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Don't Drop The Coffin



A documentary series introducing the world of one of Britain's most remarkable funeral directors – the real-life *Six Feet Under*

A Ginger Television production

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DON'T DROP THE COFFIN

Don't Drop the Coffin introduces the world of one of Britain's most remarkable funeral directors – the real-life *Six Feet Under*.

Life at FA Albin & Sons is often funny, sometimes bizarre, and at times moving. With 217 years of business under their belt they're now one of the UK's oldest funeral directors. Nothing surprises them when it comes to the business of death. Cryonics, gangland funerals, eccentric morticians, spooky happenings and fights in cemeteries are all taken in their stride.

At the head is Barry Dyer. As a nine-year-old he cleaned hearses with his father. The golden rule that Barry learnt from his dad was 'don't drop the coffin'. It stood him in good stead. Now he's built up the firm into one of the UK's leading funeral directors. The business still has its roots in the community of Bermondsey in south east London, and his sons now work with *him*.



Barry (centre) with sons Jon (left) and Simon (right)

Despite lucrative offers to sell up, Barry's resisted them all. With a fleet of 21 cars including a 1932 Rolls Royce and hearse, the Queen Mother's old Daimler and a newly-acquired Rolls Royce from the Sultan of Brunei, the Albins are in demand. His 150-year-old horse-drawn carriage carried Lou Beale to her funeral in *EastEnders*, and his Rolls Royce hearse took Christina Ricci to The Addams Family premiere. As well as servicing the local community, Albins has conducted funerals for Iranian Princes, African Kings and East End gangsters. They get more than their fair share of unusual requests, too - from the woman who takes her dad's urn out for an afternoon drive and a pint, to the woman who's launching her husband's ashes into space. And for those who want to hedge their bets and wait for technology to find a way of bringing the frozen dead back to life, Albins is the only undertaker in the UK licensed to perform cryonic suspension.



Lee and Paul

Barry's staff have as much pride in the business as he does. There's 25 of them. Kenny looks after the fleet of cars, Jackie arranges the funerals, David makes the coffins, Mark is the embalmer and Barry's two sons, Simon and Jon, both gave up a career in professional football to follow in the footsteps of Dad. When Barry goes to his local pub, the regulars joke they don't want to see him for a few years yet - this is not a business where people are pleased to see you. In the life of this funeral director, truth really does seem stranger than fiction.

Executive producer Debbie Gaunt says: "*Don't Drop The Coffin* is a ground-breaking series that offers unique access into a closed world. It breaks down barriers and perhaps it will help people understand more about the funeral business. The documentary goes behind the public face of Albins to see the staff in private moments. But we found that these people are exactly what they seem – genuinely respectful and not intrusive. Their job is all about helping the bereaved and they get great satisfaction from doing that job well."

Don't Drop The Coffin is produced by Stephen Joel and the executive producers are Helen Alexander and Debbie Gaunt. It is a Ginger Television production for ITV1.

Who's Who at Albins

Barry Dyer – owner

Barry followed his father into the business and took over FA Albin & Sons in 1986. One of the best-known faces on the streets of south London, Barry also has a worldwide reputation in the industry and is the UK's representative on the funeral governing body FIAT/IFTA. Barry describes Albins as his vocation and his role encompasses, amongst other things, master of ceremonies, counsellor, lawyer, courier, flower arranger and, occasionally, bouncer.



Barry Dyer

Simon Dyer – manager

26-year-old Simon grew up in Albins and joined the firm after studying at college. Once a funeral has been booked, it is Simon's job to ensure it is organised in accordance with the family's exact wishes regarding the choice of coffin, mode of transport, numbers of staff and any special requests. He also manages the specialist coffin supply company, Barry Albin & Sons, assists at funerals and occasionally conducts them himself.

Jon Dyer – manager

Jon began conducting funerals at the age of 18 after a childhood spent living and working around FA Albin & Sons. Now aged 23, he frequently conducts two funerals a day and is responsible for making sure that everything runs to order on the day. Jon also manages Albins' fleet of cars, which includes horse-drawn hearses, a Daimler once belonging to the Queen Mother and a Rolls Royce limousine recently purchased from the Sultan of Brunei.



Jackie Costin

Jackie Costin – office manager

Jackie joined Albins as office manager 13 years ago and is in charge of arranging funerals and managing the front office. Barry credits her with having a special gift for dealing with the bereaved.

Jonathan "Fletch" Fletcher – finance director

Fletch manages the finances for Albins, which include a registered charity, a pre-arranged funeral trust, a joint venture repatriation company and a specialist coffin supply company as well as the funeral directors. He also assists with funerals.

Mark Richards – mortician

Mark is in charge of the Culling Road mortuary and occasionally works in Albins' other shops. As embalmer, he collects the deceased and gets them ready for the Chapel of Rest.

Kenny Bambridge – fleet mechanic

Kenny is responsible for maintaining Albins' luxurious fleet of cars to the highest standard, carrying out any repairs and ensuring all MOTs and vehicle tax discs are kept up to date. The vehicles are treated like babies.

Maureen Barker – Memorial Garden

Maureen is responsible for organising and maintaining the Albin Memorial Garden, built on land next to the funeral home in Bermondsey. Open to anyone, the garden has space for the ashes of nearly one million people and is open seven days a week.

Maureen Barker



Lee Cook, Paul Rutherford, Spencer Baxter, David Spalding and Greg Mancini

Members of the funeral team who work as chauffeurs and pallbearers as required. Lee also conducts funerals and, with Paul, is in charge of cleaning the fleet. David is also an embalmer and Greg also engraves coffin plates and helps in the workshop.

Kenny Bambridge – fleet mechanic

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Jamie Cross and Perry Mulligan – apprentices

Jamie and Perry joined the firm in 2002 and are learning the job. As non-drivers they must also pass their driving tests before learning to drive the hearses and limos.

Joanna Downes – receptionist

Joanna is often the bereaved family's first point of contact with Albins. As well as working as receptionist at Culling Road, she also arranges funerals.



