

Death, Dying, and Funerals in Victorian (and slightly later) Yorkshire

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We are all going to die. But when, how and even where we die – the social, emotional and spiritual process of dying – is particular to time and place, and Victorian Yorkshire was no exception. While average life expectancy for young adults started to improve from the 1860s onward, the very young would not benefit from improved life expectancy until after the turn of the century. This meant that infant mortality remained high – up to one in five in the very poorest urban districts of Yorkshire’s industrial conurbations. This statistic also highlights the class divide, since dirty, crowded accommodation, malnutrition, and overwork rendered the urban working classes most vulnerable to sudden death from waves of infectious disease. Waves of cholera, dysentery, typhus, typhoid, and influenza were all regular visitors to urban slums, while tuberculosis was endemic amongst young women of all social classes. Medicine at this time was still essentially palliative, with penicillin not to be discovered until 1928.

In an age when death therefore often struck the young and vital, and a minor injury could quickly turn life threatening, we should not be at all surprised to find contemporary folklorists recording an entire gamut of popular death portents which answered the need to feel some sense of control over the uncontrollable. Such portents started right at birth, with the popular belief that a baby born with a caul was unable to die by drowning – unless the caul were later sold, in which case the purchaser acquired this protection. A baby who failed to cry at baptism was not long destined for the world; how many infants were discreetly pinched at the critical moment remains a matter for conjecture. Nowadays, with infant mortality no longer the norm, this particular death portent belief has become transmuted to being merely unlucky. William Henderson notes how at the meal which traditionally followed a baptism, the “groaning-cheese” would be ritually cut by the new father, “taking care not to cut his own finger while so doing, since in that case the child would die before reaching manhood”. In 1911, when Richard Blakeborough published his *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs of the North Riding of Yorkshire*, there were still those who considered it ominous should an infant’s first tooth appear in its upper jaw. Rocking an empty cradle was also popularly reckoned to be fatal to its erstwhile occupant, but this at least was avoidable. Given the aforementioned high infant mortality throughout the period, such desperate resort to magical measures is understandable. It also gives the lie to assertions by certain historians that, inured to grief by cold, dirt and hunger, the Victorian working classes cared little for their young children.

Attested in Yorkshire and further afield, another childhood death portent had it that a child who picked cow parsley would by so doing cause the death of his or her mother, hence the plant’s popular names “mother-die” and “stepmother’s blessing”. The latter especially must have reflected the anxieties of Victorian children around blended families, as they nowadays would be called, frequently engendered by parental death and remarriage. Also attested in 1911 was the folk belief that a mole on the outside corner of either eye was

believed to denote the likelihood of a sudden death – presumably that of the bearer, although Richard Blakeborough, the folklorist who recorded it, does not specify.

Deaths were popularly supposed to go in threes; upon examining his parish registers the Reverend Wood Rees of Barmby Moor was astonished to discover a factual basis to this particular belief. Attending four funerals in unbroken succession was also considered unlucky, although this only seems to have applied if the person concerned was unmarried. Bachelors and spinsters who had attended three funerals in a row were therefore advised that, in order to avoid dying single, they must at least be present during part of a wedding service before standing at the graveside of a fourth funeral.

There was furthermore the Yorkshire belief that a body must not remain unburied on the Sabbath. Given that Sunday was the only non-working day, if a death occurred later in the week then this was actually quite possible, and brought with it the alarming prospect of three further deaths in the locality in quick succession.

Birds of many species which flew about or hovered over a house, rested on the window-sill, or tapped at the window pane were popularly regarded as foretelling a death in the house. In Nidderdale, *gabble-ratchet* was a local term for the nightjar and meant “corpse hound”. This term was first recorded around 1665, and appears to have been a popular conflation of the medieval wild hunt. The same term could also be found further south in Leeds during this period, although there it denoted the souls of unbaptised children which supposedly haunted the place of death.

Other popular death portents involving birds included a single magpie, known in regional dialect as the *pyenate*, hovering over the doomed person. To see a single magpie or, according to some variants, a raven croaking near a house for an unusually long time, was also widely regarded as portending death. However, quickly making the sign of the cross in the air could avert the bad luck. Another means of averting the bad luck was to remove one’s hat and make a polite bow to the bird. A pair of magpies, however, was thought to be lucky. This belief lingers today in the popular rhyme beginning “one for sorrow, two for joy”. Indeed magpie is a contraction of “maggot pie”, further suggestive of its association with death as a carrion bird.

