

# The UNDERTAKER

IN THE QUIET FORMER SITTING ROOM OF A METICULOUSLY RESTORED HISTORIC COTTAGE IN GRAHAMSTOWN THAMES, TWENTYMANS FUNERAL SERVICES OWNER ADRIAN CATRAN SCANS THE TEXT OF A *HISTORY OF EMBALMING* TO CHECK HIS FACTS.

There is already a great deal that he knows, having owned his business for more than a quarter of a Century and taken a great interest in his profession, including visiting the Valley of the Kings in Egypt to the site of the world's most famously embalmed person – Tutankhamun. “Everyone in Egyptian times knew they would be treated by a funeral director. Pharaohs took 4-6 weeks to prepare and lesser mortals a couple of days,” he says, plucking a photo of the tomb from an album, noting the accuracy of the stone work, and commenting that his is “among the oldest professions in the world”.

The pharaohs are still in good condition today, and while modern care for our dead has evolved from these times, the Egyptians still had a viewing room, a treatment room and a casket room just like Twentymans funeral home in Grahamstown.

Modern embalming dates back to the American Civil War, when families who had lost soldiers would go looking for the body of their loved ones in hospitals and even battlefields. A Dr Thomas Holmes personally prepared 4000 bodies of soldiers in the Civil War, and as more people began embalming soldiers so they could be “brought home” by their loved ones, legislation was enacted and embalming licenses were issued.

That was 1865, just two years before Twentymans Funeral Services opened its doors.

Twentymans is the oldest surviving funeral home in New Zealand, of which Adrian is extremely proud. Trading as W. Twenty man –

“Show me the manner in which a nation or a community cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of its people, their respect for the law of the land and their loyalty to high ideals.”

William E Gladstone

Builder and Undertaker, the business began as a building firm, since it was the job of a builder to construct a casket, and some would ‘undertake’ to make a delivery to the cemetery.

Adrian bought the business in 1993 and kept the name, even though his own surname has a long (in the European sense) association with Grahamstown. Six Catran Brothers (tin miners) sailed from a small town of Ludvgan in Cornwall, England, to settle in Grahamstown, seeking fame and fortune from gold mining. They lived a few streets from where Adrian now lives.

“The start of the Thames Goldfield was 1867 and the population peaked at up to 60,000 here, and there were mining accidents, people dying from lung infections from mining and many children dying too. The cemeteries at Totara, Tararu and Shortland are full of babies and young children.”

It would have been a terrible

Below: An animal lover, Adrian's ragdoll cat Bella is a soothing presence in the home.

Bottom: The Twentymans Funeral Chapel in Grahamstown is an award-winning state-of-the-art building that few realise exists.



Adrian unwinds with a walk along the Thames Coast Walkway with beagles Missy and Milly.

time for many. From this came the tradition of a funeral to mark the passing of a person whose life had meant something. Modern funerals have not changed a great deal from these times.

“For me, it's ensuring people have a good send off; that we can look after people in their hour of need and make sure that it's done correctly and properly to make it as stress free as possible.”

Nowadays you can choose a casket made of recycled timber, cardboard, one that is hand painted, digitally printed with photos or even made of wool, and your funeral service can be ‘live streamed’ around the world from Twentymans award-winning chapel.

Yet with all the advances, there are also worrying trends, says Adrian. “We've gone back 30 years with people going direct to the crematorium and not having any sort of service. In America counsellors are seeing people who haven't had closure after losing someone because the person didn't have a funeral and the opportunity is gone. I think it's important to have a body at a service; for a person to see the fact that there's a casket containing a body.”

“There are not a lot of differences in the expense to have a service that gives people closure,” he adds. “With modern techniques we can save on costs and we work with families to deliver a service they can afford.”

That's also why funeral directors advocate for paying for your own funeral with pre-payment options. Any money set aside is kept in a trust account which earns interest. There are no bank

fees, and the funeral director cannot access the money until they have a death certificate and a signed letter from the estate. Meanwhile for a grieving family, it's all taken care of.

Pre-planning your own funeral takes away the stress of decision making at a very stressful time for families and there is a surprising amount of information legally required for registering a death. A common one that trips people up is knowing the date that the deceased was married.

Death may well be a morbid subject to some – not the kind of thing to talk about over the barbecue or around the children – but having been involved with so much of it, Adrian believes it's healthy to discuss what you want in death as well as life. More than that, it's unhealthy not to.

“People think they are immortal and that's why they have difficulty with dying. There are only two sure things in life – death and taxes – and the last time I looked the death rate in New Zealand was still 100 per cent, no-one has beaten it yet.”

“People need to contemplate what happens after they die and decide what sort of funeral they want. For some people it's cathartic to plan the whole thing. They are reluctant to come in but once they have, they're most grateful to us for helping them sort it out. You can do it any time, update your funeral plan and it's free. We take down the details and place it in a large envelope which goes in a drawer, and that's where it stays until you die.”

What does it say about a culture, the way they treat their dead? Adrian reads a quote

from former British Prime Minister William E. Gladstone.

*Show me the manner in which a nation or a community cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of its people, their respect for the law of the land and their loyalty to high ideals.*

This is always in mind when Adrian makes decisions about how his business will operate. The staff at Twentymans must always dress formally, show the utmost of respect for the deceased and the families of loved ones lost, and never, ever has Twentymans been late for a funeral in Adrian's 26 years. “On the Coromandel roads that's not always easy to achieve” he says.

“People sometimes say ‘you have to move with the times’, and Twentymans are at the cutting edge of technology – we were among the first funeral directors in New Zealand to instigate many practices that are now the industry standard – but casual breeds casual. If you allow small standards to slip, then this can grow into bigger standards slipping. As we always say, every aspect of the funeral should be a personal reflection of the individual that we have the privilege to serve.”

**TWENTYMANS**  
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