

Natural burials – Lastingpost.com

Introduction

The term natural burial is nowadays used to describe the burial of human remains on a site where the burial plot will create or preserve a haven for wildlife. Although human remains have been disposed of in this manner on heaths and moors and woodland since ancient times, natural burial has only recently become an increasingly popular alternative to burial in a cemetery or cremation.

In the UK the first natural burial ground, a woodland site, was opened by Carlisle City Council in 1993 on an unused part of its municipal cemetery. Since then public interest in natural burial has grown to the point that there are now over 220 natural burial grounds either in operation or planned, many of which are owned by local councils and others by private operators.

Natural burial is also of growing interest both in the USA and Canada, and in Australia and New Zealand. In the USA the first natural burial ground was opened in South Carolina in 1998, and natural burial grounds are now in operation or planned in eighteen States, including California, Texas, Ohio, New York and Maine. In Canada one site has been opened in British Columbia. In Australia one site is in operation and four more are planned, and in New Zealand two sites are in operation and more are planned.

Natural Burial Explained

At the outset natural burial, or green burial as it is sometimes termed, was seen as an environmentally friendly way of disposing of a human body, the aim being to allow the body to decompose naturally and quickly on land where its decay would contribute to the regeneration of plants and wildlife. Accordingly it was held that after death the body should not be treated with chemical preservatives or disinfectants and that it should be buried in a bio-degradable coffin or a shroud.

This has remained the view of many who opt for natural burial, but there are others for whom these environmental requirements are less important and who choose a natural burial site because it is a place where the remains of the departed will rest in peace in pleasant and tranquil surroundings. This after all has been the wish of many people down the centuries, and sadly it is a choice which is no longer available to those who live in our crowded towns and cities.

Natural burial is also seen as an environmentally friendly and inexpensive alternative to both conventional burial in a cemetery and cremation. In general the cost of reserving a grave in a burial ground is less than in a cemetery, and if a family wishes to make its own arrangements it is possible to avoid the expense of a funeral director. A natural burial also has the advantage that it is not subject to the time constraints of a cremation, where the family and mourners are often prone to feel that they are on a production line.

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Natural Burial Grounds

Natural burial grounds are typically sited in a quiet secluded spot, in woodland or in a meadow, where the site and its surroundings will remain undisturbed. There is a wide variety of sites to choose from. Many natural burial grounds are sited on land which has been set aside for this purpose in existing cemeteries, for which the local Council is responsible. Some natural burial grounds are located in the grounds of an estate, others are in nature reserves, and many are on farmland. Some burial grounds are run as a charitable trust and others as a private business. Some burial grounds are managed by the landowner and others by a local firm of funeral directors on behalf of the landowner.

Many sites insist on the use of bio-degradable coffins, others are more relaxed. Memorials may take the form of a plaque on a tree or a small stone set flush with the ground on the grave. Some sites make a point of providing easy access for visitors; others prefer to leave the burial ground as far as possible undisturbed.

Many sites will allow the family to dispense with the services of a funeral director and to bury the deceased themselves in a simple cardboard coffin or in a shroud.

Few sites are consecrated, apart from those which are owned by the Church of England. If required it will however usually be possible to arrange for a priest to conduct a simple service at the graveside and to bless the plot.

Burial plots can be reserved for a fee as in a cemetery, and the management will have a variety of bio-degradable coffins to choose from including ones in cardboard and willow, together with memorial plaques, stones and nameplates. Most sites provide plots for the burial of cremated remains, and a designated area for the strewing of ashes.

Natural burial grounds can be protected from change of use by covenants, and some burial grounds have arranged for their land to be handed over in due course to a wildlife trust for use as a nature reserve. The management of a natural burial ground is required by law to keep a record of the position of every grave.

By law human remains, once buried, may not be disturbed or removed from the grave without the necessary permission, which in general will require a licence from the Department for Constitutional Affairs.

The Department for Constitutional Affairs will only issue the licence in certain limited circumstances, which can include personal reasons by the next of kin, public health or safety, and the public interest in connection with site developments which have public or other planning consent.

