

A Step into Post Christian Britain, or a Step back to pre-Victorian normality?

On Friday 15th May, Neil Richardson attended the opening of the Chiltern Woodland Burial Park, situated at Potkilm Lane, Jordans, Buckinghamshire. The morning was full of interest and surprises and all the guests were made to feel thoroughly welcome with smiling and accommodating staff, very nice refreshments and an excellent lunch. Pity about the weather!



An outstanding feature of the event and the general ethos of the Burial Park for me was the lack of visible reliance on the Christian tradition which has informed Britain for the past 2000 years. Gone are such names as "Chapel". Now we have a Woodland Hall. Gone are the artefacts to be found in chapels such as crosses and other Christian symbols. In their place we have a tree. Of course, individual funerals may import artefacts to display and then take away, but here in this new setting, an assumption has been made that the vast majority of funerals will not require a pre-set religious ambience. This is probably the correct reading of today's needs.

The Company's Statement of Values reads: "We respect people of all origins, cultures, faiths and beliefs." They interpret that as meaning that the symbols of the official religion of the country are no longer acceptable in the design of the buildings. At this point, it did feel that we had arrived in a post-Christian world.



I wasn't sure whether this feature of the ethos was affirmed or denied by aspects of the day because there was also an aura of ambiguity about the event. For example, the Order of Dedication had printed on it "A place to celebrate life" which could mean celebrate life here and now or life in some hereafter. The glossy booklet given the guests was headed "In the truest sense, a place where life goes on" meaning, perhaps that the life of the mourners goes on as attested to by the life of the woodland going on, or is it a form of words which suggests reincarnation or resurrection, or what? However, the English love a bit of ambiguity and the Church of England in particular has rested on it as a key feature of keeping the ship afloat for centuries. So, let us all shout "Long live ambiguity!"

podium and lectern in the context of a tree

time, will want to opt for a burial rather than a cremation on the grounds that it is better for the environment. But they wouldn't want the traditional cemetery approach, with the usual features of broken and un-cared-for monuments, over-the-top stone carvings of kitsch angels, and tacky epitaphs. When questioned about the

The owners of the enterprise were selling it as "Uniquely peaceful and uplifting, the beautiful surroundings offer a natural alternative to conventional funeral options." In conversation, I learned that cremations are a very eco-unfriendly method for the disposal of The human remains and the owners envisage that the current generation of young people, who will be dying in 30 or 40 years

need for more and more land, we were told that the whole burial park, could, if necessary, be re-cycled after about 100 years as the mourners would themselves have passed on and the human remains buried would be virtually non-existent. Here we have the ultimate expression of the contemporary adage “reduce, re-use and re-cycle.”



All this is, in fact, a return to the British way of doing burials before our Victorian forebears brought on their vision of the necropolis with its mausoleums and street scenes of ever-more impressive self-important tomb structures. Before this, the dead were buried in “God’s Acre” using the sole parish coffin for the burial service and then placed in the grave in winding sheets and the whole plot would then be re-used in due time.

I was pleased to be able to talk to Graham Brown, who described himself as the “architectural designer” of the buildings. Graham was a very sympathetic interlocutor and I was very interested in how he

described his vision for the design. Graham told me that his brief had been to design “a sacred non-denominational building” which, at first sight, seems a tall order to achieve without specific religious reference points, but in fact, he has achieved it remarkably well. The roofs are inspired by “reciprocal frame geometry” and look beautiful, leading the eye upwards to the sky. The principles are encapsulated by seven points on the journey which the mourners will undertake. The sevenfold vision is expressed in the seven sections and seven sides which may be seen at every turn in the ceremonial buildings. The start of the journey is the gate of the Burial Park where there is a focus on the reality of what is going to take place. Then, the mourners will enter the Gathering Hall where they meet each other, some after long periods of separation, greet each other and socialise, perhaps with refreshments. From the Gathering Hall, the mourners will get a view of the Woodland Hall suggesting something sacred and final, and this gives mourners a focus on which to reflect and prepare for what is coming. Then, crossing the connecting space, the courtyard, the mourners will enter the Woodland Hall where they begin to accept that they will soon be separating from their loved one’s body. Looking up, through the roof light, they will perhaps reflect on Heaven’s Gate. Then comes the doorway from the Woodland Hall and out to the woodland where the burial will take place. As they move through the ceremony, they may reflect on the timeless nature of love. Finally, there comes the journey to the grave, the final gateway. After the burial, the mourners may return to the Gathering Hall for time together or even refreshments for which the facilities are available. Graham Brown deliberately chose 7 sided structures for the ceremonial buildings because the number seven is in tradition, a sacred number which supports the exploration of the mysteries of life and death. He designed 6 sided buildings for the office where logical thought processes are expected for the running of the business.

The owners are promising that at least 2 hours will be allocated to every funeral to allow the time necessary for decent mourning, talking and condolence-sharing.

This contrasts very starkly with the 20 minutes offered at the normal Crematorium, followed by a few moments in the outdoors, often in rain, where they chat before going home or to a funeral breakfast in another venue altogether.



