

**Policy for the Care of Human Remains in
Museum of London Collections**

June 2006

Museum of London Human Remains Working Group

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1. Introduction

The Museum of London holds in its archive approximately 17,000 human skeletons from archaeological excavations in Greater London. Almost all of these were excavated under, and are covered by, Home Office (now Department of Constitutional Affairs) licences that allow for their study and research and then, when appropriate, reburial. In addition 65 skeletons or parts of skeletons are accessioned into the core collections.

There is an ongoing debate as to the ethics of excavating, holding and displaying human skeletons by museums. This is a complex and multi-layered debate, influenced by concerns of Indigenous peoples in other countries; the multi-cultural nature of modern society; as well as modern religious and humanist philosophies, medical ethics and museological concerns.

In addition, it is recognised that human remains have a very high research value and can make a major contribution to such subjects as:

- human evolution and adaptation, and genetic relationships
- population relationships through genetics and morphology
- past demography and health
- diet, growth and activity patterns
- disease and causes of death
- history of disease and of medicine
- burial practices, beliefs and attitudes
- the diversity of cultural practices in which the body and its parts are used.

The Museum of London wishes to fully engage with this debate and to ensure that it is collecting, researching and curating human remains in a way that maximises their research and educational use while causing no offence and treating remains with the up most respect.

Human remains within the Museum collections are cared for by the Department of Early London History and Collections and are the specific responsibility of the Senior Curator of Human Osteology.

In addition, the Museum of London Archaeology Service regularly holds on a temporary basis human remains from recent excavations to be analysed and recorded before either being deposited in the Museum's collections, re-buried or deposited with other museums (those not excavated in Greater London).

This policy lays out the conditions under which the Museum will hold human remains. It is a development of published good practice, most notably:

- *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museum Collections* (DCMS 2005)
- *Guidance for Best Practice for Treatment of Human Remains Excavated From Christian Burial Grounds in England* (CofE/EH 2005)
- *Human Bones From Archaeological Sites* (EH 2004)

The Museum has a cross-departmental Human Remains Working Group that oversees all matters covered by this policy. The Museum's Collections Committee will also be consulted on matters relating to the acquisition, loan and disposal of remains.

1.1. Guiding Principles

The following guiding principles underpin this policy:

- human remains will always be treated with the upmost respect
- all matters relating to human remains will be over-seen by appropriate staff
- human remains will only be handled by appropriate personnel
- human remains will be packaged and stored to maximise their well-being
- human remains will only be acquired and kept if they are considered of high research value
- human remains will not be used in any way that would upset museum users.

2. Acquisitions, Loans, De-Accessioning And Claims For Return.

2.1. Acquisition

The Museum will accept assemblages of human remains from archaeological excavations in Greater London if they are deemed to be of important research value. They will only be acquired if they are accompanied by full associated archaeological documentation, and are fully packaged and catalogued in accordance to the Museum's *General Standards for the Preparation of Archaeological Archives Deposited with the Museum of London* (MoL 1998).

The Museum expects to be involved in discussions about excavations of cemetery sites when they are being planned for. The Museum cannot guarantee to accept human remains assemblages unless it has been involved in discussions about projects from their outset.

The Museum will not normally accept unstratified and disarticulated skeletons from excavations but accepts that sometimes these may be accepted for immediate reburial or that other arrangements may be made for them.

The Museum might occasionally accept individual human remains from sources other than archaeological excavation. This will only be if they are considered to be of important research value and are accompanied by suitable documentary records.

In all cases the Museum will ensure that it is legally entitled to acquire the remains in question.

The remains will be considered to be *in our care*, as ownership is legally impossible. However, individual finds will be accessioned into the core collections, and all archaeological assemblages will be accessioned as elements of excavation archives, individual skeletons will have unique identification within individual archives.

