

## **Sustainable Deathstyles? The Geographies of Green Burials in Britain**

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### **Abstract**

In the context of a wider literature on 'deathscapes', we map the emergence of a new mode of burial and remembrance in Britain. Since a 'green' burial ground was established in Carlisle in 1993, sites for so called 'green, 'natural' or 'woodland' funerals have proliferated. There are now over 270 such sites in Britain. Drawing on a postal and email survey sent to all managers/owners and visits to 15 green burial grounds (enabling observations and semi-structured interviews with their managers), we chart their growth, establishment and regulation and describe the landscapes associated with them. This requires, and leads to, wider reflections on nature, capital, consumption, culture and the body.

Green/Natural/Woodland Burials, Nature, Culture, Sustainability, Deathscapes

## Introduction

Geographers have attended to sites and spaces that are associated with death, loss and remembrance (Johnston 2004; Maddrell and Sidaway 2010; Maddrell 2013; Young and Light 2012). This is part of a wider growth in 'death studies' (expressed in scholarly journals such as *Bereavement Care*, *Death Studies* and *Mortality*) building on a voluminous multidisciplinary literature about grief, mourning and dealing with the dead (Robben 2005). The emerging geographical work reveals how different attitudes towards death are manifested in various landscapes and, in turn, the significance of particular spaces to dying, grieving and memorialisation. Such research has highlighted that a wide range of places are associated with death, which extend well beyond conventional burial grounds or formal places of memory. In an effort to encapsulate this diversity, the term 'deathscape' has been elaborated to:

invoke both the places associated with death and for the dead, and how these are imbued with meanings and associations: the site of a funeral, and the places of final disposition and of remembrance, and representations of all these. Not only are those places often emotionally fraught, they are frequently the subjects of social contest and power; whilst sometimes being deeply personal, they can also often be places where the personal and public intersect.

Maddrell and Sidaway (2010, 4-5)

Deathscapes include sites formally associated with death, such as cemeteries (Figure 1) (Francis *et al.* 2005; Herman 2010; Cloke and Jones 2004), as well as personal memorials located in meaningful landscapes (Maddrell 2009 2013; Wiley 2009). Maddrell (2011, 220)

characterises memorials to the deceased as ‘a “spatial fix” [serving] as a record of someone’s life and a focus for ongoing mourning rituals...’ They can be physical memorials, such as a gravestone, virtual sites, such as on-line memorials, that connect a diverse range of spaces and people (Hess 2007; Maddrell 2012). Although diverse in forms and function, they reveal the importance of space, place and landscape in the way that death and mourning are imagined, performed and discussed.

In this paper we contribute to emerging understandings of deathscapes by examining ‘green’ or ‘natural’ burial sites in Britain. They are a new form of internment and, consequently, reveal much about changing attitudes to death, memorialisation, nature and landscape. The Ministry of Justice describe natural burial as:

the burial of human remains where the burial area creates habitat for wildlife or preserves existing habitats (woodland, species rich meadows, orchards, etc.), sustainably managed farmland, in-situ or adjacent aquatic habitats or improves and creates new habitats which are rich in wildlife (flora and fauna). Where a funeral precedes such burial, it would typically seek to minimise environmental impact. The terms ‘green burial’, ‘green funeral’ and ‘woodland burial’ are also sometimes used<sup>1</sup>.

Ministry of Justice (2009, 1)

Over 270 green burial sites have been founded in Britain since the inaugural one was established in Carlisle in 1993. In no other society have they proliferated to anything like this extent. Germany and Sweden had woodland cemeteries many decades before the site in

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<sup>1</sup> We also use the terms ‘green’, ‘natural’ and ‘woodland’ burials interchangeably in this paper, reflecting the diverse/overlapping use of these terms.

Carlisle was established. Indeed, a Waldfriedhöfe (woodland cemetery) was established near Munich early in the twentieth century, inspiring another established near Stockholm from 1917 (Constant, 1994). Neither however, articulate green credentials nor mobilize 'nature' in the forms that have developed in Britain since the early 1990s.

In this paper we trace and explain the emerging geographies of green burial sites in Britain and, in doing so, we draw attention to variations in the form, appearance and nature of green burial sites; highlight differences between different forms of green burial sites and point to the complex relationship they hold with other sites for human remains and remembrance.

The paper is structured into three sections. The first section places the development of green burial in the context of changing funeral practices in Britain and describes our methods in exploring the geography of green burials. The second maps the distribution of green burial sites and traces their establishment and regulation. This is followed by a third section that is focused on the varied and complex ways and modes of invoking the natural or nature in green burial sites. Our conclusions reflect on the changing forms of deathscapes in Britain and what can be learned about their geographies through green burial sites.

