



How Bellacouche took a leaf from Siberia

At first glance it's difficult to see what this detail of a horseman found locked in the permafrost of the Pazyryk Mountains in Siberia and dating from 600 BC has got to do with the British wool industry.

The clue is the fact that the fragment is in felt and is part of a body of evidence proving that the wool by-product was widely used in burial tombs.

In 17th Century England it was common practice for people to be buried in a woollen shroud and in 1666, the year of the Great Fire of London, Parliament ruled that everybody should be buried in wool rather than hemp, linen or silk.

At that time the wool industry, as now, was in difficulty. The practice of using wool at funerals gradually declined and is only now once more beginning to be accepted as a more sustainable alternative to traditional wood coffins.

History, however, has paved the way for Anne Belgrave, who lives on the Welsh Borders, and Yuli Somme from Dartmoor, to work together to design and produce a new and softer alternative to the traditional coffin.

They believed that there was a need for funerals to be more relevant than they are to current lifestyles.

So they produced a shroud shaped like a leaf which they see as a metaphor for the changing seasons of life. They have a number of designs all of which make use of this woodland image.

Their felted wool leaf shrouds are used instead of coffins for both woodland and traditional burials.

It is an environmentally friendly product, they point out, made as it is made from sustainable, biodegradable materials which return to the earth.

Each shroud is individually made, and constructed of five layers of felt with a built-in wooden frame and handles.

They operate from a workshop in Powys called Bellacouche, the old name of the converted barn they use which means 'beautiful resting place'.

It is close to the church and at one time was used to keep the coffins before burial, so the tradition continues.

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