

THE EVOLUTION OF THE BRITISH FUNERAL INDUSTRY IN THE 20TH CENTURY: FROM UNDERTAKER TO FUNERAL DIRECTOR

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**FROM UNDERTAKER TO
FUNERAL DIRECTOR**

BRIAN PARSONS



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Abbreviations

Publications:

<i>BMJ</i>	<i>British Medical Journal</i>
<i>FSJ</i>	<i>Funeral Service Journal</i>
<i>TUJ</i>	<i>The Undertakers' Journal</i>
<i>TUFDJ</i>	<i>The Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal</i>
<i>BUA Monthly</i>	<i>British Undertakers' Association Monthly</i>
<i>TNFD</i>	<i>The National Funeral Director</i>
<i>TFD</i>	<i>The Funeral Director (Monthly)</i>

Trade Associations:

BES	British Embalmers' Society
BFWA	British Funeral Workers' Association
BIFD	British Institute of Funeral Directors
BIE	British Institute of Embalmers
BIU	British Institute of Undertakers
BUA	British Undertakers' Association
IBCA	Institute of Burial and Cremation Administration
FBCA	Federation of British Cremation Authorities/Federation of Burial & Cremation Authorities
ICCM	Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management
LAFD	London Association of Funeral Directors
NACCS	National Association of Cemetery (and Crematorium) Superintendents

xii Abbreviations

NAFD	National Association of Funeral Directors
NCDD	National Council for the Disposition of the Dead
SAIF	National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors

Others:

MMC	Monopolies and Mergers Commission
OFT	Office of Fair Trading
SCI	Service Corporation International

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Preface

In 1963, Robert Habenstein and William Lamers published *The History of American Funeral Directing*. Now in its sixth edition, the volume traces the origins of funeral service in the United States from the Egyptians to contemporary times. The subject has since been brought even further up-to-date by Gary Laderman's *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*. This side of the Atlantic, those wishing to investigate a similar period of history need only refer to Julian Litten's authoritative work *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450*. His survey, however, concludes towards the end of the nineteenth century. The intention of this book is to start at this point by providing a comprehensive account of how funeral service developed in Britain during the following 110 years. In a period that has seen a shift from burial to cremation, the replacement of the horse-drawn hearse by motor vehicles, the introduction of embalming and the growth of large funeral firms operating on a centralised basis, there has also been an increasing preference by the industry for the description 'undertaker' to be replaced with 'funeral director'. Endorsing the desire to be perceived as a professional, this new term reflects the increase in responsibility and complexity of funerals acquired during the twentieth century.

This book draws together research I have carried out over the last 20 years. Some material was presented in 1997 to the University of Westminster as a thesis entitled 'Change and Development in the British Funeral Industry, with Special Reference to the Period 1960–1990'. Teaching on the foundation degree in Funeral Service at the University of Bath prompted the revision of the original along with new material, a move greatly assisted by unlimited access to the *Undertakers' Journal/Funeral Service Journal* and the *BUA Monthly/National Funeral Director/Funeral Director Monthly*.

The development of the British funeral industry is a vast subject. It is hoped that this first text on the subject will provide a good starting point for anyone wishing to become acquainted with a fascinating but largely unexplored part of our social and industrial history.

Brian Parsons

Introduction

The occupation of the undertaker first emerged in the seventeenth century as a supplier of coffins, funerary paraphernalia and the means of transport to the place of burial. However, as the disposal of the dead has gradually increased in complexity, the work and role of the undertaker has mirrored this change by beginning to include care for the body and provision of the place of repose in the interval between death and the funeral. This responsibility for the custody of and access to the dead has also presented the opportunity to carry out embalming. Other developments have also impacted on the role, such as changes to the production of coffins and the shift to motorised transport. These factors, together with the issue of succession for family funeral businesses, have coincided with the growth through acquisition of the large organisation. Managing funerals on a centralised basis where all capital-intensive resources are organised in a single location enables operational efficiencies to be achieved through the control of high fixed overheads. Despite this structural change, the independent/family owned business continues to dominate funeral service in the UK in terms of market share.

It is against this background of organisational change that the occupation has sought to reposition itself from ‘undertaker’ to ‘funeral director’ in an attempt to gain recognition as a professional service provider. The formation of a trade association, the launch of a code of practice, the education of funeral directors and attempts at registration have been components of this process. In striving for this status, however, the funeral director has been hindered by two key issues of stigmatisation: handling the dead and making a profit from loss.

**The Evolution of the British Funeral Industry in the 20th Century:
From Undertaker to Funeral Director, 1–2**

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Predominantly historical in approach, the first six chapters explore how care towards the body, coffins, transport and the structure of the industry have changed over the twentieth century. Chapter 1 examines the emergence of the first undertakers, followed by an appraisal of change during the nineteenth century. The concluding section identifies the three key factors that have impacted upon funeral directors during the twentieth century: custody of the dead body, cremation and the funeral reform movement. Chapters 2–6 explore the effects of these changes. Possession of the body and the provision of chapels of rest and embalming are covered in Chapters 2 and 3, while Chapter 4 examines how coffins have changed through increased use of technology and the impact of cremation. The shift from animate power to motor hearse together with the use of alternative funerary transport is considered in Chapter 5. The combined effects of these changes and the challenges facing small firms have enabled the growth of the large firms. This period of expansion is appraised in Chapter 6. The penultimate chapter assesses attempts by external organisations to regulate the industry in an attempt to control funeral costs, while the final chapter identifies seven key areas in the process of professionalisation as the undertaker has sought to become the funeral director.