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 terminology 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 what are commonly referred to as 'human remains'. By providing clarity about how terms 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) Deceased persons

'Deceased person' refers to human bones, ash from funereal cremation, peat-preserved bodies and other aspects of human physicality.

HAD's remit covers both the deceased persons and documentation/records of any associated artefacts that may have been placed with the person at the time of their interment. These may be in museums and other collections, whether in store, currently being studied, or on public display.

HAD's interest lies equally in deceased persons (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 deceased persons 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 body[1].

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) Deceased Persons from Overseas

HAD may be supportive of specific campaigns for restitution of non-British deceased persons to other countries, and it includes within its remit support for appropriate care for all deceased persons and sacred objects held in UK collections, whatever their origin. However, HAD will not initiate or lead specific campaigns outside of the defined scope, as these are likely to be covered by other organisations with relevant expertise.

3. HAD's Aims: 'Honouring'

a) The Call for Care

HAD's primary aim is to ensure that appropriate care is given to these deceased persons and artefacts by those involved in their exhumation, and in all subsequent decisions made about them, including their study, housing, display or return to a place of rest. In some instances, it may be appropriate for repatriation to museum or archaeological stores closer to the exhumation location.

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.
- The dead retain their personhood as integral and influencing members of the community.
- Personhood entails the need for respectful interaction.

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

[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.

When encountering the tangible physicality of the dead, many people experience the rise of an instinctive duty of care towards them. This can be particularly acute when individuals 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. 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 discussion, interest and advocacy for the bodily evidence of ancestors has grown in recent years, but has largely focused on non-British ancestors retained by cultural and heritage organisations within the UK . Without significant ongoing debate regarding British ancestors, 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 deceased 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. There are signs of change to this perspective within the museum and heritage sectors in this space, as evidenced by the recent Museums Association's 'Code of Ethics' (2025).[2]

By bringing the issue into the public eye, HAD aims to provoke people into thinking more deeply about how the dead are treated 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 has developed and maintains a comprehensive database of information on which museums have deceased persons in their collections. This database is available equally to professionals and the public.

Where archaeological digs, debates or other issues arise, HAD provides information 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

[2] Museums Association. 'Code of Ethics'. https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/disposal/#.

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 deceased persons.

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 deceased persons in their place of work, HAD offers guidance and advice. This may be done through various forms of correspondence, or through face-to-face meetings.

HAD provides a collection of guidance documents, giving practical advice on consultation, housing, reburial and display of the dead. These are publicly accessible and can be found at: https://www.honour.org.uk/resources/.

g) Supporting a Broader Involvement

When deceased persons and relevant artefacts are exhumed or encountered, there are always people who are particularly 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 encourages inclusive approaches to 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 dead. It may be to do with access to an archaeological site, or to deceased persons held in museum stores. It may be that a discussion becomes necessary with regard to the future of particular deceased individual, 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 supports individual people and communities who have a genuine interest in the dead 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, a particular ancestor in a museum collection, about a specific place of

exhumation or reburial, to spend time in meditation or ritual with a deceased individual, to be involved in the decision-making process as to the future of a deceased person in whom they have a specific interest, HAD provides help, giving advice or liaising with 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 a realistic option for many museum and other heritage organisations. HAD promotes dialogue with all UK museums housing deceased persons, in order to discuss ideas, plans and strategies for the future.

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

Where reburial is not the chosen option, HAD encourages the return of the deceased from distant museums or stores to the area where they were exhumed, or as close as is feasible. In all cases, HAD supports the development of respectfully designed places for the dead, in line with its guidance on housing in museums and archaeological units.

In almost every case, however, return to the earth is considered the ideal solution through the process of secure reburial. HAD provides guidance and practical support for this open in its Reburial Handbook.

Original: 2009
Updated: 2017, 2026