

## A Nod to History: “Undertakers” versus “Funeral Directors”

This month I have mostly been... in the archives. I’m not talking about picking my way through dusty shelves, which are groaning under the weight of mothballed volumes, but rather I’ve enjoyed delving into the few histories of the funeral trade which exist, and also rummaging around the pristine digital vaults of the British Newspaper Archives (BNA).

I’m no stranger to this activity and I probably spend over 95% of my writing life looking at the histories of people, animals and companies. In fact, I spend very little time in the “real” (present) world at all.

So, I needed very little excuse to retreat into my comfort zone and when I heard mention of the 115<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ballard & Shortall (Funeral Directors) in Forest Row, Sussex, I found my way in (or back, to be precise). I wanted to see how the business of funerals had changed over the last century, or so: how had the trade changed and, related to his, how had people’s attitudes towards the trade changed?

Unfortunately, I found no direct reference to Ballard & Shortall (and its previous incarnations) in the BNA, but I found snippets about another CPJ Field company - George Attree in Brighton (forerunner of Attree & Kent) - and a pamphlet on the 150-year history of Haine & Son, Eastbourne.

George Attree had adverts in the *Sussex Advertiser* throughout the 1850s, describing himself as a “Furnishing Undertaker - Proprietor of Funeral Carriages, Horses, and Feathers.” He would have had a significant business, hiring out these high cost items (and every other article required for a “fitting” funeral) directly to bereaved families or to the undertaking trade. By 1855, his establishment was the only one in the county where horses were kept exclusively for funeral use.

I ran into a muddled topic straight away after reading this advert. What on earth was the difference between a Victorian “undertaker” and a “furnishing undertaker”? I will leave it to the expert to explain – Julian Litten, and his snappily-titled *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral since 1450*, was my guide:

“The trade had three branches: coffin-making, undertaking and funeral furnishing. The coffin-maker did as the title suggests: he made coffins. He might also have performed funerals, but not necessarily so. The undertaker was a coffin-maker and performer of funerals, whereas the funeral furnisher did not make his own coffins, but bought them in ready-made, dressed them and in addition performed the funeral.” (p.26)



(Image above: Compliment slip for J.D Field (CPJ Field’s ancestor), with its trade proudly on show – also see note \*)

It appears that not every “undertaker” was equal, even though they all disposed of the dead. Basically, a “furnishing undertaker” was top dog in the business – they didn’t get their hands covered in wood splinters, but instead hired out every conceivable funereal item to the undertaking trade. And late Victorian funerals could be undoubtedly ornate, as you can see in the picture below (taken from Trevor May’s *The Victorian Undertaker*).

The two gloomy gentleman standing at the front of the procession are the “mutes” – professional mourners who, with their silk-covered wands and mourning sashes, set the tone; Litten describes them as the “harbingers of death itself”. Then there is a man carrying a plume of black ostrich feathers on his head, followed by the attendants/bearers with their top hats and arm bands, six Belgian blacks pulling the feather-bedecked hearse... And, finally, out of the picture are the actual mourners in their coaches, with the women dressed in crape and black bombazine.



It was the undertaker (to use his common name) who provided what was considered “correct” and “fitting” for a funeral – the bereaved had little choice in the matter – and this would often lead to financial ruin for the poorer classes. Charles Dickens satirised the way undertakers exploited the most vulnerable by appealing to their wish to keep up appearances:

‘Hearse and four, Sir?’ says he.

‘No, a pair will be sufficient.’

‘I beg your pardon, Sir, but when we buried Mr Grundy at number twenty, there was four on ‘em, Sir; I think it right to mention it.’

‘Well, perhaps there had better be four.’

‘Thank you, Sir. Two coaches and four, Sir, shall we say?’

‘No, coaches and pair.’

‘You’ll excuse my mentioning it, Sir, but pairs to the coaches, and four to the hearse, would have a singular appearance to the neighbours.’

