

**Portrait of Mortality: Croydon 1937.**  
**Death and Disposal in a London Suburb**  
Brian Parsons

Comparatively little is known about the format of funerals in England and Wales, particularly during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the growth of cremation has been explored and in recent years a few small-scale surveys assessing contemporary rituals have been published, there is much scope for a comprehensive analysis from 1900 to the present day.<sup>2</sup> The scale, however, involved in gathering and assessing data makes this a daunting, if not impossible, task. Regional studies focussing on specific date is a more approachable solution. As part of a larger project examining the changing face of funerary practices in the south London area over the last 150 years, this paper focusses on the area of Croydon. The location and year were selected on account of the availability of data, with a funeral director's records being the most significant source. In addition, material has been gathered from a few other sources. After profiling the area and presenting the data a number of themes will be identified before findings are contrasted to the present day.

### **Croydon – an Overview**

For the purposes of this research Croydon is classified as part of south London, although in 1937 it was a Surrey county town and it didn't become a London Borough until 1965. The population was about 242,000.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the northern part of the 12,617-acre borough touched urban south London, the southerly tip was semi-rural.

There were 2,800 adult deaths and 76 stillbirths in 1937. The coroner dealt with 171 deaths referrals, being just over 6 per cent. In addition to the two local authority cemeteries (Queen's Road and Mitcham Road) the area was served by a jointly run burial board cemetery (Bandon Hill), four proprietary cemeteries (Crystal Palace District Cemetery, Streatham Park Cemetery, Nunhead Cemetery and West Norwood Cemetery) along with a number of churchyards, such as Sanderstead, Woodmanstearne and Shirley. There were nineteen funeral directors in the Croydon area with the most dominant firm being TH Ebbutt & Son. The business carried out 656 funerals in 1937, so just under one quarter of the deaths. This high number reflects the longevity of establishment and reputation. Correspondingly, the firm's records provide invaluable data. Surveying the information for all the funerals during the year was too large a task, so the first month of each quarter has been sampled and this helps to construct a portrait of mortality in Croydon during 1937.

### **Croydon 1937**

Table 1 indicates where people died.

Table 1 Location of Death

<b>Month</b>	<b>Number of funerals</b>	<b>Deaths at home</b>	<b>Deaths in an institution (hospital, nursing home, etc)</b>	<b>Deaths elsewhere</b>
January	69	36	23	10
April	59	31	22	6
July	36	13	18	5
October	57	32	18	7
Total	221	112 (50.67%)	81 (36.65%)	28 (12.66%)

Just about one half of all deaths occurred at home, while 36.65 per cent were in an institution, such as Croydon General Hospital, Mayday, and Purley along with those at a distance, including Littlehampton and the Royal Cancer Hospital. This second category also included a number of nursing home. The small proportion of ‘deaths elsewhere’ can be accounted for unclear information in the records and also that whilst death may have taken place in one location, it was actually certified in a hospital.<sup>4</sup>

In cases where death took place at a distance from the area another funeral director would have been engaged to place the coffin on a train for collection by the funeral director. Although outside the scope of this four-month analysis but occurring within 1937, this was the case for a death in Bournemouth with the coffin despatched to East Croydon station.

Table 2 Location of deceased between death and funeral

<b>Month</b>	<b>Number of funerals</b>	<b>Deceased at residence until funeral</b>	<b>Deceased kept at hospital/mortuary until funeral</b>	<b>Deceased resting in Ebbutt’s chapel of rest until funeral</b>
January	69	42	1	26
April	59	32	2	25
July	36	14	6	16
October	57	32	2	23
Total	221	120 (54.29%)	11 (4.9%)	90 (40.72%)

Table 2 details where the body was accommodated in the interval between death and the funeral. Just over half (54.29 per cent) rested in the family home until the time of the funeral, a factor that is underpinned by the number of deaths taking place in the family home. When the body remained at home, Ebbutt’s provided either a purple or black catafalque on which the coffin would be positioned. A measurement of the body would be obtained, a coffin constructed and then delivered to the house.

One image: Croydon 1

Caption:

The interior of TH Ebbutt’s chapel of rest at Clarendon Road.

