Bellacouche
down to earth - using wool
Old traditions... new ideas

Why is this different?

"It makes the whole experience of sitting with death so much more real than a coffin. And her body just seemed incredibly well held and entrusted to the felt."
- Gladys Paulus, 2020

“I wanted to feel that he would be cosy in his last resting place. The felted wool and curved shaping made him look safely wrapped rather than in a hard unforgiving box. Thank you.”
- Q. Morgan, 2021

“I am a funeral celebrant, well used to dealing with ‘wooden’ boxes but a recent burial used a Leafcocoon. A body prepared for a funeral has never moved me so much. I knew the deceased, but that wasn’t the reason and the ‘moving’ wasn’t all sad. The simple beauty of the shroud, its dignity and the hope it held out for the way the energy contained in this body would be recycled by nature, brought me a degree of comfort that was most unexpected and gave me strength to conduct the ceremony. Thank you for helping to make grief more bearable, softer, gentler – everyone should be buried this way.”
- Lesley Mary Close, 2021

Bellacouche - meaning beautiful resting place - is a wool focussed enterprise based on Dartmoor, in Devon, specialising in making felt shrouds and ‘soft coffins’. I also hand-make useful felt products and accessories for the home and felting kits with unique themes such as Feet Felt, Origami Felt Swan and Postcard Needle Felting kits.

Yuli Sømme
The Final Footprint

Approximately 95% of coffins used for cremation in the UK are made of particle board or MDF. During cremation each of these emits the equivalent of a 2,268 mile journey by car. If, like me, you are mindful of the impact humans have on the environment, then there is much we can do to reduce our final footprint.

From the inks on the printed order of ceremony (if there is one), to the flowers (if there are any) on the coffin (if there is one), the best funerals are when the family feel empowered to make their own choices without the hindrance of current convention. Old traditions, however, often have an eloquent simplicity. By looking to the past we can see that some very ancient traditions, such as simple shroud burial, can be beautiful, poignant and respectful. Couple this with a natural burial in one of the growing number of sites in the UK, and you will have an ecological funeral just as nature intended. The choice of using wool born of these Isles for burial, seems an obvious one; from soil-to-soil and nature’s simplest solution. For more help and advice here are the best organisations:

www.naturaldeath.org.uk  Helpline: 01962 712 690
Association of Natural Burial Grounds, help and advice on funeral planning without the mythology.

www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk
The not-for-profit helpful resource.

What is a soft coffin?

Everyone knows what a conventional coffin looks like; personally, it’s not an object I find aesthetically pleasing, and its environmental impact has troubled me for some time. Twenty years ago I began looking into alternatives using the fibre - wool - that I have worked with as a weaver and felt maker all my adult life. I was inspired by a 17th Century British Law that decreed that the dead must be buried in wool. Thinking outside the box, I combine the softness of wool with the practicality and strength of wood as support, but not as a box. Because of the layers and thickness of the felt there is a gentler aesthetic that people find comforting and approachable.
The Leafcocoon

This is how the Leafcocoon is structured:
A padded leakproof wooden frame, encased in felt, with six strong handles, bears a weight of up to 20 stone. Extra-large sizes can be made to order. This forms the base to which the shroud is strapped.

A thick felt shroud cocoons the body, giving a smooth outline. Hand-made hazelwood toggles add a literal sense of a Devon hedgerow and are used to secure a cover.

An optional plain cover gives an extra smooth outline. A simpler version of the Leafcocoon, called the Shroudcocoon, can be made to order. This has a DIY element, but has the advantage it can be rolled up for storage. Please ask Yuli for details.

The cover can be decorated by Yuli, or you might like to do it yourself, with friends and family. Please ask for details.

Different sizes kept in stock; please call or email Yuli for more help and advice.

Reflecting our ancient heritage of burial in wool in a safe and practical way, and changing the conventions of a coffin, the Leafcocoon is a multi-layered cocoon of thick organic wool felt securely held on a wooden base. A complete ‘soft coffin’. There are no hard edges and no plastic, just natural materials for a modern ecological funeral.
“Absolutely everything needed was provided… A most beautiful addition to anyone’s journey… a very hard day made so much easier with the Leafcocoon.”

- H. Millard, 2021
The Oseberg Cradle

The serene shape of a famous Norwegian Viking burial ship inspired the Oseberg Cradle. Craftsman-made by Sam Horrocks from local wood, this is designed for burial or cremation and has been tested for safety. Using traditional and natural materials and methods it is carefully constructed without glues or nails, just the three traditional materials: hemp, wool and local sustainable wood. The graceful steam-bent curves add a poetic touch to this *soft coffin*. Different sizes kept in stock; please call or email Yuli for more help.

Why a cradle?

We are cradled at the beginning of life, so why not at the end? I designed this *soft coffin* as an alternative to a box, which many feel distances us from the process of grieving. The soft woollen shroud has a gentler presence, helping us to connect with our loss. The strong hemp and wood handles are covered in soft felt for ease of carrying, and it is usually carried low. An added cover softens the whole shape and, as with the *Leafcocoon*, decoration is an option. The handles are threaded through the cover.
“Thanks so much for creating such a beautiful and useable alternative to a tradition coffin.”
- Louise Winter, Funeral Director, Poetic Endings
The Heritage Shroud

A burial can take place without a conventional coffin. The *Bellacouche Heritage Shroud* enfolds the body in thick layers of felt, unlike other textile shrouds that abruptly reveal the shape. It’s like a papoose, and presents the person in a comforting, unchallenging way. Different sizes are usually in stock and can be posted within 24 hours; please call or email Yuli for more help and advice.