Hooting owls were also particularly associated with death. The owl was thought to possess a keen sense of smell, and so be particularly able to detect disease early on. This is a very old belief attested in the fourteenth century by Chaucer, who wrote in his *Parlement of Foules* of “the owl eke that of deth the bode bringeth”.

Meanwhile, children in Victorian Yorkshire might gather round a cherry tree and sing as follows to the cuckoo: “Cuckoo, cherry tree / Come down and tell me / How many years afore I dee.” This is another medieval belief which survived well into modern industrial times. A cock crowing during the night rather than at dawn was also considered portentous of approaching death, while the rock pigeon was widely regarded as being essentially a bird of death when or wherever it appeared. The stonechat, swallow, and jackdaw – especially if they flew down the chimney – also were ominous.

Birds were not the only creatures popularly credited with the ability to foretell death. The belief that a dog howling under a window was a sure token that someone within would soon die was still being noted by John Fairfax-Blakeborough as late as 1935. Meanwhile, if a cat deserted a house where there was sickness and refused to be lured back, this was thought to foretell the patient's demise.

In rural Yorkshire, "riddling" the chaff left over from the harvest was another means of predicting death. The procedure for this was to firstly obtain a "riddle", or sieve, and some chaff. The ritual should take place in a barn, at midnight with the barn doors left wide open. Should the "riddler" observe two people bearing a coffin past the open doors of the barn while carrying out this procedure, he or she was destined to die during the following twelve months. Related is the custom of "ass-riddling", in which the ashes from the household fire were riddled onto the hearth before retiring to bed: in his recollections of *Forty Years in a Moorland Parish*, Reverend J. C. Atkinson commented that "the superstition still lingers [...] that if any of the inmates of the house be going to die within the year, the print of his, or her, shoe will be found impressed in the soft ashes; – a superstition which has led to many a thoughtless, but very cruel and mischievous joke."

Henderson and others recorded another popular divinatory custom, that of keeping vigil upon St Mark's Eve. This involved keeping watch in the churchyard for an hour either side of midnight on St Mark's Eve for three successive years (or, in some variants, for three successive nights in the one year). On the third occasion the watcher would observe the ghostly spectres, or *waffs*, as often known locally, of those destined to die during the following twelve months, passing in grim array one by one into the church. However, if the watcher fell asleep during the vigil, it was they themselves who were doomed.

The spectral world also provided its share of death portents, notably the "black dog" across northern England. One example was Bloody Tongue, who reputedly haunted Bent Ing Bottoms near Bradford. Black dogs, also variously known as *barguest*, *padfoot*, and *shriker* according to local dialect, were widely believed to appear before, or just after, the death of a person known to him or her who saw it.

The home was no respite from portents of death; whether knockings and creakings – probably caused by settlement of timber framed buildings – or the death watch beetle whose pervasive tick-tick sound reportedly made many an otherwise brave Yorkshireman or woman blanch. A clock stopping was also widely taken to signify a death in the offing.

If the fire threw out a hollow oblong cinder this was known as a "coffin" and thought to portend death, but if bag-shaped it was called a "purse", or "poss", and thought to indicate good fortune. There was also the folk belief that taking a light out of the house on New Year's Day meant that somebody within the household would die during the following year. T. F. Thistleton Dyer supplies further detail:

"[i]n the North Riding of Yorkshire, those who have not the materials for making a fire, generally sit without one on New Year's Day; for none of their neighbours, although hospitable at other times, will suffer them to light a candle at their fires. If they do, it is believed that one of the family will die within the year."

Writing of the Whitby area c1820, George Young adds dramatically that “[...] it is exceedingly dangerous to give a light out of the house, nay, even to throw out the ashes, or sweep out the dust!” Presumably this latter precaution guarded against the risk of throwing out even a still-glowing ember.

Breaking a mirror was also widely thought to foretell a death in the family, and is another portent belief which still survives in attenuated form. Also picture-glass: a picture falling, cautioned Richard Blakeborough, spoke clearly of a death in the family at no very distant date. If the glass remained unbroken then misfortune of some kind was hanging overhead, but possibly everything may come right in the end.

Wild bird feathers, especially pigeon feathers, were thought to delay death. Hence removing feathers from the bed would help the dying person on their way. A more extreme – and undoubtedly highly effective – solution was to move the dying person from the bed altogether. Alternatively this effect could be used to advantage, with instances on record of feathers being inserted into the bed to “hold back” the individual in this world for one last important visitor.

In Victorian Wensleydale, it was recorded that it was customary for the female neighbours to gather in the house as a death approached. This was known locally as a passing, although it is unclear whether the gathering took place in the death chamber itself – and whether this was experienced as an act of neighbourly support or as merely intrusive.