### **A British Way of Death?**

Funeral practises in Britain have changed substantially during the last two centuries. After the first legally sanctioned cremation in England in 1885, burial grounds were established

beyond consecrated lands around churches, which signalled a change in the geographies of the dead and remembrance:

by the tenth century and up until the nineteenth century, churchyards – the burial land found around a church – were the main burial places in much of Western Europe. From the nineteenth century onwards this role was increasingly filled by purpose-built cemeteries, able to offer burial for people of all backgrounds and beliefs, and with the advantage of having more space available to inter the increasing urban populations of the industrial revolution.

Deering (2010, 75)

In part, the establishment of cemeteries was a response to over-crowded urban graveyards in consecrated grounds. Cemeteries were pioneered by private companies but the cost of private burials, together with changing understandings of disease and techno-social shifts led to new ‘attitudes towards human remains and their disposal’ (Rugg 1998, 114) that required the state to act. As Herman (2010) notes, the Metropolitan Interment Act of 1850 secularised burial and led to greater regulation of burial and its spaces. These were part of the rise of what Michel Foucault (2004) has aptly termed bio-politics: referring to the governance and intersections between human conduct, population, health, life and territory<sup>2</sup>. Even then, however, considerable variation occurred in the spaces of cemeteries, which reflected differences in class, beliefs and attitudes towards commemoration (Herman

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<sup>2</sup> These moves also coincided with the construction of many state orchestrated memorials (Yarwood 2014) and by the first quarter of the twentieth century, the UK was peppered with these, which then became the site of collective ritual and remembrance for war dead – many of whose tangible remains lay elsewhere, in new landscapes of regimented war cemeteries.

2010). Although death is universal, the treatment of corpses, the way the dead are grieved and remembered is not. These vary greatly across cultures, times, religions and states.

In Britain, burial had been an accepted way of disposing of, and remembering, the dead even though some significant variations developed in how and where it was done. One important trend was that a permanent memorial should be established for the dead and the Victorian era saw the development of elaborate headstones and markers that revealed differences in class and wealth (Herman 2010). Unmarked graves, by contrast, reflected poverty or exclusion, rather than choice. There was also an expectation that graves should be tended and the areas around them kept manicured: nature transgressed cemeteries, rather than being actively enrolled into them as would happen later in the twentieth century, through tree planting and conservation narratives and practises (Cloke and Jones 2004). Fifteen years after it was legalized in Britain, only 5% of bodies were cremated at the start of the twentieth century: the growth of municipal crematoria would follow a parliamentary act enabling them in 1902. There was a slow but steady growth in their number between the wars and a significant expansion in the first half of 1950s as municipalities sought to accommodate increased demand.

Thus, as the century progressed, cremation found favour over burial to the extent that, by the turn of the millennium, 72% of bodies were cremated (Grainger 2010). This change in practice was driven by an acceptance that cremation was not only 'clean', but a way of leaving 'land for the living'. As the disposal of ashes does not require the extensive use of ground, land in pressured urban spaces could be used instead for housing or industry

(Kelleher and Worpole 2010). More than half of British crematoria were constructed between 1950 and 1970, often in cemeteries on the peripheries of cities that provided for a wide catchment area. Cremation encouraged a 'simplified mourning code' that might involve a short ceremony in the secular site of the crematorium, followed by the simple and clean disposal of ashes of in gardens of memory (or other sites with personal meaning) that were often distant from the places where people had lived (Grainger 2010; Kelleher and Worpole 2010). At the same time, contact with and public (or semi-private at wakes) display of the dead became rare and their preparation for funerals was professionalized by the medical profession and undertakers.

It is precisely this shift (caught up with secularization, mechanisation, commodification and role of professional intermediaries) that underpinned the development of conscious alternatives to the commemoration of death and care of bodies. Alternative forms of memorialisation reflected increasing choice linked to the distancing of burial spaces from formal religious sites and a growing sense of entitlement that bereavement and the way it is enacted belongs to the bereaved rather than a (secular or sacred) authority (Maddrell 2010). Likewise, Hockey *et al.* (2012, 129) note that 'a burial ground without many of the markers of a mortuary purpose customary in churchyards and cemeteries offers multiple readings and forms of engagement'. Parallels can also be found in births and marriages where a wide range of sites, ceremonies and vows now offer 'consumers' a choice for their wedding. These ideas are also reflected in the remarkable rise of the green burial movement in the past two decades.

The first green burial site was established in 1993 in Carlisle when the city's council demarcated part of its municipal cemetery as a 'natural burial ground' where bodies would be interred in unmarked graves in an area that would become woodland:

the design and regulations that were attached to this new burial provision signalled the most significant development in Britain in how the dead were disposed of since the first 'official cremation' was carried out at Woking in 1885 ....unmarked graves have always been a feature of our cemetery landscapes, provided by the burial authority for the interment of people living and dying in poverty, this new form of disposal was quite different. It represented a positive choice, an acceptance of anonymity in death and required the purchase of a grave.

