Natural Burial: The De-materialising of Death?

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Defining the natural burial ground

This chapter describes a research activity designed to explore public understandings of the concept of natural burial and asks how people might make sense of embodied experiences of the materialities of the natural burial ground. As both a concept and a practice, natural burial is particularly prevalent within the United Kingdom with around 250 sites now in existence, compared with 25 in Germany, 13 in the United States and 2 in the Netherlands.¹ That said, uptake of this burial option represents a small proportion of the United Kingdom’s overall disposal choices and what the public and indeed providers understand by the term ‘natural burial’ remains unclear. The data presented here enable us to address this question as part of an ESRC-funded project² which explores the cultural, social and emotional implications of natural burial and explores its potential links with the professionalisation of death and dying, a revival of Romantic values, ecological concerns and the claiming of a distinctive identity through bespoke disposal. As the data indicate, answers to these questions are by no means mutually exclusive.

Core to the development of this work has been the diversity of design, management and ownership of natural burial grounds since their inception in 1993. Potentially evident within this diversity are possible orientations towards this practice, reflected in the project’s theoretical concerns listed above. In part, this contributes to the difficulty of enabling individuals to make informed choices about pursuing a natural burial option, an issue addressed in the research activity discussed in this chapter. While each natural burial ground may subscribe to a shared aim of providing an environmentally sensitive approach to the care of deceased people and the landscape, how this is addressed may
vary significantly (see Thompson, 2002; Clayden, 2003, 2004). This variety partly reflects site providers different habitat objectives; for example, the creation or preservation of woodland or the return of improved pasture to a wildflower meadow. Where the concept of natural burial is expressed in the creation of a new habitat, this may not be realised for many years and, therefore, makes the challenge of communicating the idea even greater. For example, natural burial grounds are frequently described as woodland burial even though no woodland may yet exist. This requires the family and friends of the person who has died to imagine a landscape they may never experience in their own lifetime. It may also require them at some future point when the trees have become established, to accept that they no longer have access to the grave.

For this project, alongside data from members of the public discussed in this chapter, we carried out site visits and interviews with 20 burial ground owners and managers across the United Kingdom. These reveal a richness of design and interpretation of natural burial which goes beyond a purely ecological or environmental aspiration. Perhaps inadvertently, the natural burial movement has opened the door to new operators including charities and not-for-profit groups, natural burial companies and landowners whose motivation for providing burial space may be very different from the Local Authority or Church. These providers bring with them different motivations and relationships with the landscape which may not be informed or confined by a working knowledge of the cemetery or professional experience of caring for deceased and bereaved people. For example, an upland farmer we interviewed, in the North of England, whose family had worked the land for many generations, decided to use one of his fields for natural burial to diversify the farm’s income. His approach to setting out the field for burial was informed by his knowledge of traditional farming techniques. By ploughing, he decided to return the field to the traditional rig and furrow, once a common feature of upland farms. This pattern became a template for locating each grave; on the rig, between each pair of furrows there is space for two adjacent graves.

What’s new?

In discussing natural burial grounds we begin by exploring their relationship with more traditional burial sites. In defining a burial ground Rugg (2000) highlights the explicit order of the cemetery landscape, where typically each grave is easily locatable within a grid of rows and sections. Within this grid it is commonplace for the name of