

The Management of Civilian Funerals in the Second World War

Brian Parsons

Introduction

World War Two challenged funeral directors on an unprecedented level. Essential supplies were rationed, staff were called-up and premises were bombed, while working practices and funeral traditions were amended to cope with the national emergency. The Ministry of Health issued regulations concerning deaths due to 'war operations' that included the use of shrouds instead of coffins and burial in trenches.

Drawing from trade journal, funeral records, council minutes and oral history, this article looks at how funeral directors prepared for war before assessing the effects of the shortage of supplies and contribution to the 'war effort'. After briefly focusing on the management of

funerals in specific locations, final remarks concern the State's intervention in funerals and the response by the funeral industry to the changing environment of disposal.

The Industry Prepares for War

The possibility of conflict with Germany was anticipated by the mid 1930s and preparations were in place by the time war was declared in 1939. Funeral directors recognised that their services would be affected and at the NAFD conference in 1938, the National President John Jobson, appointed five members to form a Special (War Emergency) Committee to deal with specific war-related issues. On a local level, one way funeral directors could assist was by becoming involved with

the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) department established in each area. In October 1938, the ARP Department at Kensington Borough Council contacted funeral directors and trained them in the decontamination of a gassed body, identification and storage until burial. However, the most important development in respect of funerals was the Ministry of Health's circular 1779 'Civilian Death due to War Operations'. Sent to all local authority clerks it outlined their responsibility for providing mortuary accommodation along with staffing and administration, arranging transport from the place of death to the mortuary and for burial. Several comments can be made about this circular. Firstly, although it was assumed that most bodies



Recovering victims of the Blitz in London

would be claimed by relatives who would then arrange and pay for a funeral, where this did not take place the local authority would be obliged to carry out a burial. Secondly, authorities were required to assess available burial space, but were also empowered to use burial grounds not under their control including proprietary cemeteries and churchyards. Thirdly, there was no mention of cremation. With only 3.5% of deaths followed by cremation at the 54 crematoria operating in 1939, it was not a popular disposal choice. Furthermore, as Dr Julie Rugg has revealed, the National Association of Cemetery and Crematorium Superintendent's (NACCS) pointed out that crematoria would be impeded if gas and electricity supplies were severed. However, others disagreed and at the eighth joint conference of cemetery and crematorium authorities, the Dr AB Williamson of Portsmouth stated, "There is probably no stronger advocate of cremation than the Medical Officer of Health." Recognition was given to the impact of severing gas and electricity, objections by a large part proportion of the community (despite Hull providing a free cremation service and St Marylebone reducing their fee to £2 2s for war victims); the cremation of the unidentified and delays due to certification. Other difficulties were that the cremation of unidentified bodies prevented exhumation at a later date whilst the completion of certificates would lead to delays. Lastly, consultation with funeral directors by the local authority was encouraged. Although funeral directors did not receive the circular it was reprinted in both *The Undertakers' Journal* and *The National Funeral Director*. The NAFD recommended that funeral directors did not offer their premises as mortuary accommodation, that staff in the mortuaries should not be connected with funeral directors and that vehicles used for the recovery of bodies should not be hearses. However, as the war progressed it was evident that a close working relationship resulted with the former giving their time freely as mortuary

attendants, that funeral directing premises were commandeered for body storage and funeral vehicles were utilised.

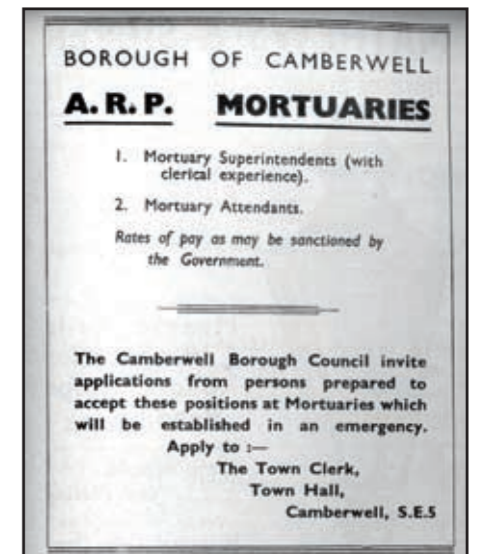
Local authorities opened mortuaries in buildings such as recreation halls and swimming baths, while newly recruited staff were trained in interviewing the bereaved and identification techniques. Those at St Pancras mortuary in London were trained by Sir Bernard Spilsbury, honorary pathologist to the Home Office, Bentley Purchase, the coroner, and a police inspector. The