As soon as death was observed, in many households the windows and or/door would be opened, and silence kept for a short while. Blakeborough notes that furthermore “the fire, if such be burning in the room, is immediately extinguished, and it is not an uncommon thing for the looking-glass to be either draped entirely, turned with its face to the wall or removed from the room”. Sometimes the door handles were also covered, the aim being to disguise reflective surfaces that might distract or even entrap the departing soul as it took flight. The window coverings would be closed, or might even be taken down and temporarily replaced with white sheets. These sheets were often kept especially for this purpose, also made as part of the bottom drawer and handed down the family.

Meanwhile, the passing-bell both announced the death and scared evil spirits away. This is another medieval funeral custom that was carried on well into the modern period, until the ringing of church bells was forbidden by the 1915 Defence of The Realm Act. With the exception of outlying rural districts, the custom of ringing the passing-bell was not widely revived after the war. The number and pattern of tolls denoted the age and sex of the deceased, with exact conventions varying from district to district and even village to village.

Until the 1930s, when the first Chapels of Rest were opened, the dead were customarily kept and carefully watched at home. Laying-out was a very physical but also precise task, performed by local women for token payment, or payment in kind. Shrouds and other burial clothes were becoming commercially available toward the end of the twentieth century, but many were still home made; Bedale Museum possesses a particularly delightful pair of knitted burial stockings which were probably made as part of a bride’s bottom drawer. Victorian coffins were narrower than nowadays, so that the hands had to be crossed on the

chest or pelvis. Big, heavy pennies held the eyelids closed – if the corpse’s eyes were open it was seeking another – and were sometimes known as “a penny for St Peter”. It is unclear why they were called this, although, since St Peter traditionally opens the gates to heaven, it is possible that the custom was by way of a viaticum. Yet again there is a sense here that the living owed the newly dead care and protection in the vulnerable period between death and burial.

On a purely practical level, candles around the body provided light while family and neighbours sat up watching the body; in an echo of the medieval baptismal rite, they were also popularly supposed to deter evil spirits from interfering with the deceased. This latter was also the reason widely given for placing a saucer of salt upon the corpse’s chest. Visitors touched the lain-out deceased in a gesture of solidarity and reconciliation; to refuse to do so invited bad dreams, and there persisted an old belief that a murdered corpse would bleed at the touch of its killer. Belief in corpse cures was also, in both senses of the word, common. In the earlier Victorian period there was (no doubt conveniently for some) even a belief that a will “signed” by the deceased was valid provided the body was still warm. If rigor mortis failed to set in so that the body remained limp, or “lethwaite”, this was a sign that another death was to come.

Waking is most often associated with Irish immigrants to Yorkshire’s towns and cities, but there is plentiful evidence from this region and elsewhere that it was also an indigenous English custom long predating the Irish influx. Sometimes wakes might become rather raucous, including sexual innuendo and suggestive games such as “hot cockles” where blindfolded players attempted to spank the rears of their fellows. However, there are other recorded examples suggesting a rather more decorous affair at which hymns were sung, interspersed with quiet reminiscences and a shared tobacco pipe until the sun came up.

Meanwhile family, friends, and neighbours were “bidden” to the funeral with written invitations and funeral biscuits. Sometimes this was done by friends and neighbours, sometimes by the undertaker. “Roundlegs” of *Sheffield Songs* fame, who “[...] to Wadsley went/ With burying cakes he was sent/ Roundlegs tumbled o’er a wall/ Let all his spice cakes fall” is thought to have been the assistant to George Pearce, confectioner of Grindlegate whose funeral biscuits were famous in the area. Meanwhile Atkinson recorded how, during the 1860s, he had chanced upon a dish of small, crisp sponge cakes sitting in a confectioner’s window in Whitby. The confectioner informed him that these were not for sale, but had been baked to order for a funeral and were known by the locals as “avril-breads”. A keen amateur philologist, Atkinson was struck by the similarity between this and the old north-eastern dialect word “arval” denoting a “succession-ale” by which heirs to the deceased person were formally recognised. Like other varieties of survivalist explanation so beloved by Victorian folklorists, it is possible this may contain a small grain of truth, insofar as the dialect of north-eastern England has indeed been heavily influenced by the region’s Scandinavian heritage. That said, this fails to explain the custom’s prevalence right across the British Isles, and ultimately there is no documentary trail to support Atkinson’s theory.

