

# Cremation Frequently Asked Questions

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**How many people use cremation today in Great Britain?**

1968 was the year in which the number of cremations exceeded disposal by burial for the first time, since when the proportion has increased and now approaches 70% of all funerals.

**Are there any religious groups, which forbid cremation to their members?**

Yes. Today all Christian denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church, allow cremation but Orthodox Jews and Muslims forbid it. It is the normal method for Sikhs, Hindus, Parsees and Buddhists.

**Is cremation dearer than burial?**

No, generally the cost of a grave is much higher than the fee charged for cremation. The funeral director's charges are much the same for both services. The only additional charge for cremation arises when the death has not been referred to the coroner; therefore, fees to two doctors have to be paid for the necessary certificates. This does not apply to burial. With cremation there are no later costs for headstones, grave care, etc, which arise with burial.

**What religious ceremony can I have with cremation?**

The service for burial and cremation is the same apart from the form of committal service.

The service may take place in your own church or chapel with a short committal service in the crematorium chapel, or the whole service may be conducted in the crematorium chapel. You may arrange for your own minister to conduct the service. The form of service should be arranged with the minister, and if hymns are to be sung at the crematorium, the organist should be advised in advance.

**Must there be any religious ceremony with cremation?**

No. This is not obligatory. A civic ceremony can be conducted or there may be none at all. On occasions, a memorial service is conducted separately from the cremation ceremony.

**How is a cremation arranged?**

The Cremation Regulations are still quite complicated, and it is wisest to approach a funeral director immediately death occurs and advise him that you desire to arrange for a cremation. Discuss with him how soon you wish the cremation to take place, and whom you wish to officiate at the service, also the form of service. The funeral director will then do all that is needed to procure the necessary statutory forms for the cremation. You will need to sign the cremation form 1 if you are the executor or the next of kin or are authorised by either to do so. The death will have to be registered and you will be advised how to do this.

**Do I have to sign anything else at this stage?**

You will probably be asked how you wish to dispose of the cremation ashes. If you know what you want at this stage, you will be asked to sign an authority for the crematorium staff to carry out your wishes. If you are undecided, DO NOT sign any authority. Most crematoria will retain cremation ashes for a month, giving you time to make a decision.

### What can happen to the cremation ashes then?

In eighty per cent of cases the cremation ashes are strewn or buried in the gardens of remembrance at the crematorium. A few crematoria have niches where urns may be placed, but these are usually on a lease basis and if not renewed periodically the ashes would be strewn or buried. The alternative is to remove the cremation ashes from the crematorium in a suitable urn for disposal elsewhere. This may be by burial in a family grave or by strewing the ashes at another crematorium, or in some favourite spot. However, it must be borne in mind that when ashes are strewn in other places, e.g. graves, churchyards etc. prior permission must be sought and any local rules or regulations obeyed.

### What are the Gardens of Remembrance at a crematorium?

The gardens of remembrance consist of areas set aside for the disposal of cremation ashes. Usually representatives of the Christian churches have dedicated these areas for the purpose. Ashes may be strewn or buried but without any spot being reserved to any one person nor are individual memorials permitted in such gardens to mark the spot. This is because the areas are used again and again over the years and will be for as long as the crematorium is in operation.

### What memorials are possible then at the crematorium?

Usually the only permitted form of memorial available is an entry in the Book of Remembrance. This book is usually displayed in a special Memorial Chapel and each day the entries for that day are on display so that a person is remembered on the anniversary of the death. Some crematoria allow wall plaques or plaques on kerbstones, etc, but these are usually for a limited period and require to be renewed periodically by further payments. At some crematoria it is also possible to dedicate a rose bush or other garden item with a small plaque but this again is for a limited period with the option of renewal on further payment. Again some crematoria are able to accept donations of such items as seats, stained glass windows, etc., where a memorial inscription may be permitted while others have memorial funds to which relatives can make donations and the monies are used to provide additional embellishments for the grounds or buildings. If you are anxious about memorial facilities at the crematorium you should enquire of the funeral director at the time of making the arrangements in order to ascertain what facilities are available.

This can avoid disappointment at a later date.

### What happens at the crematorium on the day of the funeral?

The coffin is usually brought into the chapel followed by the mourners in procession. While it is being placed on the catafalque the mourners take their seats and the service proceeds. At the moment when the committal of the body takes place the coffin may be obscured from view by means of curtains closing round the catafalque or the coffin may be withdrawn through a gateway or it may be lowered from the catafalque and descend into a committal room below. The method varies at each crematorium but the most common method today is the use of curtains. At the end of the service mourners leave the chapel and may inspect the floral tributes before leaving.

### What happens to the coffin after the committal?

It is withdrawn into a committal room where the name plate of the coffin is checked with the cremation order to ensure correct identity. The coffin is then labelled with a card prepared by the crematorium giving all the relevant information. This card will stay with the body from now on until the final disposal of the cremation ashes.

Does the cremation take place immediately or are the coffins stored up until a number are ready to be cremated?

Where possible the cremation will follow immediately after the service. The Code of Cremation Practice, which is adhered to by the members of the Federation of British Cremation Authorities, requires that the cremation shall take place on the same day as the cremation service.

Is the coffin cremated with the body?

Yes. The Code requires that nothing must be removed from the coffin after it has been received from the chapel and it must be placed into the cremator exactly as received.