The Coventry and District Funeral Directors' Guild assemble for a photograph during a respirator drill in 1939. Mr AE Pargetter was chairman of the Funeral Directors' ARP Committee. (*The Undertakers' Journal* September 1939)

Borough of Twickenham converted two open air swimming baths and the cemetery chapels into temporary mortuaries. Capable of accommodating 244 bodies, the cost of racking, water boilers and other fittings was £990. Bodies were to be labelled with a metal or Bakelite disc with a serial number; where appropriate, photos were to be taken.

Local NAFD associations continued to form groups to prepare for civilian deaths. The Croydon ARP Department estimated that 140 men would be required for their 'collecting party' to serve four mortuaries capable of holding 500 bodies and the local association contacted them to offer assistance; the Coventry Guild of Funeral Directors did the same. The York Association took part in a



The Borough of Camberwell advertised for mortuary personnel in *The National Funeral Director*

mock air raid causing twelve 'deaths' while the London-based wholesale suppliers, Dottridge Bros, were of sufficient size to establish their own Local Defence Volunteer or 'Home Guard' unit.

3 September 1939: War is Declared

With the declaration of war funeral directors were immediately affected by restrictions. Firstly, although classified as a reserved occupation towards the end of the Great War funeral directors (including assistant director, branch manager, foreman coffin maker and coffin maker) aged 30 years of age and under were called-up. Hearses were later added to the list. However, the category for embalmers was absent as there were very few full-time embalmers and comparatively little embalming was carried out. Despite deputations to Government ministers from the NAFD's Special (War) Emergency Committee on a number of occasions, the age was increased to 35 from October 1941. (Call-up

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Sandbags protect the premises of Thomas Ebbutt funeral directors in Croydon

was not finally suspended until April 1944.) Secondly, petrol for hearses, following cars and removal vehicles was rationed. The same committee met with the Ministry of Mines (Petroleum Department) in September 1939 which confirmed that applications for supplementary supplies would be considered. However, as the war progressed, attempts were made to change working practices in an effort to conserve supplies. The suggestion of a fixed radius for motor hearses was first made in 1940, but shelved. However, by June 1942 the Ministry of War Transport stated that if a coffin had to be transported over 30 miles (in Scotland 20 miles) 'in ordinary circumstances', this had to be by rail, except if many changes were involved. The use of vehicles for long

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Suppliers to the industry were affected by the war. The coachbuilder Thomas Startin ceased marking hearses and limousines for most of the war, while George Lear appealed for glass embalming fluid bottles to be returned for reuse. Supplies from Dottridge Bros were curtailed and their premises in London bombed on 15 occasions.

distance funerals was discouraged. As will be seen, this was only one initiative concerning funeral transport. Thirdly, tyres were rationed in 1942 and only supplied for vehicles if essential to the war effort. Lastly, restrictions on timber were introduced at the end of September 1939. Any person purchasing timber or boxboard up to a value of £20 per month must have a licence. By December this was reduced to £5 per month while the following year the thickness of wood used in coffin construction had been reduced; the sides, ends, tops and bottoms were not to exceed 5/8" thick. Other restrictions affected coffin preparation; the availability of metal fittings for caskets ceased in May 1942, while sandpaper was also rationed. Bunny France of A France in Holborn recalls that lead for lining coffins could only be obtained by seeking written permission from the Ministry of Supply. With no repatriations taking place during the war years, bodies were placed in lead lined coffins and retained in catacombs, such as at St Mary's Cemetery Kensal Green, to await eventual transportation.

