

# Natural burials

## Background

Natural burial is a term used to describe the burial of human remains where the burial area creates a habitat for wildlife or preserves existing habitats (also known as 'green burial' or 'woodland burial').

The concept was first raised in England in the 1980's, initially with local authorities utilising unused natural areas of existing cemeteries. Since then the movement has spread to the private sector. There are now several hundred sites across Britain, often where landowners have recognised a potential for higher income than that gained from agriculture.

Natural burial now has mass appeal as a green alternative to traditional burial and cremation and provides a number of benefits. These include:

- avoiding the concerns of fuel use and emissions that are associated with crematoria
- avoiding the requirements for embalming, therefore reducing formaldehyde pollution of groundwater
- providing both new and additional burial space in local authority cemeteries
- satisfying the growing demand for environmentally friendly funerals
- encouraging wildlife and bio-diversity.

## Earlham Cemetery

There are many areas within the older sections of Earlham Cemetery which can be used for natural burials and the potential exists to offer an even 'greener' alternative burial service.

A three year programme of memorial testing started in July 2012 and this programme includes a range of additional survey work. One survey will assess the number of common graves within the cemetery and will calculate the total amount of burial space which remains in these graves.

For example, a common grave dug to nine feet but with only two burials to date will still have space for another two burials (common graves are graves which have not been purchased and are also referred to as un-purchased or un-owned graves).

Burial authorities have the right to sell the remaining space in common graves, giving the purchaser the rights to the remaining spaces and the right to erect a memorial on the grave (subject to payment and any conditions relating to memorials).

This is an attractive option for a number of reasons, which include:

- improving choice for those who seek an alternative to a formal burial or cremation
- extending the operational life of Earlham Cemetery
- providing a new income stream to set against the operational costs of

maintaining the cemetery

- providing the option of a natural burial in an existing grave as opposed to digging a new grave
- natural burials will occur in areas that are already in conservation management
- previously interred remains will not be disturbed – we will only be utilising the unused space in existing graves
- extension of the service to other areas of the cemetery according to the burial needs of the community.

### **Descendants**

The majority of the graves under consideration will be between 100 and 150 years old. Although the burial registers will contain details of who is buried in each grave there will not be any record of the next of kin as they are common graves – they were never purchased, so no ownership records would have been recorded and the graves belong to the council.

There are some common graves within Earham Cemetery that have had memorials erected on them, but as these graves have not been purchased the council has no record of the memorials and they are, in fact, unauthorised structures.

However, in the interests of good management and to avoid any possibility of distress, the council will issue a formal notice in the press and in the cemetery before any common graves with memorials are re-opened.

This will present an opportunity for any living descendants to come forward. At this point they can accept the use of the remaining space or they can purchase the grave and therefore remove it from the natural burial programme.

### **Site management**

The specific management plan for the natural burial area is being prepared between the cemeteries management, the natural areas officer and the grounds maintenance supervisors. This plan will take due account of the needs of people and wildlife.

The areas concerned will not be left to go wild but will be managed with the appropriate level of intervention in order to help maintain the cemetery's County Wildlife Site (CWS) status.

The management plan includes a number of provisions. These include:

- burials will be restricted to biodegradable coffins or biodegradable containers for cremated remains
- memorials will be restricted to those which are environmentally friendly ie the use of stone which has been quarried overseas and imported will not be permitted
- memorial size, design and material will be restricted to those that are discrete and appropriate to the existing landscape of Victorian monolith memorials
- any planting will be restricted to specific species suitable for the local

environment and which are easy to manage

- plots will be made available according to a structured plan to ensure maintenance requirements can be achieved in an efficient and effective manner.

### **Financial issues**

Grave space is 'sold' with an Exclusive Right of Burial (ERB), often referred to as a grant. This grant allows the owner to determine who is buried in the plot and to erect a memorial on the grave.

Grants are issued for a period of 50 years and at the expiry of the grant the owner is required to renew it by payment to the council. If no payment is received the grave reverts to being a common (un-owned) grave.

The natural burial service will operate in exactly the same way as the traditional burial service and charge fees for the same three services.

For the grave grant, the cost will reflect the fact that the graves will already contain at least one body burial. For this reason the grant will be a pro-rata cost according to how much space remains in the grave eg 75% of the current fee if three spaces remain, 50% if two spaces remain and 25% if there is only one space. For both burials and memorial applications the fees charged for traditional burials will apply.

For current costs for graves, memorial approvals, interments and grave maintenance (2014-15), please [click here](#).

The natural burials service allows the purchase of graves 'in reserve' (ie in advance), rather than solely in conjunction with a planned funeral. Purchase in reserve for new graves is not permitted as it could create a situation where all the cemetery burial space is purchased but many graves are empty because the graves have been purchased but the owners are still alive.

This is not an issue for the natural burial service as it will utilise graves that have already been used, rather than digging new plots and exhausting the physical space available. There will, therefore, be two distinct policies, with purchase in reserve permitted for the natural burial service but not for the formal burial service (where the digging of new graves is required).