Clayden *et al.* (2010, 119)



**Figure 1: The geography of green burial sites in Britain**

There are now 270 natural burial sites in Britain (Figure 1) according to the Natural Death Centre (2013). These are owned and managed by a range of agencies that include the local state (municipalities), farmers, and private individuals and, in some cases, larger commercial enterprises that might offer a range of facilities and services adjacent to the burial site. Some sites include spaces for pets as well as people. Sites therefore vary in size and appearance (Hannah 2008), and range along a continuum of sustainable practices. Some do not permit any markings but others allow modest grave markers such as engraved stones (rather than carved headstones) or plants, though these are far from the ornate tombs that became associated with the expansion of burial grounds in Victorian Britain and still exist in their thousands across the country (Figures 2 and 3). Unlike traditional burial grounds, where trees transgress graves (Clope and Jones 2004) or are used as symbols of loss (Clope and Pawson 2008), 'nature' is enrolled rather than controlled in green burial sites. It is also worth noting at this juncture that most burials in the world prior to the rise of modernity, would have resembled today's natural burials and many still do. In other words, modern western society had to first de-naturalize burial to then re-invent 'natural death'.



**Figure 2: A conventional, manicured, municipal cemetery with headstones. Contrast with Figure 2.**



**Figure 3: A Green or Woodland Burial Site in England.**

The growth of green burials and the variation in the way that they are practised raise broader questions about the interrelationships between grief and landscape (Maddrell 2011) as well as how these spaces are regulated and personalised. Further, their growth may reflect a hitherto unstudied facet of green consumption, even in death, with all of the tensions between ideology and commercialisation that this implies. The rest of this paper interrogates these questions. The next section describes our methods. We then trace the evolution and regulation of green burial, and describe different forms of green burial and the attendant discussions and differences in the movement.

### *Research Methods*

The paper draws on a study of green burial sites conducted in Britain between 2008 and 2010. It followed a two stage methodology. First, an in-depth questionnaire survey was sent to the managers of all sites listed by the Natural Death Centre (NDC)

[www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk)). The ND was established just over two decades ago. It is a registered charity that has published a series of widely disseminated Natural Death Handbooks (now in a fifth edition) and established an Association of Natural Burial Grounds. Our survey elicited data about the size and location of each site, together with information about the kinds of practices that were allowed or encouraged there. Questions examined, for example, how graves were marked and tended; what practices (such as the frequency of grass-cutting or the use of (in) organic products) were used in the management of the site and what services were offered. Further questions examined the process and motivations for establishing the site as well as how respondents worked with other actors and professionals within the funeral industry and green burial movement. The final questions prompted opinions on the green burial movement and its future. Forty-eight questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of nearly 25%. Our sample included sites owned by local authorities (52% of respondents, reflecting national ownership), private companies (21%), private landowners or farmers (15%), charities or trusts (10%) and community associations (2%).

From this survey, 15 sites were selected for further study that reflected the range of practices, ownership and management identified in responses. These sites were visited by the research team and semi-structured interviews were held with their managers. The aim of the interviews was to further explore further themes discussed in the questionnaire and, more significantly, to tease out some of the complexities and intricacies associated with green burial. All interviews were transcribed and coded. The site visits allowed the interviews to be triangulated with observations made about the appearance and 'feel' of

each site and the way that perceptions and practices by managers and mourners impacted on the landscape. For obvious ethical reasons, these visits were not conducted when funerals were taking place. But we did visit some sites just prior to or soon after funerals and sometimes spoke with grave-diggers as well as our more formal interviews managers/owners.

The following section draws on the multiple strands of data collected to examine how and why green burial sites have emerged in Britain. It begins with an examination of the reasons for establishing sites and moves on to a more extended consideration of their negotiation, operation and regulation. This leads to a subsequent section that reveals some of the differences and tensions between the ways nature is produced in 'natural' burial sites.

### **The Growth, Establishment and Regulation of Green Burial Sites**

Nearly half of respondents indicated that their site had been established in the period between 1996-2000 when their number expanded from the handful established at the start of the 1990s, although 6 (16% of our respondents) dated from this pioneering period. The other 40% of those who responded to our survey are from the more recent, post 2001 phase of expansion of green burial sites. Although sites reported that they were experiencing a high demand for burials, only a third had plans to expand and, instead, intended to manage future demand at their current locations through what they viewed as sustainable practices (for example the multiple use of graves and/or a rotation of growing and felling trees). Table 1 reveals that a high consumer demand has driven the establishment of sites, together with alternative views on death and a desire Table 1:

Primary Reasons given by site managers for establishing their sites for sustainability in death.

The following sections explore these themes in more detail.

