

Excavated Human Burials

New guidance on Christian burial grounds

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English Heritage and the Church of England are collaborating to produce guidelines for the treatment of Christian burials excavated from archaeological sites.

Every year, thousands of ancient burials in this country are disturbed by development of disused burial grounds, by smaller-scale works in churches and churchyards, and by continuing burial in old churchyards. Excavation and study of these burials increasingly add to our understanding of the past and inform television programmes such as *Meet the Ancestors* and museum exhibitions such as the Museum of London's *London Bodies*.

There is, however, considerable uncertainty about how best to treat disturbed burials. The law involved – both civil and ecclesiastical – is complex and unclear. Most archaeologists are conscious of the need to afford the dead respectful treatment and avoid offending religious or secular sensibilities, but standards for best practice have yet to be codified. Clergy and parochial church councils seek advice about when disturbance is acceptable, about how burials should be treated if they must be disturbed and about who should bear the costs. In addition, after archaeological excavation and study, there is the question of whether human remains should be retained long-term for scientific study or reburied.

Feedback from archaeologists, parishes and clergy indicated a clear need for guidance on these issues. As a result, in 2001, a Working Group was convened jointly by English Heritage and the Church of England and included representatives from the Church, archaeological and museums organisations, and the Home Office. Its remit concerned burials from Christian contexts in England dating from the 7th to the 19th century, including both churchyards in current use and disused burial places such as monasteries. This context provides a coherent body of material to which a consistent theological framework can be applied

to inform ethical treatment, and for which reasonably specific guidance might be given. As three out of every four skeletons excavated as a result of archaeological fieldwork in England come from Christian contexts, the guideline should have widespread application. The main principles of the Working Group's deliberations were that:

- Human remains should always be treated with dignity and respect.
- Burials should not be disturbed without good reason. It was noted, however, that the demands of the modern world are such that it may be necessary to disturb burials in advance of development.
- Human remains are an important source of scientific information.
- There is a need to give particular weight to the feelings and views of living close family members when known.
- There is a need for decisions to be made in the public interest in an accountable way.

The working group has produced a draft report which describes the current legal framework for the treatment of human remains and makes recommendations for best practice within this framework. It attempts to balance ethical considerations derived from Christian theology against the recognised legitimacy of scientific study of human burials, while being aware of public views about the disturbance of, and scientific work on, human remains.

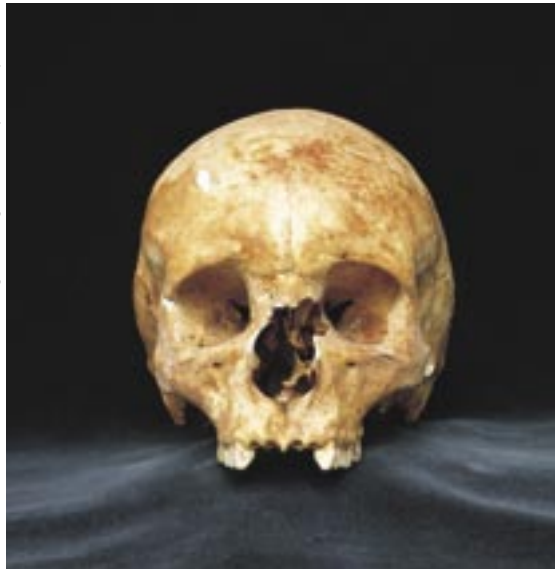
The report presents overviews of the legal, ethical and scientific considerations associated with human remains and their context (burial artefacts and monuments). It also provides practical guidelines for the treatment of such remains in fieldwork projects, summarising the legal, ethical and scientific considerations pertinent at each particular phase of work.

A summary sets out the main recommendations, which include:

- If a planned development (large-scale construction or minor building work) appears likely to disturb burials more than 100 years old, then the relevant area should be archaeologically evaluated; any subsequent exhumations should be monitored and, if necessary, carried out by archaeologists.
- The developer, whether a religious or secular organisation, should be responsible for the cost of any archaeological intervention (including post-excavation study of the remains and their reburial or deposition in a museum or other institution) necessitated by the development.
- Research excavations of unthreatened burial grounds are acceptable only if the remains are more than 100 years old, if the proposed work is acceptable to close family members of those buried (if known), and if it can be justified in terms of specific research aims.
- If family members request it, excavated human remains should be reburied.
- In some instances, it may be difficult to reconcile different viewpoints concerning the long-term fate of excavated human remains. This most often occurs when the scientific importance of a collection means that it is desirable that it remain accessible for research but that other parties with legitimate interests, such as the Church or the local community, desire that the remains be returned to consecrated ground. A possible solution in such cases might be the deposition of the remains in redundant churches. The Report recommends that this possibility be further investigated.
- A standing committee should be set up jointly by English Heritage and the Church of England to serve as a national advisory body on the treatment of human remains from Christian burial grounds and to provide advice in controversial cases.

The Report will be published in late January 2005 as part of the Centre for Archaeology Guideline series. It will be available from customers@english-heritage.org.uk and from www.english-heritage.org.uk.

The redundant St Saviour's Church was adapted by the York Archaeological Trust as its Archaeology Resource Centre. The aisles house an archive of the Trust's excavations, and the nave is used as an educational area.



A human skull from the graveyard in the deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy, in the Yorkshire Wolds, subject of one of the longest-running archaeological excavations in Britain (1950–90). The human and animal bones from this excavation form part of an important research archive.