The biscuits would have been wrapped in paper printed with suitably lugubrious images and words, and the packets sealed with black wax and ribbon. F. H. Marsden reports

of the Calder valley that while it was considered rude to decline a funeral invitation without compelling reason, it was unthinkable to attend without having been bidden thus. On the day of the funeral itself, mourners gathered at the house to share refreshments, of more funeral biscuits and “burnt wine”. There are some references to special ceremonial vessels being used for this ceremony, including a shared cup or tankard for the drink. Could this custom possibly have been a distant echo of the pre-Reformation funeral mass, long since transposed into the domestic realm of folklore? As for the drink itself, Sidney Oldall Addy describes it as “a dark-looking liquid, with a strongly aromatic smell,” which “consisted of ale spiced with cloves, nutmeg, ginger, and mace”.

Scarves, gloves, even rings might be distributed amongst the mourners present, possibly echoing the medieval practice of giving dole. Whether Victorian mourners knew or cared about the custom’s origins, it certainly was a useful means of marking out favoured guests, with the principal mourners receiving black kid gloves and the servants worsted. A recurring character in local folklorists’ accounts of this custom is the (unnamed) thrifty vicar’s wife who carefully accumulates sufficient of these scarves given to her husband at funerals that she is able to make herself a dress from them – bearing in mind too the full-skirted styles of the time.

Before motor hearses made their appearance in the 1920s, most working class funeral processions went on foot. Depending on the roads, a wheeled bier might be hired from the local parish church to carry the coffin. Otherwise bearers were obliged to carry the heavy, awkwardly shaped and frequently leaking coffin quite literally over hill and dale; depending on the distance, in some very rural areas this might take a day or even more. Hymns were sung along the way. It was considered unlucky to meet the sun, but lucky if it rained. Certain “corpse roads” were traditionally used: with enclosure being only recent, there was the widespread belief that passage of a corpse over private land created a right of way. This led to the custom of inserting pins into the gatepost by way of symbolic payment, as attested in Victorian Leeds and Wakefield. Few of these corpse roads remain today and those which do, such as that in Swaledale, running for sixteen miles from Keld to the parish church at Grinton, are now heritage attractions.

Atkinson noted how at the funeral service “the chief mourners kneel round the coffin, which is usually laid in the chancel [...] during the reading of the Psalm and the Lesson, the males with their hats always on; and after the Lesson three verses of a Psalm are usually sung before leaving the Church”. Funeral sermons, the Protestant replacement for medieval prayers for the dead, were commonplace; these were sometimes printed up much in the manner of present day orders of service and kept as mementoes.

While the service was underway, female “servers” remained at the house in order to set out the funeral tea. Refreshments typically served included ale and large quantities of boiled/smoked ham. Indeed, so ubiquitous was this latter item that it was the basis of the popular local saying “to be put away with ham”. M. C. F. Morris also mentions bread, tea, sugar, beef, mustard, and salt as items typically served on these occasions. As at christenings and weddings, a cake often stood as the centrepiece of the feast. R. W. Bishop relates an amusing incident where

“An old farmer was dying, and the owner of his farm with his wife had walked over the moor to enquire about him and if possible see him. The old housewife, who was notoriously mean and miserly, made them a cup of tea, explaining that she was too poor to provide more than simple bread and butter for their entertainment. Unfortunately this was overheard by a grandchild, who, childlike, exclaimed, ‘Oh! grandmother, there’s such a beautiful cake in the cupboard.’ The old woman shouted angrily, ‘Hod thee noise, doant ye know t’cake’s for t’burying!’ ” (p. 147)

Consumption of a hearty meal upon return from the graveside symbolised the resumption of normal life, with the fare on offer at these occasions counterpointing the relatively restrained refreshments prior to the burial. Social differentiation was also again in evidence: at the funeral of one Yorkshire farmer: “[t]he better class were regaled in the parlour with wines, spirits and cakes; the smaller folk were offered ale or spirits in the front kitchen; the labourers had ale and bread and cheese in the back kitchen”. Similarly Dr Bishop, who lived in Kirkby Malzeard from 1894 to 1906, describes how the “quality” were served port and sponge cake, while the “many” were provided with mulled ale and parkin.

As well as quantity, the quality of the food served at a funeral was important, being always of the very best which the family could afford. As Fletcher remarked:

“I have more than once heard friends, on taking their leave after the funeral tea, give some such comforting assurance to the bereaved family as the following: ‘Well, nobody can say but what you’ve given him (or her) a most beautiful an’ respectable funeral [...] You’ve done ivverthing by him you could; there’s neea two ways about that!’ ” (p. 177)

Sometimes however, the commentators were more critical: “They buried him wi’ cowl ham. Now, I’ve putten away three childer, and they wor all buried wi’ roast beef and plum pudding”. Clearly the social pressure to put on a good show was immense.

