

## MUSEUMS AND HUMAN REMAINS

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'Respect for Ancient British Human Remains: Philosophy and Practice'  
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*This paper explains*

- *The strategic context to our approach*
  - *How consultation and consent inform our decision-making*
  - *How we are improving our care for human remains*
  - *How we balance arguments for reburial or retention*
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I (Sarah Levitt) will give an overview of our service and developments over the last few years, and how we first responded to the issue of human remains. Laura Hadland will then outline her work since she joined our team, and what we are about to do.

Not much of what follows is specifically about human remains, but it is all fundamental to our approach and as the story unfolds you will see why.

### **Our museum service and its collections**

Leicester's first museum was opened in 1849, but the current Service came into existence in 1997, when Leicester became a unitary authority and the old county service was split. Today we manage six museums, and around two million items, covering biology, geology and palaeontology, fine and decorative art, world cultures, social and industrial history and archaeology. Human remains in our collections include several mummies, parts of bodies used in artefacts like a Tibetan skull drum, and bones studied by natural historians, but most importantly a large and growing quantity of remains excavated during redevelopment of the city over the last 150 years.

The first inhabitants arrived around 6,000 years ago. I like to think they came up the river and made clearings in the forest with the axe heads we have from that period. A later Iron Age village was superseded by one of the ten most important Roman settlements in Britain. Much of the modern city centre is built on the archaeological evidence of 2,000 years of continuous occupation. The Roman street pattern and town gates are still clear today. The Forum lies just under a car park where the Fosse Way became a ceremonial thoroughfare. Where centurions parked gleaming chariots Radio Leicester reporters now pop into their headquarters. Jewry Wall still stands, once part of a massive bath-house. Jewry Wall Museum was built there in 1966 to display mosaics, wall paintings and other finds from years of excavation, including the cutting of a ring road right through the Roman town. Leicester's current regeneration programme involves excavation of around 20% of the area within the Roman walls. Many Roman and medieval human remains have been found, including two

churchyards and a charnel house. Much of this material will come to us, so in two years time we may be looking after the remains of 2,000 people. These range from the Glen Parva Lady, an important Saxon skeleton with grave goods and remains of clothing and jewellery, to tiny fragments of bone mixed in with general archaeological material.

### **Strategic approach**

When I arrived in 1997 my job was to turn a traditional, under-funded and inward-looking institution into a modern city service. We reviewed all our activities, buildings and collections and changed how we worked in order to:

- Promote social cohesion and well-being, local pride, cultural identity and intercultural understanding
- Support learning for all age groups
- Broaden horizons and enrich lives
- Become a useful source of knowledge about Leicester and the world
- Promote Leicester's heritage and cultures to others
- Support economic development and regeneration, especially through tourism
- Make sure the cost of providing this is value for money
- Look after public assets properly and use them to their full potential.

We still have a long way to go; however in nine years we have:

- Carried out major improvement projects at four of our six sites
- Increased income through grants and commercial activities
- Replaced derelict and inaccessible storage with a new central store and improved collections care and access
- Created an outreach service from scratch
- Improved our education, exhibitions and events programmes
- Begun to work with a wide range of Leicester's communities
- Begun to be recognised as a significant contributor to city agendas.

### **The single most important change has been in our understanding of accountability**

*Many museum people used to believe that we were accountable:*

1. To ourselves. We used to call ourselves 'museum professionals', and believed we were paid to do what we thought best to do
2. To our collections and the body of scholarship held about them by a particular group of people
3. To existing visitors, supporters, enthusiasts, Friends and champions
4. To 'the general public', which we thought of in very general terms

5. To the museum's governing body - be it council, university or trustees.

*Today we are accountable to all Leicester's citizens, and Leicester's elected members, who represent them.*

*We are paid to deliver a service that is relevant to and reflective of the citizens of modern Leicester and ensure that as many as possible can participate in it.*

This is quite a challenge: Leicester has nearly 300,000 residents, of which about 38% are from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. Most are Asian and African Caribbean, with an increasing number of Africans and Eastern Europeans. It is the most diverse city in the UK, with about 70 different languages spoken and about 30 different faiths practised. It has high numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, high levels of deprivation amongst long established white communities, low aspirations and low academic achievement - we are next to the bottom in national league tables.

All these people's interests have to be balanced against those of the more affluent and vociferous white communities; traditional British culture and heritage are central to their sense of identity. They see us as 'their' museum service although many live in the County not the City.

