

[Skip to main content](#)[University links](#)

University links

For staff

- [For Staff](#)
- [Services A-Z](#)
- [Student Education Service](#)

For students

- [Minerva](#)
- [Mobile app](#)
- [For Students](#)

Faculties

- [Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures](#)
- [Faculty of Biological Sciences](#)
- [Faculty of Business](#)
- [Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences](#)
- [Faculty of Environment](#)
- [Faculty of Medicine and Health](#)
- [Faculty of Social Sciences](#)
- [Lifelong Learning Centre](#)
- [Language Centre](#)

Other

- [Staff A-Z](#)
- [Campus map](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Alumni](#)
- [Contacts](#)
- [Library](#)
- [IT](#)
- [VideoLeeds](#)
- [Leeds University Union](#)

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- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [YouTube](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [Medium](#)
- [Weibo](#)
- [The Conversation](#)
- [RSS news feed](#)

[Close quicklinks](#)Search Destination [Living With Dying](#)

- [Home](#)
 - [Home](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Family Historians](#)
 - [Family Historians](#)
 - [Workshop: Family history and academic history](#)
- [Leeds General Cemetery](#)
- ['Remembrance' Exhibition](#)
 - ['Remembrance' Exhibition](#)
 - [Events Programme](#)
- [The Grief Series](#)

1. [Home](#)
2. [Blog](#)
3. What can history tell us about dying, grief, bereavement and remembering?

What can history tell us about dying, grief, bereavement and remembering?

Category

[Research](#)

Date

Wednesday 12 July 2017



Does the past matter? This research project is investigating the history of death, dying and the relationship between the living and the dead in twentieth-century Britain. It focuses on the place of death, dying and the dead in everyday and family life, asking how families think and talk about dying, what happens when someone passes away, and how deceased relatives are remembered and 'kept alive' over many years.

As such, we're interested in not only what happens when someone dies, but the longer term ways in which our late relatives are remembered. What stories and things are preserved for future generations? Why is remembering so important – from having photos around the house of a loved one, to rediscovering long lost relatives through family history?

This project involves historical research – both by using archives, of oral history interviews, autobiographies, newspapers etc – and through working with a group of family historians. We're working with around 20 family historians to help investigate their histories, which will be helpful for both them and us. Furthermore, we're interested in what kind of relationship this group of people today have with their often long-dead relatives. Why does remembering and researching them matter?

We're also working in partnerships with a number of organisations to explore how this history might be useful today. We're collaborating with [Leeds Bereavement Forum](#) and the City Council Public Health team, and are part of the [Leeds Dying Matters partnership](#), which brings together those across the city working around death, dying, end of life care, bereavement, funeral services and so on. Might a historical perspective on some of these issues be useful to professionals and practitioners?

We're also working with the [Thackray Medical Museum](#) and [Abbey House Museum](#), to think about how death and dying – which are obviously emotional subjects – should be displayed in a museum setting. At [Abbey House](#), we're working towards an exhibition in 2018, focusing on remembrance practices. We're also producing a box of handling objects which can be taken out to different audiences to start conversations about this topic, featuring items from both the Thackray and Leeds Museums & Galleries' collections. And as the [Thackray Medical Museum](#) is undergoing a period of redevelopment, we'll be feeding in our findings to inform how they display death in their galleries in the future.

Finally, we're also working with Ellie Harrison, an artist who has produced '[The Grief Series](#)', a number of different artistic pieces dealing with grief, loss and bereavement. We're working with Ellie and her team to explore how particular places can be important to how we remember, from a cemetery to a beach, park or pub that might hold memories of that person. This thinking will inform Part 6 of the Grief Series. We'll also be hosting a conference with Ellie and the [Live Art Bistro](#) team in March 2018.

So there's lots going on! But can history really serve a purpose today? I'd suggest it can, in a number of ways.

Firstly, history can help us evaluate the present. By examining the past, we can learn about what works and what doesn't (in medical practice, family life, mourning rituals and so on...) and we can also question what's 'normal' or taken for granted. History can simply show us alternatives to what we think of as obvious or the only way of doing things. For example, doctors and undertakers are today responsible for the dead body – but in the past, a members of a local community, known as a 'layer out', and family members themselves would be involved in preparing the body after death, often in the family home.

On a more personal level, understanding the history of the last century or so can help us understand the attitudes of the older generation – by exploring the context in which those now in their 80s and 90s grew up, and talking to them about it, we might better understand their preferences and attitudes today. For example, whether someone is comfortable talking about their own mortality or not might relate to how they were brought up.

Furthermore, history helps us trace change and continuity. Understanding the history of a particular issue, organisation or way of doing things helps us understand the reason for those things. By understanding how change has happened in the past – from shifting hospital rules and regulations to a cultural change in attitudes towards the dead human body – we might be able to think through how to instigate change today.

And finally, when you start to look for it, you see that history is part of the present. An idea of the past is often used to justify the present situation, by suggesting progress has been made. To give an example from another part of my research into fatherhood: men are often said to be more involved in family life today than in the past. The modern, twenty-first century dad is thought of as so much more hands on than his counterpart fifty years ago – the 1950s dad, by contrast, is painted as distant and aloof. And this means, therefore, that any kind of involvement by dads today is seen as progress, even if they might be much less responsible for childcare than mothers. And indeed, research shows that men were much more involved in family life in the past than we recognise. Here, a certain version of the past helps justify particular parental roles today

So, we think history does have a role to play today. History can help us question the present, understand how change might come about in the future, and challenge assumptions about things always getting better. And we're dealing with a sensitive and emotional subject here – not everyone is comfortable talking about death. By using stories and examples from the past, we also hope that history might offer an easier or more neutral way for people to start thinking about their or their relatives own end of life care and death, and plan for these where possible.

Footer navigation

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