

What is Natural Burial?

The term 'Natural Burial' is used to describe a funeral that has a low environmental impact.

There are many facets to a funeral; all of these can be looked at with to see if they can be carried out in a way that is kinder to the environment. We now routinely recycle, lower our emissions and fit solar panels. Most of us do this gladly and understand why we're doing it. The question of our own ultimate fate is less considered. Many decisions are taken quickly at a time of grief. We all want to 'do the right thing' but getting it right can be difficult. Getting it wrong can be very upsetting. To a growing number of people Natural Burial seems an appropriate way to go and maybe says a lot about the person who has died. For those who care about the environment and love nature it seems especially fitting. The burial is often seen as a final contribution to nature.

Natural Burial will not be for everyone of course. Some will be always be bound to cremation or traditional burial by belief. The generation now beginning to make funeral arrangements and consequently to think about their own ultimate demise are also the first generation to consider the environment to the extent that they do. Natural burial was first offered in 1993, in Carlisle; twenty years later there are more natural burial grounds than crematoria in the UK. (264 – 230 at the time of writing)

'Woodland', 'farmland' and 'meadow' are among the terms that have been used to describe types of natural burial. This usually refers to a burial in a Natural Burial Ground; a burial site where generally the long term aim is to create or preserve species rich natural habitat; they are defined by the landscape they will leave behind. Every one of these is unique and will operate slightly differently. Generally, but not always, they will insist on a coffin made of natural materials, dislike embalming, will probably not allow a conventional headstone and the burial ground will almost definitely not look like a conventional cemetery. The majority are in the countryside and can be exceptionally beautiful places. They are almost always run by extraordinarily caring, committed and visionary people. It is essential to visit and to get to know the owner or manager before making a decision as you are establishing a long term relationship. A good owner will insist on this before allowing a burial.

These are not the only places you can have a Natural Burial however. The majority are parts of municipal cemeteries. Carlisle Woodland Burial Ground mentioned above is part of that city's Richardson Street cemetery. Local authorities are coming to like Natural Burial as it is not only an environmentally positive option but by being sustainably managed they are substantially less expensive to maintain. Natural burial in these cemeteries may be practised for exactly the same reasons as described above; however it may also be seen as part of a long term sustainable method of burial that will allow old cemeteries to continue working; a return to days gone by.

For nearly fifteen centuries parish churchyards were the final resting place of the whole population. If you look at those churchyards today they have not grown in size; they have grown upwards. Most are surrounded by high walls. This is because they practised Natural Burial; they had no option it was what was available. They used ground around the church systematically, eventually, much later, returning to where their forebears had begun. The burials were simple; wood and wool were often used as coffin material. Depending on the soil and the length of time that had passed since the funeral, there was unlikely to be much left. Any bones found would be either reburied at the bottom of the grave or placed in an ossuary in the church. So it continued, until the nineteenth century when consequences of the Industrial Revolution forced major change and large new cemeteries. Since then burial hasn't changed, using more and more land. Cremation has substantially eased the

pressure on land but for many towns and cities a full or nearly full cemetery is a major issue. Other countries have more pragmatic and sustainable approaches but that is another subject. Natural Burial is a way forward when we need it most.

The only people who can advise you about their burial ground and precisely how they interpret natural burial are the owners or manager. Well informed managers and a well-informed public capable of asking the right questions can only result in successful outcomes. With this in mind the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM) has created a Natural Burial Strategy. The elements of this include: A Natural Burial Charter, by adopting this the burial ground owner pledges to bereaved families that they will be treated fairly with basic standards of care and professionalism. Further to this the owner will undergo an annual self-assessment which will help them, where possible, to improve their service. This assessment will be validated by the Institute and depending upon the results of the and therefore the quality of the service provided, either a Bronze, Silver or Gold standard will be awarded. To support improvement in standards the ICCM will be organising seminars. City and Guilds accredited training will be available for the practical tasks and BTEC HNC accredited education for management. All of this in addition to the current services provided such as legal advice, telephone support and so on.

We hope this gives you some idea of what Natural Burial entails. Please visit our links page and library or contact the Institute if you require more information