

just get me to the crem in time!

Travels in space and cyberspace

I do not work in the funeral industry, but I have been to quite a lot of funerals. Earlier this year, I needed to travel to another city to attend a friend's funeral. Let us call the city Torchester. Wanting to know where the crematorium was, I put 'Torchester Crematorium' into Google, but this failed to lead me to the Torchester Crematorium website. Since I wanted to go by public transport, and I knew how to get to Torchester city centre by train, I then put 'Bus Torchester Crematorium' into Google, which went straight to the crematorium site.

Having thus found the site, I discovered it provides a number to phone for bus info. Hurray! The number turned out to be that of the local bus company. After several attempts to get through, I was eventually informed that no bus goes to the crematorium, but that there is one that stops some distance short, and it goes every eight minutes. So far so good, but they couldn't tell me how far short. I then phoned the crematorium, who thankfully told me it is only a five minute walk. I spoke to a very nice lady there who told me she uses the bus every day to get to work, most reassuring.

So I got the information I needed, but it took over half an hour, some dead ends on the web, and several attempts to get through on the phone: in other words, considerable perseverance. Not every mourner is in the mood to persevere. It is not rocket science for a crematorium to design a website that a) is quickly picked up by Google, and b) provides clear, accurate and up to date information for those wishing to get there by public transport. There is much debate about the contribution of cremation to global warming, but it has long seemed to me that a significant contribution comes from large numbers of mourners driving to funerals (and subsequent visits) rather than taking public transport. I appreciate chief mourners may be in the motor cortege, but others coming from a distance may not wish or be able to drive.

A widespread problem?

Torchester Crematorium belongs to a large national company. I was curious to know if my directional difficulties would be repeated should I need to visit any of their other premises. So, I

repeated the exercise for their Maryville Crematorium. Putting 'Maryville Crematorium' into Google, all I could get through to was the Maryville council website, which informed me that Maryville Cremation is not owned by the council; the council site provides car directions, but no mention of public transport. So I tried putting in 'Bus Maryville Crematorium', which took me to a neighbouring crematorium, and a brilliant link which actually told me the exact times of buses from the nearby train station, that the bus takes 11 minutes, and it is then a one minute walk. All very helpful if you need to go to that crematorium, but as for Maryville Crematorium, given the lack of information, it would seem I would have to give up and take the car.

Was it just this particular chain, I wondered? So I tried one of London's more famous crematoria. The ten entries of Google's first page told me nothing, apart from a few sites which gave me the address. My old fashioned printed London A-Z would then show me how to walk from the nearest tube station, but no way to find out about connecting buses. I actually went to my cousin's funeral at this crem a few years back, and now I think about it I took the tube and then walked. Good thing it wasn't raining.

Maybe crematoria run by local authorities, with their tradition of public service, might offer more in the way of information? So I inputted 'Boxton Crematorium'. Now, like the others mentioned in this article, I have been to Boxton crem and in Boxton's case I happen to know what bus to take. But the Boxton crem website says to take bus no. 4, when in fact it is bus no. 12.

The crematorium website links to the bus company's website, so I followed the link. Sure enough, bus 4 serves another town entirely. Being in the know, I surfed through to no.12, but the headline destination made no mention of the crem, so even if surfers should chance across no.12 they would not know to click through to the actual timetable which, miracle!, clearly shows that its end stop is Boxtton Crematorium.

Surely there must be some light somewhere in cyberspace for a poor environmentalist who simply wants to get to a funeral by public transport? I tried one final site, another municipal one. This time I will name it, as it deserves some brownie points. It is Aberdeen. Putting 'Aberdeen Crematorium' takes me straight through to their site, and there I read:

'For those who don't have their own transport it can be reached by taking a First Aberdeen Bus to the Woodend Terminus opposite the gate to Woodend Hospital. From there, the Council operates a free courtesy minibus service to the Crematorium. This yellow minibus sits immediately beside the terminus approximately 10 minutes before the start of each service and returns after the service.'

Wow! Hurray! But sorry Aberdeen, though you get top marks for effort, you have left out several details. Your website provides no number for the Woodend bus, nor how frequent it is, nor where in the town centre to catch it, nor a link to the bus company's website. I am sure Aberdonians will know which is the Woodend bus, but it is thirty years since I lived in Aberdeen and in any case my memory is not what it was.

