

Shifting Aesthetics: Communicating the Values of Cremation from the mid 1920s to mid 1960s.

(main body text: 3283)

A field of colourful crocuses featured on the cover of a 1965 leaflet issued by The Cremation of Society to promote the values of cremation. This low-growing plant and its fragrant flowers - which throughout human history symbolised rebirth, youthfulness and joy - was adopted as a new visual metaphor to communicate cremation. The leaflet was titled "Why Cremation" and although its text was substantially the same the Cremation Society adopted since the mid thirties, the use of abstract images such as a colourful field of crocuses was a complete departure, in terms of aesthetic choices. This bold move was not only to do with the need to introduce stylistic changes in order to attract new adopters of cremation, but was also the culmination of a long journey of experimentations and testing - in terms of graphic design and communication strategies - that Company embarked on since 1922.

It was in this year that the Cremation Society held its first General Conference (24th October at the Mansion House in London), and which established a long standing tradition that is still lasting to this day. What was special about that gathering was not only that it was the first of this kind for the Society, but also that what emerged from it marked a unique turning point in the history of the Society: the need for a change of direction in terms of promoting the values of cremation. To that point the Cremation Society was struggling to get numbers of adopters to grow so the focus started to shift from the mechanics, to the poetic aesthetics of cremation and in particular the landscaped gardens associated with the crematoria, this new direction started to be reflected also in printed promotional material used for the Society to attract new adopters.

Evidence of this can be gathered in a article that appeared in The Undertakers' Journal in 1926 titled "Fifth Annual Conference of Cremation Authorities"¹ where it was mentioned that: *"The 1922 Conference, which was held in the Mansion House, London, was marked not only by its being the first meeting of this kind, but as the starting point of a new era in the method of propaganda. Up to that time the advocacy of Cremation had been mainly directed on sanitary, financial and economic lines, the advantages of which were not and could not be controverted. Yes, as many speakers at that meeting pointed out, the movement had made but slow progress, and suggested as an alternative that our endeavours should be rather centered on the aesthetics and sentimental side to which cremation so*

¹ The Undertakers Journal 1926, 361-4.

readily lent itself - that our buildings with the surrounding grounds, and our services should be made as beautiful as possible, thereby appealing to all and especially to those who unfortunately were compelled to attend on those sad occasions. It was obvious moreover that the subject of cremation could be much more easily introduced by discussing a beautiful garden than by speaking of what ultimately happened to the body after death.”²

It was also mentioned here that due to this change of propaganda the cremation society started to see a shift in the public perception of cremation, which was measured by a steady increase in the numbers of adopters recorded by the Company between 1922 and 1926. In an extract from the article we can read that: “[...] the marked increase in cremation which has taken place during the past five years is very largely and directly due to this policy in regard to propaganda - and as a practical outcome, Garden of Rest and Remembrance have been established in connection with some of our crematoria. This innovation may in the future solve many of our difficulties in respect to the building of numerous crematoria, and restrict undue expenditure. For the time being, therefore, it would seem that our policy in directing propaganda along those lines should be continued, though ultimately no doubt when the persistent demand for land for houses, for gardens, for playing fields, and for allotments, has been satisfied, and when the laws permit the extension of cremation to less wealthy persons, then the great motive power will be an economic one.”³

Further evidence of the long journey undertaken by the Cremation Society with regards to their new approach to communication strategies can be found in the historical documentation available in the Archives of The Cremation Society of Great Britain are held within Barker Research Library at Durham University. There, it is possible to see how from the mid 1930s to mid 1960s the Society’s printed promotional leaflets changed - both in terms of visual aesthetics and written contents. One main aspect of this transition consisted gradually shifting from using images of crematoria buildings to photographic content that was focused more on other elements connected with cremation aesthetics such as the Book of Remembrance or the Garden of Rest. Following the comments made in the 1926 report, a new communication trajectory was shaping the future of the Society. For example in a promotional leaflet dated 1936 titled “Leading Questions About Cremation: Answered by a Cremationist ” we can note the cover photo used here featured “The Garden of Rest from the arched Cloister at Golders Green Crematorium”. This small publication was introduced about fifteen years later from when The Cremation Society first realised that they needed to change their communication strategies to the public. In terms of contents one can say that this is the equivalent of a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section we can find

² The Undertakers Journal 1926, 361.

