

Funeral Records

The role and responsibility of the funeral director in our society is one that is not always clearly understood. Often religious beliefs influenced how the funeral was to be conducted. A number of duties had to be performed which included ascertaining the family's wishes, providing advice to ensure an appropriate funeral service, inserting funeral notices in the press, collating all official forms and filing death registrations.

Funeral records in Australia and New Zealand until recently have been an unchartered frontier for genealogists and historians. Some of these records from defunct businesses have ended up in genealogical libraries, such as the Society of Australian Genealogists or local history collections. Genealogical and local history societies have acquired and indexed records of this nature. One significant project recently completed was the indexing of the original funeral registers for Charles Kinsela Funeral's Sydney considering many of the registers were damaged when rescued by the Society of Australian Genealogists some years ago.

The records of defunct undertaker or funeral directors and monumental masonry businesses often have useful information about the deceased and family along with details about the funeral and monument. Their records can fill in information gaps caused by damaged tombstones, or absences of other primary documentation. While many of these are private records access concerning private records should be possible in most cases by making tactful inquiries to firms still operating in the district in which you are interested.

Up until about 20 years ago, most funeral directors were well established, small-to-medium -sized, family owned businesses, passed from one generation to generation. But in the 1990's, major companies started buying Australian and New Zealand funeral homes and many of the records were lost.

In recent years, significant advances have been made in the availability, computerisation and indexing of cemetery and council records. It is now easier to trace your ancestors in Australia and New Zealand.

Why Funeral Records Are Important

Funeral records are especially useful when seeking addition evidence of deaths and burials in Australia and New Zealand. The records kept by the funeral director are sometimes the only surviving evidence of a person's existence.

The value of funeral records is highlighted by the examples below

- It was the early carpenters or cabinet-makers in the colony who looked after burying the dead, due to their skill of being able to produce a coffin. In some instances firms were established with people coming from family backgrounds or experience with furnishing undertakers in Britain. A typical funeral director was essentially the head of a small family business. Due to the secrecy surrounding the profession in the early years usually the funeral home would stay in the one family through successive generations, borne out by today's funeral directors. Some funeral directors expanded their business to include monumental work as well. Their premises were usually quite basic, consisting principally of a workshop and office.
- If the business remained in the family, barring natural disasters the ledgers of the business also survived. However, the funeral directors employed by the firm in many instances would not remain with that company. When the employee retired or moved on to further employment their personal ledgers containing their work in many instances went with them.
- The funeral director kept deeds to graves at the cemetery in the early years. Often the one firm would bury several members of the same family, some in one cemetery, others in various cemeteries. It is possible, where deed books have survived to trace back several generations of one family, if the name of the firm where the records are housed today is known.
- In many towns there was not always a clergyman near by to give the deceased a Christian burial. However most towns had a roadside wheelwright who also acted as the town's undertaker. Not only would he bury the deceased but also would be responsible for all the necessary arrangements concerning the affairs of that person. In many areas the local cemetery was adjacent to the church. However in smaller communities the minister only visited the region once a month, so the only witness recorded for many burials was the funeral director.

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Funeral Ledgers

The early funeral ledgers contain the basic information including the age and identity of the deceased, the name and address of the client arranging the funeral, the cemetery, the type of coffin used, the number and types of vehicles used, and the cost of the funeral itself along with the various additional expenses that appeared on the clients account. Standard expenses were those paid to the cemeteries for new graves or the opening of old ones, payments for newspaper notices, payments to clergymen, and if necessary mourners.

In the very early days when a person died the local parish priest would visit the residence of the deceased to make arrangements for burial. The church burial register records show only the name, age and place of residence of the deceased.

The funeral director's interview needed to obtain a lot more information. Often the family member or informant supplying the information is relying on vague memories rather than fact. In many cases they honestly believe they are stating the truth. Sometimes, the person is emotionally disturbed thus may inadvertently supply incorrect information. There are known cases of when the listed informant is a family member, deliberately supplying the wrong information to portray the deceased person in a more prestigious light.

The following is a good example of what can happen:

A funeral director arrived at the home to make arrangements for the funeral .The relative being interviewed was still extremely upset, so her grand niece stepped in to make the arrangements. She was questioned her concerning the deceased parents, and advised that they were William Sixsmith-King and Ada Sixsmith-King nee Sexton. A thorough search through various surname books failed to find the name Sixsmith-King so it was obvious that the information supplied was not correct. A sexton is the name of an occupation. This highlights where errors can occur and that the grand niece should have provided the funeral director only with the facts she knew about, and not what information she considered to be correct. This resulted in the death certificate being produced with the wrong parents of the deceased, thus making the document unreliable and far less useful as a genealogical source.

Some death registrations are lacking in particulars, simply because the information was not made available to the funeral director, so was never recorded. The death certificate in these cases then will record only name, age, place of death, place of burial and cause of death.

When there were doubts concerning a deceased's death, often a report about the death would appear in a newspaper, but frequently there was the need for an inquiry or inquest. On the death registration it will state under cause of death "subject to a coroners inquest". These are a separate set of records not kept by the funeral director.

Another common problem is the spelling of the SURNAME, or less occasionally the Christian or given names. The informant at the interview may have been illiterate, so to spell the name the undertaker may have to rely on how the name is pronounced. A good example is outlined below.

