

The coffin of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother is borne by Leverton's staff from Royal Lodge to the Royal Chapel of All Saints, Windsor Great Park, 31 March 2002

OPPOSITE PAGE: Queen Victoria on her deathbed. A picture of her dead husband hangs above her head



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Royal Undertakers

Often decades before they meet their maker, kings, queens, princes and princesses play an active part in planning the dispatch of their mortal remains. As ROBERT GOLDEN reveals, such a delicate task requires the help of experts in this field

SENIOR MEMBERS OF the royal family rarely – if ever – experience the day-to-day inconveniences endured by ordinary citizens. For instance they do not have to wait on a cold rainy day for a bus that takes ages to arrive, then on boarding are packed in like sardines; they don't suffer the indignity of reclining on a trolley for hours in an overcrowded accident and emergency department; nor are they plagued by cold-calling salespeople flogging double glazing and the like. However, like everybody else, one day they will require the services of a funeral undertaker. Death is the great leveller.

For several centuries royal funerals were arranged by household officials and the College of Arms, who provided the trappings associated with the obsequies of monarchs and aristocratic families. The funerals usually took place after dark, within the privacy of a royal chapel or country estate; women did not attend.

It was not until the early 19th century that a commercial firm of undertakers, or funeral upholsterers as they were known, was employed to carry out the necessary arrangements. From 1811 to date only five family firms have been entrusted with such delicate and deeply private tasks.

France and Banting were the first, becoming William Banting when the company separated. A. France and Son are the leading undertakers for Catholic funerals and have overseen the arrangements for several Archbishops of Westminster. Bantings were given a royal warrant, the only

firm to have enjoyed that privilege, but in 1928 they closed and the warrant lapsed. Since then it has been a contract.

The firm of William Garstin of Marylebone were the first contract holders until 1941, when the old established family business of J. H. Kenyon of west London took over. They carried out many royal funerals until the present holders, Leverton and Sons, of north London, were appointed in 1991. The south London firm of F. A. Albin & Sons has also been involved with certain aspects of royal funeral arrangements.

Bantings, of St James's Street, were responsible for royal obsequies for much of the 19th century. They were engaged for the funerals of George III and George IV in 1820 and 1830 respectively. George III was not embalmed, but was wrapped in a cerecloth (of waxed linen) before being sealed in a lead coffin. It was the practice, especially if the body was to be lodged in a crypt or vault, and not buried in earth, for the corpse to be placed in a wooden shell; this was then encased in a lead coffin that was sealed by plumbers before being placed in a stout outer wooden coffin. This was often covered with purple cloth, ornamented with a large silver or brass depositum plate and elaborate handles. The practice of covering with cloth died out in the early 20th century.

The empty coffin of George IV was put on display in the showroom of Bantings; hundreds of people came to see the ornate outer case and its lid, which was propped up to give a better view.

