***Back to Nature? The Cultural, Social and Environmental Implications of Natural Burial***

**Rationale**

In the UK, disposal of the dead represents a national problem (HC91-1, 2000/1), with concern at government level about dwindling burial space; political and public reticence over grave re-use; and costly measures required to manage the environmental dangers of cremation. With the first comprehensive government review of burial law for 150 years now taking place, this project investigates the innovative practice of 'natural' burial. Established in 1991, the Natural Burial Movement is committed to providing burial grounds where headstones are not permitted, where environmental considerations inform body preparation and disposal, and where there is a concern to preserve or create new habitats. While we can access remains of a material culture of burial in this country from around 4,000 BC onwards (Ray, 1999), 'natural' burial may involve few of the permanent markers of human culture which have traditionally lent burial grounds a 'sacred' status and provided containment for the human body: for example, durable coffins, grave stones, a boundary wall and dedicated buildings (Rugg, 2000). Yet Davies argues that, despite natural burial's apparent lack of cultural markers, it potentially 'furnishes an authentic basis for understanding both life and death for those for whom either 'heaven' or 'memory' is an inadequate means of making sense of life and of death' (2005:87).

Noting the post 1970s shift away from a religious iconography of collective hope in resurrection and towards the secret scattering of cremated remains in sites of *personal* memory, Davies argues that this postmodern fragmentation of tradition and rise in consumerist 'freedoms' may itself be undergoing change (2005:87). The growing availability of natural burial grounds, from 1993 onwards, potentially heralds a new collective sense of 'ecological immortality', he suggests, as the whole, un-embalmed body returns to the earth. While these propositions are thought-provoking, we lack empirically grounded, theoretically informed analyses of natural burial in the UK which might allow them to be explored (see Thompson, 2002; Clayden, 2003, 2004).

In addition, data such as the Association of Natural Burial Grounds'(ANBG) register show the *concept* of natural burial being fluidly interpreted, sites categorised as 'natural burial grounds' including both new burial grounds and areas within traditional municipal cemeteries. Indeed, no single model governs the design and management of natural burial grounds; their location and type of ownership (local authority, charitable trust, and private company); and the body preparation, coffin type, and grave-marking/tending permitted to bereaved people. Despite the Natural Burial Movement's initial ecological commitment, some commercial burial grounds have relatively permissive policies about embalming fluids, coffin materials and the permanency of grave markers. While this might broaden natural burial's appeal, founder members of the Movement foresee the original concept becoming debased as its environmental credentials are undermined (West, 2003), and economic interests take over.

Questions emerge, therefore, as to whether the ecological aspirations of the Natural Burial Movement *can* provide a basis for a new coherence within UK belief and practice around death; and how natural burial might engage users when it lacks the traditional forms of material culture which signify a 'sacred' landscape of some kind, a place where the human body can be contained, both materially and symbolically.

**Back to Nature?**

As noted, Davies (2005) suggests that natural burial might promise a kind of 'ecological immortality' which reflects commitment to collective stewardship of the planet and responsibility for the well-being of future generations. Core to this orientation are the ways in which the concept of 'nature' is understood. As Macnaghten and Urry (1998) argue, 'nature' is not a singular concept. Instead it is both highly contested and situated within varied and ambivalent social practices. On the one hand, Romantic perspectives depict 'nature' as a wilderness which offers refuge, retreat, and a resource for spiritual solace. Yet the *wildness*

of urban woodland can make 'nature' an abject non-place of dereliction which potentially forces an unwelcome confrontation with the transience of both human culture and individual lives (De Groot and Van den Born, 2003).

