



C.P.J. Field.

The Rise of the Fields

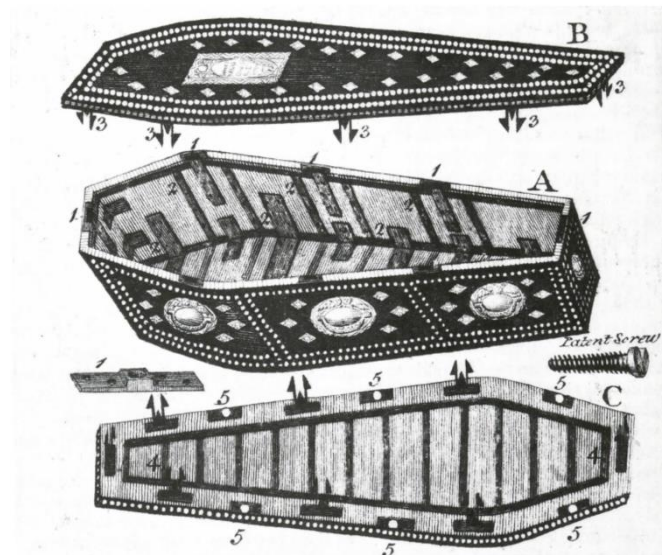
This year, CPJ Field is celebrating 325 years of business. And they are rightly proud of their heritage, especially as the Field's ancestors were there at the beginning of the undertaking trade in 1680s London.

Their home turf was Southwark, on the south bank of the Thames, specifically around Gravel Lane - it was not a glamorous address. George Godwin, writing in 1854, describes the area: "Ewer Street is a long street of dilapidated houses, partly wood, which comes into Gravel-lane. The drainage is here most defective; and according to an old inhabitant, in this and the surrounding neighbourhood were formerly many open ditches, into which the tide regularly ebbed and flowed."

Whether the workshops of the Field family were flooded is unknown, but we do know that alongside their trades of building, carpentry and joinery they were involved in making (what we would know today as) shroud boards and cases. For several reasons, it was a growing business they tapped into.

Firstly, coffins were widely used in London by the late 1700s; gone were the days when bodies were taken to their grave in a reusable communal coffin to be buried in a shroud or winding sheet. The Fields were also fortunate to have business partnerships with undertakers over the River, in Fleet Market and the surrounding areas - one such undertaker owned "the Four Coffins" (shop) in Fleet Street.

By 1803, when the following description of the Fleet Market was written, the funeral industry seemed to be thriving as 'the never-ceasing hammers of many Undertakers seem to have expelled more quiet trades...' It wasn't necessarily coffin making they were up to, but nailing small nails into a pattern on the lids depicting the initials and date of the client's death and some heraldic symbols (see image below from London Metropolitan Archives - patented coffin c.1810 Jarvis & Son, who were taken over by the Fields, see later). The actual coffins would usually be bought ready-made, 'in the whole' and this is where the Fields saw their market.

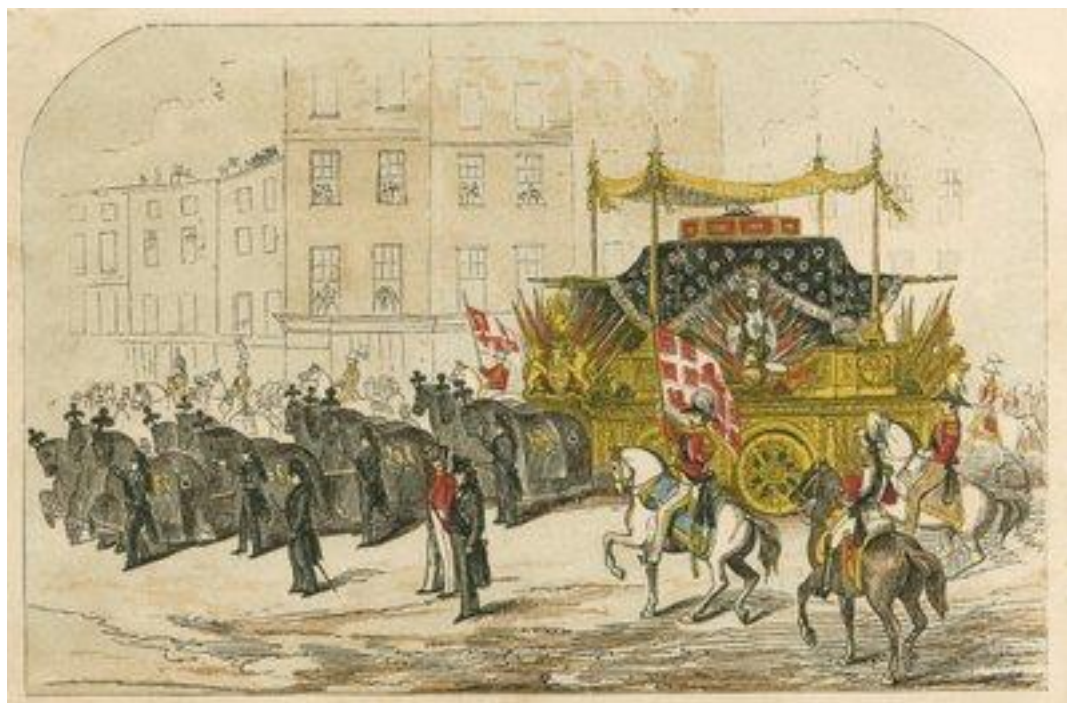


Over the generations, the coffin sideline passed from father to eldest son... but it was not a good line of work to be in, according to John Field's father-in-law, Charles Dyer.