Back to Torchester

After my experience at Torchester, I used the feedback section on the company's website to let them know of my experiences. I suggested they tweak their website to make it more accessible via Google, and to provide full information about public transport. I mentioned that I occasionally write for the funeral press, that this is the kind of experience that prompts me to go into print and that I trusted they would speedily amend their website so I could cite their company as an example of good practice.

That was four months ago. So today I re-ran my Torchester investigations. No change. I still have to go through the same tortuous process even to find their website, and it still does no more than provide the phone number for the bus company. In this article, I could have named them and shamed them. But that would be invidious, because my researches reported here into other crematoria indicate that poor practice may be widespread, and not specific to that particular company.

Lessons?

My sample of crematoria is not huge, but their consistently poor website access and information is worrying. I encountered nothing but courteousness in the crem staff I have spoken to, and one even took the bus to work. But as far as their information systems are concerned, it seems that the bus travelling mourner is pretty much off the radar.

British crematoria spend millions cleaning emissions, yet few bother to spend just a very few pounds keeping websites accessible and informative, so people can arrive by public transport. I conclude from this that crematoria operate environmentally only in response to legislative requirement or to the prospect of legislation. Crematoria are uncannily like natural burial grounds, concerned to green the technology of disposal, yet barely aware of the carbon emissions of possibly hundreds of cars travelling to their facility each week.

I wonder if this is part of what I would call the car culture of funerals? Both deceased and family travel to the funeral in what may be the poshest car of their life (weddings excepted), and the UK has sustained no tradition of other means of transport for mourners. The Victorian trains from Waterloo to Woking were a bit of a one-off, and mourners do not hire double decker buses to get to the crem as they do in Hong Kong. And when a British family today chooses a horse drawn funeral, the horses arrive in a large van that may have journeyed hundreds of miles to get there.

Though we are prepared to green the actual technology of disposal, whether cleaner emissions or woodland burial, the ritual of going out with a stylish limo, like getting married with a stylish limo, seems to be a sacred cow whose environmental consequences it is taboo to question. New crematoria are often built with easy access to motorways and ringroads, rather than to public transport. This is largely due to the cost of available land and the need to get planning permission, and it certainly makes travel easy for motorised mourners

from afar, but it does discriminate against the rest of us.

With most British funerals, the crematorium is first contacted by the funeral director, not the family. In a very real sense, the client is neither the family nor the many other mourners who come to the funeral, but the funeral director. Sure, mourners make subsequent visits to the site on their own, but the reality is that crematoria need to keep funeral directors happy as much as they need to keep the public happy. And funeral directors are into car culture, big time. So if the crematorium is easily accessible by car, there is no complaint from that quarter. Who will stand up for the green mourner who needs to get to the crem in time?

Well, we cannot change car culture in a day, and many may not want to. But as I said earlier, it is not rocket science nor is it expensive to:

- keep your website informative,
- keep it up to date,
- with the bus user as well as the car user in mind

Tony Walter, Centre for Death & Society, University of Bath

Postscript

When this article was accepted by The Journal, it was suggested I look at the website for the editor's very own Mortlake Crematorium. It is perfect. Google takes you straight there, and you then click immediately on 'Getting Here' to find the tube station and bus numbers; and there's a link to Transport for London's excellent journey planner. I look forward to the day when it's that simple getting to every crematorium in Britain!

Mortlake Crematorium - Getting Here



Mortlake Crematorium Board
 > Its History
 > The Present
 > The Future

The Cremation Service
 > Before
 > During
 > After
 > Online Book of

By Car :

Via Townmead Road, a turning off the [A205 South Circular Road](#). Adequate on site parking

By Bus :

R68 (Townmead Road stop) or 190 (Clifford Avenue stop and access via the adjacent Mortlake cemetery)

By London Underground :

Kew Gardens, district line (10 minute walk - directions on helpful notice board at exit from the station and directional signs in the pavement)

By London Overground :

Either : Mortlake station (10 minute walk via Ship Lane, Thames Bank and access via River Thames towpath) or Kew Gardens (10 minute walk - directions on helpful notice board at exit from the station and directional signs in the pavement)

Transport for London have an excellent routefinder at <http://journeyplanner.tfl.gov.uk>