

square pegs and round holes; the challenges of restoring and developing crematoria built in the '50s and '60s

The editor's visit to Salisbury Crematorium, recorded in the Summer issue of *The Journal*, highlighted the challenges of updating facilities at crematoria built in the mid 20th century. Keen to know more, he asked Martin Street, Director of Rose (formerly Ramsay) Project Management – who oversaw all stages of the work at Salisbury – to elaborate.

In the early nineties I spent hours watching my son playing with blocks – looks of intense concentration would give way to smiles as he negotiated one shape of block through an incredibly tight space then another - the rectangular peg, then the circle and then the cube. Twenty years later he is sun-bathing on foreign shores and I remain here, still negotiating the blocks. My son had the advantage of room to manoeuvre, a luxury in my version. The single most common challenge facing the work that we do is space.



The majority of the facilities in which we work were designed and constructed a generation or more ago and at that time no one had predicted the far reaching changes in legislation that have since come into force.

Fitting in a modern abatement system, or refurbishing a refractory lined flue, or housing a new cremulator (the rectangle, circular and square pegs respectively) in a building the design of which had never anticipated the need for such equipment, is a challenge. Many older facilities contain asbestos which has to be managed and the access required to remove and replace equipment is often not available, without knocking through walls.

There have also been changes in our society. People, and therefore coffins, are becoming larger and heavier leading many crematoria to replace standard size cremators with larger ones; with the subsequent need to similarly enhance the catafalque, committal wall and ancillary equipment such as biers and cold stores – and it's not just the size of the equipment that has increased.

In 1950 there were approximately 4 million vehicles in the UK, by 2000 that number had reached 30 million. Many crematorium carparks simply do not have the capacity to cope with modern levels of car ownership; the result being that mourners are often forced to park in over-spill areas which in turn impacts on the logistical operations of the site, impedes emergency access and in some cases restricts the flow of traffic in nearby streets. This is compounded by the need for most facilities to operate on 45 minute cycles which means that it is not unusual for the parking and access requirements of individual services to overlap. There are also increased demands on internal public areas. Modern building regulations require the provision of better staff and public welfare facilities and enhanced access for wheelchair users.



For a variety of reasons it may not be possible to simply increase the footprint of the building to accommodate these additional requirements. The proximity of trees can be an issue and some crematoriums are bound on all sides by gravestones; others may have Listed status which places restrictions on the changes that can be made so often the challenge is one of achieving 21st century compliance within what is effectively the heritage sector.



It is also vital to remember that while crematoria provide a social function they are also businesses with operational and commercial needs. Any form of construction work carries with it a considerable level of disruption, and one of the great strengths of our team is the ability to deliver improved facilities for both crematorium operators, funeral directors and mourners without significant impact on day to day operations thus allowing the crematorium to continue to provide a valuable public service and maintain revenue during the development phase.

Just as the legislation has evolved and matured so too has modern Facilities Management. Crematoria by their very nature consume large amounts of energy, the price of which has increased significantly in recent years. Position this against the pressure on both private business and the public sector to save money since the downturn and the result is that energy efficiency has become a refurbishment priority for many crematoria.

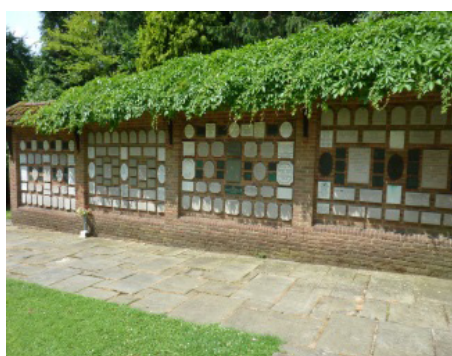
Cremators with improved energy consumption are only part of the solution. Increasingly our clients are specifying the introduction of coffin cold storage to allow for better sequencing in order to optimise energy efficiency. Advances in technology such as heat-recovery equipment, improved insulation and LED lighting also allow for energy savings. While these items may very well add to the initial cost of the build, omitting them in the context of rising energy prices is increasingly seen by many clients as a false economy.



Operational concerns aside, the facilities in which we work are in the public realm, and in the case of local authority crematoria they are refurbished using public money which carries with it a level of expectation. It would be perfectly possible to make a significant investment in the crematorium's infrastructure without there being any discernable improvement in public areas; therefore we always recommend to our clients that part of their budget is set aside for this purpose.

Funeral directors in particular have the ability to directly influence revenue, and comfort and aesthetics are significant factors in their recommendation to their clients. Relatively straightforward improvements such as a fresh coat of paint, a new carpet or refurbishment of specialist joinery such as pews and catafalques can make a big difference to the mourner experience. Those facilities that invest in such upgrades often see increases in their business as a result – people will always choose to pay their respects in the best environment available locally.

The changing cultural demographics of the UK is also a factor. Some mourners, either by faith or by preference, need the facility to witness the coffin being charged and refurbishment projects are the ideal opportunity to re-configure public areas to include a viewing gallery for this purpose.



What of the future? Legislation continues to change and in preparation for 2020, when the UK may require 100% mercury abatement, we are seeing an increase in requests for feasibility studies as private operators and local councils seek to assess their options from a technical and commercial perspective.

Refurbishment isn't about simply upgrading the crematorium and the associated public areas it is also an opportunity to identify and develop additional ancillary services for the bereaved, such as the provision of a columbarium or a wall of remembrance – the by-product of which is increased revenue. We anticipate a number of these feasibility studies will convert into development and refurbishment projects over the next 24-36 months. Square pegs and round holes are all in our day's work.

Martin Street

Editor's note

The 1950s and 60s were the most prolific 'new build' crematoria decades in the UK; 74 in each including Streetly (Walsall) replaced in 1984, Bedford replaced in 1995, Hereford replaced in 2009, Nuneaton replaced in 1995 by Heart of England, Darlington a 1901 replacement, Sandwell Valley (West Bromwich) replaced in 2010, Chanterlands (Hull) a 1901 replacement and Chester replaced in 2013. The most new crematoria opened in one year, either before, during or since, was in 1956 – a total of 16.