One image: Croydon 2

Caption:

The advertisement for Ebbutt’s chapel in the Croydon Advertiser (12 July 1947)

The provision and use of the chapel of rest by nearly 41 per cent of clients is worthy of further comment. TH Ebbutt’s chapel of rest was constructed in their Clarendon Road premises in West Croydon. This was the location of their coffin workshop and garage while the firm’s head office was at 89 High Street in the centre of Croydon. The exterior of the chapel was constructed in a quasi-ecclesiastical style while the interior had wood panelling, a hammerbeam roof and stained-glass panels in the side windows. Furnishings included an altar upon which rested a wooden cross and two flower vases. To ensure prospective clients knew of its availability, photos of the chapel were included in the firm’s advertisement published in *The Croydon Advertiser*, *The Croydon News* and elsewhere. They also appeared in the album of coffins shown to clients at the time of arranging the funeral. There was no charge for use of the chapel of rest, unless the coffin was accommodated for a number of days. It has not, however, been possible to ascertain the precise charging policy.

Slide: Table 3 Type of funeral

Month	Funerals	Burials	Cremations	Transported out of the country
January	69	62	7	
April	59	55	4	
July	36	29	6	1 (County Wicklow)
October	57	47	10	
Total	221	193 (87.33%)	27 (12.21%)	1

Table 3 shows that 87 per cent of funerals were burials with only 27 cremations out of the 221 funerals, so about 12 per cent. This figure contrasts to the UK proportion in 1937 of 2.44 per cent.

Slide: Table 4 Location of place of burial

Month	Number of Burials	Burials at Mitcham Road Cemetery	Burials at Queen's Road Cemetery	Burials at Bandon Hill	Burials in a local churchyard	Burials in other cemeteries
January	62	19	7	9	19	8
April	55	10	1	15	15	14
July	29	10	2	4	11	2
October	47	14	0	11	15	7
Total	193	53 (27.46%)	10 (5.18%)	39 (20.20%)	60 (31.08%)	31 (16.06%)

In respect of burials, as table 4 indicates, the largest proportion took place in the town's main cemetery on Mitcham Road. This had opened in 1897 after the supply of new graves in Queen's Road that was nearly exhausted.

Reflecting the semi-rurality of south Croydon, burials also took place in both new and reopened graves in a number of local churchyards. Burials in 'other cemeteries' can be categorised as those within a fifteen-to-twenty-mile radius of Croydon and including Hampstead, Brompton, St Marylebone, Walthamstow, Addlestone, the City of London Cemetery and Buckhurst Hill.

In 1937 the Croydon area was well served for burial space; indeed, the year concluded with the announcement of a new American-style lawn cemetery called Greenlawn being opened at Upper Warlingham.<sup>5</sup> Coffins were also transported from Croydon by train for burial in Bath, Bradford and Shrewsbury. The need for the deceased to be reunited in an existing family grave, irrespective of the distance, explains this trend.

Slide: Table 5 Burial by type of grave

Month	Number of Burials	New private grave	Re-opened private grave	Public grave	Public grave with option	New brick grave	Re-opened brick grave
January	62	34	22	4	2		
April	55	25	21	8		1	
July	29	19	8		2		
October	47	21	22	1	1	1	1
Total	193	99	73	13	5	2	1

Table 5 indicates the type of grave with the largest category being new private graves, although 38 per cent were in an existing grave. The 'public graves with option' is worth mentioning as this was an unpurchased grave where the local authority permitted the exclusive right of burial to be purchased within fourteen years of the interment taking place; this was a relatively common practice at the time, but is no longer found.

Just over 19 per cent of funerals were held in church prior to burial or cremation as table 6 indicates. For the remainder of ceremonies, a service was held in the cemetery or crematorium chapel or at the graveside.

Slide: Table 6 Service in church

Month	Funerals	Service in church prior to burial/cremation
January	69	17
April	59	12
July	36	5
October	57	9
Total	221	43 (19.45%)

### **Croydon 1937: Commentary on the data**

From analysis of the above data and supplemented by qualitative sources, three themes about mortality in Croydon during 1937 can be highlighted.

**One image: Croydon 3**

**Caption:**

**TH Ebbutt's Rolls Royce hearse. The firm first used a motor hearse in February 1913. This was followed by a two-decade transitional period as it would be April 1932 before the last animate-powered funeral took place.**

**(Author's collection)**

The first concerns funeral directors caring for the deceased on their premises. Historically, the work of the undertaker/funeral directors has centred around provision of a coffin and transport to the place of burial. However, the changing place of death added a third strand to the services offered as custody of the deceased led to the provision of the chapel of rest.<sup>6</sup> Possession of the body presented the opportunity to offer embalming, a quasi-medical technique that required training by the practitioner. Sanitary treatment gave a modern edge to funeral service, although data from the four months shows that it was only carried out on six occasions.