We do this by:

- Checking who uses us and who doesn't and what they think of us through market research
- Holding consultation events and focus groups for all major projects
- Setting up a museums consultation panel of around 30 stakeholder organisations reflecting all Leicester's diversity from the Leicestershire and Leicester Archaeological Society to a Hindu Temple and a young people's project on an outer estate. The last meeting was held at our new store and they advised us on our future direction
- Recruiting staff to reflect the diversity of Leicester, and using them as a vital link with communities and an informal consultation mechanism
- Activities that are specifically aimed at bringing targeted communities together in a delicious fusion of cultures
- Supporting many organisations to deliver their own projects at our sites
- Developing our outreach work in the most deprived neighbourhoods and including in that work trips to museums.

### **Faith, belief and spirituality**

One of the most interesting changes we have made because we have got to know a wider range of our communities has been in our attitude to expressions of Faith and Spirituality. In the old days museums displayed things associated with faith and belief, but from the point of view of anthropology, archaeology, sociology, fine or decorative art. The objective was appreciation not participation.

This view, still widely held, reflects western secular culture, but prevents meaningful engagement with people from many new communities in Britain for whom faith is integral to all aspects of life. It also rules out opportunities to find different ways to use collections that are significant for modern people.

We first crossed this Rubicon - and outraged a few staff - in 1999 when we helped the Sikh community to organise an exhibition celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Khalsa Brotherhood.

Later that year a Rastafarian arts practitioner produced an event commemorating the journey of African people to modern Leicester. It began with traditional African priests offering prayers and libations to the earth.

We do a lot of partnership work with Leicester Cathedral, and when we had the opportunity to show the Aids memorial quilt exhibition it was natural for us to invite the cathedral to share the show and hold a very moving service as the opening event - it turned out this was the first time this well known exhibition had ever been shown in a religious building.

More recently we held an exhibition called 'Meeting God' about aspects of Hindu spirituality. A special area was set aside for meditation classes and Friday night *poojas*, many visitors took off their shoes in the exhibition and enthusiastic visitors consecrated at least one shrine! Many people remember this exhibition with pleasure, and when the new Archbishop of Canterbury came to one of Leicester's temples I was invited to lunch too.

We also promote non-faith perspectives. When the Secular Society complained about our support for Islam Awareness Week, we explored what we could do to reflect their particular contribution to Leicester's diversity. As a result we now have a Humanist celebrant available for weddings at two of our sites.

We also have a good relationship with our local pagan community. In 2004 when the British Museum's 4000-year-old terracotta plaque of a Babylonian goddess called the Queen of the Night came to New Walk Museum, an event was hosted by the Director of the British Museum to celebrate the launch of the British Museum's Partnership UK programme and raise awareness of Iraq's cultural heritage. Attendees included an interesting mix of local 'good and great', Iraqi refugees and pagans. The following day around 50 people held a pagan rite at the museum to acknowledge the Queen of the Night's presence in Leicester.

### **Leicester Museums and HAD**

Emma Restall Orr approached me at about that time to see if I would act as an adviser to help set up Honouring the Ancient Dead (HAD) (see the conference paper by Emma Restall Orr). Coincidentally the DCMS consultation on human remains was underway, and together we attended the Museum Association's conference on the subject.

I welcomed the working party on human remains because I did not believe that we were dealing with ours properly. Although consultation was recommended it seemed

to have in mind restitution overseas, but our existing approach to community involvement, consultation and faith meant that it was obvious we should be consulting our communities about the remains in our care.

Last year Emma came to speak at an event on human remains we held at Jewry Wall Museum for the Midland Federation of Museums and Galleries, at which she put forward a Pagan view, a Midland Federation Council Member gave a Christian perspective, and members of my staff who are Sikh, Hindu, Muslim and Traditional African led discussions on those faith perspectives on remains. A representative of Leicester's Muslim Burial Council joined them. The overwhelming view of participants was that there was a need to treat human remains in museums with greater sensitivity and respect; it was acceptable to store or display them with care, and store separately from other collections, and to acknowledge their past existence as living beings, whether on display, in store or at reburial, with a modern faith-based ceremony.

The DCMS Guidelines on Human Remains and the work of HAD are very much in line with our existing approach of consultation, community participation, and respect for faith and belief. We welcome the opportunity to develop this approach with our archaeology collections, and involve more people in this important subject area.

Laura Hadland helped to organise the Midland Federation day, and used it as a starting point for her subsequent work, which she will now describe:

I began as Senior Curator of History at Leicester Museums in July 2005. One of the first tasks brought to my attention was the Midland Federation Conference on Human Remains and the need to formulate my own ideas about the DCMS Guidelines so that I could provide a useful contribution to that day. This process of getting to know my collections and the human remains that were in my care was not only useful, but also made me hugely interested in the issue of the care of human remains by museum professionals.

