

ENGLISH HERITAGE  
PRESS RELEASE

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HUMAN REMAINS IN AVEBURY MUSEUM WILL STAY

After consideration of evidence and extensive consultation, English Heritage announced today (6th April), with the support of The National Trust, the decision that the prehistoric human remains in the Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury, should be kept in the museum for the benefit of public access and understanding.

In June 2006, a group of Druids requested the reburial of human remains from the Avebury museum. The remains, an important bone collection dating back to 2,000 - 3,700 BC, were among the contents of the Museum which were gifted to the nation in 1966. English Heritage, as the Government's statutory adviser on the historic environment, has been responsible for them since then. The National Trust owns the Museum and has curatorial responsibility on behalf of English Heritage for the management of the collection.

Dr Sebastian Payne, Chief Scientist at English Heritage, said: "We respect the beliefs that have led to this request, and we have taken the request seriously. These remains are important for our understanding of the past. We found that the public overwhelmingly support the retention and display of prehistoric human remains in museums, and that there is no clear evidence for genetic, cultural or religious continuity of a kind that would justify preferential status to be given to the beliefs of the group which requested reburial.

"While every case is different and must be determined on its merits, we feel that the general considerations given to this case are likely to apply to most prehistoric human remains in this country. We hope that other museums considering such requests in future will benefit from the evidence we have assembled and made accessible, saving them time and expense in reaching their decisions."

The principles set out in the Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums published by the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2005 were applied in arriving at the decision. This guidance recommends that claims for remains over 500 years old are unlikely to be successful except where very close and continuous links can be demonstrated.

The human remains in question belong to an area of great archaeological significance as recognised by its World Heritage Site status. They are well-documented and well-preserved. With technological advances in analytical method such as ancient DNA and stable isotope analysis, they have considerable potential to add to knowledge and understanding. Keeping them in the museum will enable scientists and archaeologists to access them for research, the benefit of which far outweighs the harm likely to result from not reburying them.

These conclusions were widely consulted between October 2008 and February 2009 and were supported by the majority of respondents. In a separate opinion poll of 1,000 people commissioned in June 2009, around 90% said they were comfortable with keeping prehistoric human remains in museums.

Dr David Thackray, Head of Archaeology for the National Trust, said: "Some of the remains are an important part of the Museum's exhibits, and the Museum survey shows that most visitors value this. Many of those who responded to the consultation also commented on the importance of public access and education."

Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe, archaeologist, Oxford University, said: "The physical remains of humans found in archaeological contexts embody knowledge of our past that we have hardly begun to unlock. Through a series of scientific techniques now being developed we are able to ask questions about early British populations which even ten years ago would have been thought impossible to answer. Archaeological remains must be retained for research that benefits us all. "

Professor Ronald Hutton, historian, Bristol University: "This decision represents the resolution of a question of great moral importance and with major practical implications, by reference to government guidelines, expert opinion, and general public opinion. All three have supported the same outcome."

A summary report on the case and the findings of the public consultation and the opinion poll are available at <<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/aveburyremains>>[www.english-heritage.org.uk/aveburyremains](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/aveburyremains).

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