Joanna Downes

Jamie Ali – trainee embalmer

Jamie Ali, known as Jameelah, joined Albins in 2003 as a trainee. A former mortuary technician at another firm, she helps embalm, dress and lay out the deceased.

Elaine James – manager, Deptford

Elaine manages the FA Albin & Sons shop in Deptford and arranges funerals. She is also the company's head of catering.

Rose Ricks – manager, Mottingham

Rose manages the Mottingham branch and is experienced at handling repatriations. She also books stone masonry work for memorials or inscriptions.

Father Alan McLean - Priest

Father Alan is the parish priest at the Church of The Most Holy Trinity in Bermondsey and works closely with Barry.

FA Albin & Sons – The History

FA Albin & Sons has been involved in funerals since the late 18th century in Bermondsey, south east London, and is one of Britain's oldest independent firms of funeral directors.

When Barry Dyer was born, in 1951, the company had four funeral shops and was jointly owned by Fred, Ernie and Arthur Albin, with Barry's father George Dyer as senior manager.

After more than 20 years experience in the industry and working around the world, Barry achieved his dream in 1986 with purchase of FA Albin & Sons from the Fred Albin.



Barry (centre) with sons Simon (left) and Jon (right)

He sometimes adds the name Albin to his own as a way of maintaining continuity with the original family firm and his own sons Jonathan and Simon have followed him into the business.

In the late 1980s, funeral home magnate Howard Hodgson offered Barry £1.5 million for Albins along with a job running his operation in America. A few years later, the world's largest funeral directors SCI offered him £6.5 million to take his formula and franchise it in big towns across the UK.

Barry refused both offers, staying true to his original aim of turning Albins into a top, modern funeral directors without losing any of its traditions and reputation. He has also resisted suggestions to float the company on the Stock Exchange.

FA Albin & Sons now has four offices in south London including the main Culling Road funeral home, built in 1974 with a Chapel of Rest and state-of-the-art mortuary.



Jackie

Albins conducts 1,000 funerals each year, ranging from ecological services, using a cardboard coffin, to tailor-made funerals with a wide choice of coffins and caskets, headstones and urns, limousines and hearses, catering and floral tributes

The company even provides facilities for so-called techno funerals, where the body is cryonically suspended, or deep-frozen, in the hope of eventual 'resurrection', through its association with the Cryonics Institute in Detroit.

True Stories and Fascinating Facts

- The largest funeral Barry has conducted was for the son of an Iranian businessman and involved 71 matching limousines and more than 1,000 floral tributes.
- Celebrity funerals conducted by Albins include those of actor Donald Pleasance and rock star Alex Harvey. Barry has also supplied coffins for the Shah of Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini.
- Barry has assisted emergency services in major disasters including the Moorgate train crash, the capsizing of the Herald of Free Enterprise off Zeebrugge and the Air India plane crash off the Irish coast.
- He attended the scene of the Iranian Embassy Siege in 1980 and, four years later, was himself a hostage when the Iranian Consulate was stormed by anti-Khomeini students.
- Albins conducted the funeral of murdered Peckham schoolboy Damilola Taylor in the glare of media spotlight, and arranged for a dove to be released at the boy's private burial.
- Albins' horses Fred and George pulled the hearse at the recent funeral of Jamie in *EastEnders*.
- A police security net was placed around the funeral home in 1990 when Category A prisoners Dennis and Mehmet Arif were brought from Brixton jail to pay their last respects to their late father.
- A coffin finishing and supply subsidiary, Barry Albin & Sons, produces around 4,000 coffins each year and clients have included the Royal Family. Using oak from the Royal forest at Windsor, Royal coffins are based on the design used to bury Henry VII and are handmade with a lead shell inside.
- Barry's horse-drawn carriage was built in 1864 and used for the funeral of the first president of Ireland, Douglas Hyde.
- The modern-day hearse contains more than you might expect – from video camera and tripod to portable keyboard, as well as wheelchairs and umbrellas to make the day as comfortable as possible.
- After cremation, ashes are created by placing the remains in a rotating container with ball bearings, which gradually grinds them up. Afterwards, a magnet is used to extract the ball bearings.
- Albins has established a Virtual Memorial Garden on the Internet where people can place or visit a memorial to loved ones, leave a message to their memory, or pass on condolences.
- There are number of musical favourites which are consistently requested for funerals. At Albins the favourites are –

My Way
Unforgettable
Without You
Wind Beneath My Wings
Candle in the Wind

Endless Love
You Were Always on my Mind
Pal of My Cradle Day
When Your Old Wedding Was New
Make me a Channel of Your Peace

Time to Say Goodbye
Memories
When I Leave the
World Behind

From Ice Cream Vans to Jazz Bands -

Customised Funerals

Jazz music, football songs and loud clothes could become as common at funerals as black ties and hymns, according to a recent survey.

The report, commissioned by the Co-operative Funeral Service, found there was growing enthusiasm for personal, customised funerals that owe less and less to religion.

Almost half of people questioned said they would consider having a themed funeral, with ideas ranging from a gangland-style procession to New Orleans jazz bands. Other suggestions included treating friends and relatives to a firework display by mixing cremated ashes with gunpowder.

FA Albin & Sons has already helped organise a number of personalised funerals and, since the death of Princess Diana, the firm has seen an increase in people wanting to plan ahead for the type of ceremony they want.

Some of the more unusual funerals Barry Dyer has conducted include one for a biker, with a flotilla of Harley Davidsons, and one for an Italian ice cream salesman with 50 ice cream vans in tow.

A Gothic style funeral featured a black coffin with the deceased woman adorned with white make-up and long painted nails, while a gypsy funeral saw the mourners in carriages pulled by shire horses, and afterwards everyone returned to the dead person's caravan and set light to it.

At the funeral of a Bermondsey woman named Dolly, the family asked for white horses and booked a jazz band. Mourners were tapping their feet and singing *When The Saints Go Marching In* and *Hello Dolly*.

