

## Funeral Study Day Friday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2019

The Coffin Works  
13-15 Fleet Street, Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham, B3 1JP  
contact: [josie@coffinworks.org](mailto:josie@coffinworks.org)/ 0121 233 4785  
Tickets: £40 (£30 for students)

<b>10.00</b>	<b>Registration and refreshments</b>
<b>10.30</b>	Welcome address and The Coffin Works Story Sarah Hayes
<b>Morning session</b>	
<b>11.00</b>	Morbid Curiosity: Telling stories through the stones at Arnos Vale Cemetery, Bristol Janine Marriott
<b>11.30</b>	'Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more': The Victorian Funeral Janice Norwood and Hayley Bradley
<b>12.00</b>	From Cradle to Early Grave: Death, Burial and Mourning for Infants and Children in Glossopdale, 1890 – 1911 Abbie Shelton
<b>12.30</b>	Soldered Shut: contagious coffins and pernicious miasma in the 19th century cemetery Heather Scott
<b>13.00</b>	The Excavation of Park Street Burial Ground Stuart Milby
<b>13.30</b>	<b>Lunch</b> <b>with 20 minute taster tour of the museum</b>
<b>Afternoon session</b>	
<b>14.30</b>	A History of Embalming in the UK Josie Wall
<b>15.00</b>	The Purity of Shrouds: A Creative-Critical Reflection Laura Joyce
<b>15.30</b>	What are we going to do with all the dead people? Carrie Weekes
<b>16.00</b>	Coffin Decorating and Funeral Wishes Workshop
<b>17.00</b>	<b>End of day</b>
<b>17.30</b>	<b>Drinks TBC</b>

### Abstracts

#### **The Coffin Works Story: Newman Brothers and the decline of a company**

**Sarah Hayes**

The Newman Brothers factory is a Mercantile Marie Celeste in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, where the very finest Coffin Furniture was once made for the great and the good including Winston Churchill and the Royal Family. This talk looks at what made the Newman Brothers so successful and why everything changed, covering at the history of the company from 1882 to 1998 when the doors closed. Luckily that wasn't the end of the story – hear how the building and collection were saved, enabling the factory to open again as The Coffin Works museum in 2014.

## **Morbid Curiosity: Telling stories through the stones at Arnos Vale Cemetery, Bristol**

**Janine Marriott**

When someone dies; their story does not die. Graves and their stones are fantastic resources that can tell us so many things from genealogical information to beliefs and relationships.

The interpretation at Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol is built around the stories of some of the 200,000 people remembered on the site. Tours, talks and signage are just some of the ways that hidden stories are revealed within the landscape of Arnos Vale Cemetery.

Over the last 10 years, Arnos Vale Cemetery has developed as a place for visitors by offering a range of interpretation that both compliments and respects the space whilst revealing the histories and stories within the site. The public engagement programme for adults at the cemetery has 3 main strands; tours, talks and interpretation. The tour programme includes a wide range of subjects from Women's history to War stories and even a tour devoted to causes of death. This presentation will share some of the lessons learnt from developing a wide-ranging tour programme and will explore how challenging and sensitive issues about a burial space as a visitor space are tackled.

Arnos Vale Cemetery is the first Garden Cemetery in the South West and was built in 1839. It is the last resting place of over 200,000 people, a listed landscape, a Site of Conservation Interest (SCI), it has a collection related to the history of the site from its inception and continues to be a working cemetery.

## **'Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more': The Victorian Funeral**

**Janice Norwood and Hayley Bradley**

The Victorian theatre was fascinated by death with numerous popular melodramas presenting scenes featuring emotional death-bed farewells, ghostly reappearances of the deceased or dangerous situations in which characters narrowly avoid fatal injury. Yet the funeral, that most dramatic of life rituals, is strangely absent from stage representation during the nineteenth century. In this conversational presentation, Dr Hayley Bradley and Dr Janice Norwood will discuss the reasons for this and propose that the funeral itself was a form of performance practice where private grief was enacted in a public space according to accepted codes of behaviour. Using contemporary paintings and illustrations as prompts, they will deconstruct elements of the funereal procession, costume and cemetery space, including the employment of the funeral mute, the symbolic presence of wreaths and remembrance tokens, and the role of the audience, interpreting them all as forms of quasi-theatrical expression. The informal talk will draw on the speakers' individual research into the lives and careers of several lesser-known stage performers and writers.

Dr Janice Norwood (University of Hertfordshire) and Dr Hayley Bradley (Sheffield Hallam University) are in the early stages of a new collaborative research project on death. Janice is just completing a book on Victorian touring actresses and has previously published work on a range of topics related to popular theatre and visual culture. Hayley has written on aspects of late nineteenth to early twentieth century popular British theatre including stage machinery, spectacle, collaboration, and adaptation.

