Guidance for Housing Ancestors

The following points are laid down as agreed guidelines compiled by Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD), in consultation with its base of volunteers, together with other members of the museums profession.

Terms used in this policy are in line with HAD's ***Definitions*** document, which should be read prior to this policy or referred to for clarity. In particular, rather than 'human remains', the document refers to the dead, the deceased, or ancestors, in order to retain a critical awareness that we are talking about once living human individuals. Further, whether an articulated skeleton, a section of bone, or a quantity of ash, we speak of the dead as individuals, as to do otherwise risks diminishing their human status, allowing them to be perceived and treated as artefacts instead.

The remit of the document includes hominin ancestors not classified as *Homo sapiens* with whom some may feel an ancestral connection.

Further to this guidance and its ***Definitions***, HAD has published a collection of further documents, providing ideas, support and practical advice on consultation, reburial and display of the dead. These are publicly accessible and can be found at: https://www.honour.org.uk/resources/.

1. Introductory Remarks

Since 2006, through its ***Your Local Museum*** (YLM) project, HAD has contacted hundreds of museums up and down the country for information about the dead held within their collections. The information returned shows that tens of thousands of individuals are retained within museum collections within the UK. HAD is aware of more that are held by archaeological units, universities, historical societies and other heritage bodies. Indeed, no comprehensive, up to date or official records exist for exactly how many are stored nationally. Allowing for the fact that not all museums holding evidence of the dead are as yet represented in the YLM database, and that no archaeological units or other organizations have been surveyed, a reasonable extrapolation might be that there are potentially hundreds of thousands kept in stores.[1]

Following their exhumation, these individuals might originally have been retained in museum collections for a number of reasons, including intended future use for scientific analysis, academic research, education or display. They may have been

[1] In his article in *The Guardian*, 7 March 2026, David Batty suggests the number to be over 263,000; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/07/what-human-remains-are-held-in-uk-museums-and-where [accessed 5 November 2026].

retained simply because of the lack of a human remains or relevant disposal policy. Some may have come into collections as trophies or curiosities, or because they represent very real, tangible links with the past. Others may be candidates for reburial. However, with ever-decreasing resources, very often the work is not prioritised, and as a result, a great many are retained in storerooms, in far from ideal conditions.

HAD's central premise concerns practical respect: it believes that these individuals, many of whom can justifiably be understood to be genetic, cultural or geographical ancestors of a landscape's modern residents, must be treated as human beings, not as resource material stored for a possible future use that might never happen. HAD's position on retention can be found in its ***Statement of Intent*** and other guidelines; the focus of this document is how the dead who remain in store may be housed with greater respect.

The structure of the document is simple. The Principles of Best Practice section aims to capture HAD's fundamental thinking with regard to why the dead should be housed in a certain way. The Recommendations section then sets out HAD's guidance for how to do that with respect.

2. Principles of Best Practice

2.1 *The ancient dead should not be treated any differently from the recently deceased.*

The passing of time should not be seen to dilute the entitlement to respectful treatment. Consequently, those who died 2,000 years ago should be given no less consideration than those who died yesterday; a Saxon soldier should be ascribed the same value as an individual human being as a World War I soldier unearthed in Flanders' Fields. The practical needs may be different for the recently deceased, but the attitude and level of respect should be exactly the same.

2.2 *All people should be treated equally in death, without prejudice or favour, as they should be in life.*

It is generally accepted that we should not differentiate between the rights of individuals on any grounds in life. HAD asserts that this should equally be the case in death – regardless of religion, gender, economic or social status. An individual whose bones are exhumed, but whose name and life story are not known, has as much right to be reburied and rest in peace as a disinterred king.

2.3 *The 'personhood' of the individual continues beyond death and should be respected.*

Until such time as all their bodily material has dissolved back into the earth, and all their stories disappeared from memory, a human individual is still a person. To assert this not only acknowledges the ongoing individuality of that person,

but also the ongoing influence of that individual. Persons who have died, whether recently or long ago, remain members of our extended family or tribe, connected to us through blood, culture, geography or religion.

To deny someone's personhood is to remove their humanity. HAD believes this is done when human bones or ash are treated as objects, whether under the spotlight of private study or public display, or simply through neglect.

