

# Human remains policy

## 1. Introduction

This document sets out the Science Museum's policy relating to the care of human remains in its collections and the guidelines within which the Museum will make decisions about the treatment of human remains in its care. The Science Museum currently holds approximately 900 human remains, and objects incorporating human remains and/or human tissues. A full list of these remains is available here: [Human remains list](#).

The majority of human remains in the Science Museum's care form part of the Wellcome Trust collection. These were collected for Henry Wellcome (the Trust's founder), in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Wellcome Trust collection has been on loan to the Science Museum since the late 1970s. Requests to borrow or access remains forming part of the Wellcome Trust collections will be handled by the Museum (and any such requests should be directed to the Museum), and the Museum will consult the Trust in relation to such requests before proceeding (these remains are indicated by acquisition numbers which begin with 'A'). Further information on the Trust, and its human remains policy can be found here: [Wellcome Trust Policy on The Care of Human Remains in Museums and Galleries](#).

The Science Museum remains committed to the appropriate use of human remains and tissues in display and research contexts. The Museum considers that human remains have a unique status within museum collections, and as such should be treated with respect and high standards of care. The Museum also recognises that there are particular sensitivities surrounding the display, documentation, and storage of remains. As such, the Museum follows the recommendations in the [2005 Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums produced by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport](#) in the treatment of remains within its care.

The Museum follow the definition of "human remains" found in the DCMS Guidance. That is, human remains are understood to refer to the bodies and parts of people, including osteological material (whole or part skeletons, individual bones or fragments of bone and teeth), soft tissue including organs and skin, embryos and slide preparations of human tissue. The definition does not include hair and nails obtained from a living person, in line with the [Human Tissue Act 2004](#). Human remains also include any of the above that may have been modified in some way by human skill and/or may be physically bound-up with other non-human materials.

The Museum policy will be reviewed periodically, and may be revised to reflect changes in the DCMS Guidance, or the legal and regulatory environment, including compliance with the [Human Tissue Authority \(HTA\)](#) regime.

## **Contents:**

### 2. Treatment of remains in the Museum

#### 2.1 Display

#### 2.2 Loans

#### 2.3 Acquisition and de-accession

#### 2.4 Documentation and storage

#### 2.5 Research

## **2. Treatment of remains in the Museum**

### **2.1 Display**

The Museum recognises the high levels of interest, and educational value, in the human remains held within its collection. The Museum remains committed to the usefulness of exhibiting human remains, and objects incorporating human remains, in an appropriate and sensitive manner. Such displays will be in line with DCMS guidelines and HTA legislation.

The sensitivities of both source communities and potential audiences will be actively considered when human remains - and artefacts incorporating human remains or tissues - are displayed. For visitors who wish to avoid viewing human remains, the galleries are listed on the [summary page](#). Remains of European origin will be displayed when interpretive factors, and appropriate intellectual and social context can be provided. There is a recognition that cultural sensitivities within Britain vary within the population, and over time. In all cases, the context in which remains are to be displayed will be carefully considered.

The display of non-European remains will be considered on a case-by-case basis. In the case of many indigenous communities, display of such remains in the context of a British museum may be considered inappropriate, or even offensive. 'Sensitive' remains are considered as those from a group or groups where there are known cultural objections or taboos surrounding the representation of remains, as well as the display of remains themselves. Where there are known to be cultural objections to the display of specific human remains, or images of these remains, the emphasis will be on respecting this sensitivity.

### **2.2 Loans**

The Museum will continue to loan remains to other institutions for research and display purposes when the proposed activities are in line with the Museum's policies and all relevant legal and regulatory requirements. Remains already identified as sensitive will not normally be made available for display or loan.

Any remains less than 100 years old will only be lent to UK institutions which are licensed for the display of human remains by the Human Tissue Authority

### **2.3 Acquisition and de-accession**

The Museum will continue to acquire remains when it feels that this furthers its educational goals. Any proposal for the acquisition of human remains, human tissues, or artefacts containing these, will be considered in line with the code of practice resulting from the 2004 Human Tissue Act. This Act seeks to provide a consistent legislative framework, centring on consent as the guiding principle, for issues relating to the donation, taking, storage and use of human organs and tissues.

Acquisition of remains may take the form of collection of historical material already in existence, or contemporary remains. The Museum will only acquire contemporary material where clear consent for storage and public display has been granted by the deceased. In the case of historical remains, every effort is made to ensure that provenance has been

established as clearly as possible. The museum will not acquire material that there is any suspicion that it has been illicitly acquired.

Under the Provisions of the Human Tissue Act 2004, the Science Museum is amongst those institutions granted the power to de-accession human remains from within its collections. Requests for return or burial of remains will be considered with reference to the ethical framework laid out in the DCMS guidance.

If remains are to be disposed of, they will be disposed of safely and respectfully in accordance with the Human Tissue Act 2004 and, in the case of burials from Christian contexts, Guidance for best practice for treatment of human remains excavated from Christian burial grounds in England produced by the Church of England and English Heritage in 2005.

Requests for the repatriation of human remains will be considered by the Board of Trustees on a case-by-case basis. Any requests for remains forming part of the Wellcome Trust collections should be submitted in writing to the Director of Medicine, Society and History at the Trust. Further information on how to make a claim for remains forming part of the Wellcome Trust collections, and the criteria for assessment of such claims, can be found [here](#).

#### **2.4 Documentation and storage**

The Museum is committed to broadening access to information relating to its holdings of human remains. A full list of the remains held at the Science Museum is available [here: Human remains list](#). The Freedom of Information (FOI) Act establishes the basic requirements for the provision of information about the Museum's collections. The Museum will consider the FOI requirements as the minimum for the provision of information relating to human remains in its care.

Further provenance information on certain remains may be available in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum archives held at the [Wellcome Library, Euston Road, London](#).

All human remains in the collection are held in an actively managed and monitored environment, in line with DCMS guidance and good museum practice. Remains are held together in a discrete area, separated from artefacts.

#### **2.5 Research**

The Science Museum provides access to their stores to students and researchers by appointment and under supervision. Requests for access by researchers will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Requests for the study of remains identified as sensitive, or involving innovative procedures or destructive sampling, will be considered in consultation with the Wellcome Trust when the remains in question form part of their collections.

Requests from cultural groups to access remains and/or information about remains will be treated constructively and sensitively. Where appropriate, this will occur in consultation with the Wellcome Trust.

### **Further information**

For more information on human remains in the Science Museum email: [human.remains@sciencemuseum.org.uk](mailto:human.remains@sciencemuseum.org.uk)

