



The Lost Generation:

The problem of Scattering Ashes in the modern era

Abstract

Scattering ashes is the new normal, most families will choose to memorialise in this way but what is the scale of the issue and what are the consequences?

Richard Martin
richard@scattering-ashes.co.uk



Summary

- 76% of families will remove ashes from the crematoria.
- 74% of the ashes left at the crematoria will be scattered, with 22% being interred and 4% in a columbarium.
- Ashes ceremonies at the crematoria are attended by friends and family 46% of the time.
- More than 6m people's ashes have been informally scattered since 1970.
- Almost all have gone unrecorded as there is no formal system for this.
- This figure is likely to increase to 10m by 2030.

Executive summary

Since records began, we have known the final resting place of every person. Over the last half a century this has changed, now we know about only a fraction of where people are laid to rest. The practice of scattering a person's ashes has increased year on year since the late sixties and now it is the most common choice, but as it is informal no records exist.

Our research shows that three-quarters of all those cremated will have their ashes removed from the crematorium, of the ashes that remain there 74% will be scattered in the gardens of remembrance and 22% will be interred within a columbarium making up about 4% of the total. For ash ceremonies carried out at the crematorium, 46% are attended by friend and family.

Considering the number of scatterings carried out and the timeframe since this cultural phenomenon began, our assessment shows around 6.45 million people will have scattered ashes with the final resting place going unrecorded and as this method is now the most common choice this total could rise to 10 million by 2030 - literally a **Lost Generation**.

Introduction

Cremation has been a funeral option in the UK since the late nineteenth century. At the start it was only for the few, as the cultural norm was for people to be buried. Over the course of the twentieth century society's preferred method of funeral shifted, with 1967 being the turning point when cremation overtook burial, since 2007 three quarters of us, or more, have choose cremation.

When the first tranche of crematoria were built post WWII, they were almost all owned and operated by local authorities. This meant there was a degree of public oversight. Organisations such as Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM) and The Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (FBCA) have acted to advise and standardise procedures to maintain high standards and provide customer confidence.

Crematoria broadly operated in the same way as the church, providing a venue for the funeral. One of the main differences, apart from the cremation itself, was that they tended be more non-denominational to provide a service for other religions, such as Hindus. Moreover, until recently most people held the funeral at the church, then a smaller family group would go on to the crematoria. This too is changing with the

crematoria acting as the principal location, the rise of direct cremation and ceremonies being carried out in locations such as hotels and other public spaces.

Crematoria would also be the location where people scattered the ashes. The crematoria would document this and keep a public register of all those scattered or interred on the premises. This system of recording works reasonably well and those wishing to trace a relative needing only to consult the register to determine a person's final resting place.

Over time the choice of final resting place has changed. In the 1960s the number of people who removed ashes from the crematoria was small. This, combined with those who chose to bury the ashes in a formal setting (e.g. churchyard), would account for the majority of people's last resting places. Now, this is not the case.

Note: Core figures for this paper were taken from the statistics survey in 2019 and which was pre-pandemic. However we don't expect a change in overall trends.

Section 1: What is the situation

The issue

The rise of the practice known as scattering ashes has enabled those with no religious bindings or a less traditional outlook a less restricted way to memorialise. This, combined with the UK having a relaxed approach to the scattering of ashes on private land, has led to a cultural shift.

A study from Sheffield University in the early 2000s entitled “[Where have all the ashes gone¹](#)” was one of the first to investigate this phenomenon. The study concluded that people who were choosing the final resting place for the ashes were trying to create their own *environment of memory*: a place where they could remember the person in their own way.

This led to locations predominantly being unregulated locations such as beaches, rivers, gardens or hilltops. The outcome being that the final location of people’s cremated remains went unrecorded, a situation that had never existed before.

The Legal Conundrum

Ashes, death and public records are confusing legally. If you are cremated there will be a certificate associated with that and that is the last document that an individual ‘receives’ (unless that person goes on to be buried). Then if you choose a crematoria, a churchyard or cemetery as your final resting place your location will be placed on a public register. You will also be recorded (theoretically) if you inter outside of one of these locations because if you choose this route you will need to apply for permission from the local authority (although this rarely happens in practice).