Since both the locations of UK natural burial grounds and the meanings of the *concept* of 'nature' are heterogeneous, the cultural significance of this trend is unclear. Are its users moved to contribute to the sustainability of humankind's shared environment and collective future? Or do they experience a personal desire for 'an emergent landscape, where emotion/grief and nature are once again linked as symbolic partners' (Francis et al, 2000:47)? Does spirituality figure here, as, for example, eco-theology, residual religiosity, or a desire for 'continuing bonds' with the dead (Klass et al, 1996)? Although the UK is world leader in natural burial *provision* (Weinrich and Speyer, 2003), with almost 200 sites already established, media reports suggest polarised public responses. Those in annex 2, for example, demonstrate enthusiasm ('bluebell bulbs and wild flower scattered over the grave … the dead transfigured into new life'); resistance ('villagers fear that Terrington would become known as "The Village of the Dead"'); and repulsion ('a severed head … on the M1 was traced back to a natural burial ground where a grave had been desecrated'). Similar contradictions characterise the policy arena where simplistic assumptions that low cost use of natural landscapes can solve current disposal problems (see annex 2) are confounded by evidence that natural burial is not necessarily cheap, nor are its landscapes always 'natural'.

Existing research sheds some light on the broader context of these responses. For example, funerary practice has been identified as the most conservative of all life course rituals (Vallee, 1955), with cremation only outstripping the UK's preference for burial in the 1960s, despite its legality since 1884. While ash disposal and associated memorialisation practices have changed considerably since the 1970s, these *may* represent adaptations of traditional practices, rather than innovations (Kellaher, Prendergast and Hockey, 2005). In addition, consumer awareness can be underdeveloped with regard to death (Walter, 1990), since funerals are often unplanned 'distress purchases' (Brown, 1995). Such factors merit consideration when investigating the recent, unregulated and heterogeneous growth of natural burial and its resulting divergences between the assumptions of managers, bereaved people, and the wider community.

In addition, if 'natural burial', as manifested within the UK, diverges from its conceptualisation by the founders of the Natural Burial Movement, then popular *perceptions* of 'natural burial'/ 'nature' may bear little relationship with the *experience* of a particular natural burial ground. Reading and understanding a landscape requires embodied engagement, rather than simply visual mapping, as both archaeologists and anthropologists have stressed (see Bender, 1993). How conceptions, perceptions and experiences of natural burial might diverge is therefore a related question which the proposed work is designed to explore, one which has major implications for individuals choosing a disposal option.

## Consumer Options?

Although natural burial might signify a shift in both the (material) culture of burial and, more broadly, in environmentally-oriented ethical practice, other interpretations must be considered. Natural burial potentially provides an additional consumer option which can serve providers' financial interests and individual purchasers' emotional and economic needs. Indeed Campbell (1987) argues that modernist patterns of consumption reflect the ethic of Romanticism, an obligation to promote individual uniqueness, often through the satisfactions promised in the marketing of products and experiences. Postmodernists (see Featherstone, 1991) might add that neither products nor experiences have fixed meanings, so lending themselves to more individualistic projects. Natural burial's associations with ambiguously defined, yet positively perceived concepts such as 'nature', 'ecology', 'memorialisation' and the 'sacred' may therefore bind individuals with very different understandings of these terms to an apparently *unified* set of values (see Cohen, 1985).

Certainly the availability of more commercially focussed natural burial grounds, coupled with a proliferation of goods and services, promises to satisfy romantic desires for a secluded natural environment for individualised grief and devotion to a 'loved one's' unique memory. However, as a 'consumer' choice,

natural burial can paradoxically represent the *rejection* of contemporary patterns of consumption, as manifested in elaborate body preparation/presentation and permanent cultural markers associated with the disposal of the dead. And indeed, while modern consumerism may reflect Romanticism's privileging of individual self expression, that 'self' is profoundly social. 'Taste', as manifested in consumption practices, constitutes an important source of cultural capital which allows for identification with one social group rather than another (Bourdieu, 1984). Similarly, as research into the vulnerability of the bereaved consumer indicates (Hockey, 2003), while a funeral/disposal has only one purchaser, that individual can be under pressure to orchestrate a one-off, *social* event which must satisfy many consumers – from the immediately bereaved to more distant relatives and friends.

## Theoretical Issues
The extent to which both individualistic and more collective trends are shaping the culture of death, both now and in the future, is therefore central to the proposed project's agenda. In addressing the four theoretical propositions set out below, we aim to find out what the growth of natural burial reveals about contemporary responses to death in the UK.