The folklore accounts suggest that the funeral tea was frequently a convivial, even a jovial occasion. According to Fairfax-Blakeborough, “there is a curious idea in rural Yorkshire that port wine is a teetotal drink, and cases have been known of staunch teetotalers rather overstepping the mark at funerals”. Fairfax-Blakeborough also recounts how an elderly villager was advised by her doctor to get out more. A fortnight later, the patient apparently reported that she had since attended three funerals, and consequently felt “just as dowly ez Ah was”.

The quantity of food served was considered very important, as remarked by Blakeborough: “[t]hose who have never seen what provision is made for an affair of this kind can form but a very poor idea of the actual amount of food provided for and consumed by those who follow as mourners to the graveside.” Atkinson records that at the funeral of a Cleveland churchwarden, “between two and three hundredweight of meat, mainly beef and bacon, was put on the tables.” Meanwhile M. E. Fowler notes the belief that the more heavy the feast, the more honour done to the dead. Quantity of food served, and the cost thereof,

attracted criticism from funeral reform campaigners who argued that the money could be more productively spent on the living.

A final important task was to put the bees into mourning, and to formally tell them of the death in the household. This included ritually offering them a portion of everything, often down to the clay pipes and tobacco: nothing must be omitted, for in some undefined way the bees watched over the welfare of those to whom they belonged, and it would be unwise to offend them. As the items were presented, a formula was spoken – the wording varied slightly from district to district, but essentially telling the bees that their former owner was dead and commanding them to work for the new owner. Perhaps this otherwise strange custom makes more sense if we remember that bees were popularly believed to be souls of the dead; so this may have been a propitiation ritual, indicating once again the need to manage the dead. There are documented examples of this custom being performed in the Yorkshire Dales throughout our period, and as late as the 1960s (and the author has been verbally informed of instances into the 2000s).

Many of the customs discussed here were directly inherited from the Middle Ages – pre-Reformation survivals transposed, as Ronald Hutton has discussed in relation to calendar customs, into the informal, domestic realm of folklore. This accords with copious other documentary and material evidence that the Reformation took centuries fully to become established in the remoter parts of England; if indeed it ever truly did. Interestingly, from the available evidence it appears there was little difference between Anglicans and Nonconformists when it came to taking part in such customs. Protestantism could not subsume the profound human drive to maintain and negotiate post-mortem relationships with the dead (“continuing bonds”, in modern psychological parlance), through the mechanisms of contagious and sympathetic magical thinking.

Furthermore, alongside direct survivals, we can see in the funerary folklore of Victorian and early twentieth century Yorkshire such magical thinking being creatively applied to the products of modern mass manufacture. Examples particularly include the “traditional” covering of the mirror in the death chamber; since affordable silver glass mirrors were not mass manufactured until the 1830s, as a popular custom it cannot predate then. This also applies to the belief that the household clock stopping was a death portent.

In addition to conducting the dead where they need to *go*, an effective funeral gets the living where they need to *be* (this pithy summary being the words of *The Good Funeral Guide* author, Charles Cowling). In Victorian and later Yorkshire, this aspect is particularly seen in the gift-giving and hospitality customs associated with funerals. As the social anthropologist Marcel Mauss’s gift theory reminds us, gifts are rarely “just given; rather, they come loaded with messages about the relationship – actual, perceived or desired – between giver and recipient”. Thus, whether an invitation to a funeral, scarves, gloves and other items, or food and drink, the real gift being given was that of social recognition and inclusion. It follows from this that the gift-giving customs of Victorian and slightly later Yorkshire functioned as a means, actively and calculatedly, of manipulating social relationships, whether to include or exclude, to flatter or to snub. Something of this may especially be

perceived in the customary rules around funeral attendance, and in the judgements pronounced upon funeral teas.

Undoubtedly the funerals of working class Victorian Yorkshiremen and Yorkshirewomen included a degree of aspirational imitation of upper class customs, as well as conspicuous consumption. However, in emphasising these factors, historians of this subject too often have neglected creative agency on the part of the Victorian working classes in getting the dead where they needed to go and the living where they needed to be, in the context of a time when life was frequently short and precarious. By drawing upon evidence from contemporary regional folklore collections, it is hoped here to have gone some way toward redressing this balance.

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