Contributions to the War Effort

In addition to these restrictions, the industry also was involved in a number of initiatives

to help the war effort. Towards the end of 1939, the Newcastle, Gateshead and District Local Association of the NAFD suggested eliminating funerals at a 'walking pace' so that vehicles could do at least two funerals per day. However, a more radical plan was to stagger funerals and with the encouragement of the Ministry of War Transport a pilot scheme commenced at Bolton in 1942. Most funerals took place between 2pm and 3pm. However, by widening this to between 10am and 3pm, a reduction in the use of hearses from 21 to 10 was recorded. A central office was used to co-ordinate vehicles and arrange times with funeral directors. Furthermore, processions where mourners walked in front of or behind the hearse were not allowed as a minimum speed of 15 mph was introduced; mourners were also encouraged to meet funerals at the church and processions should take the most direct route to a cemetery or crematorium. The staggering scheme was also proposed in Portsmouth and Glasgow. It should be noted here that the interwar years were a period of transition from the use of horse drawn to motor hearses. However, the war did not help with retaining horses as feed was subject to rationing. Furthermore, the Cemeteries Association were concerned that horses would

be difficult to manage in case of gun-fire or explosions and suggested that their use be curtailed.

Other war effort suggestions included the Southampton local association proposing to reduce brass or copper coffin handles from four to two pairs, while WH Painter of Birmingham encouraged funeral directors to use for scrap old hearse rails, coffin plates with mistakes and tarnished metal fittings. Railings from graves and the boundaries of cemeteries were removed for the same reason.

A degree of flexibility was introduced as cemetery authorities changed their hours of burials, while Registrars of Deaths also extended their attendance times. Funeral directors were encouraged to become involved in fire watching and in Holborn, Bunny France recalls taking his turn on the roof of the firm's premises in Lamb's Conduit Street where a stirrup pump and sand were kept for putting out fires.

The NAFD had to modify its annual gatherings to save on long-distance travel for members; the 1940 Conference was scaled down from three days in Aberystwyth to one day in Manchester and a single day event was held throughout the war years except 1944 when the conference was cancelled.

More general restrictions also impacted on funeral directors. If an air raid sounded when a funeral was on its way to a cemetery or crematorium, the procession must leave the street to keep them clear for civil defence vehicles. Gas masks had to be carried on funerals, while vehicle lights had to be modified to expose the beam only through an aperture the size of a half penny. Speed limits were enforced in the black-outs with offenders being fined by the magistrates. Signs and traffic lights countrywide were removed and to help with navigation the NAFD established a scheme whereby a local funeral director would pilot a visiting funeral through a town. All premises had to be blacked-out and in some cases protected by sandbags.

Funerals of the Victims

Despite the challenges of war, funerals carried on. However, in addition to the day-to-day work funeral directors in urban areas had on occasions to cope with deaths due to the euphemistically entitled 'war operations'. It is estimated that there were over 67,000 civilian victims during WWII. As already mentioned, families could claim bodies of relatives and arrange for their burial. However, under Circular 1779 the local authority had an obligation to bury unidentified and/or unclaimed victims. After

a discussion between the NAFD's National Secretary and the Ministry of Health in October 1940, it was recorded that, 'Where [unidentified] casualties are numerous the local authorities have provided for disposal in canvas wrappings or cardboard coffins, in shallow trenches, so as to facilitate any exhumation if it becomes necessary at a later date.' Local authorities were to approach the Ministry of Health with the number of shrouds they wished to purchase; the minutes of Bermondsey Borough Council indicate that the Ministry could obtain them for 3s 9d each. St Marylebone Borough Council purchased 750 pairs of sheets for shrouds from Peter Robinson in Oxford Street at 2s 4½d per pair. The Borough of Twickenham ordered 250 fabric lined rubbers sheets, and also hessian bags for personal belongings. However, both funeral directors and cemetery superintendents were scornful of the use of anything except a coffin. The editor of The Undertakers' Journal commented that '...burial in sheets is a lamentable mistake on the part of the Ministry' and likened such burials to a pauper's funeral, while NACCS objected on the grounds of the difficulties attached to disinterring uncoffined bodies.

