



# Time to say GOODBYE

GEORGETTE MCCREADY VISITS MEMORIAL WOODLANDS, A PRIVATE BURIAL GROUND NEAR BRISTOL, TO FIND A PEACEFUL RETREAT AMONG THE TREES WHERE MOURNERS HAVE THE SPACE, TIME AND PRIVACY TO HOLD THE KIND OF FUNERAL THEY WANT

**W**e British are great when it comes to organising stylish, all-embracing weddings, and pretty good too at welcoming new babies into our families. But when it comes to saying goodbye to our mums, dads, partners and friends, we just don't seem to have the same all-powerful cultural traditions. All too often the final send-off can be a half hour slot in the local crematorium chapel followed by an awkward buffet at a hotel, leaving the bereaved feeling they haven't really had the chance to say their goodbyes as they would have liked. In the grief of the moment we often fail to say what we afterwards wished we'd had the space and time to voice aloud.

Christopher Baker understands this. He is one of the country's pioneers in a new kind of funeral. As the founder of the Memorial Woodlands just north of Thornbury, he knows that families need three essential ingredients for the saddest of all life's rites of passage – time, space and privacy. And that is what mourners are given at this 100 acre rural site, where simple stone slabs beneath the trees and a couple of ancient stone buildings provide a tranquil setting for all kinds of funerals.

The Memorial Woodlands only hosts one funeral a day. This means the family can gather in the comfortable sofas and chairs of the converted barn which houses receptions and wakes, and if they need time to compose themselves before the ceremony, or if Uncle Bob has been held up on the motorway, they have the luxury of unhurried time.

The funeral service itself is held in a quietly dignified chapel, which can be adapted to any, or no, faith. The old stone walls and big windows lend it a spiritual air, and if the children need

to let off steam afterwards there are wide open expanses of mown grass for them to run about.

Christopher's vision of creating a wood which will be here for future generations is being realised.

He started the venture after inheriting some farmland from his father, but didn't set out with a vision of what the site could one day become. He said he always intended to create a woodland for future generations to enjoy and 'never intended to go into the undertaking business.' But now, with both his late mother and father interred at Woodlands, Christopher can offer support to bereaved families, backed by a professional team.

He says: "There isn't a right way or a wrong way to hold a funeral. Families come and visit us to plan the day, and we find out how much of it they want to do themselves. Our chapel is multi-faith and people can choose whether to have a minister or someone else conducting proceedings.

“there isn't a right way, or a wrong way to hold a funeral”

"We have seen all kinds of funerals held here, from the traditional to the unconventional. We've had classic cars, a jazz band and salsa dancing and one family even had a bouncy castle because they felt the children had seen enough grief."

He has chosen to grow a variety of trees, from oak, beech and ash to holly and apple trees. Families and friends are encouraged to plant bulbs and wildflowers are allowed to flourish in the grass and in dappled shade beneath the trees.

AN OASIS OF PEACE: the Memorial Woodlands near Thornbury will be a permanent memorial which families can visit any time they like



ANCIENT SETTING: the sensitive adaptation of the old stone buildings have won awards. The chapel lies just a few yards from the reception centre, so mourners don't have far to walk. The secluded courtyard provides complete privacy

A charitable trust has been established to protect the site for perpetuity. Everything has been put in place to stop developers from eyeing up the site. The Memorial Woodlands also has an open gate policy, giving people access every single day of the year, as with a conventional graveyard, so mourners can visit on anniversaries and birthdays. Christopher says he likes to see families picnicking, bringing the newest members of the family to 'grandma's tree'.

There are around 200 funerals here every year. A lot of people choose to use a crematorium which is a few miles away. Close family can accompany the coffin there, while the rest of the guests can wait for them in the comfortable surroundings of the reception rooms at the woodlands.

One of the practical aspects of the Woodlands Memorial site is that mourners only need to walk a few yards from the chapel to the reception rooms. A first floor hall, with rural views,

allows in-house or external caterers to make sure everyone is fed and watered. With good, seasonal food inside them, it is often at this time that people share their happy memories and stories about the departed.

The funeral party can follow a willow coffin drawn on a flower-bedecked horse drawn bier or see their loved one take their final journey in the Austin Princess that carried the coffin of Sir Winston Churchill after his state funeral in 1965.

Just as with the best planned wedding, when guests leave feeling they have been a part of something special, so it should be with a funeral – holding the experience as meaningful in their hearts – and that's where places such as the Memorial Woodlands come into their own. ■

Memorial Woodlands, Earthcott Green, Bristol BS35 3TA is open 365 days a year. Visit: [memorialwoodlands.co.uk](http://memorialwoodlands.co.uk)



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