<b>Primary Reason for Establishing Sites</b>	<b>Number of Sites (n=48)</b>
Response to consumer choice/demand	23 (58%)
Farm diversification	7 (14.5%)
Sustainability	6 (12.5%)
Alternative ethos of death	4 (8%)
Personal	4 (8%)
Lack of burial space	4 (8%)

Source: authors' survey

### ***An Alternative Ethos of Death?***

A report from the Ministry of Justice (2009) points to changes that underpin the proliferation of green burial sites, noting how the 'baby boomer generation', born in the decades after the Second World War have been more ecologically conscious and that together with influences from the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s, this has created the demand for natural burial. The words of one site manager bore this out:

we've all been brought up the Christian way, the Victorian way. And all of a sudden we rebel against it. And it's the recycled hippy generation; you know we want something different. We don't want to go down the road of a church ceremony, we don't want to go to a gloomy churchyard, we'd rather be in our own garden, and this is the next alternative.

Whilst the reference to a 'Christian way' also raises issues about secularization and multiculturalism<sup>3</sup> in Britain, it is the conscious search for alternative ways of dealing with the key events of birth and death that found expression in the natural death movement. The Natural Death Centre (NDC) was established as a charity in 1991 to advocate alternative approaches to death. Their philosophy, like the natural birth movement, is one of empowerment, a critique of medicalization and an advocacy of nature, but within a framework of consumption and choice; enabling people to make informed decisions relating to death, dying and organising a funeral:

just as there are societies to encourage home births, there should be societies for home deaths ... dying in hospital as most people do now, stuck full of tubes in white rooms, surrounded by sufferers and strangers, with those you love kept at the end of a telephone, is a sad and bad ending'

Wienrich and Spiller (2003, 13)

Their work involves disseminating knowledge about the dying process and offering alternatives to mainstream views about death, grief and memorialisation. Green burial sites have been a central tenet of this approach, with the NDC establishing the Association of Natural Burial Grounds in 1994 together with a voluntary Code of Conduct for these sites. A directory of green burial sites is maintained on the NDC's website and it presents annual

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<sup>3</sup> Jassal (2012, 124) points to 'the diversity of death and body disposal practices that operate in the West today, a diversity that is in part a result of complex (and utterly spatial) logics of migration...[yielding] a much greater diversity of traditions and conventions of dying and body and soul disposal...'

awards to highlight those that it considers exemplary in fulfilling its ethos. To an extent, the green burial movement has emerged as an alternative and more personalised choice to the conventions of cremation or traditional forms burial in municipal cemeteries and the NDC has been an important catalyst in this process. Some of the sites in our study aligned themselves closely with the NDCs work or a desire to live and die ethically/environmentally. Thus, one respondent in the survey argued:

*We must find a way to talk about dying, burial choice and bereavement so that people really do have a choice, an informed choice before it is too late for them to choose and relatives are left un-knowing.*

Site 45, Community Trust

The NDC remains an important catalyst for green burials but according to their data only a fifth of sites are affiliated to the organisation (just under half of our respondents were members, a higher proportion than nationally) and green burials appear to have gained a momentum of their own. As more people attend green funerals, read about them, or see them in municipal sites they are becoming a more accepted, reflected in the high demand for green sites discussed earlier. Bespoke services have emerged to support a growing industry, such as a shroud maker we spoke to who uses wool from local, organically-reared sheep to produce personalised shrouds for individual clients. A number of interviewees mentioned links with local undertakers as increasingly important to their business and one worker at a municipal site talked of having to regularly replenish leaflets on natural burials that 'seem to fly out' when they are displayed. Taken together, these examples reinforce a

sense that natural burial has gained a certain momentum and achieved a secure niche in Britain.

As sites have proliferated, so has their acceptance. Churches have advised their congregations to 'think about our deathstyles or how we can plan ahead to reduce the impact of our funerals on the planet' (Exeter Diocese 2013). Indeed, it is this environmental agenda and a desire to live (and it seems to think about dying) sustainably that is driving the green burial movement, rather than a desire for difference *per se*.

### *Sustainability*

Some of these environmental concerns were shared by the owners of private sites who, while recognising the commercial demand for green burial sites, often did so in tandem with a personal interest in conservation or ecology. Thus, one argued that he saw 'no better way to protect woodland than by burying people there'. Sustainability was expressed in two main ways. First, there is a desire for a burial with minimal environmental impact through, for example, using coffins made from wicker, cardboard or other biodegradable material. All sites offer a range of products aimed at achieving this goal to a greater or lesser extent (as the next section discusses). Second, having been buried in a sustainable way, there is a wish for the grave itself to contribute to the conservation of the environment by, for example, supporting native trees and other fauna. One site manager predicted his site would be:

More and more beautiful, more birds and bats and greater variety of flowering plants...

And eventually it will revert to wild woodland.

