

It's your funeral: The eco burial movement gathers ground

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Natural burial is often thought of as a green option that takes place in the countryside for non-religious people, but according to researchers at the University of Sheffield, that is only part of the story. 'Lots of different approaches to natural burial have evolved since 1993 when the first site was opened,' explains Mr Andy Clayden, who is leading the research team, which includes Professor Jenny Hockey and Dr Trish Green, 'they cater for people who want a more informal setting in keeping with the person they want to remember. There is no conflict with faith.' The topic is to be discussed at an event on Natural Burial: Do we need a Headstone? to be held in Sheffield on March 14 as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Festival of Social Science.

There are now over 200 [natural burial grounds](#) across the UK ranging from extensions to local authority cemeteries to sites owned by charitable trusts or private individuals. The project, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, is looking at the range of services on offer and the wider impact of natural burial both on the people involved and the landscape. The researchers have already visited 20 sites and are continuing to interview managers, bereaved people, funeral professionals and members of the local community. They will also be conducting an in-depth study of four sites with different interpretations of what natural burial means.

Early findings suggest that natural burial is attractive to people who want to construct their own way of remembering a relative. Natural burial grounds vary tremendously in terms of the habitats they are trying to

create or protect. For example some sites offer a specific guidance on what trees or wildflower seeds can be planted whilst other burial grounds may have a more relaxed and permissive approach. There are sites where the dead are almost completely anonymous; the field may be cut for hay or grazed by sheep.

'People have told us they like to visit sites where they can hear the birds or a stream in a wild life habitat,' says Andy Clayden. 'Some people are put off by the formality of cemeteries and are uncomfortable with the conventions and rules involved in conventional burials. As well as catering for very individual ways of memorialising some sites have created new ways of bringing the bereaved community together at the burial ground. Examples include a Christmas carol service and candle-lit procession and a summer garden fête with live music.'

The research suggests that the farmers and their families who offer land for burials are very enthusiastic about the new movement. 'Some of them live in remote upland areas and they find that by providing burial space they have a new role which requires them to 'open their door' to a new community whom they welcome onto and into their land. Many of them remain a point of contact with the bereaved,' says Andy Clayden.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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