

# Victorian Cemeteries

Prior to the Victorian era, most people were buried in churchyard cemeteries right outside of their place of worship.

Due to a population boom between 1800 and 1850, the cities in which these churchyards were located started to run out of burial space, and experienced water and sanitation issues due to the high number of burials taking place in densely populated areas.

Many cities, including London, Ontario, decided to move their churchyard cemeteries, and the bodies that were buried in them, to new cemeteries outside of city grounds. In 1879, this led to the opening of Woodland Cemetery on a rural piece of land on the outskirts of London.

The Victorians appreciated park-style cemeteries because they were able to own the land that they buried their family members in, and they saw this as an extension of their property. The vast amount of space also allowed them to display lavish monuments with intricate symbolism, and to spend days in the cemetery with picnics or leisure activities visiting their deceased family members.



# "Memento Mori"



Memento Mori, translated as "remember your own mortality", were trinkets that the Victorians kept not only to remember someone who had

passed away, but to constantly be aware that their own time was not infinite. Memento Mori came in two main forms: post-mortem photography and hair jewellery. In the Victorian era it was common to commission a photographer to take a photograph of a dead family member, especially if they were a child. One of the reasons for this was that it may have been the first time that the person was photographed, and it was much cheaper than commissioning a painting.



The deceased was often photographed in their casket or posed laying on a bed as if peacefully sleeping. If the family wished the person to look as if they were alive, the photographer would often paint ovetop of the eyelids so the eye would appear open. It was also a Victorian trend to make art or jewellery out of the deceased's hair. This was usually done by women, as hair jewellery was one of the only decorations that they were allowed to wear during the mourning period. If an art piece was made, it often contained the hair of many different family members.



# Victorian Mourning

# The Victorians

## Customs



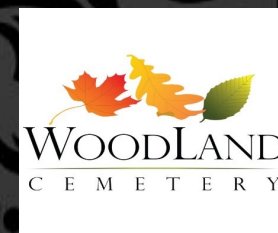
The Victorians (1837 - 1901) had a unique relationship with death. From strange superstitions to lavish funeral processions to strict mourning attire, those who lived in the mid- to late-nineteenth century held the process of mourning a death in high esteem.

One of the reasons for this behaviour was that death was a constant presence in the lives of Victorians. Many more people died of accidents and disease, and nearly one third of all children did not survive childhood.

## The Victorian Culture of Death and Mourning

Mourning customs were only bolstered by Queen Victoria's own mourning behavior. In 1861 she lost her husband, Prince Albert, to typhoid fever when he was only 42 years old. The Queen went into a period of deep grief. She refused to make public appearances, set out Albert's water and razor for his shave every morning, and wore nothing but black cloth for the rest of her life.

This brochure will guide you through the era when mourning culture was at its peak, and will explore the customs of the time as well as how they impact our mourning culture today.



## A Victorian Funeral

When a death occurred, Victorians usually left the duty of planning the funeral to a close family friend so as to take some of the burden off of the bereaved family. This friend, usually a gentleman, would organize the hearse, invite guests, and prepare keepsake memorial cards. He would also request pallbearers, which had to be close friends of the deceased who were of equal age and social status.

The expense of the funeral was expected to represent the deceased's social standing, and people went out of their way to provide loved ones with "good burials" despite financial strain. Attendance and a large procession were also status symbols, and one could hire professional mourners to increase attendance.



Funeral processions, lead by a hearse decorated in black ostrich plumes if an older person had died and white if a child had died, proceeded through the city streets to the cemetery. Hearses of this era were horse-drawn and had glass sides so that onlookers could view the casket and the displays of flowers surrounding it. The hearse was followed by carriages full of mourners. Once the party arrived at the cemetery, a clergyman would conduct a graveside service. All women in attendance were then asked to leave, as only men were allowed to see the casket lowered into the earth.

## Victorian Mourning Attire



One of the most important parts of mourning, to the Victorians, was what one wore. One's relationship to the deceased person dictated how long they should dress in mourning attire. The mourning period ranged anywhere from four weeks for a close friend or cousin to one year for a child or parent, or two years for a husband. All mourners were expected to wear black clothing to represent their inner spiritual darkness and sorrow in response to the death. Some also believed that dressing in black would prevent the deceased's spirit from possessing the living. Women had the most restrictions during the mourning period, as a woman in mourning was not allowed to partake in any social engagements. Widows could not leave the house for a full year without wearing a four-foot black weeping veil. As men were still expected to work, they wore their regular attire with a black band around their upper arm or their hat. Children, who were thought not to understand death in the same way, wore white or grey clothing with black trim. Wealthy families would order new mourning attire each time a death occurred, while families who could not afford this would often dye existing clothing black.



## Superstitions and Customs

The Victorians had a few beliefs and practices that seem rather strange to us today. They were rigorous about things such as stopping the clocks at the moment of death, drawing the curtains, and covering all of the mirrors so that the spirit did not become trapped in the room. They hung black wreaths on the door to alert visitors to the death. Victorians were also superstitious about keeping mourning clothing in the house after a mourning period had finished; hence the booming mourning attire business. The Victorians also believed that many things were omens of death, including if three knocks were heard, if a firefly entered the house, if one smelled roses or saw themselves in a dream, or if one spilled salt and did not toss some over their shoulder. The Victorians also had a few customs related to burial. Christian individuals were buried facing the East, because they would be facing the sun and the call to rise on Judgement Day. If a husband and wife were buried together, the husband would be buried on the left and the wife on the right, just as they would have stood at the altar on the day of their wedding. One of the most well-known Victorian burial customs was the practice of burying someone in a "safety coffin". These were coffins that featured a string with one end tied to the hand of the deceased and one end tied to a bell above the ground. If someone was accidentally buried while just in a coma, they could ring the bell to alert others.



## Influences on Today's

### Mourning Customs



Some of our terminology and mourning customs today find their origins in the Victorian era. For instance, Victorians held 3 to 4 day "wakes" in which the body of a loved one was watched over to make sure the person was actually dead and not just in a coma; this is why we still hold "wakes" before burial, albeit not for the same purpose. During the wake, candles and flowers were often brought to the room to mask the odor, as bodies were not embalmed at that time, which is one of the reasons that we bring flowers to funerals today. One of the biggest legacies that the Victorian era left us was the rise of the funeral parlour. During the Victorian era, wakes and funerals took place in the family home (specifically in the parlour, as it was usually the largest room). While this is the origin of the expression "funeral parlour", the Victorian era also represented the move towards the private funeral industry, as the extravagance and size of many Victorian funerals begged more organization than family could provide. Many of today's funeral parlours still locate themselves in old Victorian homes.

