

Garden Burial – Resting in Peace?

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Published in *Funeral Director Monthly*, October 2009, 92(10), pp. 26-27

Burying on your own land, rather than in churchyard or cemetery, is rare in England. When it happens it can hit the news – as with broadcaster Johnny Morris and novelist Barbara Cartland, or more local instances where objections from neighbours make the local press. Media coverage can give the impression that burial on your own land is a recent innovation. Actually it has been practised, if rarely, for several hundred years.

Looking at wills between 1689 and 1834, we identified fourteen cases, all involving death from natural causes, where the deceased requested and received interment on their own private land. They were clearly going against the normal practice of their times. So who were they?

All were Protestant, tending toward non-conformity, seeing no need to be buried in consecrated ground. Nine of the fourteen lived well beyond the usual lifespan for the times, making them a distinctly elderly group of people. All but one was male. They had been employed in a range of different professions. They included a printer, lawyer, soldier, schoolmaster, an Anglican clergyman, an ambassador, two radical political writers, an ironmaster, a manufacturer of bricks and tiles, a physician and a surgeon and apothecary. The remaining three were principally landowners, though many of the professional men also owned considerable amounts of land. Seven held titles – two were baronets, one was a knight and four were esquires.

Several were religiously motivated to bury on their own land, as they disagreed with the notion of consecrated ground. Other motives included a fondness for a particular hilltop view, a desire for isolation, strong feelings about remembrance after death, and classical or biblical precedents.

Secure?

So, we know a bit about who they were, and why they wanted to be buried on their own land, but how secure, in the long run, were their graves? Then as today, houses and gardens get sold, and even if the ground stays in the family, subsequent generations may not be so keen on having a grave in the garden. So did our fourteen rest undisturbed in their unusual graves?

Relatives played an important part, not just in determining whether to respect the deceased's wishes for the burial itself but also, subsequently, whether to move the body or let it remain in situ. Having surviving children did not help. All those whose bodies were moved within twenty or so years of their deaths had surviving children. Several children decided at a later date to disinter and opt for the comparative safety of the churchyard for their parents' bodies.

Precise location of the grave was also important. Eight of our fourteen specified burial within the cultivated, horticultural area close to their houses, often naming the specific part of the garden they had chosen and referring to buildings and other manmade

features. Jonathan Dent was most precise in his directions to be interred ‘about three feet from the Eastern Wall of my Tenant’s Cottage and about midway between the Northern and Southern boundaries of my...garden.’ Sir William Temple directed that his heart should be buried ‘six feet underground on the South east side of the stone sun dial in my little Garden at Moreparke’.

Six elected to be buried elsewhere on their wider estates, sometimes deliberately in a bleak spot. Dr William Martyn chose ‘the most barren field in the most elevated part of it’ on his Cornish lands to make his point about the futility of burial in consecrated ground. Thomas Hollis made a similar point in Dorset, being buried, according to his biographer, in ‘a grave ten feet deep’ in a field ‘immediately ploughed over that no trace of his burial-place should remain’.

Those who chose burial on their wider estates rather than in gardens close to their houses were less likely to have their bodies subsequently disturbed. We also identified, in addition to the fourteen, another four who were buried on someone else’s estate. These were Peter Labilliere and Richard Hull, each interred on Surrey hilltops, John Olliver who was buried close to his windmill on Highdown, West Sussex, and Samuel Johnson whose grave was in his master’s woods in Cheshire. As far as we can tell, all four are still resting there undisturbed, despite not having owned the land.

John Wilkinson

The aftermath of the death in 1808 of John Wilkinson, the famous ironmaster and a key figure in the industrial revolution, highlights some of the possible pitfalls of an unconventional approach to burial and inheritance in the early nineteenth century. His several burials and reburials show how easily the desire for a garden funeral could descend into farce through lack of necessary attention to detail.

Wilkinson himself had prepared for his burial by leaving an iron coffin of his own design and manufacture at each of his principal residences and was happy to be buried in the garden at whichever he happened to die; for him what mattered was his metal coffin. On his death at Castlehead in Lancashire, his body was placed in a wooden coffin but at the funeral it was discovered that this would not fit inside the iron one, so he had to undergo temporary interment until a new wooden coffin arrived. He was then disinterred and it was discovered that there was insufficient depth of soil in which permanently to bury the body, until the rock beneath had been blasted. Finally at the third attempt he was buried and a huge iron monument erected over him in the garden, though he did not to stay there undisturbed for long.

John Wilkinson’s colourful and eccentric life resulted in him fathering three children in his seventies with his housekeeper, while his childless wife was still alive; he legitimised them only after her death in 1806. One of his nephews had been led to believe he was Wilkinson’s heir but now he found himself merely a possible residuary legatee after provision had been made for the housekeeper, with the bulk of the estate destined for the three children. Unwilling to accept this new situation, he contested Wilkinson’s will. While this may have given John’s nephew a minor claim to literary fame as the probable model for ‘the man from Shropshire’ in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, it devastated the Wilkinson inheritance, which was spent on lawyers’ fees. By

1828, just when the children were coming of age and should have inherited, the house at Castlehead had to be put up for sale as little else was left of Wilkinson's once great industrial empire. Fearing that the monument and grave might detract from the asking price, John Wilkinson was disinterred once more and moved, despite his Unitarian beliefs, to Lindale churchyard, with his monument nearby.

Lessons

Those whose remains were subsequently moved had held some ill founded assumptions. The first was a belief that their family line would continue indefinitely - an odd assumption for several of them, as they had not themselves fathered children. Their second assumption was that the links between a family, its wealth and the land it owned would remain forever unbroken; the Wilkinsons were not the only family where financial mismanagement or misfortune proved this woefully inaccurate. It is therefore not surprising that so few of those buried in all but the most remote locations on their land are still in situ.

So what about those who bury in unusual locations today? A number known to us have buried not in their garden, but on a separate plot of land. This may well prove a decision for which subsequent generations will be thankful. If we are to learn anything from the past it would be this. If you are thinking of burying on private land and wish no trouble for later generations, you might best bury not in your garden but in a separate plot of private land, of little agricultural or other economic use, and preferably owned by someone else. If it's okay with them, it will probably be okay with the land's subsequent owners.

That said, what usually matters to those who bury on private land today is not long term security but being able to control the entire funeral process. If their garden is the only available location for a private grave, then that is their right and their choice.

Note on further reading

For more discussion and detail, see our chapter in A. Maddrell & J. Sidaway, eds, New Spaces for Death, Dying and Bereavement, Ashgate, 2010. We explore the reactions of neighbours to home burial in our chapter in J. Hockey et al, eds, The Matter of Death, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. See also C. Gittings 'Eccentric or Enlightened? Unusual Burial and Commemoration in England, 1689-1823' Mortality, 12, 2007: pp.321-349

For practical details about home burial, see J.B. Bradfield Green Burial, Natural Death Centre, 1993; and The Natural Death Handbook, Rider, 4th edn, 2003, pp. 95-103.