Graham Brown (pictured) saw his work as one entity, one space with the lines connecting the buildings and courtyard to each other giving a united experience from start to finish.

I was very impressed by Graham Brown and his design was very well thought out and attractive to the eye. I expect many people will enjoy his work for many years to come.

The sevenfold roof of the Woodland Hall with a view of Heaven's Gate.

The invitation I received was to a "Service of Dedication" and I was very impressed by the range of people present to make their own act of dedication to what is a multi-faith and no-faith Burial Park. There were 3 Christian representatives, headed up by the Bishop of Buckingham, then reps from the Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu faiths, plus a rep from the Institute of Civil Funerals and from the British Humanist Association. The last rep was from "Interfaith Ministry" but despite having a long conversation with her, I am still none the wiser about what this is.



After welcoming speeches from Fran Hall, the Park Manager and Nick Taylor the Company Managing Director, we heard the Right Reverend Alan Wilson, Bishop of Buckingham, who gave a sparkling address enthusiastically praising the organic architecture of the site and the human scale of the buildings which are so sympathetic to their purpose. He applauded the work of Graham Brown in offering mourners space for progression, reflection and release. He described typical Victorian cemeteries as "the back drop to many a horror film" and reminded us that cemeteries are as much about the needs of the living as the dead. He drew on an image from the Judeo-Christian heritage to promote the message that all humanity comes from the earth and will return to the earth and he said that the

Woodland Burial concept embodied this pivotal point of ancient wisdom. He then turned to the glass doors out into the woodland and spoke words of dedication.



The interior of the Woodland Hall where funeral ceremonies take place. The large glass doors lead directly into the woodland burial areas.

After each one had spoken, they lit a candle on a small table close to the doors on to the burial park.



Here you see Kelsang Loten light her candle.

Irit Shillor, a female Rabbi from the Harlow Jewish Community spoke of the Woodland concept meeting the Jewish requirement for ecology and being “outside the city.” Then, in dedication, she sang Psalm 23 in Hebrew, very beautifully. Struti Dharma Dasa, of the Krishna Consciousness Society made an amusing speech and then sang a prayer from the Upanishads in Sanskrit and Carole Warren of Interfaith Ministry read a section of words from Kalil Gibran.

I am sorry to say that some of the other speakers misused their slot by promoting their particular world-view or brand of doing funerals. Chris Howe of the Institute of Civil Funerals waded in with unnecessary crowing by telling us that 5 years ago, 181 Civil Funerals were performed, whilst last year there had been 3,013. The Humanist Ros Curtis also used her slot to promote the BHA. All very unwelcome words in what was otherwise a very warm and united service which recognised that despite differences, we were all in the business of actively supporting mourners at a very difficult time.

The notable absence from the line up of religions prepared to dedicate the burial park was a representative of Islam. Apparently an invitation had been sent to them but had been declined. After the Opening Dedication, we all went outside to watch the release of doves.

This was followed by an opportunity to ride in a horse and carriage around the woodland to see what it is like, and observe the places where burials have already taken place, about 12 since September 2008.

I took a ride, of course, thinking I would enjoy the experience and I did, accompanied by a group of similarly interested professionals.



The woodland is typically untidy and unruly and will be fairly cheap to maintain, unlike the over-manicured flower beds and lawns of a typical crematorium.

What I did not expect was a sense of grief when, enjoying the woodland scene, one suddenly came upon a grave. In a cemetery, you expect it and you only go there if you want to experience it.

If one looks carefully, one sees a heap of raised ground where the grave is. In the natural woodland, the sudden experience of death left me with a twinge of sadness, as though the grave had spoiled the scene, transformed it from a place of tranquil beauty into a graveyard, out of the blue.

For people who are constantly dealing with funerals and graves and crematoria, there is always a struggle to separate out one's own feelings from the grief of others. It is very easy to become involved at an inappropriate level or at the other extreme, to retain distance by flippancy or coarse humour. After 25 years of funeral taking, I was surprised by the negative impact these woodland graves had on me.



Was there anything inadequate about this facility?

I could only spot one thing which was the room where people could inspect the names inscribed in a memorial book.

Memorial rooms are often little spaces and heavy with the scent of floral tributes. Chiltern Burial Park have provided a very small space which is, in contrast to all else, very poky and not at all friendly or beautiful.

Perhaps there are plans to develop this aspect in future?

The Bishop of Buckingham said to me after the ceremony that in conventional cemeteries, the older the cemetery the higher the maintenance costs and by contrast, the lower the income due to diminishing space available for new burials and new income. This project will not experience that financial crisis and so it is very likely be successful financially.

I came away from this ceremony impressed by the thought and effort which had been made to introduce a new approach to funerals which is designed "to surpass the expectations of all those we serve" as the Values Statement puts it. I felt confident that the Burial Park would be a roaring success and I left with positive feelings for the staff and the whole project.



I am sad in a way that the Christian faith is not at the heart of the building design, but we do live in changed times and we Christians have to "get over it" and live in the real world.