessary to ensure that it is strong enough to hold the body whilst being carried. Less obviously, if varnishes or oil based paints are used, these could cause a flashback when the coffin is placed into a pre-heated cremator.

The Federation of British Cremation Authorities (FBCA), which represents a large proportion of cremation authorities in the U.K., issued a directive on coffin design. This prohibits the use of materials such as PVC, pitch or zinc, which pollute the atmosphere. It is important to consider the explosion or pollutant impact of anything placed in a coffin, especially for cremation. Heart pacemakers, implants, batteries, pressurised containers, even coconuts (that have been punctured) have all caused explosion. A doctor, a mortician or the funeral director can remove medical implants even clothes made of man-made fibres, shoes or any rubberised materials can cause smoke and pollution. As crematoria have to operate within the Environmental Protection Act 1990, these can cause serious operational difficulties. Most metals including jewellery, bolts or screws, artificial joints and bone splints, pass through the cremation cycle without difficulty, and are withdrawn at the finish. Jewellery melts and is unrecognisable, forming small pieces of aggregate. These and all other metallic residue are buried in the grounds and are disposed of through a national recycling of metals scheme. The proceeds are distributed to various charities around the UK. The use of balms, scents, flowers and other natural materials should not pose any difficulties.