Interviews

Barry Dyer - owner

Barry Dyer admits he was nervous about letting TV cameras inside his funeral firm – but he realised a documentary series might help people gain an understanding of what happens after someone dies.

“I’ve done lots of TV news items about cryonics and I wrote a book last year, so I made a decision that I would only ever do one more programme which would be a real documentary about our business and about Albins – where it’s been and where it’s going,” says Barry.

“Bereavement is the biggest illness in the world – people who are grieving are genuinely sick. I wanted to do something definitive about it and show that you don’t have to be afraid of the people who look after your loved ones when they die. A lot goes into a funeral and we are all normal people who enjoy having a laugh, but who happen to be doing a very difficult job.



“When Stephen Joel contacted me I told him my views. I gave him a tour and he said he’d go away and talk to ITV. When he came back and said he’d got the go-ahead, I sat down with my mouth open.”

Barry consulted his staff before making any commitment, however.

“I knew we would be putting ourselves on the line. I’ve spent my whole life building up to this and the series could make or break it. I didn’t want to put my sons and their families and the guys here through the experience if they didn’t want to. I got them all together and we had a two-hour conversation. I told them exactly what would happen - and to a person they wanted to do it.

“For the first few weeks I was very nervous. Then the crew came with us on a funeral that took all day. We had a big horse drawn procession with six cars and Lewisham was gridlocked in very bad weather. We did what we always do and carried on in the mud and rain. At the end of the day the crew were still with me and I realised they were on my side. They didn’t want me to fail so they could get a good story.”

Barry grew up in the industry, living above the FA Albin & Sons funeral homes where his father George worked, and started helping at seven years old. By the age of nine he had a summer holiday job cleaning the cars, making baby coffins and French polishing with linseed oil.

From an early age, he developed a skill for laying out deceased people, doing their hair and applying make-up. Although he toyed with the idea of being a photographer, policeman and professional footballer, he did not hesitate in joining Albins upon leaving school and, at the age of 19, conducted his first funeral.

He bought the business in 1986, but despite a lifetime in funerals, he is not hardened to death and the tragedies that often accompany it. “We are all afraid of death and I’m no different,” he says. “People don’t like to see the deceased in a chapel because we are looking at our own certain future. I always talk to people if I’m embalming them or dressing them because I don’t want to forget that they are a real person. The worst thing that happens is when someone loses a child. I’ve dealt with

it a thousand times but I couldn't tell you what it feels like and I wouldn't have the audacity to say I had.

"People think funerals are expensive – they don't want to spend £2,000 on a funeral but don't mind spending £20,000 on a wedding. It's the one thing nobody wants to pay for. In some way, they are blaming me for the death and I understand that."

Barry believes everyone is equal in death – no matter how they have spent their life.

"Twenty funeral directors refused to bury Myra Hindley and I think that's wrong. My sympathies are with the children's families, not her, but you mustn't draw lines. A proper funeral director serves and doesn't question. I may not like everybody that I bury but death is a really good equalizer. People at different ends of the spectrum die and are in the same hearse within the week."

Barry was in the media spotlight himself when he conducted the funeral of murdered Peckham schoolboy Damilola Taylor.

"I offered to do it for free because I thought it was a terrible thing. It was due to be a quiet ceremony then the family changed their minds. Somebody reported me to the funeral governing body for soliciting funerals because I didn't charge. Luckily they saw sense."

Although Barry represents the Cryonics Institute across Europe, it is not something he would consider for himself when the time comes.



Barry with his new Rolls -
acquired from the
Sultan of Brunei

"There's no doubt in my mind that science in the near future will rejoin a frozen arm and make it work again. But what science will never do is return someone's memory or personality or capture a person's soul."

Barry has travelled the world giving lectures on the British funeral industry and last year received a lifetime achievement award in funeral directing from the world governing body FIAT/IFTA. He is a presiding Magistrate and in his spare time runs local non-league football club Fisher Athletic.

He adds: "I'm a south London boy who's done OK. I don't run the business, the business runs me. This is my moment and my sons will have their moment. Albins is an historic mantle I picked up and someone else will carry it after me."

Jackie Costin – office manager and funeral arranger

Jackie Costin admits that she still cries every time a dead child is brought into FA Albin & Sons.

“You’ve got to be able to cope with death in this job but I still hate it when it’s children. You never get used to that if you’ve got any feelings or if you have children or grandchildren of your own. I cry my eyes out, all the girls do. We’re not afraid to cry with the families either. I always think, ‘there but for the grace of God, go I!’”

Jackie has been with Albins for nearly 13 years after meeting Barry when their sons played football together.

“I came for an interview and Barry asked me if I could do the work. I’ve never looked back. Although I was a receptionist for a solicitor’s firm in my previous job, I’d worked with the elderly in hospitals years ago. I was a physio in the geriatric ward and if they passed away I would help the nurses lay them out.



“Sometimes you see some awful sights. Last year we had so many little children with meningitis and there were three others in a car accident. It makes you think and then you carry on and go about your day. When you deal with grief all day you don’t let it get to you. But it does make you realise that life is too short – you don’t have to be old to die.”

Jackie has a special gift for working with bereaved families, according to her boss Barry Dyer.

“Barry sometimes asks me to help him when we are called to a house where a child has died. As a mother, if you have lost a child, you don’t want to part with him or her. You are more likely to give your child to another woman. I remember when I carried out one three-year-old girl in her duvet and held her in my arms in the car all the way back to the chapel. Her mum didn’t want to let her go but she trusted me with her.”

Adds Jackie: “It was seven or eight years ago but I’ll never forget it. All the children I’ve ever dealt with stay with me forever. I can still see their faces.”

Jackie sees bereaved families every day when they come to arrange a funeral.

“I think only a woman should arrange a funeral because women have a motherly instinct about them. You wouldn’t see a man cuddling another man if he’s crying because men don’t do that. Women just have a bonding thing in them.

“But I don’t think you would see a woman conducting a funeral, striding at the front of the procession in high heels. It’s not sexist. In this job it’s just who can do it the best.”