## **From Cradle to Early Grave: Death, Burial and Mourning for Infants and Children in Glossopdale, 1890 – 1911**

**Abbie Shelton**

Bereaved working class parents in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were often labelled as indifferent, or even callous; more interested in burial insurance or extravagant rituals than in their children's welfare or memory. To assess the veracity of this, the paper uses evidence from mill villages in Derbyshire to challenge the assumptions that were prevalent nationally in the period 1890-1911. Statistics and commentary from the area's Medical Officer for Health demonstrate that the misuse of burial insurance was not of concern locally and that the high infant and child mortality was due to a range of environmental and social factors. An examination of the records of over 200 infant and child burials from a local undertaker shows that most funeral costs were unavoidable and that many parents did not use burial insurance to pay them, instead relying on the flexibility of the undertaker. Choices made for coffins, furniture, transport and refreshments shows that while thought was put into rituals, they were not treated as opportunities for extravagant display. Evidence from local cemetery and Burial Board minutes suggests that parents did not prioritise the purchase of headstones, indicating financial constraint and a community preference for more private remembrance. In summary, no evidence was found to confirm assumptions about greed or apathy among working-class parents. It is suggested that further work to compare child to adult burials and utilise records from other undertakers and localities would be a valuable way to expand knowledge of the working-class experience of death.

## **Soldered Shut: contagious coffins and pernicious miasma in the 19th century cemetery**

**Heather Scott**

Nineteenth-century cemetery reformer John Claudius Loudon insists that '[a] garden cemetery is the sworn foe to preternatural fear and superstition'. Late-eighteenth-century industrialisation and urbanisation forever changed the face of Britain's cemeteries, as the overcrowded cemeteries of industrial cities were no longer able to meet the demand for hygienic interment: the garden cemetery was born. It offered a solution to the sanitation problems of Britain's swollen cities, and discouraged the prevalence of body-snatching, creating a park-like leisure space. Cemetery reform of the period focussed on hygienic interment of the dead, protection of the living from decomposition, and civic and aesthetic improvement of urban centres. This paper will probe the modes of interment during the rise of the garden cemetery movement, unpacking the significance of the dead as a financial commodity, source of pestilence, and social object.

## **The Excavation of Park Street Burial Ground**

**Stuart Milby**

The excavations being carried out at Park Street by MOLA Headland Infrastructure are providing a fascinating insight into the lives of the people of Birmingham during a period of rapid growth and change for the city. This talk will provide a brief introduction to the history of the cemetery and the area in which it lay as well as covering some of the most recent discoveries made during the excavations.

## **A History of Embalming in the UK**

**Josie Wall**

Nicola Brown, a Coffin Works collections volunteer has been researching the History of Embalming in the UK using trade sources, especially the Funeral Services Journal. This research is presented today by Josie Wall, who will also draw upon her own background of research in 19<sup>th</sup> century funerary practice. The talk will be looking at the origins of Embalming in Britain during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and factors which supported and hindered development of embalming as a service and a

professional skill during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Looking at the insiders' perspective reveals some interesting trends and shows why the uptake of embalming was initially low and why it increased later. This talk also highlights the key turning points, especially the American and Royal influences which transformed views on Embalming between the 1860s and 1960s.

### **The Purity of Shrouds: A Creative-Critical Reflection**

**Laura Joyce**

This paper is a creative-critical reflection on the history of burial shrouds, braided with reflections on the murder of a friend from adolescence.

In August 2018, I began a writing residency based in the Coffin Works museum. In part, I was using the residency to write a long essay about a dead girl, a girl who was killed by her father when we were both 14. When Emma was alive, the site was still a working factory, producing coffin jewellery and shrouds.

My office was in the corner of the shroud room where a photograph from the 1950s of one of the younger workers, Sheila, dressed in a wedding-dress is displayed on a table amongst the shrouds. The story was that she had stolen tiny pieces of lace each evening by smuggling them out in her underwear, and in this way she had enough to make a wedding dress.

Purity is signified by white clothes, and sometimes this purity can feel dangerous, as the sexually sinister father-daughter purity balls that imitate weddings and codify erotic love between fathers and their preteen daughters in some Christian subcultures.

Emma died at fourteen, a dangerous age for girls as they enter sexual maturity and are at risk of violence and death as well as historically preparing for marriage. The shroud-wedding dress in the picture was white lace, and the hybridity of this garment served to show the similarities between various Christian archetypes: death and marriage, burial and shrouding, all blurring into one spotless, virginal gown.

### **What are we going to do with all the dead people?**

**Carrie Weekes**

In this presentation we will examine how our deaths and the funerals we have in the UK today are impacting on the environment, where the choices we make now have come from, and why we dispose of our dead the way we do.

As climate change dominates the headlines, and our population grows, how we commemorate and dispose of the dead will need to change.

As a nation we are increasingly reliant on cremation as the way we dispose of our dead, and as we run out of urban burial spaces- what alternatives can we be looking at now that help us plan for the future?

We will talk about the more sustainable choices people can make today when arranging funerals- greener transport choices, coffins and natural burial.

But this won't be enough.

We will talk about future developments including water cremation, human composting, the reuse of graves and digital memorialisation.

Is the current industry around death ready for the challenge that a changing climate and growing population will bring?

And what conversations do we as a society need to be having to plan for the future?

What can a city like Birmingham be doing now to anticipate the needs of future generations.