However, this does not apply when you choose to scatter. The law regarding the scattering of ashes is a little vague because there isn’t anything explicit in law to guide and dictate. When ashes are ‘whole’ they are considered to be the same as the body. However, it appears that when the remains are dispersed then the body ceases to exist as a legal entity. So, the fact that it is not regulated means there is no legal necessity to record it.

The result

Since even before the 1836 Act for the Registering of Births, Deaths, and Marriages in England a person’s last resting place has been documented. Families, historians and genealogists have been able to pinpoint the location, but this is no longer always happening. If any record is made of the location it is held by the family.

However, just because a situation exists does not necessarily mean it is a problem, we need to consider the scale to determine whether the issue is worthy of attention.

Section 2: Ashes at the Crematoria

Historic information regarding ashes is very limited, although we have a few data points the majority of information is circumstantial and anecdotal. Understanding the current situation will illustrate how it is at present and help to cast a light forward and backwards. In order to do this, the crematoria around the UK were surveyed regarding current practise.

Crematoria survey

With the help and support of the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (FBCA) and Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (ICCM), we asked the following questions:

-
1. What percentage of ashes remain at the crematorium?
 2. What happens to the ashes that remain?
 - Percentage of ashes Scattered
 - Percentage of ashes Interred
 - Percentage of ashes placed in a Columbarium
 - Other
 3. If you used the 'other' category what does this include?
 4. What percentage of scatterings are attended?
 5. Which county are you located?

The survey was aimed at getting a broad understanding of what is ongoing in the UK and to see if there are any regional variations.

Over a period of 3 months (in 2019) we got a total of 72 responses which were overwhelmingly from local authority-controlled crematoria. This is about a third of the total number of crematoria in the country and whilst the regional data is weak in some areas it does provide some good indicators.

1. What percentage of ashes remain at the crematorium?

The average percentage of ashes that were left at the crematorium, across the UK was 24%.

There was a significant variation between crematoria with the lowest at 4% and the highest at 70%, although all but four of the sites were below 50%. There were three outliers that were 70%, these were in the north of England and Scotland, the regional breakdown tends to show a mean that was fairly consistent with the national average.

2. What happens to the ashes that remain?

- Percentage of ashes Scattered
- Percentage of ashes Interred
- Percentage of ashes placed in a Columbarium
- Other

Of the ashes that remain the most common option was scattering with almost threequarters of ashes being scattered, 22% being interred, and columbarium as an option was 4%

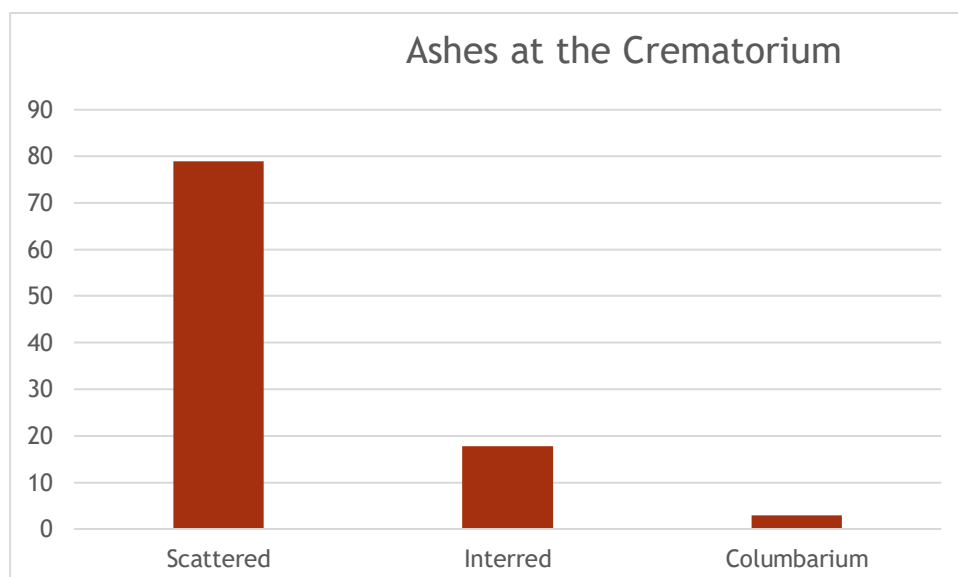
There is some regional variation here although we need to be careful not to draw too much from Southwest England, Wales and Scotland due to the low survey return rate. That said it appears that the practise of scattering appears to be most common in the south east with slightly over 91% opting for this, dropping to around 70% in the midlands and the north, and reducing further to around 50% in south west England. Wales and Scotland were the lowest at 43%, the explanation for this could be access to more space, less densely populated areas and urban cultural practises.