Simon Dyer – manager

The funeral business feels like home for Simon Dyer – because he lived above the company HQ in Bermondsey until the age of 13.

“I was always about the place and there was never a closed door. My brother Jon and I were free to run and mix with everyone and we were probably in the way a lot. I remember that the kitchen used to be the workshop and I’d go riding my kart into the mortuary area.

“I remember playing football in the living room one evening and the ball whizzed downstairs and I was sent to get it. It was dark and I hid under the desk and phoned dad to come and get me because I was scared,” he says.



Simon (right) with father Barry (centre) and brother Jon (left)

Simon soon learnt to conquer his early fear and went on his first removal of a body at the age of 10 with his father Barry.

“It was 12.30 at night and Dad got me out of bed to take me along. The people were really good and very nice to me. From that age I became quite involved and my first Saturday job was making coffin wrapping in zinc to send bodies abroad. We made the boxes and earned our 20 quid. It wasn’t strange because before that I was washing cars and sweeping the yard. Dad always encouraged us to join in but he never forced us.”

Although playing football was his first love, Simon decided to stay with the firm after going to college. He is now a manager with FA Albin & Sons, working both on funerals and behind the scenes.

“I conduct funerals occasionally or drive but my main role is managing the business. It involves so many jobs - I organise coffin stock, oversee the workshop and mortuary, arrange the picking up of bodies, organise the men and cars for funerals, sort out the Ministers’ letters and the forms for the crematoriums and cemeteries. The girls book a job and I deal with the rest and manage who gets on with it.

“My work also involves repatriation and in one week recently I organised the return of bodies to Norway and Jamaica. I get them to the airport, get them weighed and sort out what coffin or casket is needed. I also run Barry Albin & Sons’ invoicing and speak to them every day about coffin stock.”

Although his friends are familiar with his work and think nothing of it, Simon admits he is a little nervous about being seen on TV.

“I think it’s a really good programme and I’m so pleased it’s being done but I just hope it shows everything in the right light. I think I’ve handled it OK, so I’m really excited about seeing it.”

Simon is married to Michelle and they have a two-year-old daughter, Olivia. Their next child, a boy, is due in April.

Jon Dyer – manager

Jon Dyer became a funeral conductor at just 18 years of age – a challenging job that involves leading the procession and ensuring that such a difficult day runs smoothly and in accordance with the wishes of the bereaved family.

Explains Jon: “I started conducting when I was 18, and now it’s pretty much my main job. I sometimes do two funerals a day. When I first started, people would comment that I was a bit young, but they don’t any more.

“I’m completely responsible for the smooth running of the day – dealing with the cars, flowers, people, getting to places and giving directions to the men. The night before I always try to make sure I know what I’ve got on the next day, ensure all the paperwork is in the envelope, the maps are done, and the cars and my shoes are clean. Then I can get ready and go straightaway.

“I have one winter suit and two summer suits. Conductors wear different suits from the drivers but all the conductors’ suits vary slightly. Mine has just one piece of rope braid keeping it together at the top.

“Occasionally things happen, like a puncture on a car or a breakdown which can make you late but we do our best and people normally accept it as an act of God. In a funeral in the snow recently, the men kept slipping and our cars had to be pushed. It was a really difficult day, but the family were very understanding.”

As well as conducting funerals, Jon manages Albins’ fleet of cars and helps out in all aspects of the business. “Everyone is flexible, which is good, no-one’s just a driver or a bearer. There’s something different every day, which keeps variety in the job.”

Like his brother Simon, Jon grew up above the Culling Road funeral home and followed in the footsteps of his father Barry Dyer.

“I remember the people and doing little jobs from a very young age, lining coffins with zinc and helping clean the cars. I used to play football in the yard outside work hours and when I was younger football was what I wanted to do, but when I was 15 I decided to join the firm instead.”

Jon works closely with his father and the rest of the team. “We are lucky – it would be an impossible job without good people around you. I hope we will always work together and I hope Dad stays for as long as he can. At some stage I know he’ll want to calm down a bit and we’ll have to take on more. But we are prepared for it.”

Despite working in the funeral industry, Jon tries not to think about the end of his own life. “I try to concentrate on living not choosing between burial or cremation. Personally I wouldn’t go for cryonics because it would be very strange to come back, but I wouldn’t criticise someone who did. It’s there as another option.”

Jon lives with his fiancée Jane, plays football regularly and supports Liverpool FC.

Jonathan "Fletch" Fletcher – finance director

Jonathan Fletcher is probably the only accountant in the world who also gets to drive a hearse or fit a coffin as part of his job.

As finance director for FA Albin & Sons and its associated enterprises, Fletch, as he is known, sometimes has to leave his paperwork to assist at funerals. And he's had to conquer his fear of dead bodies in order to do it.

Explains Fletch: "I used to work for Barry Dyer's auditor and started auditing Barry's accounts in 1991. It was the first time I'd ever been inside a funeral directors. It terrified me at first and I wouldn't even walk past one of the Chapels of Rest without my eyes fixed firmly ahead.



"When you get a little more used to it and to the people, I started to look and it became a little easier every day. Now I don't think twice about going into the chapels, presenting the deceased to the families or going into the mortuary when they are embalming, but a few years ago I wouldn't put my head around the door."

Barry approached Fletch three years ago when he learnt the accountant was thinking of leaving his profession to open a sandwich shop with his wife.

"I had a few offers but Barry's was the only one that interested me. Strange as it might seem, it's a very welcoming place. You have to be able and willing to do anything that anyone else in the firm will do. With the exception of embalming, which requires skilled training, I do. It's not completely second nature and I still get that initial shock when I go into a bedroom or hospital room for a collection, but the feeling of unease soon goes and you get on with it."

Adds Fletch: "I play football with friends who work in the city and they think it's quite funny asking me who I've buried this week. I would never go back, although I still harbour dreams of running my own little deli or ice cream shop one day."

In his other day job, Fletch is responsible for the accounts of both FA Albin & Sons, the funeral directors, and Barry Albin & Sons, the coffin supply company which also encompasses masonry work and the Albin Memorial Garden.

