

Strangely comforting – First visit to a Funeral Home – Cooper & Son, Uckfield

It's the morning after my initiation into the world of funeral homes and I'm staring at the four words I wrote down yesterday, immediately after coming out of Rose Cottage, in Uckfield –

Comforting | Care | Eye-opening | Accessible

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My first impressions were comforting; an odd word, perhaps, but I'd been pretty nervous about my first visit to a funeral home. And it turns out there was nothing to worry about because the sticky subject was addressed almost straight way. I knew that I was meeting the Funeral Director (FD), Tony Fear (a totally inappropriate surname, it turns out) and Tony's PA and Funeral Arranger, Paula O'Neill, while they were preparing for a funeral. My husband asked me, before I left, 'Does that mean you're going to see, you know, a body?'

Reassuringly, almost Tony's first question was whether I felt comfortable with viewing the deceased, or whether I would prefer to see the coffin with the lid sealed. I opted for the latter – I was a funeral home virgin, after all. And Paula reassured me too: 'I was so nervous when I first started two years ago; it's not knowing what to expect and wondering how you will react to seeing a body for the first time.' I will save that experience for later in the year, I think.

So, I could relax a bit (also knowing the mortuary is in the Cross-in-Hand (Heathfield) branch helped somewhat). These funeral directors were human; they were smiley and welcoming, and so was the building. From the outside, the 300-year old Rose Cottage looks like the archetypal chocolate-box home, as far from the usual dour funeral homes on any UK high street. First comforting tick.

Second comforting tick was Tony and Paula's welcome and the third comforting tick was provided by the fragrance coming from the floral tributes which were arranged on the floor in the hallway. I had been slightly worried about the smell of these places...

It became clear as I was being led through the narrow corridor and up the steep stairs to the low-ceilinged office that this funeral home is living history. The business was founded in 1856 when the wheelwright in the cottage also became the undertaker and Clive Cooper, the last in the family trade, retired and sold the house (and business) in 1990, having lived and worked there for most of his life. Another comforting tick: you want to know that the people you're entrusting to look after funeral arrangements are not 'fly-by-nights'. And, indeed, Paula, Tony and Jenny (who I didn't meet) often get past clients knocking on the door to pop in and have a cuppa and a chat – they really do provide comfort before, during and after the funeral service. They even hold an annual event in December when clients can write a label remembering their loved one and hang it on the Christmas Tree; they obviously nurture lasting bonds.

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As we settle down to chat in the upstairs office, I'm immediately struck by how much Tony and Paula love their work. It is always said that clergy get a 'calling' to their career and perhaps it is similar with staff in funeral homes. Tony came into the business with no intention of making it a career, though. 'I was using the job as a stepping stone; I only intended to be here for six weeks, but I loved the job and after 28 years I still love every aspect, especially helping people when they are at their lowest ebb and often confused or misinformed about what to do.' Paula believes she was meant to work in a funeral home. For 24 years she was employed in a totally different sector, but, after being off work for three years due to illness, she started looking for any anything to get her out of the house. 'It was a bit of a joke indoors when I mentioned I'd applied; they said, "You'll never be able to cope with the grief", but I applied and was offered the job.' Paula loves the time she spends with the families; tellingly, she talks of them as 'our' families.

The myth-busting starts pretty early in the conversation with Tony asking me if I know the worst thing to say to a grieving family. I come up with the old chestnut of "Time's a healer", but, no, the answer Tony is looking for: "I know how you feel". He explains that everyone deals with grief differently and I also learn early on that no two funerals are the same either; there is no such thing as a normal funeral. Death and grief provoke unique reactions in everyone.

And the myth-busting continues. I assumed, naively, that the work of the FD and his team started when families contacted them, and ended with a burial or a cremation, but this is not the case. After burials, the headstones need to be inscribed and at least six months later installed to give the ground time to settle, and funeral homes are the repositories for the cremated remains (ashes). These will often sit on the shelves in the "Ashes' Room" for some time, patiently awaiting the family's instructions and often the FD will conduct the ashes internment. What to do with the cremated remains is one of the questions for which families don't normally have an immediate answer, says Tony. The other question they are unprepared for is whether they give their permission for the body to be embalmed. At this point, I take the opportunity to ask about embalming and why FDs recommend the process, but I will enlighten readers in a later article.