In Coventry, rumours that cardboard coffins were to be used was dismissed by the cemetery superintendent, PWH Conn, who was also given the title of 'Director of Civilian Dead in War Time'. He stated, 'If a calamity occurred in Coventry everyone would receive a decent coffin to rest in.' He was also anxious that use be made of the newly opened Canley Crematorium. This was aided by an amendment that had been made to the Cremation Regulations 1930 to dispense with the need for two medical certificates if death had been registered as being due to war operations. Although both sides of the industry had contrasting reasons to object to shroud burials, they did, however, achieve a measure of success in maintaining the use of coffins.

A Ministry of Health Circular (No 2192) issued towards the end of 1940 stated that where bodies were not claimed and the local authority arranged a funeral it should take place in a 'seemly and dignified' manner and that the 'Burial of civilians should be regarded as no less honourable than burial of a soldier by his comrades'. Where a severe strain was placed on a local authority, the '...multiplicity of funerals might in certain conditions be understandable.' As will be seen, the communal or trench grave was used during the war. The superintendent of a Glasgow cemetery found that relatives of some people buried in a communal grave resented the idea until reassured that it was not a pauper grave.

Under the Defence Regulations, a payment of £7 10s would be made by local authorities for the burial of a civilian victim of war. It was only intended to be a contribution to funeral costs; an assessment of FW Paine's funeral records shows that the average charge for a funeral in 1940 (without disbursements) was in the region of £18. From January 1944 the payment was increased to £10.

As already mentioned, few bodies were embalmed at this time, although both the British Institute of Embalmers and the British Embalmers' Society were actively encouraging sanitary education among funeral directors through class tuition and articles in the trade journals. George Lear was working as a full-time trade embalmer covering the London area and in 1940 reported that embalming was ideal where there was a delay until the burial. One reason he had encountered was where an interment could not take place due to a time bomb in the cemetery. He noted that if arterial injection was not possible, derma-surgery could be used. Embalming, however, did have its place as a team of American embalmers based at Brookwood Cemetery treated US servicemen whose bodies were repatriated at a later date.

Funerals of the Victims: Coventry

Aside from London, Coventry was the worst city to be devastated in the Blitz. On the 14 and 15 November 1940, a ten hour attack devastated 100 acres of the city centre; 554 were killed and according to an account by Kenneth Turner who dealt with the identification of the bodies, even the mortuary was bombed. Mortuary staff, '...were engaged in fitting bits and pieces together to make whole bodies.' An account of preparations for the funeral written by the secretary of the Coventry and District Funeral Directors' Guild, AJ Maton, appeared in The National Funeral Director. He was summoned to a meeting of the Town Clerk and the Medical Officer for Health on Saturday 16 October where a decision had already been made for a mass burial using shrouds as it was not considered possible to obtain 500 coffins. However, the following day the City's Emergency Committee requested 400-500 coffins to be supplied by Tuesday afternoon. The Town Clerk's messenger was despatched to visit all Coventry funeral directors with instruction to start making coffins and to continue making them until otherwise ordered. However, many firms had suffered bomb damage while there was a partial absence of electricity. Birmingham Guild was contacted and WH Painter agreed for his members to provide 250-300 coffins. Through George Jennings, funeral directors in the Wolverhampton



A view of the embalming theatre adjacent to the American military section at Brookwood Cemetery



Censorship rules did not permit the British press to show bombed buildings. These three views of the bombing at London Wall, Moorgate Station and St Giles Church Cripplegate were part of a set of postcards passed by the censor in 1944.

area supplied a further 100, while other associations also offered coffins and support. The funeral for 172 victims took place on Wednesday 20 November in the extension to Coventry's London Road Cemetery. The coffins were transported to the cemetery on a lorry the night before and placed three deep in two long parallel trenches that had been dug by soldiers and labourers assisted by a mechanical digger. The next morning mourners assembled at the gates and then walked behind the Mayor, Bishop of Coventry, clergy and other officials to the grave where a joint committal service was held. A second mass burial was held a few days later.



The cathedral church of St Michael's Coventry was bombed on the 14 November 1940. In 1947 a group of Dutch funeral directors visited England and were shown around Coventry by members of the local Guild.