2.2. Loans

It is Museum of London policy not to loan human remains from its collections to other institutions. In exceptional cases the Museum might loan human remains from its collections for research purposes or display. In either case the Museum would expect the lending institution to adhere to guidance laid out in this document and in DCMS 2005 and CofE/EH 2005.

The Museum's Human Remains Working Group will comment upon any requests for loans of human remains from Museum collections and make a recommendation to the Collections Committee.

It is also possible that on occasion human remains might leave the museum and be given into the care of non-museum staff to carry out specific research analysis. In such cases this will be recorded using appropriate Museum pro formas (see Appendices).

2.3. De-Accessioning

Due to the legal wording of Home Office (now Department of Constitutional Affairs) Licences, curatorial considerations, plus the Museum's concern to be alive to the beliefs, opinions and views of Londoners, we do not wish to hold onto human remains unless they have the potential to continue to make an important contribution to future knowledge. For this reason the human remains we hold will be continually reviewed as to their research value, on a case-by-case basis, and put into one of three categories:

1. Human remains that have no potential for scientific research. These can be de-accessioned and reburied as soon as is practical. This includes material with no archaeological context or relationship, or some disarticulated bones where individual skeletons cannot be identified.
2. Human remains of a limited research potential that should not be de-accessioned but for which long-term, less accessible storage off-site is a suitable solution. This might include assemblages of archaeologically understood articulated skeletons, where the number of skeletons is too small to currently undertake meaningful analysis.
3. Human remains that have a high research potential that should not be de-accessioned and for which accessible on-site storage is preferable. This includes the majority of the articulated skeletons in our care, large assemblages from good archaeological contexts. This material will be made externally accessible through the on-line Wellcome Osteological Research Database (WORD).

The Museum will undertake an ongoing programme of review of its human remains to decide which fall into these three categories, and find storage and curation solutions to reflect their access needs. These reviews will be over-seen by the Human Remains Working group that will make recommendations as necessary to the Collections Committee.

2.4. Claims for Return

If claims are made for human remains in its collections the Museum will adopt the procedural guidance laid out in DCMS 2005. It should be noted, that as all of the Museum's holdings of human remains come from Greater London and were excavated under government licence, claims for return are not expected.

3. Storage, Conservation And Collections Management

3.1. Documentation and Management

Detailed information on the majority of skeletons stored at the Museum is recorded on the Wellcome Osteological Research Database (WORD) providing information on archaeological context, skeletal completeness, demographics, measurements, and pathology. All skeletons are recorded under their excavation context on the database. Storage location is recorded on a separate EXCEL sheet. Human remains material in the non-archaeological Museum collections is recorded on MultiMimsy.

All new assemblages of over 50 remains accepted by the Museum will be recorded on the WORD. Assemblages of fewer than 50 remains will be recorded within site archives by context number and their location recorded on ORACLE and EXCEL sheets.

3.2. Storage

The Museum will generally store skeletal human remains in a dedicated area that has restricted and monitored access. Material under study will be housed within the Wellcome Lab at the London Wall site and in the Osteology area at Mortimer Wheeler House.

Each individual skeleton will be stored and packed according to the guidelines set out in the *General Standards for the Preparation of Archaeological Archives deposited with the Museum of London*. The packing guidelines in this document are for skeletal material that is in good condition. For material that is very fragile, rare or in high demand, it may be necessary to use a higher specification storage system. Skeletal material with surviving tissue, nails or hair may also require different storage. Possible biohazards will be investigated and dealt with as required. Higher specification storage will be decided by the Senior Curator of Human Osteology in consultation with the Department of Conservation and Collection Care.

Skeletons that have had conservation treatment will be packed with extra support and there will be a note indicating that the material has been conserved on the outside of the storage box.

All containers will be stored on shelving or on pallets at least 15 cm off the ground. Areas known to be prone to water leaks will be avoided. If storage areas are considered to have any risks associated with them they will be checked regularly.