I found that in some cases I was in slight disagreement with the DCMS Guidelines, in that many of our visitors got a lot out of the experience of viewing human remains and having a rare chance to have a close encounter with issues of death. The DCMS Guidelines recommend that human remains are displayed in an enclosed way where visitors are aware of what they are about to see and can choose whether or not to do so. This is not hugely practical in the Jewry Wall Museum because of the way the building is laid out; also I think that it would detract from the display and the impact of the remains, as to partition them off would take them out of the context of contemporary objects. This is particularly true for the Glen Parva lady, a rich female Saxon burial who is displayed not only with facial reconstructions developed at the University of Manchester, but also with the small amount of Saxon material previously been excavated in the City. I think that the material is so sparse for this period that the display of a rich burial with her associated grave goods really helps to make the period come alive to our visitors, where it would be remote and hard to understand otherwise. Indeed, the Glen Parva lady is key to our schools provision for this period.

After the conference, I realised that we really needed a written policy to look at our treatment of human remains to ensure that we gave due care and respect to them all. This policy was relatively simple to formulate as the DCMS Guidelines is split into very clear sections that you can follow when writing your own document. Naturally, there are many obvious considerations for the processes of accession, storage and de-accessioning for reburial. The important part to remember is that human remains are not 'owned' by the museum, but rather we are their stewards for the public. This brings the same obligations as with the rest of our collections – to acquire them honestly and ethically and to truly take time to make a decision about why each human remain is accessioned.

I am fortunate in that the majority of human remains under my care have been excavated in the City by very professional archaeological units who give not only due regard to laws imposed by the Home Office, but are also willing to work with the museum to make sure that human remains are retained for good reasons. Indeed, my human remains policy begins by stating that Leicester Museums has a presumption against acquiring remains unless a good case can be made that the museum should hold them for purposes of research, education and inspiration.

Looking at our storage of human remains made me realise that our documentation backlog meant that I was unable to easily identify all the human remains in our collections, let alone systematically assess their condition. Even today, the best I can do is to estimate the amount of human remains – something coming up to perhaps as much as 1,000 individuals. This has made me realise that working to give all of the remains the respect they deserve links into many other aspects of the museum's work. Writing this policy was one of the main impetuses for beginning an inventory of my on-site store, something that has clearly never been undertaken before, so that I can identify the location and conditions of all my collections.

It has also made me think about potential storage issues that may arise. Something in the region of 9% of the ancient walled city area has been excavated in recent times, because of re-development work for housing and an extension to the existing Shires shopping centre. This work brought to our attention the lost church of St Peter's and its associated cemetery. Some 1,350 burials have been excavated there and the chances are, because of the rich demographic data they afford us, that a large percentage will be retained by the museum. This highlighted the need for a sizeable dedicated human remains store.

Luckily for me, these thought processes have coincided with the development of our new off-site central storage facility, and space could be found to produce a human remains store there. However, the problem of resources to identify and move all of the human remains currently spread around various collections looms large. We are in the process of developing a set of collections care projects, where a team consisting of curator, documentation assistant, outreach and education workers will come together for a specific collections care project. I am hoping that one of the first of these projects will be based around the human remains collection. There is a dire need to identify all of the remains, ensure they are properly documented before moving them to the new store and developing a way to make this collection more accessible to our visitors, by whatever means are appropriate.

Undertaking such a project will not only allow us to understand what we hold, but also to begin a process of rationalisation. While we now have an excellent relationship with the archaeologists, where remains are not automatically kept, but reburied where we cannot make a strong case for their retention, this has not always been the case. The Austin Friars burials are a case in point. They are never used for research purposes; indeed they have all been fully documented and published. I have no plans to ever display them and currently they are unenviably stored in the roller racking at Jewry Wall Museum. Not only is this an inappropriate set of circumstances, but also I believe that retaining these remains without any coherent reason is doing a disservice to the memory of these individuals. I hope that the reburial of these and other similar cases at Gilroes Cemetery – the local secular graveyard – will be part of the human remains-based collections care project.

In conclusion, then, I think that we at Leicester are in a similar situation to museums around the country. We wish to accord due dignity to the remains we have, but this is certainly not being done where we have no full records for the remains, and some are unrecorded and badly stored. This issue links into the wider issues of documentation backlogs, poor storage provision, lack of room for future expansion and general lack of resources. However, I believe that setting out your institution's rationale and future plans is a first step to developing a collections care policy for human remains which accords them respect. While I am in agreement with reburial in many cases, I do think that human remains can add a lot to our museums and the experiences we offer to our visitors, so due consideration should be given to how we will care for remains we will not rebury.