Funerals of the Victims: Holborn

Bounded by the Borough of St Marylebone to the west and the City of London to the east, the Metropolitan Borough of Holborn was one of the smallest local authority areas in London, but was as heavily bombed as its neighbours. According to the Borough's Record of Air Raid Incidents, 432 civilians were killed between 1940 and 1945. In addition, a number were 'presumed dead.' The Borough's mortuary was located in the basement of a building at Stukeley Street near Covent Garden and Bunny France recalls seeing bodies there wrapped in hessian sheets not dissimilar to the sketches of people sleeping in shelters by the war artist and sculptor Henry Moore.

Heeding the Ministry of Health's Circular 1779 and mindful that the Borough did not have its own cemetery, contact was made with other London authorities for burial space; the Borough of Wandsworth offered its newly acquired (but never used) Tolworth Cemetery. However, trench graves were prepared at Putney Vale and Wandsworth. The worst incident in Holborn was on 8 March 1945 when a V2 rocket killed 135. Burial of six unidentified victims took place in the S Alban's Holborn section at Brookwood Cemetery. A France & Sons arranged the funerals of a number of civilian deaths from this and other incidents and entries in the ledgers are headed 'WO' – War Operations.

Funerals of the Victims: Kingston

In south west London Frederick W Paine carried out many funerals of air raid victims in

the Surbiton and Kingston area; a target for the bombing was the Hawker Aircraft works on the Thames at nearby Ham. Run by Frederick Paine who died just before the end of the war, the business was the largest funeral directing firm in Britain and operated from eleven branches in Middlesex and north Surrey. In October 1940 a total of 254 funerals were carried out; 63 of these were described in the registers under 'Air Raid Casualty'. All funerals used motor vehicles and coffins were received from or transported to distant locations such as Bournemouth, Manchester and Dumfries, using the railway. One feature highlighted by Paine's registers is the number of multiple funerals and in October 1940 nine were recorded. Five members of the same family killed in Hampton at the end of September 1940; all were buried in the same grave during a funeral conducted by Frederick Paine and his brother-in-law and requiring 20 bearers. A direct hit on a keeper's house at Chessington Zoo resulted in the death of two family members. The firms also looked after the funeral of a victim of the Balham underground station bombing when 64 of the 600 shelterers were buried alive on the 15 October 1940 after a bomb hit the main road resulting in water and sludge being poured into the tunnels.

Three points can be made about the events during WW2. The first concerns censorship and research for this article. The likelihood of civilian casualties was a concern prior to the start of WW2 but the Government was aware that reporting of deaths and destruction would have an effect on morale. It was also information of use to the enemy so they could

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assess the accuracy and effectiveness of their bombing. Newspaper and radio editors were issued with 'Defences Notices' by the Ministry of Information and these detailed what could be released and advice on how they should handle a particular subject. It is believed that 5,000 memoranda and letters were distributed. The names of large cities where bombing had occurred could not be named until 28 days after the event. Radio broadcasts reporting bombing were kept general such as 'Heavy attacks in the Midlands' rather than name Coventry. The number of fatalities could not be mentioned. Photographs of bombed buildings could not be published, although some did appear in The Illustrated London News and other media but only after a delay. Research for this article found that local authorities took many photos of bombed buildings in their area, but these were for record purposes only. Reporting restrictions were lifted to take a photo of the preparations for burial for 31 children and one teacher who died when Sandhurst Road School Catford was bombed

in January 1943. The white coffins were kept overnight in the cemetery chapel and a communal service held at the trench grave the next morning.

The majority of research has been from trade journals while the information about locations has come from the local authority 'records of incidents' that detail the destruction and casualties after bombing raids. Information has then been cross-referenced to funeral directors records. However, the suppression of incidents being reported in newspapers makes further collaboration impossible. Some incidents did creep into the news. Those at London Underground stations are well known. For example, the 173 killed at Bethnal Green on 3 March 1943 and 117 at Bank in January 1941. However, this research has identified a single raid in Holborn that claimed 135. Yet there is no mention in the local press; the only record is the Borough's Register of Incidents.

