

Burial at Sea



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Thanks to Clive Pearson, Immediate Past President of the British Institute of Funeral Directors for this update.

A licence may be obtained from the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) where they will require a death certificate, Certificate of Freedom from Fever and Infection and a notice of intention to remove a body out of England (Form 103). You can also apply online through the government's website at <https://www.gov.uk/burial-at-sea>.

There are 3 approved locations:

- Off the south coast between Hastings and Newhaven
- The Needles, at the Isle of Wight
- Tynemouth off the Northumberland coast

When arranging the service, you should take into consideration that the burial may not go ahead on the planned day due to adverse weather conditions, as the waters are required to be fairly calm for the service to take place. This is something you should make the family aware of at the time of arranging. If you're going to hold the funeral service on the same day and intend to hold it on a boat with people attending, you could also put a backup plan in place so that the service could still go ahead with the burial taking place at a later date.

Coffin requirements

The coffin has to be made to specific requirements so it is robust enough not to break up when it enters the sea, and also so it sinks to the bottom. It should be made of solid softwood and not contain any plastic, lead, copper or zinc. There should be 40-50 two inch holes drilled throughout, to allow the water to enter the coffin and the air inside to escape.

The corners of the coffin should be butt-jointed and strengthened from inside with mild steel brackets, 200kg of iron, steel or concrete clamped to the base of the coffin to ensure it sinks and remains on the sea bed, two long bands of mild steel surrounding the coffin, length ways with several bands 30cm apart running up the coffin width ways, giving the coffin even more strength to stay together on impact.

For the funeral, you can place a drape or flag over the coffin to make it look more presentable. Due to the heavy weight of the coffin, it may be wise to find somewhere close to where the burial is taking place to prepare the coffin and encoffin the deceased. The deceased cannot be embalmed, can only be dressed in lightly clad material and will be wrapped in hessian before being placed in the coffin. They will have coded identification attached so the authorities know who it is, but the general public would not.

When the burial takes place, you will require a boat large enough to take all the people required including staff, although if you wanted all family and friends to attend you may have a larger boat for everyone to travel on, with the coffin and staff on a separate boat. The coffin carrying boat will have a special platform for the coffin to sit on. When the time is ready this will be angled so the coffin slides off into the sea. There are companies who specialise in boats for burials at sea, but if you are having problems finding one, you can always contact the harbour master of the port you are leaving from, who will be happy to help.