



# **North East Museums**

## **Policy for the Care of Human Remains**

Date approved by North East Museums Strategic Board: July 2025

Date for review by North East Museums Strategic Board: July 2030

## 1. Introduction

In 2016 the Great North Museum: Hancock (GNM: Hancock) developed this policy for human remains in its collections according to the recommendations of the Code of Practice published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in October 2005. The DCMS Code of Practice was developed to provide guidance to museums in relation to the Human Tissue Act 2004. In 2025, North East Museums adopted this policy across all of its managed collections.

For the purpose of this policy, human remains will be defined as including both prehistoric and historic biological specimens from the species *homo sapiens*. This means osteological material (whole and partial skeletons, individual bones, hair and fragments of bone and teeth), soft tissues including organs and skin and any of the above that may have been modified or physically bound up with other non-human materials to form an artefact composed of several materials.

There is an ongoing debate as to the ethics of excavating, holding and displaying human skeletons and remains 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 adaption, 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 GNM: Hancock holds human remains in the archaeology collections which are held as part of the collections of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne (SANT), and in the Egyptology, world cultures and osteology collections that are held by the Natural History Society of Northumbria (NHSN) and which includes human remains pertaining to these collection areas on loan from SANT. The human remains within these collections are cared for by the GNM: Hancock's curatorial team and are the specific responsibility of the Keeper of Archaeology and the Keeper of Biology. In total, the GNM: Hancock has approximately 120 assemblages of human remains. These include single items e.g. 2 Egyptian mummified people, and also Bronze age assemblages that may contain a number of individual bones.

The North and South Tyneside collection includes human remains such as assemblages which contain bones from a number of individuals, cremated bone, fragments of bone, partial and complete skeletons, skulls and teeth. The majority of these remains are located at Arbeia Roman Fort with a smaller number at Segedunum Roman Fort and South Shields Museum and Art Gallery.

The Northumberland collection holds a small number of human remains at Hexham Old Gaol, including the skull of Colonel John Fenwick. Berwick Museum and Art Gallery is the repository for archaeology for the town of Berwick upon Tweed and as such holds assemblages of human bone.

## **2. Guiding principles**

**2.1** North East Museums recognises that human remains have unique status in museum collections as they were once living persons or parts of living persons. Therefore, the following guiding principles underpin this policy:

- human remains will always be treated with the utmost 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 not be used in any way that would upset museum users.

**2.2** We are committed to working co-operatively with representatives of source communities, other museum professionals and all interested groups, to ensure that all culturally-sensitive items are cared for appropriately. It is recognised that, as cultures differ, what is appropriate for one group of remains may not be appropriate for another.

**2.3** We are guided by the ethical principles set out in the 'Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums' (DCMS 2005). For these and other relevant documents please see the References section below.

## **3. Acquisition and deaccessioning**

North East Museums adheres to its Collections Development Policy with collecting priorities set out in Appendix A. Please see the North East Museums Collections Development Policy for full details. GNM: Hancock has a separate acquisition and deaccessioning policy which is influenced by the learned societies that the collections fall under. Please see the GNM: Hancock Acquisition and Disposal policy for full details.

**3.1** In accordance with SANT's collecting policies, we will continue to acquire skeletal human remains from time to time, and to add them formally to the archaeology collections at GNM: Hancock. However, we will only do so if we are satisfied, as far as possible, that the remains:

1. Fall under SANT's collecting time period: from the Palaeolithic to 1600AD
2. Are from SANT's geographical collecting area: the County of Northumberland, the City of Newcastle, the Roman frontier zone westward from the mouth of the River Tyne to the River Irthing (with the exception of sites provided with site museums).

**3.2** Archaeological material excavated by Newcastle upon Tyne City Council within the historical boundaries of the city is transferred to Newcastle University, and is cared for by the GNM: Hancock. Occasionally human remains may enter the collections via this route, but this material is not always accessioned.

**3.3** For North and South Tyneside, human remains may be collected if found during excavations at Segedunum Roman Fort or Arbeia Roman Fort. They may also be collected via archives deposited by commercial archaeology units working within our collecting area. For Northumberland, it is unlikely we will acquire human remains from sources other than archaeological excavation within Berwick upon Tweed.

**3.4** For the Egyptology and World Cultures collections under the remit of the NHSN, it is unlikely that we will acquire any more human remains with the possible exception of accepting any material transferred from another museum. Where remains are offered to North East Museums via a private collector, it is highly unlikely that we will accept them. However, our policy will be to assist and guide the individual to other institutions and/or government departments that will be able to take the remains for acquisition, repatriation or reburial.