*From the Raven in the Happy Family (1850)*

It comes as no surprise that most Victorian undertakers had a bad name, but there was nothing new about that. Undertaking as a trade was firmly established in London and provincial towns by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, and even then undertakers had a terrible reputation. One of the most wonderful pieces of “undertaker-bashing” was written by R. Campbell in his *The London Tradesman of 1747*:

‘... a set of men who live by death and never care to appear but at the End of Man’s Life...their Business is to watch Death, and to furnish out the Funeral Solemnity, with as much Pomp & feigned sorrow as the Heirs or Successor of the Deceased chose to purchase: They are a hard-hearted Generation, and require more Money than Brains to conduct their business: I know no one Qualification peculiarly necessary to them, except it is a steady, demure & melancholy Countenance at Command;...’

Oh dear... could this be the source of the old wives’ tales about undertakers, such as them removing coffin handles to re-use them?

CPJ Field’s past is tainted too: J.D Field played its part in making the trade contemptible. In July 1859, a court case between Mr Field, of Charlotte Street, Shadwell and a Mr Robey was reported in *The Weekly Dispatch* (London newspaper). Robey was refusing to pay the full bill for his wife’s funeral because Mr Field had gone against his wishes for “a plain funeral”, instead creating a funeral full of “pomp and foolery”. Robey was particularly incensed by having to pay for two mutes when he specifically told Field he would have none. In the end, Field won the case, but during the witness statements you can see the jury is incredulous about the charges set by funeral furnishers:

“...He [Field] had charged for six horse hearse velvets, three hammer cloths, and two mourning coaches, and for ten men including two mutes, described in the bill as ‘two porters, with robes and silk fittings’. Mr Morsley and Mr Adam Springfield were called to prove the charges were fair and reasonable. In cross-examination the latter said there were prices for mutes (laughter). Mr



Huddlestone – “What is the usual charge for a mute with a dark, good melancholy physiognomy?” (laughter). Mr Springfield – ‘There are various prices. It depends whether he is a good-looking fellow.’ Mr Baron Channell – ‘Then you charge according to their looks?’ (laughter) Mr Springfield – ‘Yes, certainly.’ (laughter)... Several witnesses were called to show the charges were too high, one of them, Mr Holley, in his cross-examination, said it was usual for undertakers to charge according to the condition in life of the parties who employed them...’

I think it can be safely concluded that supporting and caring for bereaved families was probably not the Victorian undertakers’ top priority – at least, this was the public’s perception. Are there still funeral directors (FDs) like that today?

Talking of “funeral directors”, you will notice that hardly any “undertakers” exist today. Litten states that the name change occurred because their craft had evolved: the Crown undertaker, Banting, became a “Funeral Director” in about 1895 as he rarely saw a corpse and was contracting out every stage of the funeral (see \* below) – he was servicing the public, not disposing of the dead, says Litten.

But I’m pretty convinced that “undertakers” no longer exist partly because of the negative associations attached to the word – think of greedy diggers of graves, dealers in death and morbid black attire. The image below is from the Science Museum’s catalogue: it is called ‘Caricature of an undertaker hoping for cholera, Europe, c.1854’. Any evolving trade would want to distance themselves from this type of stereotype, surely? Grasping undertakers (tradesmen) have become professional FDs - the British Undertakers’ Association (formed in 1905) metamorphosed into the National Association of Funeral Directors in 1935.





The official name change also seems to coincide with the banishment of death and dying to the shadowy fringes of society – taboo to speak of, especially when compared with the Victorian preoccupation with death and mourning. “Funeral Director” provides a softer image for the public.

I found another recent example of image “softening” in the Haine & Son pamphlet, which I found in Eastbourne Reference Library. During the 1960s, Haine & Son abandoned the “black for funerals” look in favour of dark grey vehicles and grey uniforms for bearers and FDs – top hats, morning clothes and black suits were discarded, writes Charles Haine, and these changes resulted in the firm receiving “many favourable comments”. Today, the cars of Haine & Son remain grey and the bearers wear grey suits, but the FDs have reverted to the traditional black morning coats... no doubt, by public demand; some traditional rituals stubbornly remain.