The second aspect is that the gradual decline in home deaths together with the accommodation of the body by the funeral director that has contributed to the increasing invisibility of mortality in the twentieth century. Access to the chapel of rest was by appointment only and tended to be for the close family, thus eliminating the more informal ritual of calling to pay last respects, thus reducing familiarity with the presence of death.

**Two images: Croydon 4 & 5**

**Caption:**

**Personalisation is not new. TH Ebbutt arranged for a coffin to be transported on a farm cart before a service in All Saints' Church, Warlingham. (Author's collection)**

Thirdly, often described in the local press as 'short and simple', all funeral ceremonies were religious, and while the denomination was not stated in the records, the name of the church and/or minister provides the clue.<sup>7</sup> Church of England clergy read the 'Order for

the Burial of Dead' from the *Book of Common Prayer* or the *Revised Order of 1928* from which they were not permitted to deviate, although congregational hymns could be included. Newspaper accounts of funerals reveal organ music at church services to be entirely of a religious nature, such as from Handel oratorios or Bach's cantatas. Music was not available at services in the cemetery chapels, but organs were installed in crematoria including Croydon and South London, thus permitting the performance of largely sacred music.

Despite this uniformity of the religious service, newspaper coverage of funerals also indicates personalisation through contributions and participation before or after the ceremony. These include the return of a horse drawn hearse for the funeral of a local publican.<sup>8</sup> In June, colleagues carried a coffin through a guard of honour of 100 fellow bus inspectors, drivers and conductors, while in March 250 boys did the same at the funeral of a schoolmaster.<sup>9</sup> Firemen carried the coffin of a former chief officer.<sup>10</sup> An old soldier's flag-covered coffin was placed on a gun carriage.<sup>11</sup> A bus called 'Old Bill' used during WWI appeared at a busman's funeral decorated with a large wheel wreath with a broken spoke to denote a colleague dying in service. Busman lined the street, while drivers and conductors carried the coffin, and a bugler sounded the 'Last post.'<sup>12</sup>

Information regarding the disposition of ashes also reveals a level of personal choice.<sup>13</sup> Confirming national data (which was only gathered for certain years), over 62% were deposited in crematoria Gardens of Remembrance or buried in an existing grave, but others were scattered at a local beauty spot (Leith Hill), on a golf course, at sea and in a back garden.

Table 7: Disposition of ashes from cremation arranged by TH Ebbutt & Son, 1937

<b>Month</b>	<b>Cremations</b>	<b>Ashes scattered at crematorium</b>	<b>Ashes placed in a niche at crematorium</b>	<b>Number of ashes removed from crematorium and location of disposition</b>
January	7	4	0	3 Bury in Blakeney churchyard. Bury in Shirley churchyard. Scatter on Coulsdon Court Golf Club.
April	4	2	0	2 Bury in Eltham churchyard. Bury in Sanderstead churchyard.
July	6	5	0	1 Burial at sea by relatives.
October	10	6	1	3 Removed by a friend. Scattered on Leith Hill. Transported to Scarborough.
Total	27	17 62.96%	1 3.70%	9 33.33%
National figures for 1936 (1937 not available)	11,289	7,038 62.34%	580 5.13%	2,954 26.24%

## Cremation

One image: Croydon 6

Caption:

Croydon Crematorium opened on 26 May 1937. Designed by the borough engineer, CE Boast, it comprised one chapel to accommodate eighty persons and was surrounded by arcaded cloisters.

(Author's collection)

The third aspect for comment is cremation. By 1937, the Croydon area was well served by crematoria. West Norwood had opened in 1915, then South London in 1937. A year later Croydon crematorium was opened.<sup>14</sup> Despite three locations within about a five-mile radius of each other, cremation was not popular; between 1915 and 1935 only 6,330 cremations had taken place at West Norwood, averaging only 316 a year. This was set to change as the directors of the privately-run South London Crematorium were anxious for a return on their investment. They embarked on unprecedented promotion including advertisements placed in over 50 church magazines and local newspapers, along with leaflet distribution, which were authored by the company in contrast to more generic examples supplied by the Cremation Society.<sup>15</sup>

The Company also offered a very 'user-friendly' service to funeral directors including the collection of documentation, the delivery of ashes, sourcing a physician for completing the Confirmatory Medical Certificate, the payment of commission, and few restrictions on the type of coffin accepted. Funeral directors embraced this alternative to burial by announcing they carried out 'Funerals and Cremations'. One firm trading as the 'Croydon Cremation Co' advertised a cremation funeral at a set price, resulting in a dispute with the local NAFD association which was played out in front of the large readership of the *Croydon Advertiser* and *Croydon Times*.<sup>16</sup> All activity increased the awareness of cremation facilities and was manifest in the shifting preference. This was particularly the case at South London Crematorium; as table 8 indicates in the fourth full year of operation over 1,340 cremations were recorded. This rate of increase contrasted significantly to the competing facilities at Croydon and West Norwood (tables 9 & 10); at Croydon the increase was incremental whilst war-time bombing affected the latter.

