

## From Earth to Earth: a small but growing number of us are choosing to 'return to nature' in death



*A photograph of the woodland burial  
site at Barton Glebe*

Everyone dies, so the choices made about cremation, burial, and funeral rites provide a unique window on human values and what matters to people. Death-style and life-style reflect each other. Since 2000 a registered charity, the Arbory Trust, has been offering woodland burials at a site consecrated by the Church of England near Cambridge, and the number of people buried and registering to be buried there is growing. This constitutes part of a wider trend in British society to opt for 'natural burials', reflecting people's desire for personal choice in the ritual, and a growing engagement with ecological values.

The existence of the Centre for Death and Life Studies at Durham University led to a collaboration between its Director, Prof. Douglas Davies and the Arbory Trust, and thus to the appointment of Hannah Rumble as the doctoral candidate who set out to research this phenomenon, funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#). Between 2007 and 2010 she conducted archival research, participant observation, a survey and interviews around this sensitive subject. She contacted relatives, celebrants and people pre-registered to be buried at the site. Though consecrated by the Church of England (guaranteeing a secure future), the Arbory Trust welcomes people from any religious background. Those opting for natural burial repeatedly talk about the ecological value of "putting something back", their love of nature, and of not wishing to leave a grave which will be a burden to maintain. Relatives sometimes struggle to balance such ideals and their own needs, saying that while attractive in spring and summer, autumn and winter at Barton Glebe can be quite bleak, and it can be hard to watch nature claiming back the grave. It is clear from the research that, far from simply 'letting go', bonds with loved ones continue after death. Many people return to the site to talk to the deceased, though the number of visits declines over time. Some struggle with the absence of a permanent marker of the space where their loved one is buried, and many want more chance to personalise the graves – but due to the woodland being young there are tight restrictions on planting and what can be left at the grave – for example, roses are removed as they are not a wild flower. Thus individual desires to personalise sometimes conflict with the Trust's commitment to protect the natural beauty of the site for all.

Woodland burial is a new practice still finding its way, but this research on it has been fruitful in highlighting some changing practices and values in modern Britain. Durham University's Centre for Death and Life Studies and Wolfson Institute contributed to funding a film about the site and its users made by professional film-maker Sarah Thomas, in consultation with Hannah and Douglas. The film is designed for presentation to academics, clergy and funeral professionals and others. Hannah passed her PhD in December 2010 and has received further funding from the Centre of Death and Life Studies to co-author a book arising from the research with Douglas Davies.

## Find out more...

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- Listen to the podcasts of interviews with Hannah and Douglas:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/burial\\_study\\_breaks\\_new\\_ground](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/burial_study_breaks_new_ground)
- Contact [douglas.davies@durham.ac.uk](mailto:douglas.davies@durham.ac.uk) or Hannah Rumble ([drhannahrumble@gmail.com](mailto:drhannahrumble@gmail.com), <http://drhannahrumble.com/>) or the project's collaborative partner from the Arbory Trust ([enquiries@arborytrust.org](mailto:enquiries@arborytrust.org)).
- Visit the Arbory Trust's website: <http://www.arborytrust.org/index.html>
- Visit the website of the Natural Death Centre (<http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk/>). Hannah presented at their 2007 'Green Funerals' conference, as well as the Cremation Society of Great Britain's September 2007 conference (<http://www.srgw.demon.co.uk/CremSoc/>).

## You might also be interested in...

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- Another collaborative studentship funded by the Programme at Manchester University about experineces of continuing bonds in bereavement supervised by Ivan Leudar:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/projects/phase\\_one/collaborative\\_phd\\_studentships/page:2](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_one/collaborative_phd_studentships/page:2)
- Elisabeth Hsu's (Anthropology, Oxford University) large Religion and Society project looking at changing ritual and religion in Southwest China: <http://www.isca.ox.ac.uk/research/medical-and-ecological-anthropology/eastern-medicines-and-religions/icons-and-innovation-in-southwest-chinas-religious-texts/>
- Durham University's Centre for Death and Life Studies: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/cdals/>
- The National Council for Palliative Care sub-group on 'Meaning, Belief and Faith' which the award holder Professor Davies has been invited to join: <http://www.dyingmatters.org/site/why-talk-about-it/MeaningFaithBelief>

## Project Details

### Award Title

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**British Woodland Burial: its theological, ecological and social values**

### Team

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**Principal Investigator:** Prof Douglas Davies (Durham)

**PhD Student:** Hannah Rumble (Durham)



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



## University

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University of Durham

## Research Partners

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The Arbory Trust

## Award Type

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Phase 1 Collaborative Studentship

## Key terms

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Arbory Trust, woodland burial, death and dying, funerals, ecology, memorialisation