It is also important to note that these aspects combine to provide what is seen as a peaceful place not only to bury the dead but also for friends and relatives to visit. Many sites market their rural surroundings and highlight their position on agricultural land (arable or pasture), paddocks, orchards, meadows or relatively unexploited woodlands. In the words of a large national undertakers firm who had also established their own green burial site, that is:

set within acres of countryside, amidst the peace and tranquillity of trees and meadows, our woodland burial grounds provide a natural alternative to a traditional cemetery

Co-operative Funeral Care (2013)

In four instances sites were established for personal reasons. One owner, for example, started a site because a friend had requested to be buried on his land. In another instance, the desire to establish a site was driven by dissatisfaction with other providers of green burials. However, as the next section shows, many sites have been established (often in partnership with mainstream or national funeral directors) for commercial reasons or, quite simply, to respond to consumer demand as green burials have become more widely accepted into the mainstream. This draws attention to the issue that as green burial sites are largely unregulated there is considerable variation between sites, a theme we return to and develop in the final section.

Green burial has been featured in a range of UK media over the last two decades. The majority of sites in our survey were established to meet growing consumer demand (Table 1). One questionnaire respondent stated bluntly that his site was established ‘as a farm diversification and money-making enterprise’. A recent proposal to develop a green burial site at Great Alne, indicates how green funerals may start occur on ‘an industrial’ scale rather than the small, more personal scale envisaged by most proponents. However, the monetary nexus is evident too at some of those small sites established on farmland. Several interviewees at such sites spoke about green burials as a form of diversification, set up as a much-needed response to falling farm incomes and ‘the depressed agricultural economy’ (see also Clayden *et al.*, 2010). One opined that the best way to protect green burial sites was to maintain their economic function as part of a working farm:

The land itself has to have a productive value ... each site is different but [name of two sites] are typical examples of multifunctional use of the same land. They are pasture for grazing sheep. If the sheep don’t graze, then they are hay meadows and crops of hay are taken off the meadows, and that’s current; that happens even across the tops of the graves. The land remains productive...and it’s in that way that you maintain the landscape.

Site 50, Privately Owned

Land-use in this case is ‘multifunctional’ (Wilson 2007), allowing production and consumption orientated activities to occur inter-dependently (Woods 2011). However, the majority of green burial sites are simply part of an existing municipal cemetery (52% of sites

in our survey), usually in an urban area, which explains why many green burial grounds are typically quite small (sites were 3.5 hectares on average in our survey). The establishment of green burial land is part of a wider trend whereby local authorities have designated spaces in their cemeteries not only for a range of religions, but, quite simply, to offer choice, as one council employee commented:

They just saw it as another opportunity to give another service, another opportunity

Site 38, Local Authority Owned

The establishment of these green burials sites was not substantially driven by overcrowding in graveyards; as we recorded only four instances (Table 1) of sites being established due to a lack of burial space, usually in rural churchyards. Instead, interviewees from local authorities reported a high uptake of green burials being driven by a desire to live, and it seems, die sustainably. This reflects a new facet of ethical consumption (Goodman *et al.*, 2010):

every time you turn on the television it's there, isn't it [green issues]? If there's a need for it and a demand for it, then you're obviously going to accommodate the demand from people that require green burial sites

Site 51, Local Authority Owned

But environmental concerns were not the sole factor driving consumer choice. One privately-run site developed to allow people to be buried close to, or with, their deceased pets, reflecting Maddrell’s (2010) argument that ‘individualised meaning-making’ has driven changes in memorialisation. Table 2 draws on the opinions of site managers to summarise some of the reasons that drive these consumption choices. As well as the issues discussed already, managers suggested that sites appealed to those with a connection to the place, through current residence and also through holiday visits, prior residence or family connections. Their sites offered the choice for people to be buried in sites and settings that held meaning for them.

**Table 2: Reasons given by managers for the use of their sites**

<b>Main Reasons why clients chose Green Burial</b>	<b>Exemplifiers</b>
Sustainability	A desire for an environmentally friendly burial; no long term maintenance of graves; minimum chance of grave re-use.
Surroundings	A desire to be buried in peaceful surroundings with pleasant views (for mourners) and a rural or semi-rural setting.
Locality	Sites were favoured by those with a connection to a locality, either through residence, family association or holiday visits
Personalised Services	It was felt by client that green burials offered scope for self-expression that, in turn, helps deal with bereavement
'Giving back' to nature	Literal embodiment of 'earth to earth' or 'from nature we come to nature we should return' principles

Source: authors' survey

Many site managers also argued that green burials offered a cheaper option than conventional burials or cremations (given the lack of markers, the expense of coffins and so forth). So, while green burials may reflect a consumption choice for some, this might include notions of value for money. In May 2010, the UK daily *Guardian* (Smithers 2010) reported how funeral costs had risen by half in the past three years and that there was a sense that the business of funerals involved many high charges. This has never quite reached the scale of charges of the USA's 'funeral industry' and 'necrospecialists' (Fernandez 2013) where embalming has become routine, described in Jessica Mitford's exposé (1963 1998) of 'the American way of death' (see too Harris 2009 and Slocum and Carlson 2011). Yet perceptions of value are often intertwined with discourses of nature, greenness and sustainability.

