



LIVING ON THROUGH MEMORIAL TREES

Responding to the desire for new and innovative ways to memorialise those who have passed, Marko Dakin from Memorial Trees speaks about the alternative option offered by the company

People and mourners alike continue to look for new and innovative ways to memorialise either themselves or their loved ones who have passed. At a time when ashes are being put into vinyl records or sent for a trip to space, the sector will only continue to see increasing demands for alternative memorials and more options become available.

One company which has been offering an alternative since 2016 is Memorial Trees, established when founder Diederik's wife Jose was underwhelmed by the memorial options at a crematorium near Maastricht, Netherlands. The ceramicist had some interaction with the funeral sector and shortly after coming up with the idea of the trees, passed away leaving a legacy for her husband. "Ever since then he's been very, very busy in the Netherlands, I'm a family friend and I'm now working for him,"

says Marko Dakin, UK co-ordinator for the company. "I'm responsible for the UK and Ireland, Italy and France."

The company has grown since its first installation two years ago at the Walpot crematorium in the Netherlands, with a total of 13 trees in the country. The concept has since been brought to the UK where April saw the first installation at the Lincoln crematorium, Lincolnshire in partnership with The City of Lincoln Bereavement Services. The company also installed a tree in Ireland at the Colliers Funeral Directors in Bray in May.

Based on Jose's drawings, the trees are laser cut and welded by a steel company based in the Netherlands called Tosek who also transport it to the crematoria and cemeteries which purchase them. For its UK's operations, a Derbyshire steel company - AK Bryan - handles the production of the trees and UK contractors

Greenacre and Gem precast take care of the foundation and installation. Although Jose's choice for the memorial objects to be a tree is not explicitly known, Dakin notes that, in general, trees are known to "symbolise life and renewal". Aside from that, despite clearly being made from COR-TEN weathering steel, Dakin states that the memorial trees fit nicely into a natural setting, making them appear seamless at grave sites and crematoria amongst the existing nature.

Dakin explains that the trees are delivered on a "big transporter" with a 1.5 ton concrete foundation. He says: "The foundation is put into the hole in the ground then the tree is attached with steel rods and bolts and then its landscaped." As far as the company is aware, there are no planning restrictions or requirements in the UK when it comes to the installation of this type of memorial.

The largest of the memorial trees are 320cm high with six limbs which span across 310cm. They are made of COR-TEN steel, the same type of steel the Angel of the North in Newcastle is made from, and they arrive to the respective premises shiny but quickly oxidise and darken. Dakin says: "The oxidation process is the weathering protection for the steel underneath so it will stand for many years." Leaves can then be put on the trees, which arrive at the destination bare, with each leaf engraved with a person's date of birth, name and death and a possible inscription on the back. The trees are either made of copper - which turn green over time - or an anodised aluminium in a gold colour which is made to remain shiny for decades. Each memorial leaf is bolted on as it is sold. Dakin explains: "When the families of the bereaved come in to make arrangements for a funeral at the funeral home or crematorium or cemetery, they are given options like columbariums, a slot in an urn wall, take the ashes home, scatter them, and now also a memorial leaf." He continues: "When they choose a leaf, the crematorium sends us the order and we get it to them engraved within five to seven working days."

Each limb of the largest trees can bear 100 leaves, meaning in total, 600 people can be memorialised on the tree which has a three sqm footprint. Because it covers a relatively small area and can represent so

many people, Dakin suggests that it can even help to combat the issue of burial space, saying: "Imagine if you had 600 graves or 600 plots."

One of Memorial Trees' clients utilised the figures for this very reason; Dakin points out that a cemetery in the Netherlands purchased two of the company's largest trees as the graves needed to be disinterred to allow the ground to be raised by 60cm to accommodate for the rising water levels in the country. "They've very nicely and carefully - after speaking to the families - taken up the bones and put them into a communal bone reservoir and on top of that there are two trees," he says. The company then gave the bereaved families options for memorial leaves on each of the trees as a replacement.

The trees come in other sizes as well: its smallest, a 60cm tree serves as a singular memorial and can be bought by individuals and used in place of a headstone or urn or kept at a person's home, as Dakin says: "I know there's one nearby in a local cemetery instead of a gravestone. Someone [else] has one on their coffee table as a work of art." The smallest tree is not able to bear leaves because of its size. The medium size tree is



120cm and has space for 120 leaves in total, 20 per limb. As for maintenance, Dakin says: "The tree needs to be hosed down once a year; that's the recommendation for COR-TEN steel." The tree has six limbs with two designs, welded with three of each, so that the tree does not look uniformly symmetrical.

Memorial Trees has also developed a specially made a 320cm golden tree with rainbow coloured perspex leaves for the children's area of the Waalhoven Cemetery, Netherlands. "We developed the golden trees which are made from standard steel and specially coated and attached perspex leaves with options in the seven colours of the rainbow which can also be engraved," Dakin says. "The death of children is especially difficult and its beautiful what they've done with the landscaping at another cemetery with a 120cm golden tree". There's a circular area with benches where the family can sit, remember and leave things hanging in the tree."

The company predicts that the trees will last for up to a century, allowing for the continued use through generations, not too dissimilar to existing memorial keepsakes, urns, burial grounds and public memorial sites. Dakin points out that the longevity of the trees lines up with modern lifestyle changes, namely British society's increasing preference for cremation. The most recent figures from Urns for Ashes



suggest that cremation accounted for 77.05 percent of afterlife choices in the UK in 2017. "Since cremation came in people don't have graves but they still have walls and columbariums and now we have memorial trees and memorial leaves," he says. "So the bereaved get something that is really cost-effective and I think everybody is happy with the product and it's beautiful." He also makes note of the fact that with the increased use of crematoria facilities once ashes are scattered, there is often nothing of the loved one left behind and nowhere specific to go to memorialise them. "This was Jose's idea so in this modern time, what is left is a name, a name to be remembered. It's a modern take on traditional memorialisation."

Dakin believes that not only will the memorial trees aid with the problem of burial or memorial land space and its management over time, but also feels it can help to alleviate what is and has been a hot topic in the funeral sector: funeral poverty. Referencing the Lincoln crematorium which leases the memorial leaves for 10 years for £150, Dakin says: "A headstone will cost £1000 minimum for a basic one, then you've got to pay for the plot. £150 for a memorial leaf is a very small cost to give a beautiful and timeless way for someone to be remembered." Each leaf is leased for 10 - 20 years and once that period is up, the family is asked if they would like to renew and get a new leaf, if not the leaf is taken off and can then be returned to the family.

It also appeals to those who want an eco-friendly after life option as the long lasting quality of the tree and its

recyclability means it is relatively kinder to the environment. "It takes up little space, there's no bodily remains or formaldehyde - it's as eco-friendly as you can get."

As for the funeral profession, Memorial



Trees could be a potential additional stream of income. Once the Lincoln crematorium have leased all 200 of its leaves, the crematorium will enter into profit on the initial investment of the tree which Dakin admits are "not cheap". Dakin continues: "I didn't think funeral directors would be one of our customers and yet the first memorial tree I sold in Ireland was a full sized tree to a funeral director. It's a beautiful funeral home, they installed the tree on the grounds and the owner will sell memorial leaves as a combination of recouping their investment but also donating money to local charities." The company also sells memorial trees to hospitals and hospices and charities as donor/fundraising business models or alternatively, just as a work of art.

Going forward, Memorial Trees hopes to see the use of these memorials being used more widely, as people opt for varying afterlife practices. With a war memorial installation in the UK potentially in the pipeline, the company hopes that its trees which have so far been universally positively received becomes a well established memorial option. ■