

Salisbury crematorium - befitting of the 21st century

Tackling the upgrading of facilities at any crematorium built over fifty years ago – namely, inadequate parking, waiting, office, staff, funeral director accommodation and chapel/ceremony hall capacity – is daunting enough for any local authority without receiving the challenging news, just three weeks before it's planned commencement, that work must be halted.

But this is what befell Salisbury City Council in the late summer of 2012 when, out of the blue, English Heritage granted a Grade II listing to the 1960's building, pictured right. The council were left with no alternative but to go back to the drawing board and re-submit designs and materials that would be acceptable to the crematorium's new-found status. This delayed completion of the impressive £2.7million refurbishment work until earlier this year after which the manager, Neil Lucas kindly invited me to see the transformation.



The main chapel/ceremony hall had been completely altered, with new lighting, public address and Wesley music system, enlarged catafalque, new lectern, refurbished pews and new floor coverings. It has now a warm and comforting ambience. Moreover, it can also be opened up to increase seated mourners by 25% through the innovative use of specially fabricated bi-fold oak doors that open onto an inner lobby.



A superb new waiting room, right, capable of seating 40 people with standing for double this number has been created which will have a wide-screen wall-mounted monitor to relay services when required. There are separate toilet facilities for both incoming and outgoing mourners.



This waiting area opens onto an outer lobby, right which acts as a sound barrier between the main entrance and the chapel to prevent noise disturbance to mourners.

Immediately off the main entrance a much larger office for staff and public has been created incorporating an archive room, kitchen/mess facility and training room.

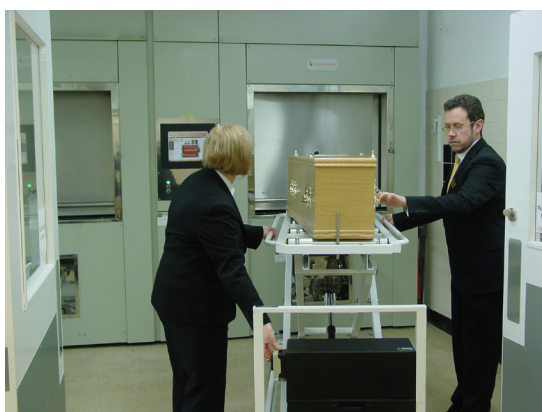
The main reception area has an ash container store for their quick and easy collection by both the public and funeral directors. Leading off this is a room where the public can discuss, in private, their funeral or memorial requirements.



This image from the front of crematorium taken mid construction shows the extension to house the new offices, staff facilities, waiting room, main reception and entrance.



Rear of house, the crematory has been enlarged by 40% in order to accommodate two new wide aperture cremators and associated mercury abatement plant. And level access has been created to the rear service yard. There is also provision for a coffin cold store. Funeral directors have not been overlooked; they now have their own retiring room with toilet and tea-making facilities.



Outside, car parking has been significantly improved with a larger main car park, pictured right during construction, with lighting and spaces for visiting clergy/celebrants and disabled spaces. There is also an enlarged overflow car park.



Neil and his staff however, were faced with another significant challenge. Allied to the English Heritage listing, the gardens of remembrance were put on the Historic Parks and Grounds register.

Designed by Brenda Colvin, an important British landscape architect who co-founded the Institute of Landscape Architects in 1929 and became its president in 1951, the gardens were described at inception as an "influential example of a crematorium landscape". They consisted of a series of grass covered glades which extended from the north-east elevation of the crematorium like 'fingers', defined and enclosed by large clusters of fine specimen trees and shrubs creating secluded, quiet areas on which ashes could be scattered.

Salisbury City Council is planning to bring the grounds back closer to Colvin's design and is in the process of removing all the memorial rose beds, the plants having become a food source for the local deer population, and accompanying plaques. The bereaved will then be offered a variety of other memorial options including 'leaves' on a very attractive Tree of Remembrance – similar to that shown on page 42 of the Summer 2013 Journal.



I couldn't leave the elevated Barrington Road site before taking the short walk via the connecting gate to the adjacent cemetery to pay my respects at the graveside of a former Salisbury crematorium manager, Alan Baker (father of the current Assistant Manager) – whom I had the pleasure to meet on a number of occasions in the 1990s when we were invited to compete in the annual JGS (John Shelton) Urn golf competition.

I am sure Alan would be delighted by the sympathetic adaptations.

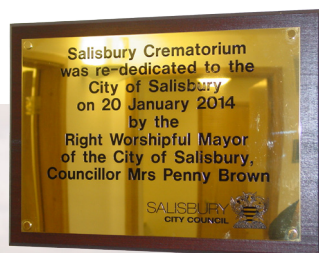
It is worth concluding this article by chronicling Professor Hilary Grainger's description of the building in her excellent reference work 'Death Redesigned - British Crematoria: History, Architecture and Landscape' (2005).

'This arresting design, comprising a closely-knit group of buildings arranged around a central lawn, was achieved by means of a style based on Scandinavian New Humanism, but invested with a certain jauntiness recalling the Festival of Britain. This is particularly apparent in the chimney, with its elegant flèche and the circular room housing the Book of Remembrance, linked to the crematorium by a colonnade. Indigenous materials were selected and deployed with care. The exterior facings were of flint and Portland stone for the chapel and Chapel of Remembrance and the brickwork is Light Cathedral Grey, with pre-cast concrete lintels. The gable wall of the entrance side of the chapel, had an interesting chequer-board patterning.'



'The interior finishes in the chapel are of Portland stone, random for the altar wall and polished for the floor. The left side wall of the chapel was finished in a light brick above which were interesting rectangular white panels framed by light wood sections. There was natural oak panelling and Mountsorrel granite, exposed aggregate was used for the structural columns. In the narthex glass mosaics in the ceiling added interest and the altar table was slate with polished brass cross and edging. The window to the wall to the right looks out onto a water garden; the white panels were repeated on this side, over the window. Mourners leave the chapel passing along a well-lit corridor, with columns to the left, leading to the colonnade where flowers are displayed.'

I should like to thank Hilary for permission to reproduce the above and Martin Street from Ramsay Project Management – who oversaw all stages of the work including the initial feasibility study through the procurement of the cremators and abatement equipment to appointing the design and build contractor (Midas Construction) – for his help in compiling this article. Ramsay PM are currently involved in improvements to three other 1950/60s crematoria, Clydebank, Lewisham and Slough. The particular challenges of restoring and redeveloping buildings of this period will be explored in the next issue of *TJ*.



Finally, my thanks to Neil Lucas, Cemetery and Crematorium Manager pictured centre, Assistant Manager Alan Baker and Crematorium Officer Hilary Macaulay for guiding me round Salisbury City Council's 'fit for purpose' 21st century facility for the bereaved.

Bob Coates



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