

# Going wild

## An ecologically-friendly solution to overcrowded cemeteries

**M**ENTION digging up graves and most people start to get a bit twitchy. But exhuming human remains from old, untended graves whose lease has expired is exactly what many cemeteries across Britain are going to have to start doing if they want to stay open. At present, that is illegal, but Ian Hussein, director of the City of London Cemetery in Manor Park, believes that, unless the law is changed and cemeteries are allowed to re-use graves, within a decade or so burial will be unaffordable for most Britons. The average price of a burial has already risen from £893 in 1991 to £2,048 (\$3,105) in 2000.

The Church of England has been digging people up for centuries: churches run their cemeteries under their own rules. Municipal cemeteries, however, answer to the Home Office. Some of them are already quietly exhuming bodies by the acre in order to sell off the land for other uses. Weirdly, that is perfectly legal, while, under current legislation, turning old graves into new ones is not. A Home Office consultation document has been promised.

In the meantime, another development is helping to relieve some of the pressure on Britain's overcrowded cemeteries. Woodland burial—usually with a coffin made from a biodegradable material such as willow or cardboard—is an increasingly popular alternative to the traditional western-style funeral involving a brisk cremation or a short lease in a municipal cemetery. Instead of a headstone, a typical woodland grave is marked only by a tree.

The first woodland burial site in Britain opened in 1993. According to Stephanie Wienrich of the Natural Death Centre, a London-based charity, there are now more than 160 woodland and nature-reserve burial grounds open or currently in development across Britain. Most are run by local authorities or as businesses by farmers or private land owners. Two are run by the Church of England. The largest woodland burial site in Britain, in Turriff, Aberdeenshire, which has room for 12,000 souls, opened last week.

“The popularity of the woodland-burial concept,” says Ms Wienrich, “reflects a growing preference for personalised, non-religious funerals, and the idea of being returned to nature when you die.” The baby-boomers and 1960s flower children are getting to a certain age now, and many are looking for “alternatives” in death just as they may have done in life. A woodland

funeral can be as idiosyncratic (or, for that matter, as conventional) as you like.

Farmers, too, welcome the growing interest in woodland burial as a means of diversification in these hard times. They own the land already; the administration and nitty-gritty of grave-digging and funeral services can be outsourced; and the maintenance costs are practically nil. Turning an unused field over to woodland burial is money for old bones.

The City of London Cemetery created a small woodland site in 1994. Though very much in favour of woodland burial, Mr Hussein insists that it must not be seen as an easy solution to the problems currently facing Britain's overcrowded cemeteries. The demand for traditional burial—complete with fancy coffin, stone monument, space for floral tributes and so forth—is still very strong. It will, he says, take many years for that culture to change, and for the woodland approach to take off. But there's no reason why it shouldn't. The grandeur of an arboreal memorial is pretty hard to beat. Why settle for pushing up daisies when you can push up a mighty oak? ■



A green shade

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