

# Going Green

Make your final statement for a more sustainable world by choosing a green funeral

by Jane Morrell and Simon Smith

When you are looking to lead a more sustainable, greener life, with all the positive lifestyle choices you can make, you may like to think about how you can make your last act on the planet greener and more sustainable too, by making sure you have a green funeral.

The funeral industry has been trying to go green by offering a wider range of bio-degradable coffins, made from cardboard, bamboo, willow, banana leaf, papier mache and other exotic materials. There are now also over two hundred natural burial sites across the UK, often based in newly planted woodland, some in mature woodland and a few in meadowland. The original idea was



a woodland burial site

to give people an alternative to conventional cemeteries and crematoria at the same time as creating new woodlands and places of natural beauty, but also it became a way of expressing support

for sustainable living and opposition to the problems of conventional burial and cremation. Funerals that take place at these sites are often less formal and involve the family and friends more in the proceedings, increasing their choices and reducing the role of the professional funeral establishment.

Despite publicity about its environmental problems, 72% of people who die in the UK are currently cremated, that's around 400,000 cremations each year. Reliable figures are hard to come by, but those around include cremation being responsible for 16% of UK mercury emissions (from fillings), significant emissions of dioxins and carbon monoxide. I was given some figures for the amount of gas used by one crematorium and the number of cremations they made in a week, and my back of the envelope calculations showed that each cremation used as much fuel as driving a family car about 450 miles. If you cause a crowd to drive to the natural burial ground fifteen miles

out of town, despite your good intentions you may well have expended more energy than you would for a cremation.

Choosing a green funeral is not straightforward. So what could you do to make sure you have a greener, more sustainable ending to your life?

There are a few musts:

Plan your funeral in advance. Make your choices and let those left behind know exactly what you want. Funerals are often organised quickly by people who feel under pressure and it's easy for those left behind to be swept into making conventional choices you may not have made.

Choose burial rather than cremation. If you can find a cemetery or churchyard that is reusing old graves, that's a very good option, as is a woodland or natural burial site. If the graves are hand dug that saves the fuel for a mechanical digger.

Don't be embalmed. Embalming is a process whereby your blood and body fluids are replaced with a mixture of water and formaldehyde, a substance which can cause allergic reactions, mental disturbance and is linked to several forms of cancer. When a body is buried the formaldehyde leaches into the ground and perhaps eventually into the ground water. In the case of cremation it may be emitted into the atmosphere. Unless the funeral is more than two weeks after the death or certain circumstances have caused the body to degrade, embalming really is not necessary, so state that you do not want it.

Avoid chipboard veneer coffins, which are made using formaldehyde. These are by far the most common coffins used for both burial and cremation as they are cheap for the funeral directors to buy and easy to handle. Most natural woodland burial sites won't allow them.

Avoid coffins made of non FSC timber or metal. Ask your funeral director or coffin supplier whether the wood comes from FSC sources, and, if you want wood, choose local hardwoods like oak or cherry or softwoods like pine.



processing the coffin

Minimise the amount of fuel needed to transport the mourners. If you need to travel a number of miles to the nearest crematorium or natural burial ground, arrange for the mourners to gather locally and hire a bus to transport them to the funeral. For a really local funeral, you could process the coffin by foot. Add a few musicians and flags of bright material and you have a dramatic event.

Minimise the amount of fuel needed to transport the body. There is no legal requirement to use a big, petrol-thirsty hearse. For many thrifty people who've led a sustainable lifestyle, it just seems the wrong choice anyway. You can ask the funeral director if they have another vehicle – we often use a diesel MPV – or you can use a family car if you have one large enough, or hire one for the day. Pat arrived in the organic vegetable van he used to drive, which ran on biofuel.

And here's some other things you could do for a greener funeral

Choose a locally made coffin. Many of the natural, biodegradable coffins you can buy now are largely made in far-off places, for example bamboo from China, banana leaf and pandanus from Indonesia and increasingly willow coffins come from Poland. Although the companies who import them pack them as efficiently as possible and the actual sea journey may not take much energy, there may be long road journeys to and from the port. If you are buying a willow coffin, there are at least two companies in Somerset that grow and manufacture locally (Somerset Willow <http://www.wickerwillowcoffins.co.uk> and P H Coates [www.englishwillowcoffins.co.uk](http://www.englishwillowcoffins.co.uk)) and you may even find a local grower and maker in your area.

