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So you want to... open a green burial ground

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Fifteen years ago, there was one green cemetery in the UK. Now there are over 270. Two-thirds of us, according to a poll, would prefer a woodland or meadow burial.

Rosie Inman-Cook is the manager of the [Association of Natural Burial Grounds](#) (ANBG), the independent organisation to which most green burial sites are affiliated. As she points out, natural burial sites have proliferated in the UK of the past few years.



Aylesbury Vale natural burial meadow – tree planting © Leedam Natural Heritage

In spite of this trend, the shortage of green sites has become a serious issue, according to Rupert Callender, who runs the [Green Funeral Company](#) with his wife Clare. “Natural burial is definitely what people want,” he says. “And every town and village needs its own green burial ground. This is an ideal way of farmers diversifying.”

So what is “natural” or “green” burial? As the name suggests, this choice of funeral involves disposal of the deceased on green sites where there is an expectation of sound ecological land management

now and in the future.

The type and standards of natural burial grounds vary hugely. Some are operated by local authorities alongside their more traditional cemeteries. Some are privately owned and run by the landowners and their families, or by staff they have employed. Some are owned by large corporate companies or are run in partnership between the landowner and a larger 'umbrella' organisation

The best natural burial grounds undertake to preserve landscapes, conserve wildlife habitats and archaeology and to minimise environmental impact in terms of the funeral arrangements – coffins are made from non-harmful, bio-degradable materials, and embalming chemicals are avoided.

What kind of site is suitable?

A burial ground can be created on as little as half an acre, although some sites are 25 acres or more. You will ideally need straightforward access from the road with turning space on-site, and adequate parking.

Redundant farm buildings may have potential for conversion to accommodate funeral ceremonies, but this kind of provision is by no means essential. A peaceful site is desirable, however, preferably with views over countryside or sea.

[Leedam Natural Heritage](#), a company that set up and manages several green cemeteries in the U.K., lists its ideal topological requirements. A burial ground would have not very sandy soil to a depth of at least three metres, a water table below three metres, and no standing water at the bottom of any grave when it is first dug.



Cardiff & The Vale natural burial meadow © Leedam Natural Heritage

Areas used for burials should not be within 250m of any spring or well used for drinking water, or within 50m of any other spring, borehole, well or watercourse.

What about planning permission?

Although planning permission is not needed to bury the remains of a limited number of friends or family on land owned by yourself, you will certainly need to make a planning application when creating a green cemetery which is for the public.

As with all planning decisions, reactions from the local authority and the local community can vary. To start with, the highways department will examine an application from the point of view of safe access, but Michael Jarvis of the ANBG advises that traffic generated by your existing agricultural activity may well be a relevant precedent here.

Impact on wildlife habitat and/or archaeology sites will be also be considered, and of course the views of your neighbours are taken into account.

James Leedam, of Leedam Natural Heritage, a company which specialises in setting up and managing natural burial grounds in tandem with landowners throughout the UK, believes that a lot of concerns can be successfully addressed through thoughtful preparation at the pre-planning stage.

Alternatively, one of the remits of the ANBG is to assist people in the process of establishing sites, for a provisional membership fee of £100.

The association offers information on initial outlay, on environmental and access issues and if necessary, will put you in touch with hydro-geologists and wildlife specialists with particular expertise in this type of development.

If you want to test out community reaction, “then we suggest that you hire a hall, and get your neighbours along to a public meeting”, advises Mr Leedam.

“Lay out all the documents relating to the proposal and encourage people to talk about their concerns.” With a register of those at the meeting, and a plan which addresses objections which may have been raised, a more confident and well-informed planning application can then be made.

What else must I think about?

Arrangements must be made for the long-term security of the burial site, and its maintenance as a green area, once it has reached capacity.

One solution might be to transfer the site to a wildlife charity so that it eventually becomes a nature reserve.

The ANBG can advise its members on how to make these arrangements and, if the site is to remain in private ownership, what proportion of income should be kept aside for future upkeep.

A register must be kept of the exact location of all the graves. Some site managers have used a chip and GPS locator system, but others opt for measurement and marking on a physical map.

Thought must also be given to families and friends having access to the place of burial after the funeral.

Many burial ground managers will highlight the fact that these are areas where the bereaved can return to enjoy a landscape which is a memorial to their loved ones.

Although most green cemeteries have open access, others give clear advice about when the site is open.

The burial ground must also be covered by public liability insurance.

Code of practice

ANBG members sign up to a code of practice, which gives assurance to the public as to the service they can expect to receive.