Table 8 Cremations at South London Crematorium

1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942
191	686	800	1,129	1,342	1,272	1,234

(Source: *The Undertakers' Journal*)

Table 9 Cremations at Croydon Crematorium

1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
110	287	311	452	398	453	566	754	813

(Source: *Pharos* and *The Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal*)

Table 10 Cremations at West Norwood Crematorium

1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942
680	455	333	303	294	202	206

(Source: *Pharos* and *The Undertakers' and Funeral Directors' Journal*)

A decade on from 1937, the popularity of Croydon Crematorium had increased to the extent that a comparison between the number of burials in the Borough's two cemeteries

and that of cremation indicates that the proportion in January 1947 was just over 41 per cent. Nationally, 12.12 per cent of deaths were followed by cremation (table 11).<sup>17</sup>

Table 11 Burials and Cremations in January 1947

Mitcham Road Cemetery	165
Queen's Road Cemetery	46
Cremations	149
Total funerals	360
Cremations at Croydon Crematorium as a proportion of burials in the two main cemeteries	41.38%

(Source: Croydon Borough Council Parks, Cemeteries and Small Holdings Committee 13 February 1947)

The provision of local crematoria eliminated the time and expense of travelling to distant facilities. Combined with skilful marketing to prospective users (Croydon crematorium started newspaper advertising in the 1940s) along with correct positioning of the cremation fee, the abandonment of burial was stimulated as a generation decided on cremation for the first time.

### **Croydon: 2017**

Eighty years on, what does a portrait of mortality in Croydon look like? What has changed? One key fact is that in 1965 the local authority area almost doubled in acreage and the population is around 364,800 (in 2011). In 2017, there were 2,424 deaths in 2016 while in April 2017 there were 189 deaths in the London Borough of Croydon.<sup>18</sup> As 2017 cremation figures have not yet been published, in 2016 there were 1,758 cremations at Croydon Crematorium.

Whilst it has not been possible to obtain comparative data from funeral directors, anecdotal information reveals that virtually no coffins rested at home in the interval between death and the funeral, that embalming is widely practiced and that new graves in the local authority cemeteries are in very short supply.

Staff at Croydon Crematorium carried out a survey of the 150 cremations carried out during April 2017. The type of service is indicated in table 12.

Table 12 Type of service in April 2017

<b>Description of service</b>	<b>Number</b>
Full service	102
Committal only	48
Direct cremation	2
Non-viable foeti	8
Body parts	2

The number of committal services indicates that a significant number of funeral ceremonies took place before the coffin reached the crematorium, whether it was a church or another place of worship/venue.

Combining Church of England, Roman Catholic and 'other Christiana' services as shown in table 13 denotes that 72 per cent of the funerals could be described as 'religious'. This figure is slightly higher than the 2011 Census detailing that 59 per cent of respondents described themselves as Christian. Only 20 per cent could be classified as 'non-religious' embracing civil ceremonies, Humanist or those being family-led.

Table 13 Description of service in April 2017

<b>Description of service</b>	<b>Number</b>
Church of England	74
Roman Catholic	14
Other Christian	16
Hindu	5
Non-religious	30
Other	11

Table 14 Cremations at Croydon Crematorium in January 1947

<b>Disposition of cremated remains</b>	<b>Number</b>
Released to Family or funeral directors	106
Witness scatter in Garden of Remembrance	11
Unwitnessed scatter in Garden of Remembrance	17
Interred in family grave	6
Retained at the Crematorium	10

Finally, in complete contrast to 1937 (table 7), just over 70 per cent of ashes were removed from the crematorium for disposal elsewhere, a figure confirming the national trend of 74.06 per cent.<sup>19</sup> Underpinning the contemporary quest of personalisation, whilst the locations of final disposition ashes are unknown, they are likely to parallel with those of 1937, such as scattering on a golf course or at sea,

