

## being let down by the funeral director

The committal of the coffin for burial or cremation can be regarded as the climax of a funeral. Representing the physical separation of the living from the dead, it powerfully confirms the reality of loss. For this reason it is as distressing as it is therapeutic. In respect of burial, the lowering of the coffin is a task carried out by the funeral director. Although the manual act of committal has largely remained unchanged for centuries, burial in places other than earth graves, dealing with large coffins and the use of mechanical devices have altered the approach. This article examines how the coffin has literally been let down by the funeral director.



### The Act of Committal

The word committal comes from the Latin *committere* meaning 'to join' (*com* - together and *mittere* to post or send). Words usually but not always accompany the committal as the body is separated from the living to 'join' the dead. As Paul Irion writes in *The Funeral and the Mourners*:

'The committal service provides, as nothing else...does so graphically, a symbolic demonstration that the kind of relationship which has existed between the mourner and the deceased is now at an end.' (1979:70)

From the perspective of the funeral director, the lowering of the coffin into the grave must be effected in a dignified manner; the objective is a slow and even descent.

### Burial of the Body

Today, the majority of coffins are manually lowered into a grave. However, in centuries past when the coffin was only used as a means of conveyance to the place of burial, the body would be removed and handed or lowered down by rope into the grave. Burial of the body rather than in the coffin is emphasized by the wording of the rubric from the 'Order for the Burial of the Dead' contained in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) where it states:

'When they come to the grave, whilst the body is made ready to be laid into the earth, the minister shall say...'

Illuminated manuscripts that pre-date this liturgy depict this scene. *The Bedford Hours* (c1423) and *The Book of Hours* (c1470) both show a man standing in a shallow grave supporting the wrapped body before laying it gently on the earth. An illustration included in Julian Litten's *The English Way of Death* (1991:59) shows a shrouded body with legs already resting in the grave; a man stands astride the grave with a rope around the back of the body whilst a colleague supports the head.



### Burial of the Coffin

Burial of the body in a coffin alleviated the need for a person to stand in the grave as the coffin could simply be lowered using ropes or webs. This also enabled graves of considerable depth to be used. However, as these images



show, there are several variations in how the coffin is prepared

immediately prior to burial. Here the coffin would rest on boards at the side of the grave while ropes or webs are then placed through the handles. The bearers then 'swing' the coffin over the grave and lower it. The image above shows the webs over the grave in preparation for the burial of John Bright at Rochdale in April 1889.



In the image left of the funeral of a priest, the coffin rests on trestles at the side of the grave before it is lowered. The wide-gauge webbing is clearly visible.

In this variation the coffin rests on putlogs over the grave. The word 'putlog' (also spelt 'putlock') is defined as '...a short horizontal beam that with others supports the floor planks of a scaffold.' In the archive image of a naval funeral, the coffin is ready to be lowered. The more modern image shows the putlogs and webs ready to receive the coffin.



**The Lowering Device**

By the late nineteenth century a number of ideas to improve the experience of mourners in the cemetery were arriving from America. The tent or awning to provide shelter against inclement weather, grass matting to cover the spoil, shoring apparatus to prevent collapse of a grave and, finally, the coffin lowering device. In June 1901

*The Undertakers' Journal* published an advertisement for 'The National Burial Device' (below left) that could be purchased from the sole agents in England, The London Necropolis Company. It stated, 'One of the most distressing features of an English funeral is the lowering of the coffin. Nothing calls louder for reform. Anything you can do to alleviate your patrons' feelings in this respect will be appreciated by them. The National Lowering Device solves the problem. It lowers automatically at an even and reverent pace; does away with all struggling, and that which grieves your patrons most.' It concluded by saying that the device was, 'Simple, practicable, and indispensable for the up-to-date funeral director.' In a later advertising feature it was noted that the idea was, '...American, of course...' and that the device could be used for children's coffins and for caskets up to 7½ ft in length. Both Brookwood and Kensal Green Cemeteries advertised the availability of a lowering device.

**THE NATIONAL BURIAL DEVICE**  
 Is used at the London Necropolis Cemetery. For the Up-to-date Undertaker.

**READ THIS.**  
 One of the most distressing features of an English funeral is the lowering of the coffin. Nothing calls louder for reform. Anything you can do to alleviate your patrons' feelings in this respect will be appreciated by them. The National Lowering Device solves the problem. It lowers automatically at an even and reverent pace; does away with all struggling, and that which grieves your patrons most.

**The "National" is:**  
 Easily Operated.  
 Convenient to handle.  
 Endorsed by Everybody.  
 Simple, Practicable, and Indispensable to the Up-to-date Funeral Director.

DEVIDE IN POSITION TO RECEIVE COFFIN.  
**THE LONDON NECROPOLIS COMPANY, 188, Westminster Bridge Rd., London, S.E.**

Dottridge Bros also supplied the 'Knock Down' lowering device, below, that was prominently advertised on the cover of *The Undertakers' Journal* in 1901.