Consider the material used for the coffin. We've already mentioned finding out about where the wood is grown and whether its FSC registered. There are quite a few cardboard coffins on the market. It's worth asking which type you are being offered and calling the manufacturer to find out what proportion of the board is made with recycled materials and whether they or their suppliers use chlorine bleaches. If you buy a plain cardboard or pine coffin, you then give your family and friends the option to decorate it beautifully, with water based paints.

Don't use a coffin at all. There is no legal requirement to use a coffin, although crematoria will insist on one to ease the loading of the body into the cremator and so as not to cause offence. But instead you can use a shroud, which is just to wrap the body in a few metres of material. If you lay the body on a board, place wadding on top if you want to disguise the body shape and wrap the material around, you then have a shroud you can carry on a stretcher or with ropes. Or you can purchase a beautiful natural felt shroud from green fuse.



Hold the funeral ceremony and the gathering after at the burial site. If you are having a natural burial, you could see if you can erect a yurt or arge tent on the land and hold the ceremony and the gathering after there, avoiding everyone having to travel from one place to another.

You can have a burial on private land. You can bury two family members on your own land as long as you meet environmental guidelines on proximity to water. If you have a large piece of land, where you could annex a piece off for perpetuity, this is an option. Having processed the coffin by foot the mile from the funeral director, we held a funeral in a yurt in the garden and made the burial on the edge of the property.

Choose your memorial carefully. Many memorial stones now are made from stone that's imported from as far away as India and China. Choose local stone if possible, or some other material such as local wood. Many natural burial sites don't allow memorial stones at all, or just small, flat plaques.

Choose a memorial site you can visit without lots of car miles. Whether you have a grave or choose somewhere to scatter or inter the ashes, think about how far you'd need to travel in the car each time if you were to make regular trips.

Depth of burial. When people are buried 'six feet under' the process of decomposition becomes anaerobic gives little benefit to plants and trees. Ask about the possibility of being buried nearer to the surface, which may be possible in a natural burial site.



a small yurt set up at a woodland burial site

No cellophane. Insist that the florist does not wrap the flowers in cellophane, which only mists up and rots them anyway. Ask them to use only natural materials, and, even better, to use only seasonal and local flowers – or pick them from your garden.

Make a carbon offset from your estate. Most of us have a large carbon footprint. A great legacy to leave is to make a contribution to the Woodland Trust or a carbon offset scheme. An average offset of an entire life's carbon footprint would cost £8,000-£10,000.

It's not easy for us to face up to our own deaths, but if you do want to leave the planet in the most sustainable way and on your own terms, you are going to have to research these options and leave detailed instructions setting out your wishes. Then you can advise others you know, amplifying the effect of your good work.

These ideas and many others are explored more fully in *We Need To Talk About The Funeral - 101 Practical Ways To Commemorate And Celebrate A Life* by Jane Morrell and Simon Smith, available as a downloadable e-book from [www.heartandsoufunerals.co.uk](http://www.heartandsoufunerals.co.uk).

You can also download a Funeral Wishes document to complete so everyone knows what you want from the same website.

**Jane Morrell and Simon Smith** are founder members of the Association of Green Funeral Directors, founded and run **Green Fuse Bereavement Care** and **Heart & Soul Funerals**, funeral directors and celebrants, with a High Street Funeral Centre in Totnes, Devon and a funeral home in Buckfastleigh. They also run Funeral Practitioner and Funeral Celebrant training programmes. They are authors of *We Need To Talk About The Funeral - 101 Practical Ways To Commemorate And Celebrate A Life*, a beautiful, informative and accessible guide to arranging a funeral, available as an e-book from [www.heartandsoufunerals.co.uk/we-need-to-talk-about-the-funeral/](http://www.heartandsoufunerals.co.uk/we-need-to-talk-about-the-funeral/)

### **Heart & Soul Funerals**

7 High Street, Totnes, Devon TQ13 7HT  
01803 840779

Riverstone, 18 Dart Mills, Buckfastleigh, Devon TQ11 0NF  
01364 643522