## **Conclusion**

This article offers only a brief insight into death and funeral ceremonies in the Croydon area during 1937. Many other areas could have been explored, such as funeral costs and the typhoid outbreak that occurred towards the end of the year. The data presented identifies two key trends. First, when a funeral director offered accommodation of the coffin in a chapel of rest, full advantages was taken of this facility, thus severing the tradition of the body resting at home until the funeral. Secondly, the availability and promotion of local cremation facilities encouraged a departure from burial. The analysis also reveals that although more families opted for ashes to be scattered in the crematorium Garden of Remembrance, others gave consideration to depositing them at locations of significance to the deceased. As the contemporary data indicates, eighty years on such a practice would become the norm.

The use of funeral directors' records to gain an insight into mortality and disposal has been a hitherto unexplored resource. As part of an on-going project into researching funerals in south London this article has identified their importance. Combined with information from burial and cremation records, newspapers and council minutes, this material will collectively increase our understanding of funerals in the twentieth century.

*This article is based on a paper given at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Death, Dying and Disposal Conference held at the University of Central Lancashire in September 2017.*

*The Evolution of the British Funeral Industry in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: From Undertaker to Funeral Director* will be published by Emerald Publishing in 2018.

[www.brianparsons.org.uk](http://www.brianparsons.org.uk)



---

1 Jalland P (2010) *Death in War and Peace. The History of Loss & Grief in England, 1914-1970* Oxford: Oxford University Press

2 See Jupp PC (2005) *From Dust to Ashes. Cremation and the British Way of Death* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, and also Holloway M et al (2010) *Spirituality in Contemporary Funerals: Final Report* Arts and Humanities Research Council/University of Hull, and Holloway M et al (2013) "Funeral aren't nice but it couldn't have been nicer". The makings of a Good Funeral' *Mortality* Vol 18 No 1 pp30-53

3 Report of the Medical Officer of Health for Croydon (1937) p16

4 See Parsons B (Forthcoming) 'Caring for the Deceased: Some observations from funeral directors' records'

5 'New Type of Cemetery' *The Times* 7 December 1936

6 See Parsons B (2014) *The Undertaker at Work: 1900-1950* London: Strange Attractor Press

7 'Mr RJ Leslie' *Croydon Advertiser* 4 September 1937

8 Ebbutt Entry 503 (Cremation on 12 April 1937)

9 'His Ashes were Scattered in his Garden. Croydon Bus Inspector's Last Wish' *Croydon Times* 9 June 1937. Funeral of Dr Pinkerton' *Croydon Times* 3 March 1937 and 'Dr RL Pinkerton' *Croydon Advertiser* 6 March 1937

10 'Fireman's Funeral. Mr Charles Connor Buried at Caterham' *Croydon Advertiser* 10 April 1937

11 'Mr WG Stone. Impressive Funeral at Caterham' *Croydon Advertiser* 2 January 1937

12 'Busman's Funeral. Ex-Soldiers and War Bus Present' *Croydon Advertiser* 11 September 1937

13 'Federation of Cremation Authorities in Great Britain. Cremation Statistics – showing disposition of ashes for year 1936' (1937) *The Undertakers' Journal* February p61

14 'Crematorium Chapel. Bishop of Croydon on "This New Method"' *Croydon Advertiser* 29 May 1937, 'Cremation for Croydon' *Croydon Times* 26 May 1937, and 'Croydon Crematorium. Description of the Buildings and Layout of the Garden of Remembrance' (1937) *Journal of the National Association of Cemetery and Crematorium Superintendents* Vol 2 May pp10-11. See also Jones PH ed (1945) *Cremation in Great Britain* Third Edition London: Pharos Press p53

15 Parsons B (2012) 'A nineteenth Century Initiative Continues: London Proprietary Cemeteries in the Twentieth Century' *ICCM Journal* Vol 80 No 2 pp62-71

16 Parsons B (2017) 'Funeral Directors and the Promotion of Cremation: A Regional Perspective' *Pharos International* Vol 83 No 3 pp32-41

17 'Progress of Cremation in Great Britain, 1938-1948' *Pharos* Vol 15 No 1 p2

18

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/monthlyfiguresondeathsregisteredbyareaofusualresidence> (Accessed 28 August 2017)  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/monthlyfiguresondeathsregisteredbyareaofusualresidence> (accessed 28 August 2017)

19 'Disposition of Cremated Remains in Great Britain' (2016) *Pharos International* Vol 82 No4 p12