Looking at the figures for interment the headline was 22% of families choosing this option. However, this hides a large variation which varied from 0 to 100%, although four crematoria appeared to offer interment only. The clustering of results that we see in the last answer was not repeated here with results spaced across a broad spectrum. Regional variations appear to show that interment is slightly more popular in the midlands and the north when compared to the rest of the country.

The final choice was columbarium which was a minor player at 4%, almost half said that the percentage was zero although interestingly there were a handful where it made up a significant proportion with the highest being 34%, although this was an outlier. In Wales the practise was more widespread, although it should be reiterated that this may be due to the lack of number reporting.

Analysis of the 'Other' revealed that there is a percentage of ashes being held expressly on the wishes of family which was in temporary storage or that had not been given express wishes so were awaiting collection. Due to the transitory nature of this option it has not impacted final disposal options.

Looking at the three options as a whole it can be seen that the results are fairly consistent across the country, however these results were almost exclusively publicly owned crematoria and one might expect that private crematoria would promote more on-site options in order to maximise revenue. Another point worth raising is that all respondents were given equal weight rather than by actual volume i.e. a crematoria doing 50 cremations a week has been counted the same as one doing 20. In future studies it would be interesting to dig deeper in the actual amount of cremations to see if that had an impact on the findings.



What percentage of scatterings are attended?

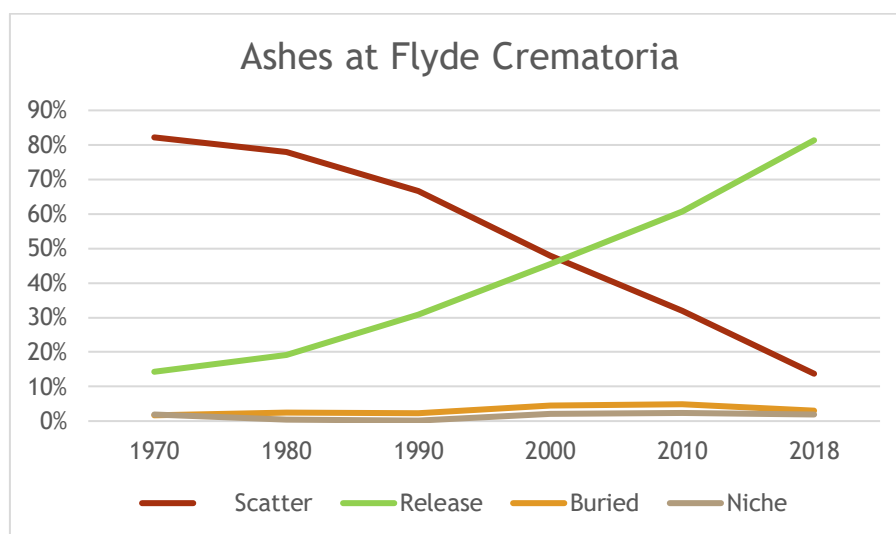
No previous work appears to have been carried out on whether: ash ceremonies are attended; *whether there is variation; what the variation might be*; and does this alter between different regions. It would also be useful to see if there is a variation between attendance of a scattering and an interment.

The average attendance across the country was 43% with a huge range from 0 to 80% for ceremonies attended. There was not much regional variation, although Scotland appeared to be lower than the rest, but again this is a small sample size so too much inference should not be drawn without further investigation. There is no easily identifiable reason why this might be. It may be due to local cultural practices and/or the engagement of the families by crematoria and funeral directors.