For this reason, HAD recommends that use of the term 'material' (such as 'human remains material') should be avoided to minimise the risk of objectifying the dead. Personal pronouns that imply ownership, as in 'my material', should also be avoided. Even where the person studying the ancestor affirms their respect for the individual in their care, such words can only compromise and corrode that respect.

2.4 *A human being should be housed not stored.*

Further terminology currently widespread within museums and other heritage organisations dehumanises the dead. This starts with the basic idea of 'storing'. Using the term 'housing' encourages staff and volunteers to remember that these are people, not artefacts, even though they may be in boxes alongside the museum's collection of objects.

2.5 *Where the dead have been exhumed, there may be value in study.*

HAD recognises that some dead persons are of significant interest to the living, whether as named individuals or due to the circumstances of their death or exhumation, and thus HAD accepts that there may well be a wish to study what physical evidence there is of these particular lives.

Furthermore, where it is not possible to complete such studies immediately, some may put forward proposals that certain individuals be retained for a time when greater funding or improved analytical techniques become available.

How the deceased person is housed in the interim becomes pertinent. This is particularly the case where a great many years may pass before study is resumed.

2.6 *Access to ancestors should be freely available.*

Where the dead are retained within museums, the opportunities for engaging with them should be available more broadly than solely to museum personnel, academics and scientists.

There are many different reasons why people are interested in the dead. Whether it be from the perspective of local heritage or community, art and

literature, spirituality or religion, culture or genetic connection, museum curators should not dismiss these non-scientific interests. Reasonable access should be granted to people without prejudice, regardless of physical or intellectual abilities, religion, gender, nationality, without prejudice or distinction.

As long as access is carefully monitored to ensure the deceased is not damaged or in any way compromised, museums should recognise the value of allowing community engagement. As examples: someone following a neoPagan faith tradition may wish to sit in quiet reflection with a deceased person with whom they feel a strong spiritual and geographic connection, perhaps because they were exhumed from an ancient sacred site or their home landscape; an artist may want time with the dead as part of a heritage art project, whether sketching or simply sitting in quiet reflection seeking inspiration.
The role of the curator is to recognise how valuable community engagement is with the museum's collection. The dead remain – and can be celebrated as being – a part of the community of the living.

Individuals seeking access need to have reflected and be able to articulate their reasons for their request. This will enable the curator to ensure facilitated access is done with respect.

If conditions have to be imposed on access specific to the particular institution, for example, due to staffing constraints, such conditions must be comprehensible to all parties, transparent and reasonable.

No charge in addition to any usual museum entrance fees should be made for access.

2.7 *Information about the dead should be kept with the dead.*

Key information that is known about an individual should be kept with that person. Further detail may, of course, be recorded digitally or kept elsewhere, but sufficient information must be available on the storage boxes or bags within which the dead are housed. Even where there is only a small amount of physical evidence, having prominent information provides a constant reminder of their individuality and their personhood as a deceased human being.

2.8 Communities should be kept together.

Wherever possible, individuals exhumed together should be kept together. Labels on storage boxes should identify each individual as a part of that community, as people who shared a landscape, village, cemetery, or the like. Labels should use terminology that retains the coherence and humanity of that community, as of a living community.

2.9 *Information about the dead should be made known.*

If a museum has dead persons in their collection, this information should be publicly known, stated on their own website, in relevant literature, and on any national database (such as HAD's YLM).

Any and all information that is known of an individual's story, or about the group of people with whom they were originally buried or exhumed, should be readily available to the public.

There are ancestors in collections whose bones or ash is unprovenanced, having no details of where or when they were exhumed, and thus may be considered the 'faceless' dead. While these individuals may have no evidenced story to tell, they are no less ancestors, no less persons, and should be treated with equal respect. At a minimum, their presence should be catalogued and made available for today's communities.

2.10 *Accepting the importance of grave goods.*

Where someone has been laid to rest in an intentional act of burial, an exhumation may also bring to light items that were buried with them. These may have been a part of the culture and funereal tradition of their period, or they may have been of particular emotional or religious value to the person as an individual. Either way, respect for the dead must include an unconditional acceptance of the very real importance of these items to that person.

