

## Honouring Michael's Last Wishes

Funerals, for my Uncle Michael brought bitter memories flooding back of financial hardship, sleepless nights and watching his mum distressed trying to "do right" by his dad and nan, who both died suddenly. Hidden costs and unexpected extras nearly broke them.

Later when his mum passed suddenly, [the insurance policy she had taken out, which seemed so generous back then, barely covered a third of the cost of her funeral.](#) Michael and my mum gave her the "traditional" send off, regardless of the short

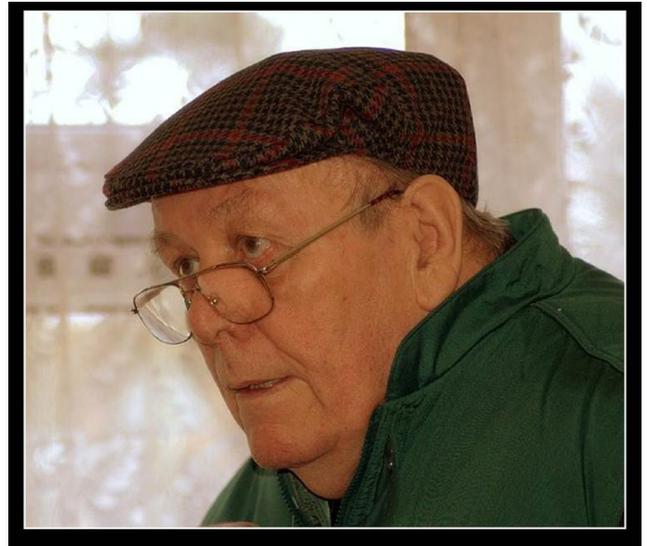
fall, however the experience set him to wondering; [when did expensive funerals become tradition?](#) When did the number of mourners, amounts of flowers and quality of casket become the "accepted recognition" of the level of regard and love felt for the departed relative? My grandmother grew up with the fear and shame poorer families felt about pauper burials, and later, in the war years, there was a collective national guilt over the unmarked graves of fallen soldiers in foreign lands - may be that was where this "tradition" was born?

[It's something Michael and I often communicated about in his later years,](#) as it concerned him that as he saw it, "his burden" would fall on me - though I assured him he would never feel a burden. His first thought was to leave his body to medical science for teaching purposes; I think the look on my face let him know my feelings on that idea! Michael was totally deaf for most of his adult life and was not at all religious, he saw life very differently to those of us that hear, and [he felt no peer pressure or need to comply with society's expectations around death.](#) His way was to be kind, caring and respectful to everyone and their beliefs in life, that's what he thought was important. So he understood when I explained that for those of us left behind, his send-off was part of our grieving process. We spoke at length and came up with something we both felt comfortable with.

He purchased a copy of the [Natural Death Handbook](#), by Nicholas Albery, and read it cover to cover, marking off relevant pages for me. He wanted a [simple cardboard coffin, no flowers, suggesting we use the money saved to have a nice meal and donate something to a charity for the deaf.](#) I managed to get him to agree to a small bunch of hand-picked wild flowers to rest on his coffin. He wanted to be [transported to the crematorium in the back of my camper van and that at no point should I engage the services of a funeral director or a vicar.](#) I agreed to carry out his last wishes when the time came. Ten years passed, and on the 14th March 2012 my youngest son Steven identified Michael for the police after they had gained entry to his flat, when Steven, who visited often had failed to get a response mid-afternoon that day. Michael had passed away peacefully some few hours earlier, whilst snoozing in front of his computer -aged 73, [he had stayed independent to the last.](#)

The news came as a shock when Steve rang me from Michael's flat, distressed and in shock himself. I drove the 250 miles from Wales to Surrey on auto pilot in my small car, I had already forgotten about the camper van promise. Later, whilst discussing Michael's last wishes with my sons Allan and Steve, and on the phone to my brother Andrew in Spain and my sister Trudi in the North of England, the enormity of my promise to Michael hit home. [How would I be able to carry out his last requests?](#) I am going to be totally honest with you, I did worry what people might think, and worried they would think we were doing the funeral on the cheap. I was shocked and horrified at how deep my conditioning went.

Then I remembered the book we had looked together at all those years ago, so I made lists, lots of lists, one clearly outlining each of Michael's wishes, then made enquiries as to how I could meet them. Lists



helped me focus on what was needed. Alistair at the Surrey County Coroner's Office was lovely and very helpful, explaining the forms I would need and the procedures that are normally dealt with by the funeral directors. Next I contacted Guildford Crematorium and spoke to Kassie, a lovely young lady who was equally kind and helpful and genuinely interested in our decision to be so intimately involved in Michael's send off, sending me a helpful information and advising me how to book the crematorium when we needed to.

Alistair rang me a couple of days later with the results of Michael's autopsy and said Michael could be collected from the Royal Surrey County Hospital mortuary, after [we had registered his death](#) at the Registrar of births, deaths and marriages in Guildford. Registering Michael's death was less traumatic than we expected, the Registrar was very helpful and advised us about a free service, [The Bereavement Register - you're given a pack and registration number which means when activated it notifies all relevant authorities and official bodies of the death, saving the family from having to have to make countless phone calls notifying people of their bereavement.](#) I wish I had known about this free service sooner, as I had already made dozens of calls in the days leading up to the registration of Michael's death, cancelling services and notifying government offices.