"We also have a registered charity, the Albin-Dyer Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Foundation, which helps local causes, a pre-arranged funeral trust with independent trustees, which allows people to arrange their funeral at today's price, and we're part of a joint venture repatriation company which moves people in and out of the UK and to and from other countries too.

"I am responsible for all these ventures and I also make sure that Barry can afford to do the things he wants such as expand the fleet. We've just had an opportunity to buy a Rolls Royce limo belonging to the Sultan of Brunei and we couldn't let it go!"

Fletch lives in Kent, with his wife Michelle and three-year-old son Oliver.

Series Producer - Stephen Joel

Stephen Joel was in the bath when he first heard about Barry Dyer.

"I was listening to a radio show and Barry was on as part of his book launch. I thought the book sounded like a good read and, as I was going on holiday to Spain, I decided to get it. I started reading and became fascinated with the whole business. I'd only ever been to one funeral, I'd never seen a dead body and I didn't have a clue what embalming was. I got half way through the book and decided it would make a great TV series."

Stephen contacted Barry on his return and visited FA Albin & Sons premises in Bermondsey to talk through the idea. "I went away and wrote up a short proposal for ITV. They loved it and two weeks later commissioned the series."

Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, it was important to draw up guidelines from the outset. Says Stephen: "The programme is pre-watershed and we have a responsibility to the families featured. Our simple guide is to show as much respect as Barry and his team do to the families and to the deceased. Everything at Albins is done with the utmost respect – it's a very caring profession and the deceased are not treated any differently behind the scenes."

"We do not show dead bodies except in the background and we are not demonstrating embalming. That's not what the programme is about – it's about the firm – and it's probably not how the deceased people's families would want to remember them."

Stephen and his team, however, had to get used to working in a funeral home.

"Some of the crew had seen deceased people before, some hadn't. The first time I came I saw one in the Chapel of Rest. I thought it was a mannequin for showing people how they were laid out. There was something quite peaceful about it."

Inevitably, filming the series led Stephen to focus on his own mortality.

"When I left after the first time, I thought that if I got knocked down by a bus then I'd like them to look after me. I'm a damn sight more careful crossing the road now because we've seen some awful accidents involving young people. I definitely look twice now."

"I've also decided I'm going to be cremated when the time comes. I'd never witnessed internment before and the end result is quite lonely and cold, just being left there. As for cryonics – if medical science could guarantee it would find a way of bringing you back, I'd give it a punt."

Stephen has worked for Ginger for seven years, where he also produced *TFI Friday*, *TFI Rolling Stones* and produced and directed *One Man and His Hob*.

Programme Synopses

Programme One

Barry Dyer opens the doors to FA Albin & Sons, the funeral business that has been burying the people of south London for more than 200 years.

Barry took over Albins in 1986 and his sons Simon and Jon have followed him into this most unique of family firms. Dealing with death is an everyday part of life for the 25-strong workforce, who are taught to remember the golden rule Barry learnt as a youngster – “Don’t drop the coffin”.

At the morning breakfast meeting, the team are busy planning the funeral of Jimmy Frazer, who was killed in a road accident while on holiday in Florida. Around 1,000 mourners are expected so detailed planning is essential and everyone is involved.

Office manager Jackie offers support to Jimmy’s widow Anita, who is concerned about her husband’s facial injuries. “If there are horrific injuries, there’s only so much we can do. But bruises, a scratched face, broken nose or black eyes can be hidden with make-up and made to look presentable. We have to do what we can because they want to remember the person they loved the way they used to be,” says Jackie.

Barry conducts the funeral himself. “I am responsible for the whole occasion. As master of ceremonies I must see that people are in the right place at the right time, that cars and staff are present and correct and that we are perfectly prepared for the day. So we all know, as one, exactly what we are trying to achieve.”

All runs smoothly and, for Anita, the day brings comfort. “I think he went out like a king,” she says.

Meanwhile, across the Thames, 25-year-old mother-of-two Jameelah is preparing to leave her job washing bodies for the Islamic Funeral Service to come to Albins to train as an embalmer.

Says Jameelah: “I think the human body is more amazing than the universe. I’ve got the guts for the job, but it’s the sadness of it all sometimes. When you are with the dead all the time you have to be with the living in the evening. You have to go out where there’s a lot of people.” Her enthusiasm impresses Barry who agrees to take her on a month’s trial.

Also, new apprentices Perry and Jamie practice hard to meet Albins’ exacting standards. To be useful members of the team, they have to pass their driving tests and get behind the wheels of the luxury fleet of limousines. This week, Perry sits his driving theory test - which he has already failed once.

Programme Two

Young mum Jameelah starts her job as an embalmer with FA Albin & Sons in *Don't Drop The Coffin*. It's an unusual job for a woman, but she's determined to make a success of it – and her first experiences do nothing to put her off.

"My friends think I'm insane and they don't know how I can do it. They call me Morticia. But someone has to do it and I enjoy it. We are seeing the horrible parts that families don't have to see. We are making that person how the family would like them to be," she says.

Mark, embalmer with Albins for seven years, shows Jameelah how special fluids can preserve and improve the overall appearance of a dead person's skin.

Explains Mark: "People know of embalming but they're not sure why or how you embalm. It makes people feel much better once they see someone. People look as if they are asleep and it takes the edge off thinking that Dad's dead and that's the end. I have embalmed my own family. It's quite difficult but it's the final thing I can do for them."

Tragedy strikes close to home when office manager Jackie has to organise the funeral of a young man who was a close family friend.

Ben Rawlings was just 27 when he died and his family want to bury him in style – with a Victorian horse-drawn carriage to carry the coffin and 800 floral tributes. It's a difficult day, and after making the arrangements, Jackie attends as a mourner.

Says Jackie: "I cried when we talked about him and how he made us laugh. It did get to me. When they're older it's very sad but they've had a life. When they're young it's obviously harder – Ben hadn't had a life and he loved life."