The second point is that with the payment of £7 10s towards the burial of civilians due

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Lancefield Coachworks advertising in 1944

to war operations, it was the first time the government had made a contribution towards funeral expenses. The issue of high funeral costs, alleged exploitation by funeral directors and the poor paying for burial insurance to prevent a pauper's funeral were reoccurring themes during the interwar period. A suggested remedy was the municipalisation of funeral directors and this had been tabled on a number of occasions including a scheme in Liverpool in 1916. In 1938 Sir Arnold Wilson and Professor Herman Levy's detailed study entitled Burial Reform and Funeral Costs was published, which contained recommendations for an inquiry into funeral charges and that death benefit be part of the National Health Insurance Acts.

The onset of war did not stem the momentum for reform. In July 1942 accusations that funeral directors were exploiting the families of air raid victims in Weston-Super-Mare, caused comment in Parliament. However, these were unfounded. In 1943 the Fabian Society recommended that a local authority funeral service be introduced, as did a document by The Social Security League the following years. However, midway through the war, 1942, William Beveridge published Social Insurance and Allied Services. Framing what would become the 'Welfare State,' it recommended payment of a £20 funeral grant. This was eventually introduced in conjunction with the Central Price Regulation Committee in June 1949. The government's contribution to the burial of civilians was however less than was half of the 1949 full grant and even though increased to £10 in 1944 was far lower than the average cost of a funeral. An assessment of FW Paine's funeral records shows that the average charge for a funeral in 1940 (without disbursements) was in the region of £18. Then as now, the payment was only a contribution to funeral expenses. The £20 grant was subsequently increased to £30 where it remained until 1988.

The third point is that from reviewing the funeral trade journals one cannot fail to be struck by the sense of optimism that Britain would be victorious and that the war was



Victory: The Home Guard marches past FA Albin's premises in Bermondsey on VE day in May 1945



St Paul's Cathedral

a route towards change and progressive opportunities. In an article entitled 'Age-old customs gone in a couple of years' published in 1943, the writer summarised changes attributed to the war including the pooling of resources, the staggering of funeral hours, no 'walking' funerals and that cemeteries were giving credit for fees.

As early as 1941, the NAFD conference was used as a platform for change. In that year, the president WH Painter, put forward three suggestions: development of the association, resume education work and rekindle the objective of state registration. The national secretary, George Hotter made similar pleas during the war years, whilst the Florence Hurry, the indefatigable assistant secretary presented a paper on 'The Wider Outlook' about funeral service education. It would be true to say that the war and the decade thereafter brought immense change; funeral service would never be the same again. Changes included the greater responsibility for custody of the body as death increasingly occurred in hospital especially following the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948. Funeral directors responded by providing chapels of rest while sanitary education was given a new impetus.

Dottridge Bros launch their school of Embalming and Funeral Hygiene in 1942 and as soon as the war was over a course for ex-service personnel was launched. Funeral directors were also encouraged to assess the strength of their business and future opportunities and included within the pages of *The Undertakers' Journal* in the month the war ended was a guidance document entitled 'Planning Ahead'. Transport was changing with the motor hearse triumphing; by 1951 it was reported that the last horse drawn funeral was taking place in London.

The wartime also gave the promotion of cremation a boost as the Cremation Society encouraged local authorities to build housing rather than open cemeteries; Lord Horder pressed for 'Playing fields not cemeteries.' Although five crematoria opened during the war years, by 1945 the preference for cremation had only moved from 3.5% to 7.8%. However, ten years later with twenty-four new crematoria opened, one quarter of deaths would be followed by cremation.

Conclusion

The challenges facing funeral directors during World War two were unprecedented. Not only did restrictions on labour and materials impact upon services, but the need to supply large numbers of coffins placed additional demands on businesses that in some cases had been adversely affected by bombing. Despite these difficulties, funeral directors worked together to ensure the dead reached their resting place whilst helping to maintain the British spirit of defiance, stoicism and self-sacrifice during a time of national emergency, but one that was also a prelude to a new beginning. ▲

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