If the grave is on consecrated ground, that is to say ground which has been consecrated by the Church of England, a faculty issued by the local Diocesan Office will also be needed.

Woodland Burials

Some woodland burial grounds are sited in an established wood, usually where there is space for a commemorative tree to be planted on or beside each grave. Other grounds are sited in a plantation or in an open field where the commemorative trees will become a wood in due course. Where a commemorative tree is planted, a memorial in the form of a name plate may be placed on or beside the tree.

On some sites the intention is that the woodland should continue to be managed and that in time all the trees should be felled and replanted in the usual way. There is a wide range of sites on offer, varying in size from just under forty acres to less than an acre.

Meadow Burials

Meadow burial grounds are typically sited on farmland and ideally on land which has been cultivated as a wildflower meadow.

Some sites do not allow memorials of any kind in the burial ground. Other sites offer to place on the grave a small flat stone or hardwood slab, inscribed with the name of the deceased, with its surface level with the ground, usually with the condition that the wildflowers will be allowed to cover the grave in summer. Many sites provide the opportunity to plant a commemorative tree in a copse or small plantation beside the burial ground.

Many farmers contract out the management of their sites to a local firm of funeral directors.

Burial on Private Land

For many centuries wealthy families have chosen to be buried on their estates, in mausoleums or graveyards on land set aside for this purpose.

Burial on one's own property may also be thought an attractive option, both by those contemplating natural burial who want it to be a private affair and by those who wish to avoid all unnecessary expense. For those who do not have any suitable space on their property there is always the possibility that they may be able to purchase a field or a small wood for their own burial, which in due course could become the family plot.

In England there is no law which prohibits burial on private land. For a burial to take place the only statutory requirement is that the death must have been registered, for which a doctor's death certificate must be produced.

The owner of the land on which the burial is to take place should however consult their deeds to ensure that there are no restrictions on what the land may be used for. If the property is mortgaged it may be as well to check the contract conditions in case it may be necessary to seek the lender's permission.

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It will also be advisable to consult the Environment Agency about any possible pollution of local water courses and the water table, and to check with the water, gas and electricity suppliers in case there are any buried lines or pipes close to the proposed site.

It will also be wise to inform the local Council Environmental Health Department of the intended burial as they will be concerned that no nuisance will be caused and that there will be at least three foot of sub soil under the coffin and at least three foot of soil above it.

There are unlikely to be any problems with a burial in a field or wood or paddock, but the neighbours may object to a burial in a small garden, and it may devalue the property. This may amount to between 20 and 50 per cent of its value.

It is also worth bearing in mind that there may be problems with access to the site of the grave once the property is sold, and without a restrictive covenant a future owner may be free to apply for permission to disinter the remains and move them elsewhere.

The owner of the land on which a burial takes place is bound by law to maintain a register of burials. All that is needed is to record the name of the deceased and the date of death in a notebook or on a sheet of paper, together with a note or better still a sketch plan of the location of the grave.

This record should be kept in a safe place, so that it can be referred to if there is a risk that the grave may be disturbed by building work or construction some time in the future.

Advice and Help

The Natural Death Centre is a charitable organisation which, among other more general purposes, aims to help people to arrange inexpensive, family organised and environmentally friendly funerals. With this in view the Centre has published The Natural Death Handbook (4th Edition), copies of which may be obtained from the Centre.

The Natural Death Centre's website lists all the natural burial grounds in the UK, by region, for example London, South East, South West and so on, including those managed by members of the Association of Natural Burial Grounds (see below).

The Association of Natural Burial Grounds was established by the Natural Death Centre in 1994. According to the Centre's website the Association now has 37 members. The Association's Code of Practice for its members is published on the Centre's website. Among other matters members are required (1) to take all reasonable steps to conserve local wildlife and archaeological sites, (2) not to require that a funeral director be used, (3) to accept for burial bodies whether wrapped in a shroud or an alternative bio-degradable container or wrapping, and (4) to follow the guidance and recommended procedures contained in the Ministry of Justice publication Natural Burial Grounds - Guidance for Operators 2009.

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Useful links

The Natural Death Centre
www.naturaldeath.org.uk

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