3.3. Marking and labelling

For excavated material, each skeleton will have its packaging clearly labelled as specified in the standards document. Because of the size of the collection, it is not realistic to mark all skeletal remains in the archive. The following will be individually marked because they are at risk of becoming separated from their labelled packaging:

- teaching collections
- material on display.

3.4. Handling

Human remains will be handled only by Museum staff, by designated volunteers and students supervised by Museum staff. Researchers and students will be permitted to handle material only after reading and signing the Museum's *Application for Access to Human Skeletal Remains* (see below) and having their references checked.

Wherever possible the designated handling collection will be used to avoid damage to other collections. Remains will only be packed and unpacked from boxes by Museum staff or those who have received guidance on the methodology for this.

All handling of human remains will take place in the storage area, teaching areas, the osteology labs and conservation labs unless agreed otherwise by the Senior Curator of Human Osteology. Human remains must be handled with respect and care following the guidelines detailed in the *Application for Access* (Appendix 1).

Particular care should be taken when handling more than one skeleton at a time to avoid the danger of mixing of unmarked material. Any new damage or loss must be reported to the Senior Curator. No cleaning, reconstruction, casting or sampling can take place unless permitted by the Senior Curator who may take advice from the Department of Conservation and Collection Care. If reconstruction is required for study, and permission is granted, methods used will be discussed with the conservators.

3.5. Environment

The Museum will endeavour to store human remains in an environment suitable to the material as recommended in current guidelines. The environment will be monitored as required to address any conservation issues.

No food or drink is permitted in the storage area. Regular pest monitoring and cleaning will be undertaken.

3.6. Cremated Remains

Cremated human bone is packed as described in the Standards Document.

Cremated remains within vessels will be excavated according to established guidelines and stored with the other human remains. The location of these bones will be recorded on the Museum's database (MultiMimsy) as part numbers associated with these vessels.

3.7. Associated artefacts

Artefacts associated with skeletal remains will be stored in the appropriate storage area for the material unless the artefact cannot be separated from the skeleton. In that case, it will generally be stored with the skeleton in the designated area for human remains.

3.8. Teaching collections

Teaching elements are derived from disarticulated material from various sites and are not recorded on the database. The bones and their packaging are all marked with a site code or a generic code relating them to the Centre for Human Bioarchaeology. The bones are marked so that no particular surfaces are covered or any pathology obscured. A catalogue of bones in the teaching collection will be maintained.

3.9. Conservation

The Museum's conservators will carry out any conservation treatments after approval by the Senior Curator of Human Osteology. Conservation treatment will only be undertaken when needed for display, publication or if required to prevent loss of information. Care will be taken to select materials and treatments that will not compromise future analysis.

3.10. Reburial

Unstratified remains and those remains where it is deemed that there is unlikely to be any further significant discoveries from additional research will be reburied in consecrated ground where appropriate. A register of contexts that are reburied will be kept as will a record of the location of burials.

4. Access, Education And Use.

4.1. Research Access

The Museum encourages research into its collections (see also 5. below). Anyone wishing to use human remains for research purposes must complete and submit a copy of the Museum's *Application for Access to Human Skeletal Remains*. Applications will be vetted by the Senior Curator of Human Osteology for Museum and Archive collections and by a MoLAS Osteologist for collections still in the care of MoLAS. Further advice will be sought as necessary.

Access to human remains will be provided under the close supervision of the Senior Curator of Human Osteology or one of the Museum's osteological staff, or in some circumstances by a member of the archive or curatorial team with delegated responsibility from the Senior Curator of Human Osteology.

Where access is granted researchers will be provided with a copy of the Museum's *Research Ethics* document.

4.2. Educational Use

The Museum will occasionally use human remains as parts of educational programmes and as parts of pre-arranged public events. In all cases any members of the public, including school children or students, taking part in such programmes will be pre-warned of the use of human remains.