³ The Undertakers Journal 1926, 361.

today when visiting websites online. The writing style is direct and accessible. For example the answer to the first question "What is Cremation?" is concise and precise: "*A simple, complete and economic method of disposal of the Dead, that is sanitary and relevant.*"⁴ One of the other interesting points is titled "Consideration for the Living". In an extract from that section we read that: "*The corruption of burial is horrible to contemplate, whereas after Cremation my remains are transformed to white ash, absolutely pure, and harmless to the living. My body will not contaminate the water they drink, the air they breathe, or occupy the land required for their houses and cultivation, and therefore diseases arising from earth burial will be abolished.*"⁵ There is a strong contrast between how earth burial is described here "*horrible to contemplate*" whereas cremation is described as "*absolutely pure, and harmless to the living*". The emphasis of the language is to encourage the reader to see the many benefits of cremation but on the low environmental impact (air, water quality) as well as preserving land which was much needed for housing and agriculture. Another interesting section in this leaflet is titled "Aesthetic Considerations about the ashes". In a passage we read that: "*The idea of my ashes lying unfettered and undisturbed in the sunlight, among the bird the flowers and the trees; Nature's monument - in a beautiful garden which is a Garden of Rest for the living as well as the dead - appeals to me more than the idea of my body slowly decaying in an overcrowded cemetery where everything reminds one, not of life and immortality, but of death and corruption.*"⁶ It is important here to notice this conversation-like approach adopted by The Cremation Society to communicate cremation values to audiences, the language and vocabulary adopted are both accessible and therefore inclusive without being patronising or hierarchical in any way. The answers are well calibrated and it feels like the person telling us about their motives to adopt cremation is sensible, thoughtful and pragmatic. The intent is perhaps for readers to identify (empathise perhaps) with the individual's choices. In a way, if the reader is considering becoming an adopter of cremation, the answers provided in the pamphlet are also helpful for them if and when they need to articulate their own reasons for embracing cremation to others. The vocabulary and expressions used in the first phrase is evocative both visually and emotionally. The romantic vision of the ashes lying unfettered and undisturbed in the sunlight is indeed attractive as it is possible to relate to this image, or recall the feeling of the sunlight warming our ashes of what was once our body. The image is reassuring and positive, unthreatening and there is no mention of possible clouds in the sky which are anticipating the possibility of a downpour or heavy rain. Somehow, only positive visions are evoked, and visions that are sedate and non-problematic or threatening to one's remains. The positive vision of "*nature's monument*" is particularly powerful as it is both nurturing and protective. Nature here not only provides a shelter, and is guardian, to our scattered ashes but also our ashes will be resting in nature's monument which is a different way of thinking of

⁴ Leading Questions About Cremation Answered by a Cremationist 1936, 2.

⁵ Leading Questions About Cremation Answered by a Cremationist 1936, 2.

⁶ Leading Questions About Cremation Answered by a Cremationist 1936, 3.

nature when in a positive and friendly way. It is interesting to notice the change of tone in the later part of the answer where another aspect of nature (decay, decomposition) is completely dismissed with “*death and corruption*” yet, the process of decomposition and decay is indeed the work of the very same nature that was, in the previous phrase, providing a cosy shelter. So, it is curious to see how in the same answer the reader is taken into this emotional journey by images evoked through text that are visually and sensorially moving and powerful.

A major shift in terms of focus from the crematorium building to the landscaped Garden of Rest took place in 1944. A typewritten document⁷ was drafted in that year by the Society to assist Committees and Officials of local authorities considering the question of establishing crematoria. Along highlighting the consistent growth of cremation adopters in the previous couple of years⁸ One of the key points highlighted by this document is related to the Garden of Rest and stated that: “*The importance of the garden should not be underestimated, whilst the acreage need not be great, it should be large enough to provide an adequate setting to the building, with lawns and attractive garden features. Experience shows that the Garden has played an important role in the influencing of public opinion in favour of cremation. Its lay-out is the task of an expert, who should be called in before the buildings are erected, in order that the available space may be planned to the best advantage. The acreages of existing Gardens differ widely, but a space of five acres may be taken as a minimum for an effective Garden, which should be screened from any nearby ground used for burial purposes.*”⁹ It is interesting to see how the Garden of Rest is understood as playing “*an important role in the influencing of public opinion in favour of cremation*”, this is indeed not new but what is important in the draft document is that the information is designed to guide and assist local authorities that might not have experience in terms of what could make a new crematorium successful and it wasn’t indeed only to do with the quality and design of the building but also how this is complemented by a suitable landscaped Garden of Rest.