The deceased was Asa PEARSE. G.H.PERRIN, the local undertaker in Deniliquin, New South Wales, recorded the name correctly, from which I was able to verify by searching the funeral director's diaries. However, a search of the death registrations in New South Wales revealed the name is recorded as ADA PEARSE on the index. It is interesting, that three years prior, the same undertaker buried Ellen Matthewson. On her death certificate her maiden surname is recorded as MEANDER instead of NEANDER.

The following are common examples of information that is often required by the funeral director in order to compile a death certificate.

Funeral Order Form or Funeral Sheet

These documents are very detailed, if the information was known at the time of death and are known to show name of the office. Name of the deceased, date of death, religion, cemetery, deed of grave, grave number, depth of grave, date of the last burial, name for the deed, day of the funeral, time of the funeral, funeral time at the cemetery, name of the minister, advertisements, name and address of the doctor, location of the body, the removal of the body, and where it is to be taken, witness to the burial, type of hearse, type of coffin, cost of the funeral, clergy and cemetery fees.

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Early Church Burials

Details of burials were sent to the deputy registrar for completion in the death registers. Unfortunately, in a lot of cases this was never done the only information provided on these documents is the name of the deceased, date of death and place of death.

Funeral Ledgers 1880's

These ledgers usually show the date of the account, name of the person the account is being sent to, name of the deceased, date of death, date of burial, type of coffin and cloth being used, type of coach or hearse being used and the cost of the funeral.

Funeral Directors - Registration of Death Form

By the 1920's the information retained by the undertaker kept in the ledgers had increased to include the following details: date of death, place of death, residence, full name, occupation, pension details, sex, age, medical attendant, fathers name and occupation, mothers name, maiden name, country of birth, number of years in the colony and or states, name to whom married, place of marriage, age at the time of marriage, and the number of issue.

Notification of Death

Family name, Christian or given names, date of death, date of birth, place of death (if death occurred in a hospital, the name of that place), sex, age at death, period of residence in Australia, place of birth (includes town, state and country), usual residence including postcode, occupation, marital status, place of marriage, age at date of marriage, name of spouse (include family name at date of marriage), up to four marriages can be recorded on the form, children (given names in the order of birth along with their ages if living, if deceased stated as such), parents including fathers name and occupation, mothers name, maiden name and occupation, declaration of informant to include full name, address, signature, relationship to the deceased, telephone number, signature of witness and the date.

Certificate of Burial, or Delivery for Cremation

Deceased - family name, Christian or given names. Certifying Medical Practitioner - full name, address, or the Coroners name. Next of kin or executor, full name, address, relationship to the deceased. Funeral Director - name of the undertaker, name of the firm, address, signature. Witness to burial or cremation - name of minister, religion, signature, if minister is not present, two independent witnesses must sign the certificate. Other information - the date of the event, whether burial or cremation, the name of place of burial or cremation, if body transported overseas the details of the carrier and destination

Official or Certified Death Certificate

When and where died, family surname, Christian or given names, occupation, age and sex, causes of death, duration of last illness, name of the qualified medical practitioner who certified death, date when the medical practitioner last saw the deceased, family name along with Christian or given names for the father, maiden name of the mother if known, fathers occupation, signature, description and residence of the informant, date of burial, the name of the cemetery, undertaker who certified, name and religion of the minister or names of the witnesses at the burial, where born and how long in the Australian States or New Zealand including where resident, in some instances only the last marriage is recorded, and if there were children their names and ages in order, if a child was deceased then this to be recorded alongside their name. (In the case of New Zealand only the ages of the children are recorded)

In many instances, if there was more than one marriage, and there were children from all these marriages, some of the children are not going to be found on the death registration, probably because the informant may not even have known of their existence.

The official death certificate does not always contain all the information submitted to the registrar. Details are known be missing. Date of birth is not found on early death certificates. If there is more than one marriage, and the official document is typed, sometimes not all the other marriage information is recorded. Other missing details include children from other marriages, the relationship of the informant to the deceased, the person ordering the funeral and their relationship to the deceased, and if a pensioner, that information.

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Children's Funerals

Appear in the ledgers only as an account with minimal information recorded as follows: date of the account, name of the child, age of the child, type of coffin used, type of hearse used, name of the cemetery, cemetery fees, advertisement costs and clergy fees.

Neglected Children

Appear in the ledgers usually as an account. The information recorded shows the name of the government official and department, name of the child, age of the child, type of coffin used, and the cost of the funeral.

Funeral Ledger & Burial Register Indexes

Some indexes to burial registers have been published in consolidated formats such as the vital records of the *Australasian Genealogical Computer Index* (AGCI).

The Australian Funeral Directors Association

The Australian Funeral Directors Association (AFDA) was established in 1935 and the peak body of the Australian funeral industry. It's members conduct two out of three funerals in Australia each year.

National Funeral Directors Association of Australia (NFDA)

The National Funeral Directors Association of Australia is an association that was formed in 1995 to promote high standards and quality of service. To qualify to become a member, firms must be 100% Australian owned and must meet strict guidelines.

Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand Inc (FDANZ)

The New Zealand Funeral Federation of Funeral Directors Inc (FDANZ) was established in 1937 and operated until 1970 when the members formed the Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand Inc. This organization is the peak body of the New Zealand funeral industry.

New Zealand Independent Funeral Homes Ltd (NZIFH)

The New Zealand Independent Funeral Homes (NZIFH) is an association that was formed in 2004 to promote high standards and integrity of service. To qualify to be a member the funeral home has to be invited to join and must meet strict guidelines one is which that they must be New Zealand owned.