The history of Haine & Son also highlights another way in which late Victorian FDs worked on their public image – they became upstanding pillars of the Eastbourne community. John Haine was one of the first members of the Local Board which was formed in 1859, taking over the running of local affairs from the Parish Council, and his son, Charles Hugh Haine, was the first alderman of the Borough when the role was created in 1883.

Today this type of community bonding comes under the business-speak term of “outreach”, where FDs mingle at social events and also support local charities and causes. CPJ Field have gone further, I suspect, than most FDs and one of the 10<sup>th</sup> Field generation – Emily Hendin-Field – is their ‘Community Engagement Director’. Her latest, and biggest project to date, is the “Community Companions” scheme. This, Emily tells me, aims to help retired people, living in residential homes, to live life to the full: in practice, this means residents choosing new equipment, and training, to make their life more fulfilling. For example, a new TV and DVD library for the resident’s Film Club; gardening tools, parasols and benches for the Gardening Club and indoor exercise classes in the winter... you get the idea. Emily tells me: “We want to change the way people think about funeral directors and become a central pillar of support for local people and the elderly.”

Are we seeing a further “softening” of the FD image, motivated by the public mood? You only have to look at recent newspaper reports to see examples of “FD-bashing” becoming a national sport: the cost of funerals increasing, while families struggle financially (unfortunately for FDs, families cannot delay deaths until finances are more rosy) and the growing interest of abandoning FD-led funerals and opting for family-controlled funerals and burials (think of Kirstie Allsopp following her mother’s wishes to be buried in the garden).

Do FDs, rather than solely relying on being upstanding in the community, now have to get their hands dirty (as it were) and become more approachable and supportive to the community in general? Will they have to return, in part, to their undertaking roots?

To explain my thinking: Like most early Victorian undertakers, the Haine family business bolted funeral “undertaking” to its other activities in 1865: they were carpenters, upholsterers, cabinet makers and builders by trade. The family were in, and part of, the community, and by providing a coffin and furnishings they saw an opportunity to help out their bereaved neighbours. Perhaps in the course of turning the undertaking trade into a profession, the funeral business (over the last few decades) has lost some of its soul by standing apart from the community and hence unleashing a tide of “FD-bashing”.



A possible blueprint for a new “community-led” FD would perhaps be Thomas Turner, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century village shopkeeper in East Hoathly, East Sussex, who was the grocer, draper, mercer, tax gatherer and “undertaker” – his 1757 diary provides details of one funeral he undertook.\*\* He asked the family of the deceased whether he could “serve the funeral”, which he did with his brother’s help. He provided a number of mourning gloves, hat bands and mourning rings, but left control of the funeral with the family. They carried, with the help of friends, the lady’s body to the grave (it’s not clear whether the body was in a coffin), and spent most of their money on a feast after the burial - simple. And the family had control.

In reality, most FDs could not adopt this blueprint because current attitudes towards handling the dead have changed beyond all recognition and bodies very rarely remain with the family until burial. This means that FDs are still needed in our communities, but perhaps a small nod to the history of village-based undertaking might help to soften public perceptions. Integrating with the community, and being approachable, would not only benefit the profession, but also encourage people to openly discuss funeral wishes... win-win, I think.

**NB:** I hadn’t actually intended this blog to become a musing on the future of funeral directing, but going off at a tangent is so easy to do when exploring the archives!

\* CPJ Field’s ancestors JD Field was, like Attree in Brighton, a “Furnishing Undertaker” and was the firm supplying all funeral products to Banting (the Crown undertaker). An entry in the J.D Field account ledger records the services provided to Banting for Queen Victoria’s funeral, which included: £56.15." (huge amount in 1901) for a “stout and large size Oak Case, framed and panelled throughout and finished in the best manner...” and repeated entries for attending rehearsals - “8 men with dummy Coffin to St Georges Barracks and instructing Soldiers”.

\*\* Detail from Paul S. Fritz “The Undertaking Trade in England: Its Origins and Early Development, 1660-1830” (1994) *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 28, no.2, pp. 249-250.

