

## ONE LA

WORDS: TIM POWER

**W**hen relatives approached Paul Allcock to see if there was any way the deceased, an ex-BT employee, could be buried in his beloved red telephone box, which he proudly displayed in his front garden, Paul was initially taken aback. But, as the wishes of the family have always been at the heart of his funeral practice, he said he would see what he could do. A few days later he was able to square it with the council and hire a JCB to make the man's last wishes come true.

Paul, joint-owner of Norwich-

based Allcock Family Funeral Services and SAIF President, said: "The family did not think it was possible but wanted to ask the question and, as I like a challenge, I looked into it and gave them some options. We had a service in the local church with a traditional coffin, then the funeral party drove to the deceased's house where we had prepared a grave large enough to accommodate the red telephone box, which would contain his coffin, and it was lifted down into the grave in the garden."

It's not an everyday request but many funeral directors are being increasingly asked to accommodate more unusual requests to help families celebrate

Unusual and non-traditional funerals that personalise the life and interests of the deceased are on the increase

# ST CALL

the lives of their loved ones.

Paul said: “In this part of England, we’ve noticed the growing trend in non-traditional funerals, but it has really taken off in the past five years. There is more media coverage of unusual funerals and more people are attending these types of ceremonies and becoming aware of the choices available.”

It’s all about personalising the funeral experiences to reflect the life and interests of the deceased, and Paul thinks this is a good development.

He said: “We’ve had clients that have wanted simple cardboard coffins, not just because of the cost, but so that the family could decorate them in their own way.

A nice example of this was when everyone put their handprints on the coffin. When it was carried by the pall bearers it looked like many more hands were helping them lift the coffin.”

Many of these new ways of celebrating the life of the deceased are carried out without a religious service, but Julian Walker from A B Walker and Son, who runs seven branches throughout Berkshire and Oxfordshire, said that many people still like to include favourite prayers or hymns in the service.

Julian said: “In our area we have witnessed a decreasing choice for a church service in favour of using a civil celebrant in a non-religious setting, but that does not necessarily

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Paul Allcock





➤ negate the inclusion of religious aspects in the event.

“Some people find that Christian churches are not a flexible option when it comes to meeting their funeral needs, and this is confirmed by the conversations that I’ve had with funeral directors up and down the country. A common theme that comes up is that it is sometimes difficult to engage with a church minister so the civil celebrant is the easiest option.

“As funeral directors are finding it easier to deal with civil celebrants to meet their funeral needs, in a way, we are encouraging the trend towards non-traditional funerals.

“However, in our area we’ve retained a fairly consistent level of religious services – around 80% – but we know that in other parts of the country it has changed significantly due to demographics, particularly in metropolitan areas.”

Paul agreed: “The choice of not having any religious content in a funeral service has slightly increased in the last 10 years but the ability for a family to engage with a celebrant who is happy to involve as much religion as wanted by the

family, such as a singing of a hymn or saying of a prayer, is welcome.”

The media plays an influential role in highlighting unusual funeral ceremonies featuring eye-catching imagery, such as a Darth Vader-lookalike leading a funeral cortege or unusual hearses, from tanks to motorbike sidecars.

Their coverage of the funerals of celebrities, from the outpouring of grief for Princess Diana to the no-nonsense and minimalist funeral arrangements for David Bowie, also influences public perceptions of how funerals can be conducted and many aspects of these are adopted by the public.

This trend is muddying the waters when it comes to defining what a non-traditional funeral really is any more, as most funerals today adopt some measure of personalisation to represent the deceased; from favourite songs through to order of service leaflets that celebrate the life of the loved one with photos and words.

Some of the more ‘unusual’ funeral arrangements picked up by the media are definitely unique. Julian said: “When I discuss what

**Clockwise from left: The timeless dignity of past funerals at Leverton & Sons Independent Family Funeral Directors; a modern approach with a webcam; and a willow casket**

the newspapers are reporting with other funeral directors we often scratch our heads because it’s rare than any of us have ever come across these types of funerals – these are definitely one-off events which are not reflected in actual practice on the ground. It’s like the media interest in the ‘do-it-yourself’ funeral stories that have been picked up as being unusual but are actually statistically totally insignificant.”

The most significant trend over the past few decades has been the growing demand for cremations, compared to burials, which has enabled people to gather and celebrate the lives of their loved ones beyond the graveside.

According to the statistics, today nearly 75% of people in the UK choose to be cremated, up from 68% 30 years ago.

Many people continue to have services at the crematorium but there is a trend to celebrate before the cremation as Paul described: “We organised a funeral for an ex-Norwich footballer recently where some 200 of his family and friends gathered at the St Andrews Hall in the city to give him a send-off, and then the body was sent on its own to the crematorium, with the ashes delivered later to the family.”

Like most things in today’s world, technology is playing an increasing role in the modern funeral service and creating what the *Guardian* termed the ‘virtual mourner’ in its interview with Paul Allcock.

“SOME PEOPLE FIND THAT CHRISTIAN CHURCHES ARE NOT A FLEXIBLE OPTION... TO MEETING THEIR NEEDS”

Julian Walker

A recent survey said around a fifth of Britain's 281 crematoriums already offered a live streaming service, while 61% of funeral directors had received requests for services to be live-streamed.

Paul believes it has a role to play but its continued popularity could have a potential drawback. He explained: "It's wonderful for those relatives who live abroad, but there's also a danger of pandering to people's laziness and not attending personally and sharing your condolences, which is such an important part of the grieving process.

"Many funeral directors will tell you that a few kind words shared over a sandwich after the funeral can never be replaced by watching the event from a distance via a web-camera."

Paul is comfortable with the growth in non-traditional funerals and enjoys the creativity and challenges it brings to help celebrate someone's life. "I don't think funeral directors should fear this trend; they should embrace it and see it as a way of helping us raise our game. At the end of the day, the industry has always been about

**75%**  
OF ALL PEOPLE  
IN THE UK TODAY  
CHOOSE CREMATION

event management and tradition is whatever you want it to be."

However, a more far reaching change to the funeral industry does not come from Darth Vader-lookalikes or armoured hearses, but from the introduction of direct cremations with "no ceremony, no fuss, no funeral", as one company states in its marketing.

According to Julian, in countries that have already adopted it the demand has been strong. In the US demand went from zero to 35% of all funerals within four years; in Australia, in the similar period, it accounts for 10%. He believes its introduction in the UK will also have a dramatic affect. He

explained: "I don't think its growth is down to just cost, I think it's people's attitudes to funerals - it is like people are saying 'why bother'?"

"This has the potential to change the face of the market as it goes against all the values of traditional funeral directors who offer their service on the back of quality, trust and flexibility to meet the wishes of the bereaved family.

"If funeral directors offer a direct cremation service in addition to their traditional service then they are going to be offering a very basic, very low-cost product while maintaining the price of their current full-service offering - creating a two-tier approach to funerals which erodes the brand of a funeral director."

He added: "We've got to be mindful that there is a shift in the market which is happening now. Although funeral directors in the SAIF network may not have noticed this, there is collective group evidence that it's occurring and it's accelerating, so we need to prepare and adapt to the market so we don't lose control with what we have to offer." ●

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