

Dispelling the myth about chipboard coffins

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The coffin is one of the most visible items at a funeral and, for many people, the purchase cost can be as much of a significant factor as the actual look of the coffin. Also it is important to recognise the growing public interest and awareness of environmental issues surrounding the use of certain materials.

Chipboard coffins

The purchase price of a veneered chipboard coffin is generally less than that of a natural timber coffin, and this presents a popular choice for customers looking for an inexpensive coffin with a traditional appearance. The basic raw material used to make the chipboard is timber that has been fed through a series of wood chippers, after which the chips are dried in a giant drum and mixed with a glue resin prior to being spread on a press or fed through a roller in order to compress the chips at high temperature, making sheets. The board is then cooled, trimmed and sanded. The application of a wood veneer/laminate is a separate process - this is done to improve the appearance of the surface.

There is a perception that the industrial process and chemicals used in the manufacture of chipboard do not consider the environment. In fact, the process of making chipboard is highly efficient as chipboard is made on a massive industrial scale by four main companies. Most chipboard mills use innovative heat recovery and carbon neutral generation in the process, and the wood used in the process can be from recycled and sustainable sources as required for Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) accreditation.

The wood used by a typical mill to manufacture chipboard is in the region of 500,000 tonnes

per year - much of this is made up of recycled wood leaving a lot of virgin wood and trees to be used for other timber and joinery products.

It is true that chipboard is made using resin which contains a small amount of formaldehyde which is listed as poison and carcinogenic. Although the commercial use of formaldehyde is licensed and controlled, the substance is also naturally present in many everyday things around us, including natural wood, plastics, cosmetics, cardboard and cigarette smoke. On this basis use of the chemical is not banned but controlled to avoid concentration and over exposure. In the UK all chipboard mills produce to BS standards to E1 grade which is the best available. In other countries some mills produce to E2 and E3.

FAQ - What has sustainability got to do with me?

Over the years, the Earth's natural resources have been used to support the lifestyle we expect today. Many commodities have been exploited and, with increasing demand from developing countries, some resources will get much more expensive before they run out. It is too late to change what has already happened but it is increasingly clear that the ongoing development and the security of future generations will be at risk if we do not change things soon.

Nowadays there are more than 6 billion people in the world, and likely to be 9 billion by 2050, and the pressure from the need for space, energy, raw materials and the

growing prosperity of developing countries will increase demand for consumer goods. As members of the funeral trade we can play our part in managing our resources better, we have the opportunity to look at what we do now and make changes that will reduce our needs as well as helping to cut our costs - this may be by simply reducing energy usage, recycling or working out an ongoing strategy to change custom and practice.

The National Association of Funeral Directors Environmental Advisory Group will encourage and support members of the trade association in developing good practice within the funeral industry in matters relating to the environment.