The code underlines the principles and practice of green burial, and issues of security, grave marking and future management.

Association members are also expected to enable families to arrange and conduct their own funerals, if that is their choice.

A tree for every grave?

A memorial tree planted at a suitable time on or near the grave was the original idea, and certainly one which some of the green sites adhere to.

But, given the difficulty in managing woodland long-term, people are beginning to see the benefits of an arguably more practical and natural plan, where native species trees are planted in clumps, or around the fringe of the site.

As Rupert Challoner explains, "Families then understand that their relative will be buried in a zoned area, say, where there will be 11 graves and two trees, and they are usually very happy with that plan."

And another practical consideration would be that a burial ground managed in this way can also accommodate more graves. For further advice on designing green burial sites, contact Leedham Natural Heritage.

It is also worth noting that, where a meadow burial site is planned, the area can continue to be grazed by sheep, providing it continues to be managed ecologically and is never ploughed.

What about rates?

The ANBG has argued robustly on the matter of business rates for its members, which resulted in an 88% reduction in one case.

The Valuation Office Agency now sets out a method of assessment which is a more realistic reflection of a burial ground's income and expenditure, taking into account the tight margins of some of the smaller sites when they are first established.

This arrangement does not apply, though, where there are "substantial" buildings for meetings or funerals, or where permanent staff are present.

How much does a grave cost?

Charges for burial of remains, or for the distribution of ashes, vary enormously, with the cost of a single plot, exclusive of grave preparation, ranging between £500 and £3,500.

Families may opt for payment plans where the grave is purchased in advance. To find out more about burial grounds in your area, visit the websites listed on the ANBG site.

Case study – Martin and Julie Chatfield

A close friend of ours became terminally ill, and asked if she could be buried in a corner of our land."

Devon livestock farmers Martin and Julie Chatfield wanted to honour their friend's request and, as they found out more about natural burial, they turned their thoughts to what other people might prefer in the way of a funeral.

"We had been to crematorium funerals and came to the conclusion that they could be rather soulless. We were starting to think that there were other people, ourselves included, who might prefer be buried on the farm too," said Martin.

Planning proposal

The Chatfields contacted the ANBG to find out more. With the association's advice, they put together their planning proposal themselves.

They were able to provide information about the water table and potable water sources, carried out their own drainage tests, and made the necessary consultations with the Environment Agency. In their

case, access to the site from the road was straightforward and there were no community objections.

Permission for change of use was duly granted, and in 2005, the Chatfields opened Crossways Woodland Burials on one and a half acres of their farmland.

Countryside stewardship

Crossways Farm is already part of the countryside stewardship scheme, and the burial site, which has views out towards Dartmoor, is fringed with hedges and earth banks planted with native species.

A track was laid, along with car parking. Some trees were planted immediately, to give an idea of the structure of what will eventually become woodland.

The site now has a separate land title from the farm, with a condition attached that it should remain as woodland. "This way we have secured the ground as far as is possible within the boundaries of the English law", says Martin.

Martin estimates that the area will have reached capacity with approximately 150 graves, at which point the Chatfields plan to apply for permission to extend the site.

Costs

The couple charge £720 for a single plot, which includes grave preparation and the planting of a memorial tree. The scattering of ashes costs £250, in an area sown with meadow grasses and flowers.

Pre-payment plans are available, but the couple would prefer potential clients to register an interest in being buried at Crossways instead, for which they would charge £50.

Funerals take place on summer evenings and at weekends. The Chatfields are available for advice, but families are encouraged to be involved as much as they want to be. The site remains accessible at all times.

Popularity increase

Martin has noticed that there has been an upturn in expressed interest in the past year, with funerals at Crossways happening currently at one a month – double the rate of a year ago.

"I think people are beginning to realise that green burial is not what is commonly known as 'alternative', but more about giving families different choices to what is normally on offer," says Martin.

The Chatfields display an enthusiasm and sensitivity for the business of supporting bereaved families. But as Martin says, this work is not for everyone. "I would not like to think of farmers setting

up a natural burial ground and a few years down the line, regretting it”.

As he explains, there is a commitment to the families involved, both in their initial loss, and in a long-term responsibility to maintain a living commemoration of their loved ones.

Where to get more information

If you want to know more, the ANBG will talk to you. Membership, both full and provisional, costs £100 per annum.

And if you do not want to manage a burial ground yourself, there are national green burial organisations in private ownership, such as Leedam Natural Heritage and Native Woodland Ltd., which are looking for suitable partnerships.

Ask around, there may even be an interested partner near you. The idea is definitely catching on.