Historic Ashes Data

Historic data on ashes practise is almost non-existent. However, as a result of the survey we were fortunate to receive historic data from Fylde Crematoria in Lancashire. The results can be seen in the graph below. Interestingly the graph shows that the trend mirrors other available evidence. It clearly shows a marked increase in the number of families removing ashes from the crematoria and consequently a marked decrease in scattering at the garden of remembrance over the time period in question.

It is also noteworthy that interment and the use of columbarium has remained fairly small and reasonably constant.



© Flyde County Council

Section 3: Calculating the amount of ashes scattered

The next stage of the process is to consider the scale of the issue, what factors should be taken into account and how these may impact the final result.

The historic data on cremations combined with our survey data give a reasonably good picture of what is happening at present. Trying to piece the whole picture together is obviously open to scrutiny and challenge, we are trying to calculate an unknown through incomplete data sets. As a result, a number of assumptions have been made and these have been highlighted and the rationale given.

Before we go through how the estimate was calculated, we will explain why 1970 was selected as the base year:

- before this date it appears that removals were small and as such, little difference to the headline figure would occur if this data was calculated.
- Scattering ashes as the cultural practice that we see today does not appear to have been mentioned in text much before this.
- It represents a convenient 50year time period

In this section we will set out how the estimate was calculated:

1. The number of people cremated since 1970.

Using the National [Cremation Society of Great Britain²](#) figures the number of people cremated between 1970 and 2021 is over **20 million**.

2. The number of people who removed ashes from the crematoria since 1970.

As previously mentioned the study released by Sheffield University entitled [Where have all the ashes gone¹](#) states that the number of people who removed ashes from the crematorium in 1970 was around 12%.

Over the decades very few data points have been established, the above report refers to the figure in 2006 being just under 60% removing the ashes. Which coincides with the data from Fylde Crematorium.

Our own research shows that the current situation to be that 75% of ashes are removed.

To determine the answer, we have assumed a linear scale between the data points, instead of 'S' shaped curve. Whilst the s shaped curve tends to be more likely, we do not have the evidence to support that case.

Therefore, the figure that removed ashes from the crematoria is estimated to be **8.6 million**.

3. The number of people who remove the ashes for formal burial.

In 1970, if we believe that scattering was a rare occurrence, then we may assume that the other destination for the ashes was formal burial, whether at a church or local authority

cemetery. Therefore, the entirety of the 12% that were removed have been assigned to this option. This practice has continued, we estimate a slight decline in line with church attendance and the increase in secularisation. With this assumption along with conversations with clergy⁶ we have adjusted the figure so that all removals (12%) were for final burial in 1970 tapering down to 9% now.

If we use these figures, then we can put forward an argument that 9 million sets of ashes were removed and 2 million sets went on to be formally buried elsewhere.

It is worth noting that as the death rate has been slightly increasing and the requests for formal burial potentially slightly decreasing, the overall demand has stayed constant and over the past fifty years with around 40k people per annum using this as an option.

4. What adjustment needs to be made for ashes that are imported and exported?

This has been assumed to be zero, to balance with amount of people importing compared with exporting. There is some anecdotal evidence that the figure needs to be slightly higher on the side of exporting due to a cultural desire for the certain members of the Hindu community to return the ashes to India. Hindu deaths account for ten thousand per annum and if we assume that a third of families make the journey to India then this would likely account for around 3,000 every year, making only a modest difference to the overall figure.

5. How many are held in semi-permanent storage at funeral directors?

There are a lot of ashes held on a semi-permanent basis at funeral director's premises. There was a [press release⁴](#) from the National Association of Funeral Directors in 2016 that estimated the figure ashes held by their members at 250,000. If we work backwards and assume that there was a smaller amount in 1970 (we have assumed 20,000 up to that point) then we can calculate an estimated increase in the region of 5,000 per year (again using a linear scale). Therefore, for the purposes of this report, we have used a figure of 280,000 sets of ashes being held at funeral directors.