Once we had registered Michael's death we were able to arrange a time and date for his cremation. We chose Monday 26th March at 4:00pm and went over to Guildford Crematorium and discussed with Kassie how we wanted Michael's last wishes to be carried out. He would be delivered to the crematorium on the Sunday and would be kept in the chapel of rest until his send off on the Monday. We ordered a [beautiful, ready built cardboard picture coffin](#) ( see attached picture) from Greenfields Creations Ltd based in Ridgewell Essex, which was delivered to the RSCH mortuary on the Thursday before Michael's send off, Gary, the anatomical pathology technician at the RSCH mortuary was very kind and respectful and laid Michael in his coffin for us. [Greenfields Creations were amazing,](#) Will Hunnebell was so kind and helpful, explaining everything we needed to know and advising us on a wider coffin as Michael was broad shouldered in life. All that was left to do was find transport for Michael from the mortuary to the crematorium on the Sunday. This proved to be the hardest task of the whole event, we couldn't find a private ambulance to hire. Earlier in the week, Alistair had mentioned that local funeral services picked up the deceased from their homes and transported them to the hospital in unmarked vehicles for the Coroner's office and might possibly be available to hire privately for the short journey from the mortuary to the crematorium as it would take less than an hour. I felt uncomfortable at the idea of engaging a funeral services van as Michael had been adamant about not using them, however, campervan-less, I thought I would make enquiries and see if it was feasible. [The first quote offered was for £1,200, the second was nearly £700.](#)

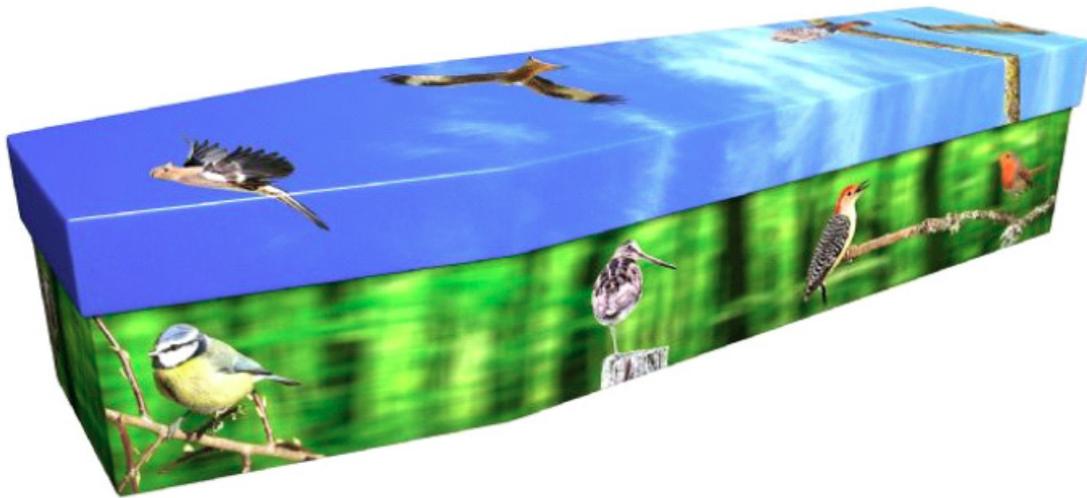
I knew Michael would never have approved. I had already hired a van to empty Michael's council flat, transporting furniture to a local charity project and recycling clothes and household goods at the local centre, so, after a family discussion, general consensus amongst us was to [keep the van for an extra day and personally drive Michael on his last journey to the crematorium.](#) Andrew and Steve accompanied me.

Gary at the RSCH Morgue was lovely; Michael's coffin was placed in the van using a trolley and unloaded at the crematorium on to another trolley, so there was [very little lifting needed.](#) Gary gave me a note with his name and number on, in case of the unlikely event that we were stopped by the police en route (a worry that had cropped up in our family discussion earlier, when we had decided to deliver Michael ourselves).

[Everything went well without any hitches.](#) Michael had his send off at Guildford Crematorium on Monday the 26th March, in the presence of his family each wearing Marie Curie daffodils in our lapels. [A bunch of hand-picked wild daffodils from the woods behind his flat lay on his brightly colored coffin depicting his favourite British wild birds, in the background gentle music with birdsong played, as Michael had often mentioned in life that he missed the beautiful sound of birdsong. Tears were shed](#)

and memories shared about Michael, the kind and caring legend who was leaving such a void in our lives, but there was nothing morbid or overly sad about Michael's send-off. He left us as he had lived his life, simply and with dignity, and we were better people for sharing the experience.

We found peace and closure in being so intimately involved in his last journey and then as a family we went and shared a meal at a restaurant where we had been with Michael in the past. The next day those able to attend watched over as Michael's ashes were placed in the plot with his Mum's, dispatched from a beautiful copper and brass urn the crematorium provides as part of their service. I believe the kindness of all the official people involved helped us enormously to overcome our conditioning. Never once did we feel judged. I can recommend to any family not to feel daunted about arranging their loved one's send off. This was never about the cost, it was always about honoring Michael's last wishes, however I have outlined the costs below for anyone interested, and a picture of his beautiful coffin.



Cremation £530, (the price will vary from county to county)

Overnight stay in the crematorium chapel of rest £60

A beautiful Greenfields Creations Ltd Picture Coffin, made to measure inc delivery £340 <http://www.greenfieldcreationscoffins.co.uk>

Three death certificates, total cost £10.50

Van hire for one day £45 + a returned £250 deposit

Flowers from nature