**3.5** For the Osteology collections belonging to the NHSN, it is highly unlikely that we will acquire any more human remains. Where remains are offered to North East Museums, our policy will be to assist and guide the donor to other institutions and/or government departments that will be able to take the remains for acquisition, repatriation or reburial.

**3.6** North East Museums would only ever acquire human remains that are more than 100 years old. This means that any acquisition will not be subject to legislation set out in the Human Tissue Act 2004.

## **4. Loans**

**4.1** North East Museums may loan human remains from its collections for research purposes or display. In such cases, the museum would expect the lending institution to adhere to guidance laid out in this document and in DCMS 2005. Any requests for loans of human remains from the museum collections will be decided upon by the museum's Keepers and the committee of the relevant society, where relevant.

**4.2** Occasionally, human remains might leave the museum and be given into the care of non-museum staff to carry out specific research analysis, e.g. full osteological reports intended for publication.

## **5. Claims for return**

It is unquestionable that human remains had in the past, and continue to have, a key role in museum research and practice, and have the potential to make major contributions to the furtherance of knowledge. It is equally clear that some were obtained in ways that would now be deemed unacceptable and that some individuals and communities wish to see the return of those remains or to gain some control over their future. Please see North East Museums Repatriation Policy for more information.

**5.1** North East Museums acting on the advice of curatorial staff from our venues, in

consultation with its partner organisations and The Great North Museum Board (where relevant), may take a decision to return human remains, objects or specimens to a country or people of origin. North East Museums will take such decisions on a case by case basis; within its legal position and taking into account all ethical implications and available guidance. Consideration will be given if:

1. they are discovered to be less than 100 years old and a claim for their return is being made by a genealogical descendant; or
2. they are less than 300 years old, and the claim is normally made by a source community which displays a cultural continuity with the remains in question, and the claim is made through a national government, national agency, or equivalent, and where, after taking any relevant independent advice on questions which North East Museums formulates as needing an answer to help it make a decision, it is in its view likely that the cultural and religious importance of the human remains to the community making the claim outweighs any other public benefit.

**5.2** North East Museums regards objects made from human remains that have been modified for a secondary purpose (artefactual human remains) or are 'separable' (e.g. made from hair or nails) as falling into a different category from human remains that were intended for burial, and so is unlikely to agree to any claim for their repatriation.

**5.3** North East Museums considers that claims are unlikely to be successful for any remains over 300 years old, and are highly unlikely to be considered for remains over 500 years old, except where a very close geographical, religious and cultural link can be demonstrated.

**5.4** North East Museums will normally only consider a claim for repatriation from a community if it has been made officially through a body generally recognised as responsible for the governance of the claimant community. The museum will not normally consider a claim from a national government unless it is made on behalf of an identified source community.

## **6. Storage, conservation and collections management**

**6.1** North East Museums aims to store and display human remains in an environment which minimises their rate of deterioration. Storage is actively managed and monitored and meets good standards of security, access management and environmental control.

**6.2** The remains are stored in a respectful and culturally appropriate way wherever possible. This may, for example, mean restricting access to certain items, where unrestricted access may cause offence to genealogical or cultural descendants. Where practical, remains are stored separately from other accessioned items in dedicated storage areas. Artefactual human remains are generally stored with other accessioned items, but in covered, clearly- labelled boxes or similar containers.

**6.3** Objects found associated with human remains, for example grave goods, are usually stored separately from the remains with other accessioned objects for practical reasons. However, the wishes of the genealogical descendants or cultural

communities, or relevant faith organisations, are taken into consideration where known.

**6.4** Handling remains is to be avoided unless absolutely necessary. Human remains will be handled only by museum staff, students supervised by museum staff and relevant staff from Newcastle University. Researchers will be permitted to handle material if they are accessing the remains at one of our venues or it has been loaned out for analysis.

**6.5** Clean examination gloves must be worn when handling and a clean area prepared if the remains are removed from their storage units.

**6.6** Any conservation treatment deemed necessary will aim to maintain the integrity of the remains. No original component will be permanently removed and every effort will be made to ensure that any material added to improve stability will be reversible in the long term and will not alter inherent characteristics such as DNA.

**6.7** Requests for analysis which involves the permanent removal of samples, such as C14 dating, DNA analysis and strontium isotope analysis, will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

## **7. Access**

**7.1** North East Museums currently provides access to its collections of human remains through academic research and public display. Human remains will not be used for object handling sessions within learning workshops or public events.

