



Totnes News



Friday
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(January to December 2008)

Changing funeral farewells

Funeral boss supports court effort to change the way we can say farewell

A DARTINGTON funeral boss is supporting a Court of Appeal battle to change the British way of death and recreate a tradition dating back to Stonehenge.

by RICHARD DAVIES

Rupert Callender, director of the Green Funeral Company, hopes the court will permit open-air funeral pyres, much demanded by the public – and wants his own death to be marked that way.

'It is my preferred choice. I would love my funeral to be like that,' said Mr Callender, who runs the company with his wife Claire.

He revealed that he regularly gets requests from families who want to say farewell to their loved ones by burning their bodies on a pyre, rather than at a crematorium.

At the moment it is against the law, but on Monday a case was brought in the Court of Appeal by Newcastle healer Davender Kumar Ghai, who is seeking to overturn the Cremations Act of 1902.

Mr Callender, who is a trustee of the Natural Death Centre,

said after the hearing that the court had reserved judgement, but Mr Ghai's legal team were 'hopeful'.

The centre had been running a helpline for 18 years and an outdoor funeral was 'a pretty regular request', Mr Callender said.

'When people find out what I do, the most popular response is "oh, I want a Viking funeral," and I think they mean it. Two families have genuinely requested this of me.'

He went on: 'We fully support the Anglo-Asian Society's attempts to re-legalise outdoor funeral pyres which we believe would bring significant rewards, environmentally, socially and spiritually.'

'It is a mistake to see this legal challenge as coming from a minority group, seeking a religious right that is alien to us, it is actually part of a wider demand for social change and as the recent excavations at Stonehenge are revealing, a part of our own indigenous cultural heritage.'

Mr Callender said the traditional British funeral of the past 30 years has become unfulfilling. 'Unsure of its purpose or meaning, styled with faux Victoriana, and filled with increasingly comfortless platitudes, it has created an emotional distance that has left people feeling an audience instead of a congregation.'

'More and more people in this country are reclaiming the experience from professionals, choosing to die at home or participating in the practicalities of a funeral such as carrying the coffin, filling in the grave, creating and delivering the ceremony themselves.'

'This is not a secular response, but a social one, and the message is powerful and clear, what we had will not do any more.'

He added: 'The decline in the influence of the religious institutions aside, much of this dissatisfaction can be traced to the industrially grim style of our crematoriums, yet an astonishing 72 per cent of us still end up in one.'

'The service they offer is often perfunctory, the design despondent and bland, and the reduction of a person's life to 20 minutes climaxing with a ritual farewell that has all the gravitas of The Generation Game soundtracked by piped music, is a collective shame on us all.'

'Whatever your beliefs about an afterlife, these places are crossing points, symbolic thresholds, and deserve to be created and managed with awe.'

'They are, or should be, places where we confront the mystery of death, instead of which we have a poor, unconvincing substitute for a genuine ritual space.'

The Philadelphia artist, 31, has been living in Totnes for five months and is studying for a Masters at Dartington College of Arts.

Joanna O'Donovan, curator of the exhibition, said: 'The works take a fresh look at Totnes through four views of the town. A number of the sites are very symbolic in their contribution to Totnes as a town, but are the types of places that as locals we can easily take for granted or not notice anymore as we walk past.'

'Noel's work investigates how changes within industries that have formed the basis of our community – like arable and dairy farming – will affect the vision of the town in the future. He looks at the symbolic qualities that places hold for people and how they are affected by change.'

Totnes prides itself on being a community in touch with its natural environment and conscious of its resources, but this show reflects on the environment we have created and how changes to how we work and live might affect the structure of our town.'

'Noel is a very talented artist and the show is set to be an exciting, thought-provoking event.'

Alongside the four paintings, there is photography of his work in progress shedding light on how he has crafted the paintings over the past 12 weeks.

Noel, who is an award-winning painter in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, where his work has been widely exhibited, said: 'I am very interested in how art can contribute to a community's perceptions, discussions and decisions about the environment in which they live.'

'As a painter, I try to bring a specific visibility to places that may be forgotten or overlooked. Connection to place can lead to care and I hope this care can heal our problematic relationship with our environment.'

The show runs from Friday, January 22 to Sunday, January 24 and is open each day from 11am to 8pm, at Studio 8, Lower Close, Dartington College of Arts.



Joanna O'Donovan and artist, Noel Hefele with his painting of the East Gate in Totnes

Contemporary twist on town icons

AN exhibition by an award-winning American painter, that explores a new and challenging view of Totnes, opened at Dartington College of Arts yesterday.

Noel Hefele's 'The landscape thinks itself in us' will feature four vibrant and colourful works of the town, including a contemporary twist on the iconic East Gate and a study of the now disused Dairy Crest factory.

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Candidate deadline

CANDIDATES who want to stand for the seat on Totnes Town Council left vacant by the death of Cllr Ian Slatter have until noon today to get their nomination papers in to South Hams Council.

If more than one candidate comes forward a by-election will be held on February 18, said town clerk David Edwards.

Cllr Slatter, a former fireman, was the father of the town council when he collapsed and died on Remembrance Sunday.

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- **Don't do it yourself... Dial an Expert** pages 12/13
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