

SAIF *insight* 100 Club

Collier's Funeral Services

Bray, Co. Wicklow, Ireland

Miller & Co. was the name associated with the Collier family for many years. Established in 1837, Robert C. Miller traded as a draper and undertaker in Bray. William Collier married Jane Miller, daughter of Robert, and eventually gained control of the business.

Their only son, Thomas Miller Collier, came into the business in the early 1900s and dispensed with the draper shop in favour of coal importation. It was not unusual to see up to six coal ships anchored at the mouth of the River Dargle. Not a pretty sight to those who had to unload them – at that time all unloading was carried out by hand! Stories of incursions with German U-boats on the Irish sea were true, though occasionally exaggerated.

The role of the undertaker in those days was that of provider of coffin, robe or habit and to oversee the funeral. Most of the time family or friends, using a wooden bier, carried the coffin. At other times a horse and cart were used. For the well to do a motorised hearse was hired from Nicholls of Dublin, until the arrival of the company's own Sunbeam Talbot in 1929.

Around 1928 the company started making its own coffins. Until then all stock had been imported from Birmingham. This new industry provided welcome employment in the Bray area. Coffins and coffin sets were transported to Bray station by horse and cart for distribution countrywide by rail.

Desmond Collier joined the business in the 1930s and one of his many memories is of his first repatriation – a Norwegian sailor. A call was made to Dottridge's in London, and the embalmer made haste by mail train and mail boat to perform his duties. Another early memory is of standing outside the church on Bray Main Street at 11 o'clock at night as removals were taking place. This practice was soon put to rights by the Union of the day.

During the Second World War the company acquired two ambulances. St. Vincent's Private Hospital hired the first of these in conjunction with local doctors. The second, also known as the Fever Ambulance, was used by the Eastern Health Board to bring people suffering from tuberculosis, meningitis or scarlet fever to St. Columcille's Hospital. After every trip this ambulance was disinfected for a period of 4 hours.

Tommy Collier followed his brother Desmond into the business in the 1940s from the Tropical Fruit Company in Dublin. He was to reveal later that this was where he learned his – at times – colourful language. In the 60s Tommy travelled to the USA to view caskets, and shortly after his return every Irish manufactured casket with a domed lid was produced in Bray.

In 1970 a funeral home was put in place. This was to spell the beginning of the end of the traditional house wakes in Bray. However in 1974 a fire rendered the factory useless. The damage took some time to repair, and the effect of this, together with worsening trading conditions, resulted in the closure of both the factory and undertaking business in 1985. While this was obviously



Staff at Miller & Co in 1943



The body of the Earl of Meath in Kilruddery House, Bray. (Earl of Meath Estate).



The remains of the Earl of Meath leaving Christ Church, Bray. Thomas Miller Collier to the fore.

a devastating time for the family, it did present an opportunity for both Stephen and his cousin Robin to enter the profession, while attempting to restore the Collier name in the funeral business.

Initially they operated a funeral service from Desmond's garage with the assistance of colleagues from other funeral homes. After three months they relocated to premises at Adelaide Villas in Little Bray, where they were able to provide a small funeral home, together with an office and stores. However, in August 1986 Hurricane Charlie left its mark by destroying all their stock and soiling their recently acquired hearse. The old eight-stroke limousine suffered the greatest indignity of all – by going up in smoke while standing in five foot of water! It took three weeks to get back into operation, and ironically the phone did not ring once with business during that period.

It was now time to be positive, and the company submitted plans in early 1987 to Bray Urban District Council for the erection of a funeral home complete with garaging on an acre site on the higher ground of Old Connaught Avenue in Bray. On the 1st July 1988 the funeral home opened with optimism felt by all the family. The building contained three chapels of rest, offices, lounge area, extensive garaging and a basic mortuary facility. This last named received insufficient attention – a fact unbeknown to them at that time.

The business gradually increased, and this allowed the company to continually reinvest in the building and rolling stock, culminating in the purchase of a new Eagle Quest hearse and matching limousine in 1994. This was a poignant time for Tommy and Desmond, who were now seeing their life's hard work coming good yet again.

In 1999 a new isolated mortuary with embalming theatre, dressing area and refrigeration unit was added. This has provided a safe and pleasant working environment for embalming and has created conditions for an awareness by staff of the importance of health and safety in the workplace.

The start of the new millennium saw the arrival of a new Mercedes hearse from Conrad Pollman of Germany followed by a limousine built by Remetzcar of Holland.

Des and Tommy have now gone to their eternal reward and a new generation is in place. Robin married to Jacqueline and Stephen married to Allison with their families will continue this story.



Colliers' Funeral Home and fleet today.

Is your business over 100 years old? Please let either your RSM or SAIF BC know about it. We would like to feature the business in our SAIFinsight new '100 Club'



August 1931. The funeral of Col. Henry Wood to the ship to leave from DunCaoglavie to Liverpool.



Col. Henry Wood heading to Liverpool for cremation. August 1931. Thomas Collier to the fore.



Staff at Colliers today (l-r) Michael Canning, Robin Collier, Albert Hill and Steven Collier. Not available for the picture Doreen Collier, Bernie Mack (embalmer), Sam Boyd and John Crabbe (part-time drivers).

