



HONOURING THE ANCIENT DEAD

PROMOTING RESPECT & DIGNITY FOR THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE
WWW.HONOUR.ORG.UK

Statement of Intent

As each new issue arises, with each new query and request, HAD's intention is adjusting, finding the resources needed in order to address what are an increasing range of problems and possibilities. The Statement here gives a broad and inclusive sense of its purpose.

1. Definition of Terms

Acknowledging how important vocabulary is in the framing of our thoughts and the recognition of assumptions in any discussion, HAD's *Definitions* document presents some key words used when talking about the respectful treatment of ancestral 'human remains'. By providing clarity about how words are defined, HAD aims to move beyond the oppositional debate and towards the recognition of solutions attainable through an approach involving a more inclusive cultural contribution. It is recommended that HAD's *Definitions* be read before reading this Statement of Intent.

2. Scope : 'the Ancient Dead'

HAD's primary focus is the tangible evidence of ancestors of ancient and non-Christian cultures exhumed within the British Isles.

a) Ancestors

In line with HAD's *Definitions* document, 'ancestors' refers to ancestral bones, ash from funereal cremation, peat-preserved bodies and other aspects of human physicality.

HAD's remit covers both the ancestors and any artefacts that may have been placed with the person at the time of their interment. These may be in museums and other collections, in storage, currently being studied, or on public display.

HAD's interest lies equally in ancestors (and related artefacts) currently being exhumed, studied or displayed, those exhumed long ago and now set aside, and those where there is the possibility of exhumation or destructive investigation.

b) **Focus : Ancient and Non-Christian**

HAD's priority is ancestors from ancient and historical pagan culture within the British Isles. This includes all those interred prior to the spread of Christianity into Britain, and all those interred since that time whose burial includes evidence of pagan religious or non-religious traditions.

HAD will also provide advice and support on a 'best endeavours' basis in cases outside its priority area of focus where these are brought to its attention due to lack of support from any other determining body¹.

c) **The British Isles**

HAD's scope includes all cultural and ethnic groups who have at any time occupied any part of the British Isles.

d) **Ancestors from Overseas**

While HAD will not get involved in specific campaigns for restitution of non-British ancestors to other countries, it does include within its remit support for appropriate care for all ancestors and sacred objects held in UK collections, whatever their origin.

3. HAD's Aims : 'Honouring'

a) **The Call for Care**

HAD's primary aim is to ensure that appropriate care is given to these ancestors and artefacts by those involved in their exhumation, and in all subsequent decisions made about them, including their study, storage, display or return to a place of rest.

This call for appropriate care is based upon the philosophy that can be summed up in the following three statements:

- As human beings we have a duty of care towards every other human person.
- As integral and influencing members of the community, the ancestral dead retain their personhood.
- Personhood entails the need for respectful interaction.

¹ HAD accepts that **Guidance for Best Practice for the Treatment of Human Remains Excavated from Christian Burial Grounds in England** (Second Edition - APABE, 2017) is a useful document, with a predominantly Christian focus.

Respectful interaction is outlined in HAD's *Definitions*, with the practical implications of such a definition further laid out in HAD's policy and guidance documents.

b) **Who Cares**

When encountering the tangible physicality of the ancestors, many people experience the rise of an instinctive duty of care towards them. This can be particularly acute when ancestors are exhumed in an area where the local community has strong roots within that geographical place and its heritage. It is also pertinent for those whose religious or spiritual beliefs perceive ancestors and landscape as sacred, as is the case for many modern Pagans, particularly those following Druidic, Anglo-Saxon and Nordic traditions. For these groups, individuals who have lived and/or died in what is now their home environment are felt to be still active and influencing members of the community, albeit in quite a different way from living members of that community.

c) **Raising the Issue**

The subject of the bodily evidence of ancestors is not much discussed in current society. Without ongoing debate, for the most part the academic and scientific community assert an assumption of custody. Such groups commonly bring with them a materialist or dualist belief that sees the ancestors as 'human remains'; the mind or soul of the person is extinguished or departs at the point of death, leaving inanimate matter that should be available for scientific study. The consequence of such a perspective is the storage of over a hundred thousand boxes of bones and ash in museums and archaeological units, with a small but significant number as objects on display.