### 1. *Natural burial as creative resistance to modernist disposal and memorialisation?*
Walter (1994) views innovative approaches to death, dying and bereavement as resistance to modernism's scientific rationality and professionalisation. This removed control of death from lay people and introduced financially and environmentally costly body treatments, coffin materials and grave monuments. While professionalisation alleviated the burden of care from individuals without material and social support, in Walter's (1994) view, late twentieth century empowered consumers reclaimed control of life cycle transitions and sought scope for meaningful, individualistic choice. Through empirical data, the project will establish the extent to which natural burial reflects the individualism of the post-traditional consumer – or instead the formation of new cultural capital, for example in the social display of environmental awareness.

### 2. *Natural burial as an aspect of the re-enchantment of death?*
Both public and private environments associated with bereavement have increasingly become sites of memory (Hallam and Hockey, 2001), whether as roadside shrines, informal memorialisation on traditional graves, or private memory boxes for future generations (Exley, 1999). This materialisation of memory contributes to the creation of 'continuing bonds' between the living and the dead, a practice which may signify a resurgence of nineteenth century Romanticism. This stressed individual uniqueness and intense emotional ties within the family (Rugg, 1999), a sanctioning of grieving which had 'nature' as its context, a place where feelings might be stimulated and expressed. Such themes appear in Hockey's work on the disposal of ash-remains (see Kellaher, Prendergast and Hockey, 2005) and we ask whether they are shared by natural burial ground users who may wish to grieve within a secluded 'natural' environment which encourages growth, not static containment.

### 3. *Natural burial as symbolic and environmental regeneration?*
Cyclical renewal characterises death ritual in many traditional societies (Bloch and Parry, 1982). While consumer empowerment and a re-enchantment of death might appear to operate more individualistically, ecological concerns can reflect a collectivised, environmentally informed desire for alternatives to contemporary disposal options. Rejecting the costly individualisation of grave sites, users may choose natural burial in order to create shared landscapes for burial, wildlife, and informal recreation. These potentially minimise the deceased's 'footprint' via their release into an undifferentiated environment, so benefiting both nature and society at a time when worry over global warming saturates the media. In asking whether a natural landscape is admired as 'wilderness' or deplored as 'wildness' the project aims to illuminate questions of aesthetics, memorialisation policies, and the practical problems of physical access.

### 4. *Natural burial as identification?*
Death can threaten ontological security, undermining a coherent narrative of self across time (Giddens, 1991). Identity is therefore key to disposal and memorialising strategies, evidenced in the weight of the

deceased's last words, the funeral eulogy, and the gravestone. As a set of values and practices, natural burial may enable postmortem identification, and so influence the emotional geography of loss. As such, the project asks about the implications of natural burial for the long-term identity of both bereaved people and the deceased. Has engagement in this practice contributed to the cultural capital of particular demographic groupings, and if so, can it alienate those for whom it might appear 'weird' or 'pagan'? How do families negotiate such choices; and what barriers might impede their choice?

These four theoretical propositions will be explored through the following programme of work, designed to reveal how individual and collective factors interact within the conception and practice of natural burial. Foucault described the cemetery as a heterotopia, a space 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (1986: 25). In asking how conceptions and perceptions of 'natural burial' relate to the ways in which it has been materialised – and is subsequently experienced, the project asks how, over time, the cultural imaginary of 'nature' meshes with the emotional geography of loss and the practicalities of disposal and grave visiting/tending in a dynamic landscape. In a country where burial space is approaching exhaustion and individuals now face a potentially bewildering range of choices at a time of potential emotional crisis, what it means to bury naturally emerges as a critical question.

## Methods

### Programme of Work
To address the theoretical propositions set out above, three phases of work combine in an innovative programme of work.