4.3. Media Use

The Museum will normally not allow its holdings of human remains to be photographed or filmed for external media purposes. However, the Senior Curator in consultation with the Press and PR Department, and others as necessary will carefully consider all such requests, and if it is considered that media exposure enhances the educational and research use of remains and adheres to the guiding principles of this policy it might be permitted.

5. Research

Research is the prime reason for holding human remains at the Museum of London. The Museum encourages ethical research of its human remains holdings by Museum staff and external researchers.

Details about access for external researchers are given above (4.1.).

The Museum of London will produce and then keep under review a research assessment of its collections of human remains as recommended in DCMS 2005.

The creation of the Wellcome Osteological Research Database is to facilitate research into the Museum's human remains collections. The Museum is committed to the active curation and development of this resource.

The Museum of London, through MoLAS, will continue to excavate and record human remains from sites as a part of PPG16 led archaeological investigations. Where there is a requirement for these remains to be analysed through planning conditions and/or requirements of the Research Framework, in-house MoLAS/MoL osteologists will undertake the research.

6. Display

6.1. Background

It has been normal practice for museums to display human skeletons in temporary and 'permanent' gallery displays as one way of interpreting past peoples, cultures and practices. The Museum of London currently includes human skeletons in its displays.

Visitor surveys show that the vast majority of museum visitors are comfortable with, and often expect to see skeletons as parts of museum displays. However, museum professionals have a duty to lead and set standards. Careful thought should be put into the reasons for, and circumstances of, the display of human skeletons.

6.2. Guiding Principle

Human skeletons are an important part of the Museum of London's archaeological collections and provide important evidence about the past lives of Londoners. If dealt with in a responsible and sensitive way they have the ability to act as a powerful method of interpretation for the Museum.

The Museum of London will continue to use skeletons in its displays, but will think carefully about when and how this is done, follow careful guidance, best practice where it is available, and be alive to the views of its users.

6.3. Guidance

1. Skeletons will only be used if they are part of the Museum's collections, with good provenance.
2. A named individual will only be displayed if we are happy it is with the consent of any known descendants.
3. If a skeleton from an modern cultural community is displayed, it will only be done so with the consent of any *bona fide* members of that community.
4. Skeletons will only be handled by, or handled under the supervision of, appropriate Museum of London staff.
5. Where a skeleton has been recovered complete, it will be kept complete for display.
6. A skeleton will only be displayed where the project team is happy that it makes a material contribution to a particular interpretation; and that contribution could not be made in another way.
7. Wherever possible skeletons will be displayed in the position and layout, in which they were found.
8. Wherever possible skeletons will be displayed in the coffin, or burial surroundings in which they were found.
9. Skeletons and burials will be displayed in high quality plain cases.
10. As a general principle skeletons will not be on 'open display' but located in such a way as to provide them some 'privacy'. This might be in a specially partitioned or alcoved part of a gallery.
11. The Museum will invite visitors and users of the Museum to comment on the general, and particular display of skeletons and take note of comments received.
12. The Museum will not normally loan skeletons for display to other institutions. Images can be loaned.

13. The Museum will review this guidance in the light of changing views in society.

14. The Human Remains Working Group will make any decisions that are needed over the interpretation of these guidelines.

References

DCMS (2005) *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*.

Church of England/English Heritage (2005) *Guidance for best Practice for Treatment of Human Remains Excavated From Christian Burial Grounds in England*

English Heritage (2004) *Human Bones From Archaeological Sites*.

Museum of London (1998) *General Standards for the Preparation of Archaeological Archives Deposited with the Museum of London*

Appendix 1: Application for Access to Human Skeletal Remains

APPLICATION FOR ACCESS TO HUMAN SKELETAL REMAINS

Museum of London, Centre for Human Bioarchaeology

Applicant surname:First
name(s).....Title.....

Affiliated institution:

.....
.....
.....

..... Telephone No
.....

FAX.E-
mail.....

Supervisor/Referee.....
.....

Site code(s) for skeletal material
involved.....