At this point Tony looks at the clock and decides he had better go and change into his funeral suit, tie and waistcoat. Meanwhile, I spot an interesting looking whiteboard on the wall, which Paula refers to as "The Bible"; the smooth running of the three branches under Tony's care depends on it, because they share staff and physical resources. This board lists the deceased's name, where their body is currently being cared for, whether the family are viewing the body, details about any jewellery in their care, the date and location of the funeral and whether doctors or a coroner is involved. I find out that two doctors are required to check the deceased before a body can be cremated, whereas only one GP/hospital GP/Coroner needs to check in the case of a burial.

I find myself being taken in by all the details and completely forget my wariness - it is truly fascinating to an outsider, like me. I ask all sorts of questions: the proportion of cremations to funerals (80:20, if you're interested), the holding capacity of the mortuary for the three Mid-Sussex branches (six bodies, ideally) and the maximum number of funerals in a day (two, because of travel times to the crematoriums in Tunbridge Wells and Eastbourne)...



I only stop my questions when the phone rings, or when Tony comes back in suited and booted, carrying his top hat, tail coat and silver-topped cane. Tony arranges the vehicles and bearers for the sister business in Seaford, looks after the Cross-In-Hand branch and also keeps an eye on Fuller & Scott (at the centre of Uckfield) which is run by his daughter, Kayleigh Fear.

While Tony, Paula and Jenny share the funeral arranging, it is only Tony and the four coffin bearers (who also masquerade as drivers) who attend the funeral. 'My role on the day is to look after the family, and make sure the funeral runs as the family want,' he explains. When Tony has left, Paula confides her wish to attend a burial and a cremation too as she wants to see and experience the whole process through. 'The more you know, the more help you can be to your families,' she adds. I get the distinct impression that funeral arranging for Paula is more than just office work; she passionately cares about the service she provides to her families and has attended four crematoriums to witness cremations behind the scenes, so she can reassure her families that a) the coffin is sealed throughout and b) you do get the right ashes back. She also felt the need to view several embalmings at the mortuary so she was aware of all the procedures involved and could answer any questions truthfully.

I'm just reflecting on the ease that I now feel discussing funereal things when Tony walks in carrying a small maroon cardboard box containing someone's ashes. To be honest, I had expected an urn or something more fitting, but, no, this time it's a cardboard box with a plastic bag inside. Its arrival prompts Paula to show me the (paper-based) checks in place to ensure that the ashes are catalogued and dealt with efficiently before they are put in alphabetical order into the "Ashes' Room".

The ashes arrive at the same time as the bearers from Cross-in-Hand and Tony announces it's time to load the coffin. Suddenly, I'm reminded of the reason the team are all here, to care for the deceased, and my nerves rise as I follow Tony back down the stairs and see, for the first time, the Chapel of Rest.

My eyes, of course, first take in the coffin made of beautifully woven willow; I look at the carved wooden name plate which also records the date of death and age of the deceased, and the garland of yellow and white flowers hanging along the side of the coffin. There is nothing unnerving about this; it's serene. I then notice the stained glass windows which, on this slightly overcast day, are still able to give the room a comforting (that word again) warmth and calmness. There are fresh flowers, a wooden cross, a crucifix, a Bible, a chair and a coffin pall folded on another chair. The pall is used when families are viewing the body, mainly (I'm aware this is probably breaking the serenity of the image) to prevent flying things from landing.

I later learn from Paula that families are very particular about how their relative's body is dressed and presented. She explains that often families will hand over a photograph of the deceased and they will say, "Mum has worn the same lipstick for 40 years; she doesn't like it too thick, just a touch, and this is how her hair should be styled." These details, and the clothes, are passed onto the embalmer. Often personal things are also placed in the coffin - love letters and Valentine's cards are popular items. Anything goes, within reason!

Quietly and reverently, the coffin bearers – Paul, Paul, Richard and Ken – go about their work collecting the floral tributes and taking the coffin (on a trolley) from the Chapel of



Rest (through a side door and passage) up to the hearse. Paula is there too, making a note of the senders of the smaller floral arrangements in case the families don't take in the details at the funeral – care is taken at every level.