**GRAVE LOWERING DEVICE.**

**On Sale.** **On Hire.**

**M**ANY advantages are to be obtained in using this "Knock-Down" Lowering Device. The size can be changed from 44 inches to 93 inches in length and from 20 inches to 34 inches in width. It can be placed in small space when ready for transportation. It is supplied with ball bearings and two hooks, which act independently. It can be taken from the cases in which it is carried, and placed ready for use in less than one minute. It is light, strong, neat, and easily fixed in position. When adjusted to a child's size it can be changed from 44 to 59 inches in length.

Obtainable from the proprietors of *The Undertakers' Journal* was the book *The Art of Funeral Directing* written by the American, CF Callaway. Published in 1928 it promoted the 'service culture' that included improvements to the arrangements at the funeral home and in the cemetery. In the chapter 'At the Cemetery' Callaway believed that it was essential to cover the open grave with the coffin or casket:

'While the family are being slowly assisted from their cars, quietly remove the casket from the hearse and place it on the lowering device....Lower the casket to the level of the earth, or until the flowers that are left on top of the casket appear as if laying on the earth. This conceals the open grave and does not allow the family to look down into the grave and see the casket so far away and amid the cold surroundings of the open grave. Anything we can do to lift the horrors of the old custom [lowering the coffin] will be appreciated by our friends [clients].' (1928:113)

Advertisements for lowering devices can be found in *The Undertakers' Journal* and *BUA Monthly* between 1920 and 1940. The notion of enhancing the experience at the cemetery re-emerged in 1928 with *The Undertakers' Journal* suggesting that funeral directors make representations to burial authorities in respect of '...three essential

improvements...the clearance of the freshly dug earth away from the grave, an automatic lowering device, and a covering over the grave...'. The lowering device should be '...part of the equipment of every burial authority.'

Although in April 1936, the London-based suppliers Ingall, Parsons, Clive & Co Ltd enthused that 'The steadily growing demand for this lowering device is proof that there is nothing more impressive than its use for the last solemn rite of burial,' it would appear the device was not utilized to any great extent. Today, hand lowering continues to be the preferred mode of committal.



A lowering device advertised in the Funeral Service Journal in 1958 claimed to be 'Manufactured for the first time in Great Britain.' On the continent they are regularly used not only for aesthetic but practical reasons. This image shows a device on display at the Paris Funéraire Exhibition in 2006.



One issue when lowering has been evenness of the descent. In 1908 Ingall, Parsons & Clive became agents for the 'Ward's patent safety Combination Cradle,' a device with six webs that could be wrapped around the coffin. The advertising stated that,

'The coffin held in such a position by the cradle that if any pair of bearers happens to lower quicker than the others, it is impossible for the coffin to slip.'

Like the lowering device, the cradle did not appear to be embraced by funeral directors or burial authorities. Today, coffins continue to be lowered using polyester or flax webs.

Burial of the coffin other than in earthen graves has required different approaches to the committal. While small coffins for children can be handed to a member of the operational staff standing in a shallow grave, the lowering of larger coffins may require considerable planning.

**Burial Elsewhere**

Depending on the size of the entrance and accessibility, the coffin may be lowered into a vault or raised on scaffolding. In some cases there may be sufficient room for the bearers to shoulder the coffin and then lower it into the grave space.



Right, the bearer party with the coffin containing Sir Benjamin Disraeli, the First Earl of Beaconsfield, enter the vault beneath St Michael's church in the grounds of his home at Hughenden Manor.



For the burial of a sixty-five stone man in 2005, left, a JCB-type digger was utilized.

Death at sea followed by immediate burial does not involve a coffin and for this reason is probably the simplest, but most dramatic, form of committal. Here the wrapped (and presumably weighted) body rests on a board under a US flag ready to be 'committed to the deep.'



The image left shows the coffin of Holiness Pope Pius IX being swung into place in St Peter's grotto in February 1878. The coffin was subsequently moved during a night procession on 13 July 1881 to the Basilica of Saint Lawrence outside the Walls.

The development of cremation in the late nineteenth century posed the problem of how the casket of ashes should be buried. Should the casket be on display prior to burial or should it be covered or enclosed?

When at Westminster Abbey it was decided that cremation must precede interment, the arrangement was to place the casket into a full-sized coffin, which was then covered by a hearse-cloth. At the moment of committal a door in the corner of the coffin would be opened, the casket lifted out and then placed in the grave as depicted right at the burial of the ashes of Horatio Bonar Law in Westminster Abbey, October 1923. The casket was removed from the coffin and lowered down into the shallow grave by two men. The same procedure took place when Thomas Hardy's ashes were buried in 1928.



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## Bibliography

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All images from the author's collection