*1.Review of literature and other textual materials.* To investigate original conceptions of natural burial, the publications of the Natural Burial Movement, the Natural Death Centre and related practitioners will be reviewed. How it is now being perceived will be established through a thematic review of national media representations. These will reveal the way information and opinion is presented and contextualise local media reporting on the Sheffield environment and the four ethnographic sites. Finally, to refine the project's theoretical agenda, the anthropology of landscape, and the material culture and death studies literatures will be reviewed.

2. *Public and Professional Perceptions of Natural Burial.* Popular perceptions of natural burial range from the romantic to the repulsed and may be at odds with the *experience* of any one burial ground. In order to explore such divergences and enable users to make informed choices, as well as to sensitise investigators to initial perceptions of a landscape with which they have become familiar, two activities are proposed: (1) a review of local media reporting of the establishment of natural burial grounds in the Sheffield area, and (2) a day event, comprising a site visit, preceded and followed by focus group discussions.

   *Day Event.* 4 focus groups will be facilitated by the PI, CI and RA, plus a researcher from Sheffield University. Each group will comprise 10 individuals recruited from the Sheffield area via adverts in the local media and on institutional email lists. They will include lay people and a maximum of 10 death care professionals, all of whom have no direct experience of natural burial grounds. Lay participants will be classified into three groups, according to generational location: young (20-25), middle aged (40-45) and post retirement (65+), professionals making up the fourth group.

   *Timetable*
9.30-11.00 am: One-hour focus group session which explores current attitudes towards available disposal options, including natural burial, followed by an introduction to the development and cost of natural burial
11.30-2.00 pm: Visit to a natural burial ground local to Sheffield
2.30-3.30 pm: One-hour focus group session which allows reflection on the visit, and comparison with discussions in session one. Key issues to be explored include responses to: the (absence of) material

culture at the site and its implications for the 'sacred' status of the site; the natural environment; and ownership and security of the site, including its capacity to 'contain' the body, materially and/or symbolically. Participants will subsequently be invited to assist in developing the project's dissemination strategy in order to enhance users' choice.

3. *Putting 'Natural Burial' into Practice*. This stage of the work investigates the diversity of interpretations of 'natural burial', by both UK providers and a localised sample of providers and users, via a Geographical Information System (GIS) survey of UK natural burial grounds. Its typology will highlight variations in features such as site design, ownership and usage over time. Data yielded via GIS will then form the basis for qualitative work. This asks how, over time, concepts such as nature, ecology, spirituality, memory, romanticism and identity might be materialised in the burial ground's spatial layout and landscape management plan, and in its policy towards body preparation and burial practices, grave marking and visiting patterns. How these are *experienced* by users is central to the next stage of the work: an ethnographic study of four sites. In this way, indicative national-level data will be complemented by an in depth, culturally focussed account of natural burial.

3.1 *GIS Natural Burial Grounds Survey*. This will compile data on: ownership, context, size, design type, number of whole body burials, cremated remains and plot reservations, providing an empirical basis for establishing the coherence or heterogeneity of natural burial in the UK. It will also identify sites not notified to the ANBG or Home Office, via contacts made with owners/managers already listed. Invitations to complete a questionnaire attached to the project website will be sent to new site owners/managers - or, if preferred, a hard copy will be sent. The survey will thus expand and clarify existing databases, including a pilot GIS compiled by the PI, and data held by the ANBG, which the Natural Death Centre manages. The Home Office has also granted access to their data on burial grounds in England and Wales. The GIS will enable future researchers to incorporate information on new sites and to modify existing data; resource the prediction of future trends in natural burial; and inform national objectives such as the protection of wildlife by combining with data held by English Nature on nature reserves.

3.2 *Site Visits*.10% of UK natural burial grounds will be visited to verify and enhance a sample of the survey data. Material to be collected includes site plans and digital images, and an interview with the manager/owner to identify how the burial ground has evolved, revenues and costs, changes in management, local community responses, and use of the site.