Albins owner Barry understands the family's decision to organise a grand funeral. "There's these beautiful horses and ceremony and it's all been put together for someone you love very much, which makes him very special – the most important person in the world for a day. You look around and think his life was worth something. It allows you to let go a little bit quicker."

The winter weather brings Albins as many as 30 funerals in a week, and driving two- and-a-half tonne hearses in snow is no easy task. But the pressure of battling against the elements is relieved in a snowball fight at the end of the day.

Also in the programme, Lee explains how the modern-day hearse carries everything from spare earth, in case the soil is full of clay, to a portable keyboard. And Barry treats the staff to a night out watching Millwall FC, with a traditional supper of pie, mash and liquor.

Programme Three

At FA Albin & Sons, every day and every funeral is different. In this week's *Don't Drop The Coffin*, boss Barry and his staff must arrange a Caribbean send-off with singing and dancing, a traditional Buddhist service and a funeral for a baby.

Elaine, manager at Albins' Deptford branch, is organising the funeral of Carmen Wiseman for her daughters Pam and Paula. It's set to be a big event, attended by the Caribbean community en masse, and a long one, as guests frequently arrive after the service has started.

Father Peter Fellows is the family vicar and has his own traditions. Carmen wanted to spend the night before her funeral in the church crypt, so Father Peter decides to join her, bringing his TV set with him in order to watch a film with his old friend.

"I think it's probably an odd thing to do but I've always spent the night with the people who have been brought into the church. I couldn't bear for them to be alone in the place where I am going to take their funeral," he says.

With over 200 mourners and a street procession, Carmen's funeral is as much a celebration as a day of sadness, but it is still a moving day for Elaine. She says: "It does affect me every single day. The day it doesn't is the day you probably have to give it up."

Back at Albins HQ in Bermondsey, Jackie is organising a Buddhist funeral complete with incense and chanting. Simon prepares the coffin which, following tradition, includes a set of clothing for each season, cigarettes and a passport.

For new recruit Jameelah, it's a challenging time. A week into her training as an embalmer, she is forced to face up to the realities of her job when she has to prepare a baby for burial.

"It's hard but it's life. I get choked because I'm a mum myself and can feel the hurt and pain. You can't imagine the grief the woman is going through. My heart goes out to her and when I go home to my children I appreciate them more."

But a new arrival at Albins lifts everyone's spirits when Barry gets his hands on an as-new Rolls Royce limo that formerly belonged to the Sultan of Brunei. As his dream car takes its place in the 20-strong fleet, Barry is proud. "Very few people can drive around in a Daimler or a Rolls Royce limousine but for your final ride, why not?"

Programme Four

It's a special day of celebration and remembrance in *Don't Drop The Coffin* as funeral directors FA Albin & Sons holds its annual memorial service, complete with doves, 1,000 balloons, gospel singers and a singing performance from local Catholic priest Father Alan McLean.

Built four years ago next to Albins' funeral home in Bermondsey, the Memorial Garden fulfils boss Barry's long-held vision of providing a place for local people to bury their loved ones' remains and come to remember them.

The service, on a bitterly cold night just before Christmas, draws over 1,000 people from the community – which means a few stressful days and sleepless nights for organiser Maureen, who manages the garden, and the team.

While the women make huge quantities of soup, mince pies, bread and butter pudding and mulled wine for everyone to enjoy afterwards, the men who carry coffins day in day out must learn how to release delicate but often struggling doves.

Barry is in his element. "I love the evening. It's a community event and a staff event. Everyone is walking around with renewed faith in themselves and the relationships with the people they've lost. It's great to see it and watch people's reactions."

A key feature of the evening is a Christmas tree which holds hundreds of stars, each containing dedications from people to the relatives or friends who have died. And as the memorial begins, Father Alan swaps his pulpit for the stage to give a rousing rendition of "Can You Feel The Love Tonight" from *The Lion King*. Inevitably, there are few dry eyes to be seen.

Office manager Jackie says: "It does help to have a little cry. It shows you're human. We've all got hearts and we all hurt at some time. I see people I've done funerals for crying two or three years on. You never forget people you've lost. The pain gets a little bit easier every day but the pain never goes away."

Also in the programme, trainee embalmer Jameelah gets a ticking off when she phones in to say she will not be coming in to work, and Barry provides a funeral for a woman who has died in a residential home with no known family and little money.

Programme Five

There's a lot of camaraderie in being an undertaker at FA Albin & Sons, but one of the downsides of the job is night duty, as the firm is on call 24 hours a day.

In *Don't Drop The Coffin*, finance director Fletch has the unenviable job of drawing up the rota, resulting in groans from the rest of the staff. Lee has been doing the job for 12 years but still doesn't like the unpredictability of night calls. "You don't know if you're going to be removing someone from a hospital or a train platform. I think I'm the worst here for hating it. You do it because you have to."

Jameelah has only been working at Albins for a few weeks as a trainee embalmer but she already faces a test. Her teacher Mark says: "She's very eager. She doesn't mind having a go and wants to learn, but it's a long process and you can't learn it in a matter of weeks."

There's a test for apprentice Perry, too, when he sits his driving theory exam yet again. Without passing, he will not be able to perform his job, driving Albins' fleet of vehicles. Will it be third time lucky?

Daily life goes on for the rest of the staff and Maureen, manager of the Memorial Garden, is arranging a scattering of ashes, while office manager Jackie helps local resident Barbara Folan arrange the funeral of her mother Mary, a strict Catholic.

Jackie's duties involve preparing bodies for funeral or viewing in the chapel of rest, even washing a person's hair when necessary.

She says: "I was thrown in at the deep end one day when I was asked to do someone's hair. I enjoyed doing it and I've done it ever since. I've never been afraid of them. Sometimes the coldness makes you want to cuddle them and warm them up. When relatives go into the chapel what they see of mum or dad lying there is what they remember forever, so it's got to be done properly."

Barbara's elderly father put money aside to pay for the funeral, including a horse-drawn hearse to lead the cortège. It's a difficult day as Mr Folan has been in hospital since his wife's death and Barbara hopes to find courage to read a tribute.