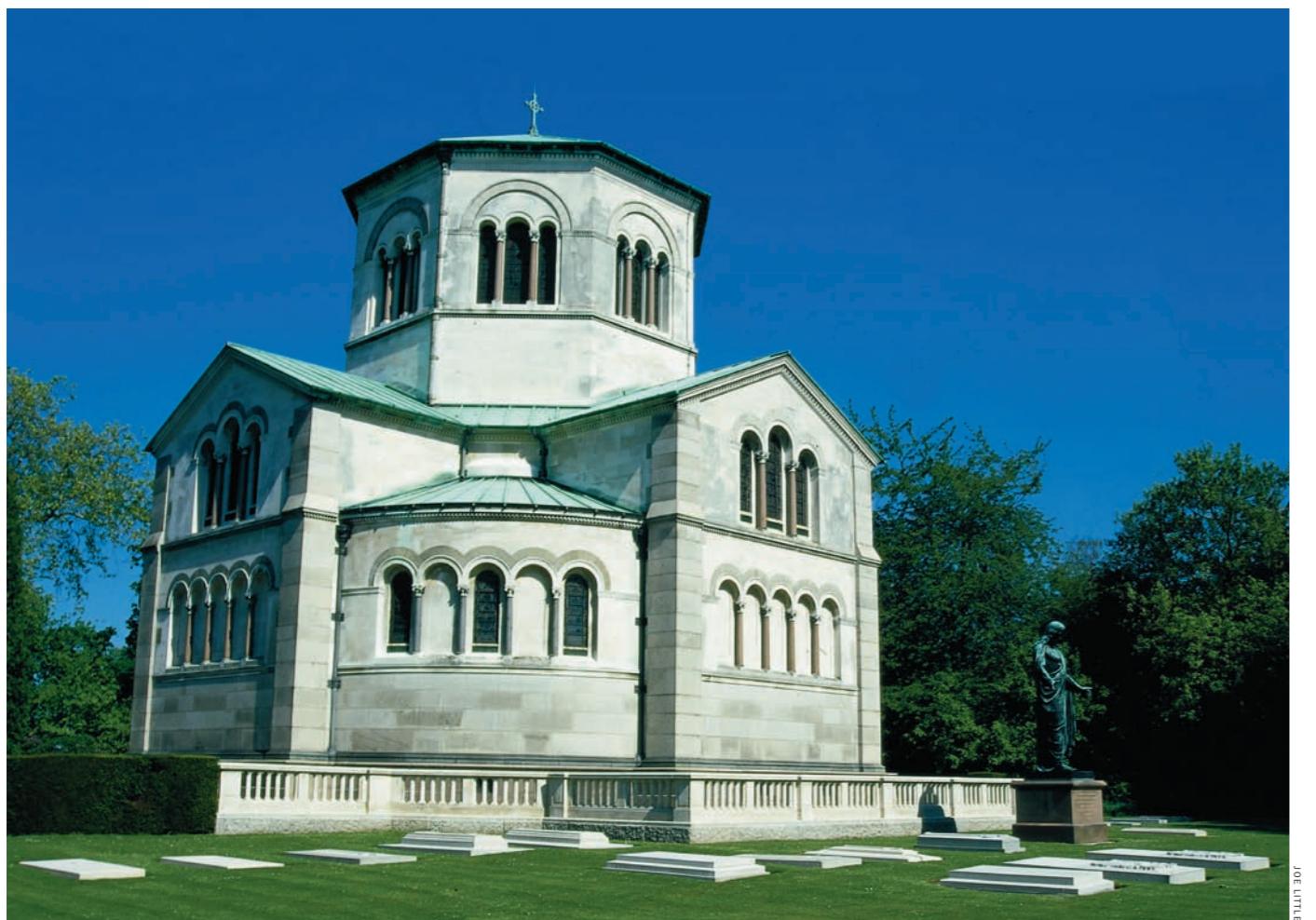


Lady May Abel Smith and her husband pause as the coffin of her mother, Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, is placed into a hearse. Her extended family, including Princess Juliana of the Netherlands (second row), look on

BELOW: The Royal Burial Ground, Frogmore. Top left are five Connaught/Ramsay graves. Near middle are the Cambridge/Athlone ledger stones



The purple velvet-covered coffin of Queen Caroline, estranged wife of George IV, in Brunswick Cathedral



JOE LITTLE

Bantings were surprisingly unprepared when Queen Victoria died at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight in 1901. A coffin was not ready and so C. P. J. Field, a local firm still in operation today, were instructed to prepare one post-haste.

Kaiser Wilhelm II dismissed Bantings' men and measured his grandmother, whilst the new King, Edward VII, and the Duke of Connaught placed their mother in her coffin. The Duke of Cambridge, who died in 1904, and his wife Louisa FitzGeorge (1890) were also buried by Bantings.

Garstins carried out the funerals of George V, his sisters Louise and Victoria, and organised the London arrangements for their youngest sibling, Queen Maud of Norway. The Garstin daybooks give detailed accounts of both royal and ordinary funerals for which they were responsible.

When Sophie, Countess de Torby (wife of Grand Duke Michael of Russia) died at 8 Cambridge Gate, Regent's Park, in 1927, it cost four guineas for four assistants to place her in her coffin. For conveying her body to the Russian Church in Buckingham Palace Road, another four guineas were added to the bill.

In 1928, Rupert, Viscount Trematon, son of Princess Alice and the Earl of Athlone, died in France after a motor car accident. Garstins provided a hearse and a principal to collect his remains from HMS *Tempest* at Dover. On the way to Windsor Castle, they took delivery of a cross from the Marquess of Cambridge. When they conducted the funeral of the Dowager Marchioness of Cambridge in 1929, they charged 16 guineas for a lead coffin and nameplate. The bill for the plumbers who soldered the coffin was four guineas.

Between 1942 and 1992, when their contract ended, J. H. Kenyon of Westbourne Grove carried out more than 30 royal funerals. Their daybooks and diaries are an absolute mine of information, the earlier ones extremely detailed.

Their first funeral was in January 1942 when they carried out the arrangements for the Duke of Connaught, the 91-year-old son of Queen Victoria. Although not announced at the time, he was privately cremated at Woking; his ashes were

placed in a bronze urn and then deposited in his bedroom at Bagshot Park. The urn was subsequently lodged in a full-sized coffin that was triple-bottomed to add weight for the bearer party at his funeral at Windsor.