### *Planning and Regulation*

So far, the paper has traced some of the (often competing) discourses that have driven the development of the green burial movement from within. Sometimes these ideas have been challenged through the planning system. About a third (15) of sites surveyed had encountered some form of local objection when they were establishing their site. Some objections were similar to those that might crop-up with any land-use change, such as the fear that the new use might generate more traffic for neighbours. In 2010 local residents objected to a proposal (noted above) to develop 50,000 graves in an 85 hectare site in Great Alne, Warwickshire (Leake 2010). Opposition centred on the scale of the operation and the potential for additional traffic that it would generate, although The Woodland Trust also

objected to the types of trees at the site and proposal to scatter ashes. Planning permission has since been granted to a much smaller 12 acre site limited to 120 burials per year.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the planning processes also revealed a certain local squeamishness about death and burial which was cited by many site-owners and frequently expressed through fears of water contamination or references to hygiene and pollution. In most cases these were dismissed by planning agencies or dispelled through discussion. Several site managers claimed that they had successfully used the Natural Death Handbook as an 'authority' when discussing such concerns<sup>4</sup>. Explicit religious objection was rare but did occasionally crop-up. However, as planning objections must be phrased within the language of land-use (Hubbard 2006), some of the cultural predispositions that may underpin objections to the development of green burial sites may have been disguised or dismissed by the planning system.

It is also important to note that, beyond the need to gain planning permission from the relevant planning authority, owners have a high degree of freedom to manage sites in the way that they chose. The Ministry of Justice (2009) notes that grounds that are part of municipal cemeteries are covered by laws of the Local Authorities Cemeteries Order and any in churchyards are covered by ecclesiastical measures. However privately owned green burial grounds fall outside of these long established legal frames. Moreover, whatever the exact legal system they fall within and after the granting of initial planning permission for a

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, our survey only represents sites in operation and we have no record of the number of proposals that have failed due to local concerns. The Great Alne case demonstrates how local opposition can impact on the development of sites.

new burial site to be established, the detailed management of the site and its practises are largely unregulated and so vary considerably between sites. Owners are thus free to follow a wide range of practices that, in turn, symbolize different ideas around sustainability or naturalness and reflect some of the competing discourses about nature and greenness that we have identified.

### **The Other Grave's Grass isn't Always Greener**

As the name implies, 'nature' is an important facet of a natural burial. Yet nature is, notoriously, amongst the most complex and contested terms in English language. Critical work has suggested that nature should not be considered as one side of a binary (in opposition to humanity and culture) but as an idea that is given meaning through the different ways it is represented and performed (Castree 2005 2013). It is clear these ideas of 'nature', as well as 'greenness' and 'sustainability' are widely debated in the green burial movement and 'no single model governs their ownership, location, design, or management (Clayden and Dixon 2007, 242). Hannah's (2008) report, for example, implies that sites should conform to particular ideals and those that fall short, such as council-run sites as part of larger cemeteries, are problematic:

a lot of the council-run natural burial parks ... are rather uninspired places. They seem tacked on as an afterthought, a tokenistic adjunct to the main cemetery business.

Hannah (2008, 6)

Rather than trying to adjudicate on what should or should not be acceptable in a 'natural site', it becomes important to consider how 'nature' in a 'natural burial site' is produced and performed through a range of practises and assemblages. Sarah Whatmore (2002, 166) has termed these 'hybrid geographies', whereby there is 'bodily redistribution' of subjectivity 'in terms of the profusion of intermediaries – instruments, signals, machines, elements – which insinuate their energies and inertias in the intimate assemblages of corporeal becoming'. Different bodies, technologies, practices, knowledges as well as human and non-human agencies are assembled to produce the site of a 'natural' burial.

How and why different elements are enrolled into these assemblages are controversial and reflect different discourses of nature and technology, not only in the green burial movement but in the funeral industry in general, as one interviewee highlighted:

conflict comes in where, what I think should be a green site and what my boss thinks should be a green site and the Joint Burial Committee thinks, so you've got the three, we've all got our different ideas

Site 51, Local Authority Owned

Microchips, for example, are used by some sites to record the location of bodies in lieu of markers but are disavowed by others who balk at such use of non-organic materials and technologies. The use of machines to dig graves; planting non-native species; the burial of people with their pets; memorial record books; websites; grave gardening; and the Natural Death Centre/Handbook are further examples of how different ideas of nature are co-

produced through the coming together of particular assemblages at particular places. Reference to 'native' or indigenous plant species, especially trees was a frequent topic raised in the interviews with site managers and owners. Some talked about wildlife havens and a number worked with wildlife trusts or ecologists to promote biodiversity and conservation. Most also refrained from using fertilizers or weed-killers and grass-cutting was usually minimal (an average of twice a year in our questionnaire sample). Thus elements that are considered 'natural' or 'un-natural' are enrolled or blocked from these assemblages by particular actors in keeping with wider discourses and trends.