3.3 *Ethnographic Case Studies.* These explore the aspirations and experiences of users, comparing their accounts of other forms of disposal with discussion of natural burial. Since natural burial is an innovative practice located within a potentially dynamic landscape, a longitudinal perspective will be incorporated. This comprises a 12 month programme of ethnographic fieldwork (to include observation, informal interviewing and focus group work) at one site in the vicinity of Sheffield, in parallel with a sequence of ethnographic interviewing and observation at an additional 3 sites. These will be selected to represent natural burial's most typical form (new woodland burial), different types of ownership (local authority, charitable trust and private company), different regions and contexts. Each site will have been open for over five years to ensure sufficient disposals, an established landscape, and user experience of different seasons.

*Site 1:* Pilot survey work carried out by the PI is to be extended in order to compare the experiences of different categories of user, 3 focus groups are proposed, comprising 10 people who have pre-planned a natural burial; 10 who interred the remains of someone close over 5 years previously; 10 who have interred remains during the last year (30 people in total). In addition seasonal variation in the appearance of the site will be documented using digital photography. Drawing on methods devised by Francis et al (2005), observational visits will be timed to include key calendrical celebrations (for all faith groups represented at the site) and involve informal interviewing at grave sites.

*Sites 2 – 4*: The GIS will inform the choice of these sites. At each one the activities listed under 3.2 will be replicated.  In addition, to elicit more personal narratives and reflections, 10 users will be interviewed about their experiences of other forms of disposal; their initial perceptions of natural burial, and their sources; their first impressions of the site; processes of negotiation among family, friends or professionals*; how site developments, such as the growth of vegetation and informal/permanent memorialisation may have influenced their subsequent emotional and social transitions.

*Where such negotiation was complex or difficult, interviews may be sought among the larger group (up to 10 additional interviews).

At all 4 sites, a sample of 10 members of each local community, including any death care professionals working in the area, will also be recruited for interview, using local advertising, word-of-mouth and snowballing.  Interviews will focus on their awareness of the site, perceptions of its status as 'sacred', the degree to which it constitutes an amenity, and interest in becoming a user. The sample will include representatives from local businesses, such as estate agents, as well as clergy, teachers and others with a range of local contacts.

*Access*
Access to a 10% sample of natural burial grounds will be secured during the GIS survey work.  Access to interviewees for the ethnographic case studies has already been secured (site 1) or will be mediated by site owners/managers (sites 2 – 4).

*Analysis of Data*
Using the principles of grounded theory, conceptions of natural burial evident in data from Natural Burial Movement and related practitioner publications will be compared with its media perception to establish how themes such as environmentalism, memorialisation and consumer choice are played out. These will be compared with day event focus group participants' perceptions, focussing on the site visit as an experiential intervention.  This material will be set alongside the GIS data to find out how these concepts and images are materialised in the nature and extent of UK natural burial ground provision.  The ethnographic data will be coded using a qualitative data analysis package, so enabling an analysis of the more experiential *process* of both setting up and managing a site, and of pre-planning and/or engaging with the site as a place at which a friend or relative has been interred.  Comparisons made by interviewees between the experience of other forms of disposal and natural burial will be a particular focus for attention, as will the significance of a natural burial landscape marked by the *absence* of a traditional material culture of death.  It is via an analysis of these qualitative data that we aim to discover how disposal in the sorts of 'natural' settings identified by the GIS might mediate the relationship between more individualistic emotional connections with the dead and an ethical concern with collective ecological goals.

*Dissemination*
In addition to academic dissemination which will enable findings to inform debates about secularisation, changing ritual practice and ecology, the project is designed to enhance users' choice of disposal option.  A panel of participants from the day event's lay and professional focus groups, plus Advisory Board members, will be invited to review examples of the data collected and help decide how best it may inform users facing their own death or that of someone close. Based on their advice, a dissemination strategy which includes the following outputs is anticipated:

· a practitioner-focused website with links to websites accessed by users
· a website discussion forum for owners/managers of natural burial sites
· an illustrated brochure detailing the taxonomy of natural burial grounds,  for professional and lay use
· articles in practitioner journals such as *Pharos*, *Resurgem*, the *Funeral Service Journal*
· conference presentations (6 academic and 3 practitioner)
· scholarly articles, book chapters and a co-authored volume