The same procedure was carried out when the Duke's daughter, Lady Patricia Ramsay, died in 1974. A private service was held at her home in Windlesham, followed by cremation at Woking. At her funeral at St George's Chapel, Windsor, her full-sized coffin was borne by soldiers of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

Another early cremation was that of the Countess of Southesk, a granddaughter of Edward VII, who died at the nursing home of her sister, Princess Arthur of Connaught, in 1945. Her remains were placed in a 'Berkeley' oak cremation casket and taken to St Marylebone Crematorium. A bronze urn was then housed in a best oak coffin and dispatched by train from King's Cross station to Montrose, thence by road to Kinnaird Castle for burial in the family cemetery.

Following the death of the Duke of Kent in an air crash in 1942, his body was brought from Scotland by train to London, then by road to Windsor, where he was embalmed. His coffin was delivered in a red Rickards van, so as to be anonymous.

Kenyon's carried out the funerals of King George VI in 1952, Queen Mary (1953), Queen Marie of Yugoslavia (1961) and King Freddie of Buganda (1969). The firm often had to travel abroad either to conduct a royal funeral or repatriate a body.

The Duke and Duchess of Windsor were brought from their Paris home in 1972 and 1986 respectively. Grand Duchess Xenia of Russia was taken to the south of France for burial following a service at the Russian Church in Exile in London.

Princess Alice of Greece, mother of the Duke of Edinburgh, who died at Buckingham Palace in 1969, was initially buried in the entrance to the royal vault at Windsor. In 1988 her remains were transported to Jerusalem, where she was placed in a chapel on the Mount of Olives. Kenyon's placed her in another coffin in order to comply with regulations required for air transportation.



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
The Queen's floral tribute
to her mother, placed on
Queen Elizabeth's coffin
for the procession to
Westminster Hall

Lady Patricia Ramsay,
a portrait taken for her
Golden Wedding
anniversary, five years
before her death

Followed by her son
and daughter-in-law,
Lady Patricia is carried
by soldiers of Princess
Patricia's Canadian Light
Infantry. At Frogmore
the bearer party was
provided by J. H. Kenyon

The mausoleum of the
Duke of Cambridge,
Kensal Green Cemetery,
west London. His wife,
Mrs FitzGeorge, and
their two younger sons,
Adolphus and Augustus,
rest on stone shelves
inside. There are also
ashes of some of their
grandchildren



PRIVATE COLLECTION

An unusual repatriation occurred in 1979 when the remains of Princess Victoire, Duchess of Nemours, a cousin of Queen Victoria, were removed from her tomb at St Charles Borromeo Church, Weybridge, and taken to Dreux in France, to lie with other members of the Orleans family. She died in 1857 at Claremont, Surrey, where the French royal family were living in exile.

Edwina Mountbatten was buried at sea off the Isle of Wight in 1960. Her coffin was heavily weighted and holes were drilled behind the handles. The coffin plate was simply inscribed 'Edwina', with no other information. Most royal depositum plates give full names and dates of birth and death.

When the Duke of Gloucester died in 1974 his coffin was taken from Barnwell Church to the chapel in the grounds of Royal Lodge, Windsor, where the depositum plate was affixed. From there he was taken to Victoria Barracks prior to being borne by gun carriage to St George's Chapel.

The last royal funeral Kenyons carried out was that of the Marchioness of Cambridge in 1988. She died at Ickworth Lodge, near Bury St Edmunds. Her remains were brought to their chapel in Westbourne Grove. There she reposed, with some of her bridal lace in the coffin, before being taken to St George's Chapel on the eve of her funeral. By 1988 the remains of the Duke of York, who was interred in the vault at Windsor in 1827, had deteriorated and required preservation. Kenyons were required to transport his body to their premises where he was re-coffined and returned to Windsor.

Levertons have carried out two high-profile funerals: that of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 and Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother five years later. They were also responsible for the funerals of Princess Margaret (2002), Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester (2004) and Lady May Abel Smith (1994).

Albin & Sons were contracted to make a number of coffins for royal personages in the late Eighties. There were two categories: the 'Senior Royal', which was an oak shell and lead case, and the 'Standard Royal', an oak shell with zinc lining. This was when Kenyons still had the contract. Barry Albin-Dyer told me that they were initially stored in the vault at Kensal Green Cemetery, but were subsequently moved. Albins also bought a Daimler limousine that had belonged to the Queen Mother.

Rehearsals of royal funerals are carried out regularly and a senior funeral director is permanently on 24-hour standby. Often years in advance members of the royal family plan their funeral service in minute detail, including the music, readings and those who are to be invited. Nothing is left to chance. ▀

Special thanks to Philip Smyth, Business Manager of J. H. Kenyon; Valerie Orpen, of J. H. Kenyon's Westbourne Grove chapel, and Barry Albin-Dyer of Bermondsey.



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