**7.2** Access to human remains in store is allowed only to authorised staff and to visitors under agreed supervisory arrangements.

**7.3** We will not allow public access to any human remains while the outcome of a claim for their return to a source community is pending.

## **8. Research**

**8.1** Anyone wishing to use human remains for research purposes must submit a formal request to the relevant Keeper outlining the intended research and analysis. This request will then be put forward to the relevant board North East Museums, NHSN or SANT (depending on which collection is being requested) for approval.

**8.2** Recent research using human remains has been on the two Ancient Egyptian mummified people and on the Bronze Age skeletal material within the GNM: Hancock collection. The website of the GNM: Hancock has details of some of these research projects.

## **9. Display**

Visitor surveys show that the vast majority of museum visitors are comfortable with, and often expect to see, human remains as an element of museum displays. They may be integral to some collections and to what we know of a society, for example, ancient Egypt. In this context, North East Museums gives careful thought to the reasons for, and circumstances of, the display of human remains.

**9.1 GNM: Hancock has a limited amount of human remains on permanent display:**

- The unwrapped mummified remains of Irtyru
- The sealed mummified remains of Baktenhor (still in cartonnage)
- A fragment of jaw bone from ancient Egypt
- A life size ancestral figure of a man made up from human bone, pig bone, mud and vegetable fibre ('rambaramp').

**9.2 North and South Tyneside also have a limited amount of human remains on permanent display:**

**Arbeia -**

- A modern anatomical skeleton, used to recreate a Roman burial
- A reconstructed skull and separate lower jaw and well as another reconstructed skull and bones, both from the pit in the courtyard house at Arbeia
- An almost complete skull with mandible of human female
- A skull, missing its right side, of a middle aged to older individual, likely female
- A skull of a young adult male, missing lower jaw
- A skull of an adult male, missing lower jaw
- A skull of a child with deformed long, thin skull
- A number of burnt bones from Cremation 1 at Arbeia.

**Segedunum –**

- The surviving teeth from a child's skull, around 4 years old, which was deliberately buried under the wall of a building in the civilian settlement at Segedunum.

**South Shields Museum and Art Gallery –**

- The fragmentary remains from the Bronze Age cist at Whitburn, dating from about 2100 to 1400 BC. Including skull fragment, jaw with one tooth still attached, rib sherds and femur
- Catherine Cookson's hair, in two plaits.

**9.3 Northumberland has one example of human remains on display at Hexham Old Gaol:**

- The skull of Colonel John Fenwick.

**9.4 While skeletal material and other human remains only account for a small percentage of North East Museums' collections, they are a significant part of the**

collections and provide important evidence about the past lives of people both from the local area and from around the world.

**9.5** North East Museums will continue to use human remains in its permanent displays and also at times in temporary exhibitions. Guidance will be followed when considering any display of human remains:

- Signs will be displayed at the entrance of a gallery to indicate that human remains are on display within a permanent display or temporary exhibition.
- A named individual will only be displayed if we are happy it is with the consent of any known descendants
- Human remains will only be handled by, or handled under the supervision of, North East Museums and appropriate Newcastle University staff.
- Where a skeleton, or a portion of skeleton, has been recovered complete, it will be kept complete for display;
- Human remains 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;
- Wherever possible skeletons and mummified remains will be displayed in the position and layout in which they were found, with grave goods where possible;
- Wherever possible skeletons and mummified remains will be displayed in the coffin, or a close approximation of the burial surroundings in which they were found
- Any human remains will be displayed in secure, high quality plain cases.



## References and links

Church of England and English Heritage (2005) 'Guidance for best practice for treatment of human remains excavated from Christian burial grounds in England'  
<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/human-remains-excavated-from-christian-burial-grounds-in-england/>

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2005) 'Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums'  
[http://old.culture.gov.uk/what\\_we\\_do/cultural\\_property/3289.aspx](http://old.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/cultural_property/3289.aspx)

Human Tissue Authority (2004) 'Human Tissue Act'  
<https://www.hta.gov.uk/guidance-professionals/codes-practice>

Museums Association (2008) 'Code of Ethics for Museums'  
<http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=944515>

Museum Ethnographers Group (1994) 'Professional guidelines concerning the Storage, Display, Interpretation and Return of Human Remains in ethnographical collections in the United Kingdom'  
[http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/media/documents/c1/a589/f6/human\\_remains\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/media/documents/c1/a589/f6/human_remains_guidelines.pdf)

GNM: Hancock research projects:  
<https://greatnorthmuseum.org.uk/collections/archaeology>