Yet it became clear from our survey that a wide range of practices occurred in green burial. Table 3 records the memorial features allowed in various sites and Table 4 records what burial practises are permissible. Some of these differences are illustrated in Figures 4-6. Most sites allow native trees to be planted as markers, something that might be expected given the moniker of 'Woodland Burials' used by many sites. Whilst readily biodegradable coffins and an absence of conventional vertical gravestones seem to have become essential markers of what constitutes natural burial, other practices are more diverse: a minority allow grave goods, metal plaques and the planting of non-native species (Figure 6). Grave markers were often limited (Table 3) and all sites avoided 'conventional' gravestones or similar monuments. This refusal of conventional monuments is unsurprising, given that green burial sites are in part a reaction against a perceived universality of municipal cemeteries. Yet it also illustrates that sites have been established to allow personal expression in remembrance. Managers had to tread a careful line between managing a site

in a green, sustainable way and sensitively catering for the personalised needs of customers, especially in a time of bereavement.

Davis and Rumble (2012, 19) note how natural burial has yielded 'an array of landscape and management strategies.' They identify three axes – ownership, physical landscape and green credentials – around which the array is organized, noting that:

...whereas many speak conceptually of natural burial in terms of what happens below ground, it is what happens above ground that frequently seems to set the image and popular perception of natural burial practice.

The wider issue of greenness is thus negotiated with friends and family, balancing a fine line between choice and prescription. In the words of one interviewee:

We're also about choice and what people really need...who is to say...[what] shouldn't be there? Maybe temporarily rather than permanently but I think we have to be a little bit careful of how prescriptive we are...We go round and round on this issue, but certainly biodegradable coffins, there's no doubt about that...But maybe you could put a teddy in, it's things like that people need for their emotional or spiritual journeys. The other thing is about markers. Right at the beginning we said not a single marker, nothing, and the more I talk to people, there's a group of people who need a marker and there's another group...who just don't need anything at all and I think we'll have to feel our way very carefully.

Site 52, Community Trust

**Table 3: Memorial Features permitted in Green Burial Sites (n=48).**

<b>Memorial Features Permitted</b>	
Planting of Native Trees	80%
Planting of flowers	46%
Flat markers	42%
Laying of wreaths	33%
Memorial stone	21%
Planting of Non-native trees	19%
Metal plaque	19%
Grave goods	10%

Source: authors' survey



**Figure 4: A Green Burial site in a municipal cemetery with no obvious sign of markings or grave locators.**



**Figure 5: The use of trees and flowers to mark graves**



**Figure 6: Visible graves marked with a range of organic and non-organic markers**

**Table 4 Permissible burial materials**

Burial Materials	Number of Sites (n=48)
Biodegradable Coffin	88%
Burial of Ashes	82%
Cardboard Coffin	81%
Wicker Coffin	77%
Biodegradable Shroud	77%
Softwood Coffin	71%
Homemade Coffin	60%
Scattering of Ashes	60%
Hardwood Coffin	55%
Bio-degradable Body Bag	27%
Burial of embalmed bodies	13%

Source: authors' survey

The diplomatic accommodation of a range of choices is so frequent that it might be thought of as significant part of the ethos of green funerals. However there are a variety of limits to the range of these choices and shades of green. Dobson (2007) has summarized the range of deep and shallow forms of green political discourse; this and associated notions of deep/shallow ecology provide a useful basis for conceptualizing the range of green funeral practises. In one sense, the issue of depth is quite literal: with some sites, geology permitting, preferring shallower graves to the more usual 'six feet under'. Some sites are more explicitly deep green and others, a point picked up by Lynda Hannah:

here it is also possible to sponsor a tree ... as a means of making money by providing what people want is both impressive and frightening. As a 'natural' alternative to existing cemeteries it is visually stunning. But as an ethical, affordable, 'green' burial option its value is dubious to say the least. It very cleverly exploits and capitalises on the connection bereaved families make between life and death and our transient place in the cycle of nature to great financial advantage of its shareholder, whilst offering nothing new to the environment.

Hannah (2008, 10)

Yet regulations seemed to be more strongly enforced in sites that were part of a municipal cemetery. Thus one manager said:

Well what we say is, obviously, conventional memorialisation can't come down here, it's going to be a natural area, so obviously it's going to be sort of like a garden, so you can't have trinkets. Like in a normal cemetery, you usually get trinkets here and there, and unauthorised memorials. I think that's at one of the other burial sites, that someone didn't like, that they had photo frames on the grave and things hanging from the trees and it was like a garden, basically, and so we have said that if there is anything here, you can put cut flowers down, as long as they're not in any wrappers or anything. Anything else, you know, we'd pick up.

