

'Green' coffins to give Dundee's jute industry new lease of life

AFTER YEARS of almost terminal decline, death may be the saviour of Scotland's beleaguered jute industry, writes *Paul Kelbie*.

For years production of the shiny vegetable fibre, which is second only to cotton in its practicality and uses, was a major plank of the local economy in Dundee - a city said to be founded on the back of jute, jam and journalism.

However, with the advance of the disposable society and the development of cleaner, man-made fibres, jute fell out of fashion. But now it is hoped that a pioneering new range of jute products will resurrect the industry - jute coffins and other funeral accessories.

Funeral directors are this weekend attending the industry's biggest trade fair in Coventry where, for the first time, jute coffins will be marketed to meet the growing demand for environmentally friendly burials.

Sandra Thomson's family has been involved in the jute trade for almost 100 years. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, much of the raw jute fibre of Bengal was exported to Britain, where it was processed in mills around Dundee for use in the carpet trade. But when the industry moved to India at the start of the last century in pursuit of lower production costs, the former 'jute city' began to fade in importance.

Now, as the clamour for more environmentally friendly funerals

increases, Thomson and her company, JFunerals, hope to revive the old skills to meet the new demand. JFunerals uses jute for every funeral product imaginable, from coffins and urns to shrouds and remembrance books and even jewellery.

'I have a huge passion for jute and was determined that jute was not going to die out of Dundee,' said Thomson, of Broughty Ferry.

Jute coffins are made from several layers of the plant fibre compressed together using natural starch to

produce a rigid structure which looks like wood. Each coffin can be personalised and painted in any colour to meet individual requirements, as everything from the lining to the rope handles are made from jute, which makes the casket 100 per cent biodegradable.

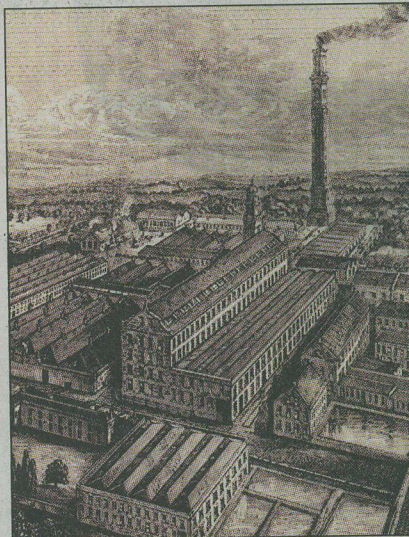
'Woodland burials is the fastest growing sector in the funerals industry,' said Thomson. 'People are not only looking at what effect their lives are having on the environment, but also what effect their death has. There is nothing toxic in the coffins, just natural materials which will start to biodegrade after a season, making it most environmentally friendly.'

'We've already had a lot of interest from funeral directors across the country. This could be very big.'

The demand for green burials has increased rapidly over the past decade. In 1993, there was only one woodland burial ground in the UK. Now there are some 200 such sites, either open or planned, across the country.

In the majority of such sites traditional hardwood coffins are frowned upon because of the length of time they take to break down in the earth.

Already substitutes such as bamboo or willow coffins have found favour among advocates of natural burials but now it is hoped that jute will provide an even more environmentally friendly alternative.



A Dundee jute mill in the 1880s.