In the late 1950s the Cremation Society reframed its communication strategies moving - only temporarily - away from the Garden of Rest and focusing instead on the Book of Remembrance, which is another element, part of the paradigm of cremation aesthetics, when it comes to memorialising the dead. In 1959 a new promotional leaflet titled “Why Cremation?” was introduced. This was a substantial milestone for the Society, as we will see later, as its written contents were used until the mid 1960. The cover photo featured a Book of Remembrance, resting solemnly open on a glass cabinet with three flower

⁷ CREMATION INFORMATION (typewritten document in multiple copies) 1944.

⁸ The Cremation Society. Cremation statistics: 1942: 57 crematoria / 28,527 cremations; 1943: 58 crematoria / 34,259 cremations; 1944: 58 crematoria / 39,016 cremations.

⁹ CREMATION INFORMATION (typewritten document in multiple copies) 1944.

arrangements inside. The sepia treatment of the photograph gives a sombre and discreet tone to its visual content but also it gives it a sense of longlasting and timeless durability. Inside the leaflet, in one passage of the text we read that: *“Although the need for a costly tombstone is avoided, relatives usually wish to have some memorial to the deceased. When cremation has taken place any one of several forms may be selected. Many prefer an illuminated entry in the Book of Remembrance. This book is an enduring work of art in which an entry constitutes a worthy memorial. Other forms of memorial are available on application at the crematorium.”*¹⁰ Perhaps this emphasis on this way of remembering was also due to the lack of financial resources due to the struggles of the Post World War II and the reconstruction years. It is interesting to note how (when compared to the 1936 leaflet) there is no section explaining how cremation is more equal than earth burial which - according to The Society - is historically associated with the division of social classes. However the fact that cremation is open to any denomination and is, in that way inclusive, is still present here, as it was in the 1936 leaflet. What the society also dropped was the list of famous and eminent people that adopted (and perhaps supported) cremation. However, quotes from Health Ministries and used here to support their proposed arguments.

A new section titled Safeguards Health, was introduced. Its text stressed the sense of duty a good citizen has in choosing cremation as a sensible choice. In a passage we read that: *“The founders of our Public Health system recognised the disposal of the dead as a problem of the first importance. Today, the overcrowded nature of large towns has rendered cremation a necessity. In one area near London, for example, so many boroughs have created cemeteries that the dead far outnumber the living.”*¹¹ The tone of the text above is putting an emphasis on how the “founders of our Public Health system” are the authority to be trusted and believe as they speak the truth about what is good, best perhaps, for society. The NHS was founded in 1948 and by 1959 (only 11 years later) was still developing and becoming embedded in the social and cultural life of people in the UK. Also it is worth remembering that rationing stopped only in 1954 and I guess still people in 1959 had a sense of social responsibility towards their nation and fellow citizens. The post-WWII reconstruction and government was prioritising the building of new homes, infrastructures and services. It is evident here that the Cremation Society was promoting cremation by adopting a language that was drawing on the social responsibilities of citizens. These ideas were stated clearly in a section titled *The Land for the Living*. In a passage we read that *“Today’s pressing social needs are for slum clearance, the building of homes and the provision of adequate playing fields. Half a million people die in Great Britain each year, mostly in the towns. To bury those not cremated requires on an average 400 acres of urban land each year. The wasteful system of burial is therefore*

¹⁰ Why Cremation? 1959, 3.

¹¹ Why Cremation? 1959, 2.