Albins boss Barry says: "It's your job as conductor to make sure the family have nothing to worry about except the pain of the day. We have to achieve what they are unable to achieve for themselves. In football terms, you are only as good as your last funeral. If that wasn't good, that's what they'll remember."

Programme Six

Barry is off Stateside in *Don't Drop The Coffin* to find out how funerals are conducted American-style.

First stop is the world-renowned Cryonics Institute in Detroit, where - for a cost of £20,000 – dead people are frozen in liquid nitrogen and suspended in tanks at minus 196 degrees centigrade in the hope of being brought back to life one day.

Barry meets pioneer Robert Ettinger, whose mother was the first person to undergo the revolutionary technique. His first and second wives are also 'patients' at the institute. "We are not really raising the dead, we are just curing the sick," says Ettinger. "It's not new. In hospitals all over the world people die and are routinely brought back to life."

Albins is the only undertaker in Europe licensed by the institute and Britons Maureen and Paul Michaels are booked in with the south London firm when their time comes. Paul says: "I am sure we will come back to a world where there is no pain and no illness. Everything will be curable."

Barry has his doubts but accepts that cryonics is each individual's choice. "For time immemorial man has wanted to live forever and immortalise himself in some way. There are people for whom this life is not enough. For me it is ample. The natural order of things is that I should move on. There comes a time when you can't play football any more."

In Las Vegas, Barry attends the annual funeral convention where the latest innovations are on display. As well as a floating, dissolving urn for burials at sea and a casket with its own writing paper, there is company that produces 'life gems' from cremated ashes to make into jewellery. But it's not all work – in the evening Barry dresses up as Austin Powers for the undertakers' 60s-themed fancy dress ball.

Back in Bermondsey, Jon takes delivery of a new feature for the Memorial Garden – a dovecote. A symbol of peace, doves can be released at funerals to signify letting go of grief – and they use the sun to navigate their way home afterwards.

Barry's 52nd birthday is a chance for the staff to leave the stress of work behind when Albins challenges a local team of ex-professionals to a football match. Half way through the first half and the pressure's on as Barry takes a penalty. Will he have enough puff to blow out the candles on his birthday cake?

Working at Albins inevitably gives the staff a chance to mull over their own choice of funeral. Simon and Lee both favour cremation while Jackie thinks it is too final. But even the option of cryonics or dissolving urns is not for Barry, who wants a traditional Bermondsey send off. He laughs: "I want it to be a splendid affair!"

Background Information

History of the Funeral

Funeral customs are as old as civilisation itself. Every culture and civilisation ever studied has been found to have funeral rites, rituals or ceremonies, as well as a sacred place for the dead and some type of memorial.

Researchers have found burial grounds of Neanderthal man dating to 60,000 BC with animal antlers on the body and flower fragments next to the corpse, indicating a ritual and gifts of remembrance.

The first burial customs probably stem from charms to protect the living from the 'spirits' which caused the death. Bodies were burned to destroy evil spirits. This fear of the dead was carried over as religious thought developed. The Polynesian word tabu expressed the view that a person or thing coming into contact with the dead was set apart and shunned. To most people a dead body is still taboo.

Sacrifices were offered in honour of the dead, including self-mutilation, the killing of slaves or even suicide. Wife burning or suttee was practised in India, when the wife of the deceased lay down by her husband to be cremated alive on the funeral pyre.

Many of today's funeral customs have a historical basis in pagan rituals and death is often still approached from a standpoint of fear. Covering the face of the deceased with a sheet stems from pagan tribes who believed that the spirit escaped through the mouth, while wakes come from ancient customs of keeping watch over the dead in the hope that life would return.

As Christianity spread through Britain, the modern funeral service developed and churches became the main sites for burials. During the 18th century, churchyards started to become very crowded and burial plots became smaller. Wealth had an influence, with the poor reduced to paupers' graves where up to 20 bodies shared a single grave, which was kept open until it was full.

This risk to health coupled with a demand for more burial sites resulted in the first English cemetery to be opened, in Norwich in 1819. But as cemeteries, too, filled up, there was pressure to find an alternative to burial. In 1885 the first human cremation took place at Woking, beginning a gradual national move towards cremation.

Different Religions and Death

Across every religion, funerals are a way for people to remember and honour their loved ones. Practices and traditions of funerals vary according to culture and faith as different people deal with death in their own distinctive ways.

In some communities death is seen as a step in the continuous cycle of life and death rather than a full stop. Rituals may be public and demonstrative, or private and quiet. The period of mourning is also fixed in some cultures. Feelings of grief and bereavement may be similar, but the ways of expressing them are very different.

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The majority of funerals in the UK follow the guidelines of the **Christian** faith. The purpose of a service is to pray for the soul of the deceased as well as to offer comfort and support to the bereaved. Christians have a strong belief in the afterlife.

Many Christians do not view the deceased after death, unless at a Chapel of Rest. Funerals are usually in two parts – a service at the place of worship followed by a committal at the crematorium or cemetery. Although pop songs are becoming more popular, most ceremonies are traditional, with hearse, black clothes and a gathering afterwards.

Jewish funeral practices have traditionally followed a strong set of customs and beliefs that are based on the Torah, or Jewish law. Jews believe that one should embrace life while accepting the inevitability of death.

It is traditional Jewish practice to perform a ritual washing of the body and then to dress it in a plain burial shroud. Watchers remain with the body around the clock until the funeral, which is usually held the day after the death, when the body is placed in a simple wooden coffin and buried. For Jews, the initial mourning period lasts seven days and families break from their daily routines, such as shaving.

Hinduism teaches that the essence of each soul is divine. Although the physical body dies, the soul has no beginning or end, although it may pass to another reincarnation, depending on its karma.

In the Hindu funeral tradition, the body remains at home until it is cremated, usually 24 hours after death. Black attire is inappropriate at the service and there is always an open casket. Ten days later, a ceremony is held at the deceased's home to liberate the soul for its ascent into heaven. The mourning period ranges from 10 to 30 days.