As we silently walk up the ramp to the hearse, I feel uncomfortable asking questions, but Tony breaks the silence: 'I'm now in charge of the funeral, and if anything goes wrong it's down to me.' After the coffin has been slide into the hearse and secured tightly, Tony offers me one example of how things can go wrong – in this case, spectacularly. 'I was going up the M1 for a funeral and we stopped at Junction 9, but the big artic lorry behind didn't,' he explains. 'It ploughed straight through the back of the hearse, everything was smashed to bits... but not a mark on the coffin. Unbelievable! I don't know how and I don't know why.'

I ask Tony about the popularity of the willow coffin, which is now in place, surrounded by flowers. This proves to be a good time to discuss the changing fashions in funereal products – like any business, FDs try to offer their clients all the latest trends. Ten years ago, willow coffins were not on offer and traditionally, dark wood or light wood was about the only option available, says Tony. Now, one in ten funerals include willow coffins, and the team is asked to arrange many more non-religious funerals – humanist and civilian – where the focus of the funeral is on the person who has died. Again, this is a topic for another article.

My next question, I quickly realize, takes Tony aback. I have to explain. I was thinking he was just about to leave and I had one last opportunity to ask him the question I want to ask all FDs I meet: 'Can you tell me a joke?' This is based on my assumption, and listening to a BBC radio programme on the topic, that FDs need a release from their work and black humour can help. Tony said, 'We do have some banter in down time, but I've never found this work depressing and my daughter and oldest son are in the profession. You do get sad cases and it affects everyone, especially when we are dealing with children's funerals, then I may go fishing or do some gardening to get a release.'

This sentiment is later echoed by Paula, after Tony has gone, who admits the children's funerals are heart-breaking. Her way of dealing with it is to cry. 'When I'm in front of the family or the mother I can keep it together and give them support, but when I come back up to the office and mention the child's name to Tony, then that's me off,' she says. However, one day she had a good cry with one of the mothers. 'I don't think they mind you shedding a tear with them. I don't feel I've always got to put on a front because you've got to show feelings; that's what you want your clients to see – that you're human.'

Being approachable is perhaps something which FDs are recognizing to be important, especially when families have less of a connection to one particular funeral home in these days of extended and spread out families. Cooper & Son has been able to rely on its reputation, within its mainly rural client base, for over 150 years, but times are changing and Cooper & Son, not being on the high street, sees the importance of attracting new clients. Paula says, 'Word of mouth, keeping up standards and showing you care will go some way, but we do need to be accessible – that's the hardest part.'

One strategy at Cooper & Son is to be transparent about their work; as Tony says of the recent Open Day, held in conjunction with Fuller & Scott, 'We have nothing to hide, if you want to walk in and take a look that's fine.' The funeral industry is tarnished to some degree by old wives' tales, which, whether based on truth or not, continue to circulate, and Tony and Paula reel off plenty of myths they are confronted with at social gathering. 'People will



either turn around and walk away after they find out what I do, or they will latch on to me and ask me questions all night long,' says Tony. 'I've been told that we don't burn the coffins and remove the coffin handles so they can be reused; we take jewellery and gold teeth from bodies and that bodies are cremated all together at the end of the day.' These myths obviously need to be busted!

Tony and Paula have another way to make themselves more approachable: on a nice day, they take a potter around the front garden during school run time just to say hello to people passing by (they have the phone with them, obviously). CPJ Field is also acutely aware of the need to interact with the next generation through Twitter and Facebook – and probably part of the reason I was chosen as writer in residence! By interacting with funeral directors on social media, people will be able to ask questions and explore the industry without stepping foot in a funeral home. But I **have** made that first step into a funeral home and it was an enlightening experience. Tony and Paula do a good brew and love having visitors...

I must relate one more story, if anyone is still in doubt, of the comforting atmosphere at Cooper & Son. Paula confided in me: 'If we have someone in [the Chapel of Rest] I say goodnight to them when I leave; I develop such a rapport with the families and having spoken to the children, who can be really upset, I just think that could be my Mum in there, so I say, 'Goodnight, Mrs...' and it feels right. Nobody knows I do it,' she laughs. Well, I hope you don't mind, Paula, but they do now...