*preventing the economic use of valuable land for housing and recreation and is detrimental to the health and happiness of the living. By contrast, a crematorium never becomes filled up or obsolete; the building will serve its purpose indefinitely and the garden will remain a joy for all time. A recent Minister of Health has said: "Cremation reduces the demands for new ground for burial. This is a growing consideration; in this small island of ours it is of some importance. Cremation offers a valuable alternative to earth burial which takes these needed acres."*¹² The tone of the text in this section is reinforcing the social responsibilities - which are urgent and not to be ignored - that were briefly outlined in the previous section (Safeguards Health). The text is tapping into the consciousness of readers and particularly in the responsibility they have towards their country and how they can contribute to those positive changes by adopting cremation. Another section titled "A Rational Outlook" takes things ever further, from the rational to the emotional. In one extract we read that *"In place of the dismal circumstances surrounding burial - the clammy clay, the cold discomforts of the cemetery and the heartbreak of the yawning grave - cremation substitutes an indoor ceremony carried out with the utmost respect for the dead and with regard to the comfort of the mourners. Altogether a more rational and healthy atmosphere is created."*¹³ The comparison outlined in this section is providing a visual and emotional image of the cemetery as a place of "cold discomforts" when compared to the "comfort of the mourners" provided by cremation. The text draws on the thermal qualities of the two spaces one outdoor and cold, the other one indoor and designed around the comfort of the mourners. The other images that are evoked here are also about how through some visual details mentioned in the text, the reader may form an opinion and will possibly decide to adopt cremation. For example the anticipation of the sight of the grave is so powerful as to produce a "heartbreak of the yawning grave". The text seems to be slightly paternalistic towards the readers, as they want to provide the best to make them feel comfortable and have a good experience. However, it seems to stir strong emotions with images usually associated with earth burial funerals outdoor functions, sight of the earth and the open grave. By contrast the cremation funerals conjure "a more rational and healthy atmosphere". However, is it worth reflecting that the proposal (promise) for/of a "healthy atmosphere" might be lacking emotional depth? Perhaps it is emphasising the need to rationalise the disposal of human remains through cremation (and its related processes) so that by choosing cremation over earth burial, we are both doing something good (as citizens) for our nation and our fellow countrymen.

The Society's printed promotional material released in 1964 marked an historical shift as two new leaflets were issued this year. One was titled "What YOU should know about Cremation"¹⁴ featuring on the cover view of a Garden of Rest bloom. Here the sepia treatment of the photograph emanates an autumnal feel in

¹² Why Cremation? 1959, 2.

¹³ Why Cremation? 1959, 2.

¹⁴ The written content was the same as the 1959 leaflet.

a rural setting. The subject of the photograph visually does not work as well as in the 1959 leaflet featuring the Book of Remembrance, where the sepia effect emphasised the sombre nature of the subject. In the same year The Society also issued a new, and revised, edition of “Why Cremation” this time adopting a new and fresh graphic design and imagery. The cover photograph is in full colour, a first for the Society and features a Garden of Remembrance along with a small hexagonal brick building, most likely where the crematorium’s Book of Remembrance was kept.

In the 1965 version of “Why Cremation” the cover featured a field full of colourful crocuses in bloom (purple, yellow, white on a background of green grass). The focus is on the crocuses, it could be any field, anywhere, as there is no crematorium in sight. So the spotlight in this case is very much on nature and its aesthetics rather than the combination of the garden and the crematorium as we have seen in previous printed campaigns. The contents too are reduced in terms of quantity, the format of the leaflet too changed and gained a more modern and fresh look. With this bold step of embracing fully the use of colour and graphic design The Cremation Society initiated a new chapter in terms of communication of cremation aesthetics that went beyond architecture and landscaped gardens or other ways of memorialising the dead. The simplification of its design and visual contents did not diminish the power of communicating the values of cremation aesthetics, but emphasised this need to rationalise, which encapsulates the essence of progressive civic modernity.

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Acknowledgements: (214 words in total)

This article would have not been possible without the constructive feedback, patience and, most of all trust, of many people. Firstly I would like to express my gratitude to the Barker Fellowships Programme at Durham Palace Green Library which gave me the opportunity to spend four weeks between mid April and mid May 2023 researching the Archives of The Cremation Society of Great Britain are held within Barker Research Library at Durham University. In particular I would like to thank Dr. Dr James Kelly, Sweeting Associate Professor in the History of Catholicism and Academic Coordinator of Durham Residential Research Library Fellowships Scheme at Durham University. I would also like to thank Barbara Jackson, Research Coordinator at Durham University. The amazing team of librarians and staff at Palace Green Library with their welcoming assistance made my experience unique and enjoyable, I thank you all for your kind support. Dr. Julie Rugg for the stimulating conversations, encouragement and support she gave especially when back from the archives and sharing thoughts and reflections about my findings. Lastly, I would like to thank Wendy Buchan, Amy Marsh and the rest of the editorial team at Pharos International for their kind support and opportunity. The content of this article is part of a post-doctoral research project titled Cremation Stories.

Biography: (63 words)

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1936 / Leaflet Code: B/5M/6/36 - Cremation versus Burial: Comparison of Costs

1936 / Leaflet Code: C.P. 3/1936 - Leading Questions about Cremation Answered by a Cremationist

1959 / Leaflet Code: B/10m/9/59 - Why Cremation?

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1964 / Leaflet - Why Cremation

1965 / Leaflet - Why Cremation