By bringing the issue into the public eye, HAD aims to provoke people into thinking more deeply about the ancestors and what might constitute a truly respectful engagement with them. Challenging those who maintain and defend their role as custodians, HAD aims to represent those who feel uncomfortable with the situation as it currently stands.

d) **Providing Information**

Through projects such as *Your Local Museum*, HAD aims to compile a comprehensive database of information on which museums have ancestors in their collections. This database is available equally to professionals and the public.

Where archaeological digs, debates or other issues arise, HAD aims to provide information that will be useful to all interested parties. In this way, HAD aims to minimise antagonism fuelled by misinformation and misunderstandings where sensitivities are provoked.

e) **Creating Relationships**

When issues arise, HAD aims to establish sound working relationships with relevant organisations and individuals, including archaeologists, historians, landowners, site custodians, museums, universities, heritage organisations, teaching hospitals and others, including all who are responsible for the stewardship of our British heritage, and whose work brings them into contact with the ancestral dead.

Through these relationships, HAD aims to encourage working practices that are based on informed sensitivity with regard to the people and communities whose instinctive, social, religious, spiritual or philosophical convictions reflect those represented by HAD.

f) **Providing Support**

For those encountering or engaging with ancestors in their place of work, HAD aims to offer guidance and advice. This may be done through various forms of correspondence, or through face to face meetings.

The HAD website aims to develop its collection of publicly accessible guidance documents, including *The Reburial Handbook*, *Consultation Policy*, *Guidance for the Housing of Ancestors*, and *Guidance for the Display of Ancestors in Museums*. All documents are created through a process of consultation with volunteers.

g) **Supporting a Broader Involvement**

When ancestors and relevant artefacts are disinterred, there are always various people who are concerned about what happens next. Recognising that genuine and valid interests may be based on social, spiritual and religious, as well as academic and scientific foundations, HAD aims to facilitate a process of consultation with all parties. Not only do such consultations allow for the community engagement that publicly-funded bodies are being encouraged to develop, consultation also highlights the value of solutions attainable through approaches involving a more inclusive cultural contribution.

Such consultations may be focused upon decisions around, for example, the exhumation, retention, study or display of the ancestors. It may be to do with access to an archaeological site, or to ancestors held in museum stores. It may be that a discussion becomes necessary with regard to the future of particular ancestors, and whether they may be returned to the place of their exhumation, or to an alternative place of rest.

h) **Supporting Interaction**

In practical terms, HAD aims to support individual people and communities who have a genuine interest in ancestors with whom they have shared the changing environment of a landscape, the evolving process of a culture and heritage, or

perhaps a connection of blood and genes. In doing so, HAD aims to be a positive force in British society for the development of a new level of respect for the ancestral dead.

Where an individual, group or community wish to access more information about, for example, particular ancestors in a museum collection, about a place of exhumation or reburial, to spend time in meditation or ritual with the ancestral dead, to be involved in the decision-making process as to the future of ancestors in whom they have a specific interest, HAD aims to provide help, giving advice or liaising with the relevant people as appropriate.

i) **Reburial or Return**

Reburial is a key focal area for HAD, and a topic attracting interest within the political, heritage, archaeological and museum communities. Reburial is now being supported as a realistic option by many museum and other heritage professionals. Long term, HAD aims to instigate dialogue with all UK museums housing ancestors, in order to discuss ideas, plans and strategies for the future.

HAD recognises that it is seldom possible to rebury ancestors in the exact place of their interment and exhumation. Further, HAD accepts that it is not always possible to have certainty about the ancestors' original funereal intent or interment. Nevertheless, HAD asserts the importance of returning the ancestors to a state of rest: allowing the dead to rest in peace.

Where reburial is not the chosen option, HAD aims to encourage the return of ancestors, from distant museums or storerooms, to the area where they were exhumed or as close as is feasible. Where reburial is not chosen, HAD aims to encourage the development of mausolea, in other words, respectfully designed places where the dead can find peace, but remain accessible for scientific, educational and spiritual reasons, or until reburial becomes possible.

In almost every case, however, return to the earth is considered the ideal solution through the process of secure reburial. HAD aims to work to help this option become more acceptable and more available, in accordance with the guidance outlined in its ***Reburial Handbook***.

Original : 2009

Updated : 2017