Sample size required.....entire skeletons/skulls/dentitions/single bone
(specify.....)*

Proposed dates for access: From.....to.....Renewable?(YES/NO)
(circle one)

Brief description of research
proposal.....

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

.....
.....
Methodology:

(i) Is the intention to remove items from the Museum for specialist analysis off- site?
(YES/NO) (*circle one*)

(ii) Will destructive sampling be involved? (YES/NO) (*circle one*)

If the answer to either question is 'YES', the written permission of the Curator of Osteology must be obtained.

I have read and agree to the CONDITIONS and REGULATIONS overleaf

Signed:

.....
....

Date:

.....
.....

**delete what does not apply; please be specific concerning bone element(s) required*

Conditions of research on the skeletal collections

Conditions regarding the use of the skeletal remains for academic study and research.

1. The Museum may refuse to approve any work likely to damage the skeletons.
2. The applicant will furnish an account of the aims of the research.
3. Precise identification of the archaeological sites and numbers of skeletons/bone elements required must be notified before work commences.
4. Destructive sampling and the removal of parts of the collections to other research locations are possible only at the discretion of, and with written permission from, the Senior Curator of Osteology.

5. A provisional timetable must be provided. Please have alternative dates in mind as the facilities may have been booked by another student. For long-term post-doctoral research, likely to require return visits to the Museum's Centre, please circle 'YES' at the 'Renewable?' prompt.
6. The appropriate permission forms must be completed prior to any work being undertaken.
7. All material must be logged out of the store and returned to the correct shelf location by the researcher at the end of use. If this is not completed correctly it will jeopardise the future use of the collections by other researchers.
8. Human skeletons and body parts must be treated with the maximum respect possible under the circumstances.
9. The human skeletal remains are available for study 9.30 to 17.00 Monday-Friday inclusive. At the present time there are no provisions for working outside these hours nor at weekends or public holidays.
10. It should be understood that all photographs and sketches taken are for research purposes only as described above and will not be used for commercial reproduction.
11. All researchers and/or their institutions must agree to acknowledge the Museum of London in final written work/presentations etc.
12. Researchers are expected to provide a written account of their results, as soon as possible, for deposition in the Centre's archives.
13. All researchers must agree to adhere to these conditions and sign the Application Form to this effect.

Appendix 2: Regulations for users of the human skeletal remains

Skeletal remains and their supporting documentary archives may be fragile. Please take care and do nothing that might damage them. All accidental damage is to be reported to the Senior Curator of Osteology immediately.

When handling and retrieving remains:

- Ensure a note is made of all contexts and their shelf location to be removed from the store. All material is to be logged in and out.
- Make sure you return skeletons to the container and shelf location in which you found them. **THIS IS ESSENTIAL TO ENSURE THE MATERIAL CAN BE FOUND BY FUTURE RESEARCHERS AND STAFF**
- Make sure the remains are packed exactly as found (or as advised by the curator) with all the labels on one side of the bag and the bone(s) clearly visible on the other. Long bones should be at the bottom of the box with the torso and skull uppermost. **Please ask for assistance if any material is difficult to handle or advice on packing is needed.**

When handling supporting documents:

- Use a pencil wherever possible
- Use a piece of paper to mark your place rather than folding pages

Please do not:

- Over-pack boxes or stack them on the shelves in any way which may result in damage to the collections or injury to users
- Write on or mark any item
- Lean on records or objects or place them over the edge of the desk
- Fold a drawing or other record unless it is already folded
- Make notes on paper resting on records or objects.

You are not allowed to:

- Eat or drink in the research areas
- Use mobile telephones without permission in the research areas
- Use items which could cause damage; this includes correction fluid, scissors, knives, crayons, and adhesive tape or highlighter pens
- Use your own camera, scanner or other copying machine without permission. **Please see the Curator for the appropriate forms.**

The Museum of London Archaeological Archive reserves the right to terminate a visit or refuse future access if regulations are contravened.