The **Islamic** culture accepts death as a natural part of life. The firm belief that the deceased has moved on to a pleasant afterlife helps the bereaved cope. Muslim customs require that the body be turned to face Mecca, bathed and covered in white cotton with the arms, legs and hands stretched out in alignment.

Within two days, the body is carried to the graveyard by four men, followed by a procession of friends and relatives. Guests pray for the soul of the departed and crying and wailing is encouraged as a way to ease suffering. The Islamic mourning period lasts for 40 days and family members must wear only black clothing. For one full year, the wife of the deceased continues to wear black.

Although funeral customs within the **Buddhist** religions differ, Buddhists believe that every soul is reborn into the world until it has been cleansed. The goal of the Buddhist is to escape the cycle of rebirth by achieving Nirvana, a state of bliss.

Buddhist services include chanting prayers, bringing offerings of fruit and flowers and wearing traditional white cloth such as a headband or armband in order to wish the deceased a pleasant journey to the afterlife. Although Buddhists understand death is a transition, not an end, it is acceptable to show grief.

Future of the Funeral

One of the biggest factors influencing funerals of the future is finding a space to bury the dead. More than a quarter of deaths in the UK are still followed by full body burial, while cremations are often followed by the burial of cremated remains in cemeteries and crematoria.

Britain is facing a shortage of burial space because of an inability to reuse cemeteries as happens in most European countries. Overcrowding is particularly bad in London where it is estimated that by 2010 there will be no burial space left at all. The problem is set to worsen as post-war baby boomers reach the end of their lives.

Statutory provision of burial space is ad hoc and largely uncoordinated and there are calls for the Government to address the issue. Among the options considered by the Home Office include the "lift and deepen" system by which very old remains could be exhumed and re-interred deeper in the same grave.

For people who do not want to be buried in a municipal site, there are now over 70 woodland burial sites in the UK. In some a tree is planted, while others allow the bereaved to put up a plaque within the nature reserve. The desire to find a 'greener' alternative to the conventional funeral sees people buried in cardboard or wicker coffins.

Burial at sea also remains an option and the two places where sea burials are permitted under a special licence are Newhaven and the Needles Spoil Ground, off the Isle of Wight.

There are no such rules governing the scattering of ashes of cremated people and this often takes place at a favourite place of the deceased. Ashes can even be launched into space via a satellite, where they eventually burn up in the atmosphere.

Supporting Materials

A special helpline is being set up for viewers affected by issues raised in the series.

A publication will also be available offering further information and practical advice on such topics as what to do when someone dies, planning a funeral, what to look for in a funeral director, bereavement, funeral rites for other religions and relevant organisations, charities and websites.

The helpline number is 0870 909 0925 and calls will be charged at national rate.

A book, *Don't Drop The Coffin!* by Barry Albin-Dyer with Greg Watts, is published by Hodder & Stoughton.

Ginger Television and SMG TV Productions

Ginger Television is the factual entertainment arm of SMG TV Productions, the network production division of Scottish media company SMG.

Based in London and Glasgow, SMG TV Productions makes hundreds of hours of high-quality, popular programming across all genres. 2002 saw development into new markets including Ginger Television's first commissions for ITV1 and Five, and SMG TV Productions' first commission for Nickelodeon. In 2003 SMG TV Productions received its biggest ever commission for children's television - *Squeak*.

Ginger Television goes from strength to strength. The 2003 broadcast of *Don't Drop The Coffin* sees its first series for ITV1. Its recent production *Celebrity Detox Camp* attracted widespread publicity. 2002 saw a similarly strong performance. *Detox* the accompanying series to the one-off celebrity version, was Ginger's first commission for Five and Ginger's production of *A Tribute To The Likely Lads*, starring Ant and Dec, was its first one-off commission for ITV1.

SMG TV Productions is the home of *Taggart*, an international success story with top ratings on ITV1 and sales to 22 territories. Now in its 20th year, *Taggart* is the UK's longest-running tv crime drama and has begun a new era with the arrival of DCI Matt Burke (Alex Norton) and a new production team. *Taggart* returns to ITV1 later this year.

Goodbye, Mr Chips – a remake of James Hilton's classic story for ITV1 – was SMG's Christmas hit. Transmitting on Boxing Day 2002, Martin Clunes starred as Mr Chips, the much-loved schoolmaster who devotes his life to Brookfield school and its generations of schoolboys, and Victoria Hamilton played his wife Kathie. Other dramas from SMG TV Productions include *Take Me*, starring Robson Green, and *Rebus*, starring John Hannah.

Factual programming goes from strength to strength. *Club Reps: The Workers* and *Club Reps: The Workers – Uncut* follow the phenomenal success of last year's *Club Reps* (ITV1) and *Club Reps – Uncut* (ITV2). The factual team is currently filming *Medics of the Glen* on Skye for ITV Daytime. Recent productions include: *Justice For My Daughter* (for ITV1's Real Crime strand); two highly-acclaimed hour-long documentaries for Channel 4's Secret History strand (*Magic At War* and *Charge of the Light Brigade*); and *Streakers 2* (ITV1) which followed on from the hugely successful *Streakers*. The award-winning *Cannibals And Crampons*, Ginger Television's first production for BBC ONE's Extreme Lives, enjoyed similar success and lead to the BBC commissioning *Leo Houlding – My Right Foot*.

For CiTV, SMG TV Productions has just secured its biggest ever commission for children's television. *Squeak* is a 50-part pre-school show featuring three mice, Tizzy, Toot and Tog. Aiming for the success of *Tellytubbies*, there is already a merchandising and video campaign in place. Other children's programmes include *Laugh out Loud*, SMG TV Productions' first commission for Nickelodeon. The team is also a major supplier of programmes to ITV1 with *Harry and the Wrinklies*, *How2*, *Ooops!*, *Twister*, *Wanted.com* and *Upstairs Downstairs Bears*, and make *What's So Good About...* for Channel 4 Schools.

