

Life and Reburial in Cambridgeshire

The Historic Environment Record maintains the County Archaeological Store. We have a large collection of Human Skeletal Remains (HSR), with the remains of c.1200 individuals in our care, of which 65% are 'Christian' burials. Several assemblages are deemed to be of national significance. Recent experiences have shown that this retention and treatment of HSR is a contentious issue.

We withdrew a display of locally excavated HSR at an Outreach event as we were concerned about the appropriateness of such a use. The response to this decision suggested that visitors had expected to see the skeletons, and our actions attracted adverse comment, which surprised us. We realised that although this has been a lively issue, no-one has actually asked if reburial is of concern to the wider public? Are people afraid of the answer?

In summer 2004, we distributed a questionnaire to the public at our events and through local museums. The survey ran for 4 months and we received over 220 responses. The questions and percentage breakdowns of responses are:

Question	Yes	No
Were you aware that skeletons excavated by archaeologists are frequently kept after the fieldwork?	85%	15%
Do you think that skeletons should be reburied?	70%	30%
If YES, at what point in time:		% Of 'Yes'
Immediately after excavation	5%	
If requested by the local community	25%	
A set time after excavation (say two years)	27%	
When the archaeologists decide there is no further scientific or research use for them.	71%	
Other (please state)	2%	
Human skeletal remains can aid future scientific study. Do you think it is appropriate to keep skeletons for future scientific work?	88%	12%
Do you think that the buried person's religion should make a difference to how the skeleton is treated?	56%	44%
Do you expect to see human skeletons displayed in Museums?	79%	21%
Do you think this is appropriate?	73%	27%
Do you expect to see human skeletons displayed at one-off public events hosted by archaeologists?	71%	29%
Do you think this is appropriate?	69%	31%

Some 80% of respondents felt that HSR should not be reburied or that reburial should only happen when archaeologists said there was no further scientific or research use for them, with similar levels of support for displaying HSR in museums and at archaeological events. We see this as a vote of confidence in the professionals, with the public trusting us to do the right thing with HSR, such as research, study and appropriate presentation.

We are not claiming that our survey provides definitive proof of anything except that this issue needs careful and objective reassessment. Our results appear to support the role of the archaeologist and that – at least amongst that sector of the public who take an active interest in heritage issues – the call for reburial of HSR is not widely supported. We plan to use these results and our experiences on the reburial debate to produce a policy for archaeologically excavated HSR. We aim to complete a consultation document later this year.