John, born in 1789, had made a very good marriage to Mary Ann - her father, Charles, being a wealthy Southwark merchant. While John was himself a successful builder and sometime architect, Charles wanted John to leave undertaking well behind and gave him money to start a business - Field & Son - as long as he stuck to building and dealing in property. Charles, in return for this gift, wanted his middle name of 'Dyer' to be given to each of John and Anne's male successors.

But John had other ideas. While his youngest son, Michael, was seemingly apprenticed to a London builder (to learn 'Block Manufacture'), John continued to supply coffins on the side. Was he naturally defiant, or did he just want to carry on the family tradition? Who knows, but John built up a flourishing business - while also becoming an 'Estate Agent and Valuer'. Michael carried on making coffins after his father died, and started to dabble in undertaking (performing the funerals). By this time, undertaking was a specialised profession, as opposed to a trade, especially in London, even though their profits were not enormous.

When Michael's fifth son - another John (John Dyer) - took over, he decided to move the workshop/premises out of Gravel Lane to nearby 183 Blackfriars Road. This area was an upcoming industrialised area with pockets of great wealth... an ideal HQ for the newly named JD Field & Son, 'Furnishing Undertaker' (see July's article for more explanation of this profession).



Their new home must have accommodated all the coffins, shrouds, hat bands, gloves, velvet palls, etc. which they hired out to bereaved families; and they also providing services to 'Funeral Furnishers', such as Bantings of St James' (the Crown undertaker) and Trollopes of Belgravia. Essential the Fields were performing funerals (mainly in South



London) and also working for the biggest funeral firms in the West End, being called upon to assist at the funerals of the Duke of Wellington (see above), Mrs Gladstone, Sir Henry Irving and Royalty. Sadly, John Dyer never got to see the funeral of Queen Victoria as he died only weeks before - his company provided over £92 (just under £10,000 today) of items, including a “stout and large size Oak Case, framed and panelled throughout and finished in the best manner”.

Still in heavy Victorian mourning attire, Frederick John Dyer Field took over the family firm and thanks to his enterprising zeal he set about building the funeral directing business. He had already purchased the “oldest funeral furnishing house in London” - Bedford, Sons & Slater - at 35 Farringdon Street and this imposing premises, warehousing all the funeral items anyone could wish for, became their HQ over the River. Frederick then went about snapping up well-established funeral businesses in central London (including Jarvis & Child, as established as Field & Son), and set his sights further afield with a purchase of a firm in Clapham which his middle son, William, completed in 1904.

But Frederick, like his ancestors, started up a sideline business. He saw his opportunity - burial space within central London was limited while demand in south London was rocketing... what to do with all the bodies? So, he and other shareholders looked to purchase a large package of land in Streatham to be used as a park cemetery, with the ambition of building a crematoria (at the time there were only six in the country). The park eventually opened in 1909, with the Fields share of the company greatly diluted because they had to encourage new shareholders to provide fresh funds.

With faltering steps, The Great Southern Cemetery, Crematorium and Land Company Ltd (see directors and shareholders below) eventually started to show a return on investment after World War One, and during the late 1930s its fortunes leapt when the crematoria was built and quickly began providing cremations for 20% of all the deceased in London.



It was an all-consuming family business, with Edward (Frederick's eldest grandson) recalling his memories of growing up at the family home - the cemetery Lodge at Streatham Park: fields full of lavender and vegetables provided the backdrop to the gravestones, a nearby fireworks factory adding an unwelcome and noisy fanfare to internments and a hay crop was annually scythed from the park.

The family company, later known as the Great Southern Group (GSG), grew due to the zeal of not only Frederick (who established other cemeteries in North and East London), but also his son, Ernest who developed other sites in Cheam and Beckenham. And the family connection continued when Edward, with his memories of life in the cemetery Lodge, was appointed Company Secretary, while in the Royal Artillery (to which he was commissioned after serving in WW2).

After being promoted to Major, Edward returned to the fold in 1956 when he had to fend off the unwarranted advance of the Amalgamated Tobacco Corporation who wanted to build their presence in the cremation market. Edward successfully defended his families interests, but took on a large debt in the process as he had to buy a substantial number of shares himself. This bruising experience led to the Fields continuing to buyback shares from other investors - when GSG was listed on the London Stock Exchange in 1984, JD Field & Sons held nearly 75% of the share capital.

Although by 1994 this family share had dropped to 56%, the Company now had three divisions: The Crematorium Company, Family Funeral Directors and Chosen Heritage (funeral plans). GSG had a turnover of over £30m, with profits of over £7m. With results like this, it was no surprise that another hostile takeover bid was made - this time, by the US conglomerate Service Corporation International (SCI). And family ownership was lost.

It could have been the end for the Fields, but funerals were on the blood - they knew nothing else. And, fortunately, the entrepreneurial gene continued with Edwards' sons, Barry and Colin Field. In late 1994, a new Funeral Directing firm was established - The Traditional Family Funeral Company Ltd - and the brothers set about acquiring respected and well-established funeral businesses within South East England; just like Frederick had done over 110 years before. Heritage & Sons was the first in 1995 and by 2004 the Company had 20 branches under their control.

When Barry decided to pursue other opportunities, Colin's children - Jeremy, Charles and Emily - entered the management fold and, with a nod to the heritage of the Fields, the business morphed into CPJ Field & Co Ltd. And they were finally able to be reunited with over 300 years of Field heritage when in 2013 JD Field & Sons Ltd returned to family ownership.

The future? Well, now with 37 funeral homes (and other interests), the Fields are back up to strength and with six (young) grandchildren waiting in the wings, it seems they'll be in the industry for many years to come - they just need to steer clear of takeovers and keep the 'Dyer' middle name going... what would the disapproving father-in-law think of the Fields now?!



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