

Funerals are an ever-changing service

Beckfords Funeral Services is still adapting after 150 years



Zac Hannis, MD of Beckfords Funeral Services. The company is marking 150 years of trading.

by Erin Vaudin

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FUNERAL services are changing rapidly today, according to a man running a local funeral business with roots going back 150 years.

Beckfords Funeral Services was founded in 1875, and is still seeing changes in the industry, said managing director and shareholder Zac Hannis.

'Fifty years ago, you realistically had a Church of England service, a Methodist service, Catholic service, and so on,' he said.

'Nowadays, people still opt for traditional faith-based services but celebration of life services are also becoming increasingly popular. It's all about the individual. We tailor our funeral services to basically whatever needs or wants somebody has.'

This move away from traditional, faith-based ceremonies has been accompanied by a significant shift from burial to cremation.

Mr Hannis noted that cremations now account for about two-thirds of the funerals the company conducts.

He suggested that this was due both to affordability and modern family dynamics.

'Being buried can be really expensive,' he said, while cremation is a more cost-effective alternative.

With families often living away from the island, the logistical challenges of visiting a grave are also factored into the decision.

This has led to a greater demand for new ways to remember loved ones, from

scattering ashes at sea to turning them into jewellery.

For those in the profession, adapting to these changes can be challenging. Mr Hannis said that while funeral directors must be professional, they are also human.

'There are many, many times where I've stood at the back of a chapel and had a tear in my eye,' he said. He added that a difficulty was the confidential nature of the job, which can make it hard to talk about the emotional toll.

'It's Guernsey, it's not hard to kind of line things up, so you do have to be cautious of that.'

The evolving needs of families have also led Beckfords to embrace technology.

Mr Hannis has launched a range of digital services to make the funeral process more accessible.

This includes the expression of wishes free online service, which allows individuals to outline their funeral preferences without committing to a formal plan.

Mr Hannis explained that the service takes the pressure off families by allowing users to log in at their convenience to record specific wishes, from requesting a direct cremation to including a special location in the funeral procession.

Beckfords has also launched Lives Remembered, a free local obituary platform open to anyone, regardless of whether they are Beckfords clients.

Additionally, a new memorial planning system allows families to preview how chosen text will appear on a headstone or plaque in real time.

Looking to the future, Mr Hannis be-

(Picture by Peter Frankland, 34383437)

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Managing director Zac Hannis

lieves the industry will continue to evolve, particularly through a growing need to cater to a wider range of cultures and beliefs.

As Guernsey's community becomes more diverse, he anticipates a rise in demand for services that respect different traditions, such as Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim funeral rites.

'We've always accommodated any religious service,' Mr Hannis said.

'But I think the numbers now will obviously increase as times go on.'

He believes it will require funeral directors to be even more engaged with the families they serve, understanding specific cultural practices.

'But the future is an opportunity to continue serving the community with compassion and care,' he said.

About Beckfords

Beckfords Funeral Services is the longest-established funeral business in Guernsey. Founded in 1875 by Jerseyman John McMahon, it was later purchased by Frederick J Beckford, and after his death, the business passed to James W Way.

After he died, his wife Bertha ran the business, becoming the island's first female funeral director, before she retired. At that point Clem Duquemin, pictured, merged his company with Beckfords. Mr Duquemin had a lifetime's experience in the sector, having trained initially in West Yorkshire, where he was evacuated to. When he returned to the island he combined funerals with running a carpentry business and serving as pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church for 36 years. He retired in 2001 but remained involved with Beckfords until his death last year. He passed on his valuable knowledge to his son Phil, daughter Jane and daughter-in-law Jackie who continue the business today, which is run by managing director and shareholder Zac Hannis.



The first motorised hearse



Beckfords owned Guernsey's first motorised hearse, a Buick nicknamed Ursula, which arrived in the island on 8 May 1928.

The hearse would do four miles an hour in top gear, and continued to operate through the Occupation until 1943 when owners Mr and Mrs Way were deported to a German internment camp. It survived the war and made its last journey to the Foulton in 1957.

The company continued to have a horse-drawn hearse as an option until February 1943.

Prosperity shipwreck

In January 1974, the cargo vessel Prosperity ran aground, and Beckfords undertook the solemn duty of arranging the Muslim burial for the recovered crew, reflecting the commitment to meeting the needs of all faiths and beliefs.

Family Connection

Zac Hannis recently discovered that his great-great-grandfather's funeral was arranged by Beckfords. William Alfred Hannis was buried in Candie Cemetery on 15 July 1921, with full military honours.

The cortege included a coffin on a gun carriage drawn by Guernsey's two war horses, accompanied by six pallbearers from the Royal Irish Regiment under the command of a sergeant. Captain E Cowley MBE oversaw the military arrangements and attended as a representative of the War Pensions Committee.

Mr Hannis served in the Yorkshire Regiment. He was too old to be accepted for the South African War, but then emigrated to Canada, where he re-enlisted in the Canadian Infantry at the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

He served for 20 months in the front-line trenches in France before being badly gassed, an injury that ultimately caused his death.

Demobilised in England in 1920, he was too ill to return to Canada, and came to Guernsey, where he died the following year.



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