An organic wool shroud intrinsically reduces the environmental impact of a burial. The shearing of the sheep takes place in early summer and the wool immediately starts to regrow in time for the winter. The 17th Century Burial in Wool Act was used to encourage our wool trade for economic reasons; Bellacouche promotes the use of local wool for ecological reasons.
“We used Bellacouche’s simple shroud at a burial. It looked beautiful and elegant. It was very easy to handle and use. It sat on trestles for the main ceremony.”

- Simon Smith, Heart & Soul Funerals, 2020
Small Cocoons

The Baby or Child Cocoon is a gentle container of organic wool felt. It is a simple construction with a soft-knit hemp wrap inside. Unlike conventional coffins these can be easily cradled whilst having enough firm structure in the base to be safely held. Choose from either a Swan’s Wing or Leaf. Each cocoon is made to order and can usually be completed within 24 hours. Prices vary accordingly so please call or email me for more information.

www.childbereavementuk.org
Helpline: 0800 02 888 40
Offers support and advice.
“Just wanted to say a personal thank you to you for the beautiful cocoon you supplied for the family I have been supporting. It was lovely to place her into something so natural and warm and I know her family will have taken great comfort in being able to do that.”

- Natalie, Registered Children’s Nurse
Poppy Seed Urn

Funerary Urns for ashes based on a poppy seed head design. Each includes a hand-made recycled cotton bag and vegetable starch plastic bag inside to hold the ashes. 100% compostable. The handle is made from hedgerow wood, usually hazel, which is so abundant on Dartmoor. I like to choose quirky curves which add an individual quality to the urn. Available in white, grey or dark brown combinations.
Coffin or Shroud Cover

A bespoke leaf-shaped felt to cover a shroud or any type of coffin, softening and smoothing the outline, expressing a person’s life. These can be kept as a heritage piece or buried with the person as a kind of grave gift. I use a combination of 2D needle felting and appliquéing naturally-dyed felt motifs. Forms tend to be stylised and simple. Average measurement: 82” X 31” (shoulders) narrowing to 20”, discussed at the time of ordering along with the design.
Or design and decorate your own

The *Lifetime Memory Cover* kit enables you to decorate your own cover to be used for any type of coffin or shroud. You don’t have to be a felt maker, religious, artistic, female, strong or old; but you can be any or all of these things. In other words, this may be for YOU!

The creative act of making, using the soft and beautiful coloured wools, can be an invitation to friends and family to open the often difficult discussion about death. From my own experience, I know that this is beneficial to the very young, as well as the old… and anyone in-between.

Until the last century, mortality rates during childbirth were very high, so women were encouraged to include their own shroud in their ‘marriage chest’. Fortunately, these days, and in this country at least, maternal death rates are low and most people have a longer life expectancy than in the past. This kit is designed for anyone who would just like to be prepared. The focus is on decorating a leaf-shaped coffin or shroud cover; something that reflects your life and passions. This can be used to cover a coffin or a shroud.

On purchase, you will have access to online tuition. My video takes you through some simple and very creative 2D needle felting techniques, and you can add your own skills of hand or machine embroidery. Needle felting is drawing, but with wool rather than paper and pencil. It’s a very forgiving medium and I encourage experimentation and using other materials too; so I include some small pieces of felt to make samples.

**What’s in the kit:**
- 100% organic wool Cover (cream) (s, m or l)
- Average size: 82” X 31”, tapering to 20”
- Pure wool needle felting pad and tool + 6 needles
- Dyed wool tops
- Small pieces of felt for sampling
- Access to online downloadable tuition as well as simple written instructions
- Extra materials can be purchased from the website or recommended sources.

The cover is made of 100% organic white British wool felt. It is cut in 3 different sizes and shapes: simple, oak, or fluted. Grey or brown covers subject to availability.
The swan appears in many ancient myths as the transformer, continuing the Cycle of Life.

Craft and making is about something that lies so deep within us as humans; we have always made objects imbued with spirit and this unique kit combines origami with needle felting.

Full details and purchasing are on the website.
“If you have to make a thing, you must know the background, the skeleton, the foundations the materials have actually grown out of, their connections with their natural background, their bio-mechanics - then building can begin. And then the reason for making, the purpose, the human connection. All sides must be considered and known. You cannot just make.”
- Ethel Mairet, Handweaving and Education, (Faber & Faber 1952)
Pet Shrouds

The death of a pet can cause real grief. A ceremony for burial or even cremation, can be helpful in acknowledging the loss and the love and joy a pet has brought to those affected. To enfold and wrap your pet in the tactile warmth of wool felt for burial can be comforting.

For children, pet ceremonies for burial are a very good way of gently introducing the concept of the cycle of life, and enhancing our understanding of what it is to be alive. Honouring and marking the death of a loved pet can give children and adults a lasting and positive memory of a precious life.

I make a standard range of pet shrouds from small to large. These have wood slats sewn into the base and felt straps to help support the body during burial. The medium and large shrouds are also open at the side to make it easier to tuck in your pet. The extra small pet/animal shrouds are more like pouches, closing with a handmade wooden toggle. Please see the website for more details.
About Yuli Sømme

Yuli was born in Norway and although she has lived most of her life in Devon, the traditional weaving and knitting heritage of Norway has deeply influenced her since she was old enough to hold needles to knit with. She has always had an affinity with wool in particular.

The foundation for her craft is environmental, imbued with a soil-to-soil ethic, caring for our environment and each other at every step.

Everything is hand-made to a high standard.

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