

# THEY WANT GIVE PAST DEAD ONE VOTE

England is one of the countries where the debate about human life rages most vigorously. MUSEUM has spoken to the British organization Honouring the Ancient Dead, which has been working for 20 years for greater respect for the mortal remains of our ancestors.

The British organization Honouring the Ancient Dead has focused on the ethics of excavating, storing and displaying skeletons and grave finds since 2006. Through dialogue with museums, archaeologists, authorities and local communities, the organization works for better practice in the field. They share knowledge, participate in debates and support initiatives that they believe can lead to more responsible solutions – including , for example, reburial. The work is carried out by volunteers and supported by donations.

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We spoke with two representatives of the organization, Mike Fletcher and Emma Restall Orr, about their work to give the dead of the past a voice in the present.

### What is the purpose of your organization?

Mike: Our main goal is to raise awareness about the value of human remains – or ancestors as we call them – in museums. It's a debate that doesn't get enough attention.

Emma: The first real legislation in this area, the Human Tissue Act of 2004, only covers 100 years. Those who have been dead for longer than that have almost no real protection. In practice, this means that you can exhume people, store them in bags or put them on display without any legal obligation to respect them. We ask the fundamental question: When does a person lose their status as a person?

### Why is personhood important when it comes to people who died hundreds or thousands of years ago?

Mike: We don't think a person loses the right to respect just because all that's left are bones. They're still the bones of that person. Yet we see that respect gradually diminishing the further back in time you go, and that's deeply inconsistent. If we can't respect people who lived before us, how can we claim to respect each other today?

Emma: And where is the line? At your grandmother's? At 100 years? At 500 years? Of course the personal connection will disappear, but it makes no sense to set a limit on when it is acceptable for respect to disappear. When we started in 2006, the First World War was covered by the Human Tissue Act. It is no longer. You can find someone in a ditch or a grave who has no real protection anymore.

We think this clarifies the importance of our work.

### These kinds of finds often provide knowledge about our past. Is there absolutely no evidence that a part of a human body is kept in a museum?

Mike: The scientific argument is the only one that can be given weight. But there are hundreds of thousands of boxes of human remains in British institutions alone , and there is not the money to research them all. So while it may make sense to research a small number of individuals, it cannot justify keeping them all – let alone putting them on display.

Emma: If there is no consent from the deceased, even more respect should be shown. If you dig up people from the plague years, there may still be genetic descendants.

## “We think that in 50 years people will look back and wonder how they could put skulls on shelves with just a small license plate.”

Emma Restall Orr, Honouring the Ancient Dead

more in the area. If there is not, the local community as a whole can give consent. For example, they can allow one person to be kept for research, but the rest must be laid to rest again.

### What is your opinion on exhibitions where you can meet people from the past in the form of, for example, whole skeletons or parts of the deceased? Is it always unacceptable or can it be done in a respectful way?

Emma: Too often we see exhibitions that highlight the creepy, the macabre, the CSI effect – as if it were entertainment. It is not respectful. Museums need visitors, but not at the expense of the dead. Human remains should only be shown together with a narrative that respects the person as a human being. And in most cases, you can instead create digital exhibitions where people can actively choose to see images of the dead, instead of stumbling upon them in an exhibition. It should be an active choice to see images or digital copies.

### But doesn't a digital exhibition make it more respectful of the person being exhibited?

Emma: That's debatable. But as a compromise , it might work if it's necessary to tell a story.



y Mike Fletcher and Emma Restall Orr. Photo: Private.

### IT SAYS HUMAN TISSUE ACT

The 2004 UK law dictates how human tissue and material may be handled in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It covers human material that is less than 100 years old. If the material is older, it falls outside the scope and is instead regulated by other laws and ethical rules.

lines of action, including within the museum and cultural heritage areas. The Human Tissue Act 2004 does not therefore give deceased persons special rights after death, but establishes a clear ethical and legal responsibility in relation to the handling of human biological material.

Mike: To me it's still unacceptable because there 's no direct consent. We've seen skeletons laid out on the floor for people to walk over – it's horrible!

In practice, there is a spectrum from good to bad exhibitions, but without consent it can never be sufficiently respectful.

### In Denmark we have the Grauballe Man and the Tollund Man – two famous bog bodies that are exhibited in Danish museums. It must be almost impossible to find consensus in those cases. What do you think the museums should do with them if they are to be respected?

Emma: With the help and consent of their local community – the place where they lived – you can tell the story of the landscape and include the dead as part of the story of their community. And then you should give them a dignified ending. We have seen local communities come together to mourn, celebrate and acknowledge a person's life at a reburial ritual. It is an incredible experience. So: Take some photos and the necessary samples, but let the person be reburied.

### Museum Silkeborg asked people about their opinion on exhibiting the Tollund Man, and 92% did not consider it a problem. That's a high number. What do you think about that?

Emma: That IS a high number. But we've learned that it really depends on how you ask the question. If you start a conversation instead of a simple yes/no question , people start to get involved. Then the answer more often ends up being: "No, it doesn't feel right anymore."

Education and awareness are part of that. We are still in the early stages of this understanding of respect.

### Do you feel like time is working against you?

Mike: It 's changed a lot. It's encouraging to see young people speaking naturally from a consensual perspective – about sex, diet, whatever. They're generally more friendly. In my day, we took it for granted that the British Empire had collected things from all over the world and that it was perfectly fine. We were naturally the 'good guys' in that story. Now there's a lot of nuance in the debate about Britain's imperial past. That's healthy.

Emma: Think about how vegetarianism and veganism became mainstream through respect for animals. The same goes for respect for people. We think that in 50 years, people will look back and wonder how they could put skulls on shelves with just a small license plate. This is the beginning of a long journey.

Lene Steinbeck is a freelance journalist.