6. What adjustment needs to be made for ashes that are kept at home?

It is difficult to estimate this figure, also to some extent it is transitory as ashes kept at home tend to be held by the spouse until they die, they are then passed onto any children or relatives who may decide to scatter or inter them without recording this action. Whilst people will hold onto the ashes of a parent, they are unlikely to hold onto the ashes of grandparents. So, within the calculation we have chosen a 5% storage rate with a lag of 10 years. This assumption is based on a small survey carried out in 2012 by Scattering Ashes*[Unpublished] on ashes disposal options and the difference between male and female life expectancy. *This figure is open to scrutiny and we would welcome more research.*

7. The total number of ashes scattered

Therefore, bearing in mind previous caveats and assumptions, we have calculated the number of ash scatterings from 1970 to now to be circa 6.45 million

The future

This cultural practise seems to show no sign of abating, if we look at the curve for the apportion by crematoria there are good grounds to believe that it will follow a similar projection.

Not everyone will wish to scatter, certain religious groups such as practising Roman Catholics will not choose it as an option as it has been prohibited and there are those who will wish to follow family tradition and be buried at a graveyard or cemetery.

It is likely that the percentage is nearing its maximum at 80% (following the above and Pareto's rule). If we combine this with the predicted number of deaths from the [Office of National Statistics](#)⁵ we can estimate that there will be around **10m people scattered by 2030.**

Section 4: Recording the Ceremony

Are Ash Scattering Ceremonies being recorded?

It depends on the definition of recording, when families are asked whether they record a scattering of ashes they will often respond that there is a photograph of the people attending the location and in some sense this is indeed a recording. However, this is informal and the recordings are not collated and therefore we are unable to see any definite trends.

The current situation happens primarily because:

- there is nowhere to record the event.
- people don't know what the rules are for scattering ashes, they don't want to be challenged so they will avoid forms and any sense of formality.
- it does not occur to people that they should record the ceremony.
- recording of such activities tends to be organised by the state such as signing a marriage register.

Is there a need to know where people are scattered?

In terms of family history, the answer is definitely yes. Genealogy is the second most searched term on the internet and the popularity of FindAGrave* shows that people really want to know the location of a relative's final resting place. Although this is likely to be some distance from the actual event. There is a real contradiction between the lack of recording and the amount of interest. It might seem strange that there is so little recording of where ashes are scattered and yet there is such potential interest in what has been recorded. There are a couple of possible reasons for this:

- The distance in time between the event and the time the details are searched for.
- The lack of connection between those carrying out the act (the family) and those wanting the data (future generations and wider family and friends)

Conclusion

In an ideal world the Government should set up a public register to capture the information. This is almost certainly not going to happen as the activity is unregulated, low political interest/pressure and there is no driver for change.

If the government are unwilling or unable to set up a register then it falls to the private or third sector to set up some form of recording system.

Solution

A website should be set up that records where people have scattered the ashes of their relative.

It is fortunate that the recording of such an activity on a large and now reasonably affordable platform is available via the internet. The system that used should be

- Private
- Secure: The data held securely with some key information needed to be able to validate and identify the person.
- Affordable / Free - basic recording should be free to encourage uptake.
- Accessible.

The Scattering Ashes Register

We have set up a system to record the scattering that achieves this goal.

www.ashesregister.com

Simple, free to use and secure



References

- 1 - 'Environments of Memory': changing practices of disposal and memorialising and their implications for grief and mourning J Hockey and L.Kellaher
- 2 - CREMATION STATISTICS www.cremation.org.uk/statistics
- 3 - Office of National Statistics National population projections:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2018based>
- 4 - 250,000 sets of unclaimed ashes waiting to be reunited with families:
<https://nafd.org.uk/2014/08/20/25000-sets-of-unclaimed-ashes-waiting-to-be-reunited-with-families/>
- 5 - Office of National Statistics Births, deaths and migration:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2018based#births-deaths-and-migration>
- 6 - Just Put Me in the Bin: Church of England Conference - Tue 26th Jun 2018