

DUNBLANE

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you could look upon a silent sea of flowers stretching off into the distance*

Philip Ewing

I find it hard to believe that the 13th March 2006 will be the 10th anniversary of the Dunblane shooting. I remember vividly exactly where I was as the news came through that there had been a shooting incident at a primary school in Dunblane. I was in fact working at one of the cemeteries that surround Stirling Castle and from the cemetery there is a view of the motorway that leads to Dunblane. At first I heard the sirens, then saw lines of police cars and ambulances hurtling along the M9 heading to Dunblane. I naturally assumed that there had been a serious car accident so carried on working for a short while before returning to my van and turning on the radio.

I could not believe what I was hearing: a man walked into a primary school classroom in Dunblane and started shooting children? It was inconceivable; yet as I listened to the reports the awful reality finally sank in.

When I got back to the cemetery office the look of shock on peoples' faces was clearly visible and we all struggled to cope through these early moments. As the morning moved to afternoon more information was released through the media and, as we talked between ourselves, we began to realise the magnitude of this tragedy. The small community of Dunblane had been touched by madness. What followed in terms of sympathy and support: locally, nationally and from all parts of the world was overwhelming and whilst this outpouring could not repair the hurt it reinforced my view that there is inherent good in humanity.

The small city of Dunblane has one cemetery and I began to consider how to manage the practicalities of interring 16 children and their teacher without overwhelming the normal routine operational demands of the site. The idea of a specific designated area, separate from the main sections, formed in my mind and this idea was floated to the bereaved parents through the local funeral director. The initial feedback was positive and, with the assistance of colleagues within the Council's landscape and design section, we set about creating a suitable area. Due to the nature of the incident, the legal requirements necessary caused a delay in the release of the children for burial. This worked to our advantage because it enabled us to plan and develop a completely new area with suitable infrastructure to allow for operational access and for the management of the forthcoming funeral services.

The tragedy caused a media frenzy and the community was besieged by press from all over the world turning the centre

of Dunblane into satellite city. Stirling District Council senior management formed a small working group of key individuals to manage the process of family liaison and operational requirements. The group met at the end of each day and for those of us involved it felt like a safe area of calm, like being in the eye of a hurricane, whilst outside the storm was raging.

I have many images and memories of the days leading up to the funerals; however one image in particular sticks in my mind causing me to well up each time I remember it. I have mentioned previously that the sympathy and support from all over the world was overwhelming, manifesting itself in a number of different ways, one of which was floral tributes. I am sure we all remember the images of flowers at Princess Diana's funeral. At Dunblane it started with locals leaving flowers at the school gates, then more arrived and more and more again. Once there was no more room outside the gates people started laying their tributes against the pavement wall and so the floral tribute trail began. It grew longer and longer and eventually stretched for miles around the streets of Dunblane. It became obvious that we would need to move the flowers from the streets at some point, so we took the decision to move them to the cemetery. The memory that brings my emotions to the surface is the sight that resulted from laying out these thousands of tributes side by side on an area of grass the size of a football park. Early in the morning, when the cemetery was quiet, you could look upon a silent sea of flowers stretching off into the distance; a very emotive image for me still.

The funerals were planned in order to give each family sufficient space and time to grieve. It was an extremely difficult period for all concerned particularly for the gravediggers who had to cope with days and days of small white coffins being brought to the cemetery for burial. I was very proud of the professional manner in which staff dealt with each service. In consultation with the parents I was able to allocate adjacent graves to parents whose children were friends and who had sat beside each other in class. Each funeral was heart wrenching to watch and I'm continually amazed at the bravery the bereaved can display at a time when their grief is at its most raw. Bravery such as listening to a lone piper playing a haunting lament over a tiny white coffin in a silent cemetery; the parent then delivering a clear and loving eulogy in memory of their child whilst all around were in tears. Over the following weeks and months we continued to meet with the parents to discuss issues at the cemetery and to decide on the future development of the area.

This process culminated in the creation of a beautiful memorial area that includes a twin pool fountain with a colourful pebble mosaic design based on ideas from the parents, including a rainbow, a sun and moon, a dolphin, a sea horse and fish. The name of the teacher, Gwen Mayor, is carved into the granite edge of the top pool at a point where the water falls into the larger bottom pool; the names of the children, Victoria, Emma, Melissa, Charlotte, Kevin, Ross, David, Mhairi, Brett, Abigail, Emily, Sophie, John, Joanna, Hannah and Megan are carved into the granite surround of the large pool.



An artistic walled central seating area surrounds a single tree, *prunus subhirtella autumnalis*, significant to the parents as it was in flower in March; a separate artistic walled hillside seating area overlooks the memorial, providing a spot for private remembrance and contemplation.



Not all of the parents chose to bury their child at the memorial area in Dunblane. One family chose to bury their child in Ayr Cemetery. Having left the employ of Stirling Council in the late 90's I now find myself in the employ of South Ayrshire Council with responsibility for, you've guessed it, Ayr Cemetery. There is a certain symmetry to this life.

This is only a short account of what took place ten years ago. It was a life-changing event for me and I hope I have conveyed some impression of what it was like to you.