

THE HISTORY OF THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR

The family funeral director has changed a great deal in the last half century. Most family firms originated from builders and joiners with the title of Undertaker added to their services.

When a death occurred the next of kin would inform their family doctor, which often meant the relatives running to the doctor's home, or using a public telephone (if one was available), as private telephones were rare. The same method was used, after the doctor had certified death, to call the "Layer Out". Every village and street had such a person nearby.

Normally, the "Last Offices" were carried out by these ladies, as they would have attended to all the family's past needs, including births. The Undertaker or Funeral Director was summoned to take the necessary measurements and details. He, in turn, would callout the Clergyman or Priest to perform the "Last Rights". Having made the arrangements with the family, a date and time would be fixed for the funeral to take place. The Undertaker would then arrange for his men to prepare and make the coffin, often late at night.

The coffin would then have been made from "sets" of oak, mahogany, elm or agar timbers. Each coffin was made to size and sealed inside with wax and bitumen. The outside would then be sanded, sealed and polished with wax. Brass furniture and name plates which were hand painted would then be added. Should the coffin have been needed for cremation, then the interior was covered in a purple baize cloth with wooden handles and name plate. The interior of the coffin would then have several shovels full of wood shavings put into it to provide the mattress and pillow and also to stop leakage. The coffin was then lined with sheeting. This process usually took between five and eight hours to complete.

The Undertaker and his men would then take the completed coffin back to the house. In many cases, the doorways were too narrow to take the coffin so windows had to be removed by the Undertaker's carpenter and replaced after the coffin had been taken in. This process had to be repeated on the day of the funeral. All of this was carried out in the evening or at night so as not to disturb the neighbours.

The front room or parlour would have been chosen as the last resting place until the funeral. It was not until the late fifties that Chapels of Rest appeared in Funeral establishments. In some cases, a side Chapel in the Church would be made available, but that would have only been available for families selected by the clergy. The deceased would have been laid out in their best nightdress or pyjamas or in their Sunday best and then placed in the coffin and left to rest with the family.

A small altar was erected at the foot of the coffin and candles were placed one at each side. The coffin was placed on trestles on top of a pall which was laid on the floor to absorb any leakages. Sweet smelling flowers were placed around the room to absorb bad odours and the Undertaker would have visited at regular intervals to check on any unpleasantness. Embalming was only performed for very wealthy clients.

The funeral would normally take place about three to four days after death.

The actual funeral did not differ much from the way funerals are carried out today, except that the family and friends of the deceased would have stood outside their homes with the curtains drawn as a mark of respect as the cortege made its way to the church and cemetery. In villages, the church bell would toll as the cortege neared its destination. The family and near relatives would be dressed in black, or wearing black arm bands or diamond shaped black patches on their coat sleeves.

The Cost of a Funeral

Should the carriage of the deceased, during removal or during the actual funeral, cross over any parish boundaries, then a fee was payable. It could, therefore be quite costly if someone died away from home.

The typical cost of a funeral in 1946 was about £20.00, which included the making of the coffin with handles and nameplate, providing four bearers, motor driven hearse and car, church fees and grave digger.

The fee of half a crown was paid to the person who performed the "laying out", this was usually paid by the family at the time of death.

Bearing in mind that the average wage was only £2.15.0d or £2.75 per week, funerals carried out today would cost a similar amount in comparison.