What happens about the handles and other coffin fittings?

Crematorium regulations require that all fittings shall be of combustible material and normally the handles and name plate are today made of hard plastic. Ferrous nails and screws do not burn and stay with the ashes until they are withdrawn from the cremator when they are subjected to a magnetic field which removes them.

What about precious and other metals?

The temperature at which a modern cremator operates (between 800°C and 1000°C) is such that such metals are fused with other material so that they are not recognisable. The Code of Practice states that any metallic material resulting from a cremation should be disposed of in accordance with the instructions of the cremation authority and recommends that this should be done by burial within the cemetery grounds.

What would you recommend to people then about leaving items of jewellery on a body?

The best advice is that it should be removed after death unless it is intended that it should be cremated. Once the coffin has been placed in the chapel there is no way of recovering such items.

Is more than one coffin cremated at one time in a cremator?

No. The only exceptions permitted to this rule are in the case of a mother and baby or twin children when the next of kin requests that the two be cremated together.

Can relatives witness the committal of the coffin to the cremator?

Yes. Normally two persons are permitted to attend and the superintendent should be advised in advance of this wish.

How do I know I shall get the right cremation ashes?

As explained, each coffin is identified on arrival and the identity card is placed on the outside of the cremator as soon as the coffin is placed into it. The card stays there until the ashes are removed and it is then transferred to the cooling tray. The ashes then go to the preparation room and the card stays with them, finally being placed in the urn, which contains the prepared remains. As each cremator will only accept one coffin and the ashes must be withdrawn before the cremator is used again, all cremation ashes are kept separate throughout the process. The size of the cremation chamber of the cremator is about 7ft long by 2ft.6ins wide, by 2ft.3ins, high.

Preparation of the ashes has been mentioned. What does this entail?

When the cremation is complete, that is when there is no further combustion taking place, the cremation ashes are withdrawn from the cremator into a cooling tray. Often cooling is

accelerated by means of air blown on to them by means of a fan blower. When cool, the ferrous material is removed by means of a magnetic field. The remaining ashes are then placed into a machine, which reduces the remains to a fine white ash. All non-ferrous metals are cleared and disposed of in accordance with the Code of Practice.

**Of what do the prepared ashes consist?**

The ashes are now totally bone ash and weigh usually between 4 and 6lbs. They are in a state that will permit them to be strewn.

**If ashes are strewn on the ground, what happens to them?**

As the highest biochemical activity exists at the surface of the soil and the cremation ashes are in a small granular form, weather and bio-chemical action quickly break down the ashes to form part of the earth and within a short time there is no trace of them. Where ashes are strewn it is the practice to dress the area with a suitable loam/sand mixtures to cover the remains.

**What can I do if I want to bury the ashes and have a gravestone?**

In such a case it would be necessary to have the ashes buried in a cemetery or churchyard where provision is made for this to be done. The gardens of a crematorium are not a burial ground within statutory law and when the ashes are buried there it is merely an extension of the idea of strewing and the ashes are not enclosed in an urn.

**Can I keep the cremation ashes if I want to, or must I dispose of them?**

The applicant may do what he wishes with the ashes and may keep them with him if this is desired. Some crematoria will place ashes in a repository at the crematorium if this is desired and an annual charge is made for this facility.

**How can I ensure that I am cremated when I die?**

Clear instructions in writing should be given to the person who will be responsible for your funeral when you die. Such instructions are not binding in law so you should ensure that the person instructed is someone who is likely to carry out your wishes. The final decision will rest with your executors.

**If I wanted to know more about cremation and perhaps inspect a crematorium, how should I go about it?**

Telephone or visit your local crematorium and discuss the matter with the superintendent there. He will be pleased to answer your queries and conduct you through the crematorium and see how it is operated.

## **A brief history of cremation**

Probably the first and best known mention of cremation is in the Book of Genesis, when Abraham is ordered by God to prepare a funeral pyre for the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. This proposed cremation is followed by reports of others throughout the Old and New Testament, and by the time of the ancient Roman and Greek civilisations, cremation had been generally adopted as a method of disposing of the dead. With the advent and spread of Christianity, however, and its concomitant belief in the resurrection of the dead, cremation fell into disfavour, and by the fifth century the practice had become almost completely obsolete.

The history of cremation, therefore, is the history of a struggle against conservatism, custom and prejudice; a struggle to reform the burial system and restore cremation to its former legal and popular usage. This task undertaken in Britain over one hundred years ago is nearing successful completion as cremation in its modern, scientific form is now accepted by over 65% of the population.

In 1873 Sir Henry Thompson, Bart, F.R.C.S., Surgeon to Queen Victoria, attended the Vienna Exposition, where a working model of a cremator designed by a Professor Brunetti was exhibited. He returned home to become the first and chief promoter of cremation in England.

In 1874 the Cremation Society of England came into being, founded by Sir Henry Thompson, with Shirley Brooks, Frederick Lebonan, John Everett Millais, John Tenniel, Anthony Trollope and Sir T. Spencer Wells representing the realms of art, science, literature and medicine.

In 1885 the first official cremation at Woking took place. In 1886, ten bodies were cremated. Since that time the practice of cremation has steadily gained momentum. In 1979 nearly half a million bodies were cremated