Site 38, Local Authority owned

Another municipal manager commented that there was 'nearly a court case' in a dispute about grave markers. Following this, the council had tightened up its regulations so that no markers at all were allowed on the site. According to the interviewee this scarcity gave the site its identity:

two seats which appeared, which I personally don't agree with ... it seems to be evolving into a bit more of a garden than a green burial site ... But I'm hoping to hold it as it is now, rather than expand it into you know, rose bushes and that type of thing

Site 51, Local Authority Owned

Such tight regulation may be surprising, especially given the more negotiated use of materials and management on private sites, but reflects the fact that a large municipal site also offers the opportunity for markers and non-organic memorials in a different part of the

site. For some, this is a cause of tension, as Hannah (2008 6) notes that 'Council regulations about what can and cannot be planted and/or placed on the graves are rigidly enforced even though 10m away all manner of decorations ... adorn the rows of mainstream graves.'

Indeed, in our interviews many respondents commented that practises on other sites fell short of their own ideals, highlighting some of the different ways in which nature and environmental practices are negotiated. A shroud-maker said that another site practised 'green wash' as it was 'just a cemetery where they let the grass grow'. One owner said of another site:

It looked amazing on the web site, deer park and all the rest of it but when we got there, bit astonished really to find that actually, the deer park was next door to the burial ground and what was there was actually more of a cemetery than what we had envisaged from the pictures. And there was a great big car park and a huge building with extensions for a chapel of rest and a mortuary and offices. We had a quick walk around the burial area, which was set out in rows with trees planted at close centres and little plaques in front of them and people were tending to do their little bit of gardening on the graves, and it was a cemetery, you know, there were trees there on the headstones

Site 50, Privately Owned

It is possible to interpret such comments as illustrating the diverse ways in which ideas of nature are fashioned, but they may also represent a positioning of sites within commercial

and increasingly valuable markets. Hence, there is a need, perhaps, for managers to argue why their sites are greener or more natural than others. Indeed, the networks that produce a green grave extend beyond burial sites and enrol funeral directors, shroud makers, planners, relatives, transport and media. These are key forward linkages connecting relatives and friends of the deceased, the corpses to be buried and the burial sites via monetary exchange.

### **Conclusions: shallow and deep green graves?**

The natural burial phenomenon raises wider questions about the changing place of deathscapes in Britain. In a landmark paper, Julie Rugg (2000, 259) considered the place of burial sites, noting their essential mutability 'even at a basic level, the significance of such space alters as time accrues between the living and the dead.' Describing cemeteries however, her paper points to certain common features; locations close to, but not usually within settlements, bearing a marked perimeter and an internal order that enables and enshrines individuals: who are usually named and intended to be readily locatable. In diverging from these, green burial practises might represent a return to older traditions of death and mourning in Britain; (notwithstanding the geography of prehistoric tumuli that have longed formed an archaeological focus) of burial, for most, in graves without permanent markers. Where prehistoric graves were marked, the archaeology of tombs – tangible remains of the dead – become a mirror to understand lives for which there are no other material remains or cultural memories. Megalith building and long barrow tombs established relationships between the living and the dead, between ancestors, dwellers and place (Tilley, 1994). Then, as now.

In the case of the growth of the natural death movement of the last two decades, Britain has led the trend. It may still represent just a small percentage of funerals, but it is arguably symptomatic of wider shifts. Nowhere else has the movement grown this fast. In many other European countries the phenomena remains rare, unknown or nascent. In North America, amidst a highly corporatized funeral business, there is a small natural burial movement with only a handful of sites – although there are long histories of settler family burial grounds in the USA and indigenous reference points in both Canada and the USA. There are a few green burial grounds in New Zealand and moves to establish some in Australia. The wider – international – dissemination of the movement awaits further research (for some pointers from East Asia, see Kong (2012)). In the meantime, whilst historical and political geographies may study the weight of the past, and economic, urban and social geographies have been mindful of the relationships between past and present, or economic geography might refer to capital as being constituted out of past (even dead) labour, it is evident that the trajectory of the dead reflect wider social forces. Bodies have also been at the fore in strands of feminist and latterly Marxist geography (Harvey, 1998, Longhurst, 2007) and strands of social, cultural and political geography make frequent reference to embodiment. Such work usually assumes – or perhaps takes for granted – that the body is alive, including those ‘hybrid geographies’ that ‘allies the business of thinking space...to that of thinking the body’ (Whatmore, 2002, 3). Understanding the significance of the body in space and as an agent within and transforming nature and human/non-human interfaces ought not to be restricted to those of us alive. When they become the objects of green burial, dead bodies introduce further challenging questions about nature, capital, space and culture. Funerals and burial sites may be part of a light green, ‘shallow’ or loose

commitment to ecology and sustainability (structurally akin to recycling or ethical commodity consumption). Others may reflect 'deeper' green aspirations that correlate with alternative lifestyles and relationships to nature. Either way, green burial might be read as a variant of wider discourses about sustainable consumption and service provision (Goodman *et al.*, 2010) as well as reworkings of belief, sacredness and the secular. Death is unavoidable. In some cases however, green burial has been driven by a distinctive ethos and/or a desire to live and die in an environmentally-friendly way but, as our work has demonstrated, it is now partly a consumer choice that a wide range of providers are willing to fulfil.

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