Consequently, the ideal is that all grave goods should be retained with that person, as their personal possessions. However, where the grave goods must be stored elsewhere, clear information about the items should be kept with the person, ensuring there is an ongoing reminder of these items. Of course, this information will also be in the holding organisation's usual records system.

Grave goods should not be permanently taken away from the person, for example, by being deaccessioned and transferred to another collection.

3. Recommendations for Adapting or Improving Existing Housing

The following recommendations are for situations where the dead are already being housed and options for improving this are being considered.

3.1 *Housing*

- Facilities for housing the dead should be maintained at the level of 'state of the art' as far as possible. This includes keeping the correct temperature and humidity, but also creating a place that actively expresses respect for the dead.

- Signage should be in place which alerts staff and volunteers as they approach the area where the dead are housed, reminding them that they are in proximity with the dead. Signs also remind staff and volunteers that a different quality of respect is required.

- If possible, the area should have a default of low or no lighting, with lights available when required for access. Equally, signage should request that the area is kept quiet. This is, after all, a place of dead.

- Where funding does not allow the creation of a separate facility, and where environmental conditions do not require otherwise, the dead may be housed within a collection's general storerooms. This does not mean it is acceptable to keep ancestors in the same containers used for artefacts. It should be immediately evident from a storage container that it contains a human being (or part of one).

- If kept in a general storeroom, consider curtaining or screening off the area where the dead are kept. This proffers as sense of privacy for the dead and any who are working in that area.

- Where there is a lack of funding, there is no less serious a duty of care. It may be that, where standards cannot be raised, the only option is to deaccession the individuals, transferring them to a more suitable museum or laying them to rest with reburial.

3.2 *Containers*

- Containers should, of course, meet the appropriate standards, whether acid-free card, tissue, polythene or the like. Pieces of bone should be kept in the container with care, using tissue or other soft material.

- Where the bones or ash of various individuals are found mixed together at the time of exhumation, they should remain this way.

- Where bones may have been mixed together with others during the process of their exhumation, or while in the care of archaeologists or curators, where possible they should be separated into identifiable individuals by forensic analysis. They should not separated into groups based on the type of bone (e.g. skulls with skulls, leg bones with leg bones).

- Equally, where human and non-human bones or ash are found mixed at the time of exhumation, they should remain mixed. If combined at a later date, they should be separated.

3.3 *Information*

- Every individual should have information recorded about them. Even individuals whose bones or ash are unprovenanced should have any available information recorded, even if only to state how long they have been in the collection, or when their presence in the collection was first registered.

- All information about the dead housed in collections should be made as freely available as possible, including at the place of their housing, through online documentation, and more widely through other means. A lack of funding does not excuse this lack of availability, given resources that can be drawn on within the wider community, for example, local history societies, schools, colleges, community groups.

- Information about the number of deceased human individuals held by the institution must be publicly accessible: where they are within that institution, in what conditions, together with what is known about them, both as living people and since they were disinterred or found.

- Museums should be honest and transparent about the level of information they hold on the dead in their care.

3.4 *Display*

Where ancestors are to be displayed in a museum or other heritage institution, please refer to HAD's ***Guidance for the Display of Ancestors in Museums***.

3.5 *Security and Training*

- Arrangements to minimise or remove the possibility of theft, and of accidental or deliberate damage, should be in place.

- Both staff and volunteers should receive training with regards to the holding organisation's duty of care to the dead. This may be as simple as explaining where and how the dead are housed, emphasising the need for respect, quiet and care. If specific curators and staff are respectful, but other staff or volunteers are not, the organisation is not fulfilling its role of appropriate care.

4. Location and Movement of the Dead

- Individual people should be housed as close to the site of their exhumation as is possible. If there is plausible evidence of their connection with another region, repatriation to that area should be seriously considered. In other words, they should not be held in a place that is geographically or contextually at odds with their probable expectation in life.

- Where a museum or heritage organisation is facing closure, and a collection is to be relocated, if the dead within that collection were exhumed within (or are in other ways significantly connected to) the region, all efforts should be made to ensure they remain within the region. Reburial close to the site of exhumation would be the preferred option.

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