



BRITISH  
ASSOCIATION OF  
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OSTEOARCHAEOLOGY

Advice and guidance about accessing  
collections of human remains in the  
United Kingdom

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BABAO Committee

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## Accessing skeletal collections for research: advice and guidance

This document focuses on skeletal collections held by museums and archives (hereafter, termed institutions) in the United Kingdom (UK). However, where collections are held by universities or other responsible bodies (e.g. commercial field units) this document will be relevant.

Institutions are funded and staffed in a variety of ways and will have different priorities, routes and criteria for granting access to their collections. They are not required to provide access in every case and may have limitations on when a collection can be viewed. With this in mind, you should always leave sufficient time (i.e. at least two months) to request a research visit and supply any supporting information needed.

You need to have a good idea about which site/collection you want to access before you contact the institution. Whilst institutions are usually happy to help, they are usually limited by staff time and costs, and this will impact on how much they can help you. Collections which fit your research aims can be identified using local Historic Environment Records (HERs, formally SMRs), publications and grey literature. Commercially produced site reports usually state where the site archive will be deposited. With respect to archaeological material, institutions usually cover a prescribed geographical collecting area. If you have identified a site but have been unable to find out where it was deposited, the Archaeological Data Service (ADS) hosts an [interactive map](#) compiled by the Society of Museum Archaeologists which identifies the collecting areas of different museums and archives. Bear in mind that this map only shows current collecting areas, and sites excavated a long time ago may not have ended up at the most obvious institution (e.g. the Natural History Museum and The British Museum curate Iron Age and Roman human remains from Yorkshire). The institution currently covering the area is still a good place to contact in the first instance, as they will most likely know which institutions are relevant to your search.

Check the institution's website thoroughly; some institutions have some or all of their archives listed online. If you find the right archive online, see if the institution has a formalised application process and if they do, follow it to the letter, and make sure you provide all the relevant information. If the institution does not have an online catalogue, they will usually have a central enquiries route (often via email) which you can follow. If in doubt about where you need to send your enquiry, call the institution to find out who you should contact.

At this initial stage, you should provide as much useful information as possible for the institution to answer your enquiry. Always include your name, position, research project and interest in the collection, but be brief – you can always provide more detail at a later date. Not all institutions catalogue their archives in the same way, and older archives contain different information to recently excavated sites. At a minimum include the following:

- Site name
- Site location (include the grid reference if known)

- Site code
- Date of excavation
- Excavator name (especially useful for older excavations)
- Period of the site

It can also be useful to include the monument number assigned to the excavation by the HER, but this is not always carried across to the institution, and its use will vary between counties and countries in the UK.

Wait a reasonable amount of time for a response (e.g. two weeks); keep in mind that institutions with collections which are accessed frequently, are dealing with many enquiries and staff may be engaged with other projects. Conversely, institutions with fewer enquiries may have less staff responsible for many different collections.

The institution should be able to tell you if they hold that site, or will be able to suggest an alternative institution. If they are unable to answer your enquiry or grant access at the current time, they should inform you of this. If the institution has the archive you are looking for and can support research access, it is reasonable for supporting documentation to be requested prior to access being granted. Institutions may have blanket rules covering access (e.g. undergraduate research vs PhD research). These policies will have been created by the institute to safeguard their collections and make appropriate use of staff time, and should be respected.

Institutions who can offer research access may have a limited timescale for doing so, for example, one day a week or not during certain periods. Staff may be able to make arrangements for researchers coming a significant distance and there is no harm requesting an alternative arrangement, but the rules are usually created in response to staffing levels and commitments, and space limitations, so there are no guarantees.

Collections are held by institutions so that research can be carried out and prior assumptions revisited. Researchers play an important role in this work and institutions will try hard to offer a good service. However, please bear in mind that institutions are generally busy and understaffed, and providing access to collections is only one aspect of their role. It may not be possible for your specific request to be given priority in an organisation which has numerous other areas to oversee, many of which are managed by the same individual or small team. Making an enquiry which is polite, straight-forward and demonstrates that you have done your own back-ground research makes it easier to answer, and is more likely to result in a positive outcome.

## Contact information for the Historic Environment Record (HER) offices and where relevant, museum services in the United Kingdom

The [Historic Environment Record](#) (formerly known as the Sites and Monuments Records, SMRs) is a resource which archives all of the information about archaeological sites and finds, historical buildings and landscapes for a given area.

Note that the linked page provides the local authority areas covered by the HER, online record access information, location, opening hours, facilities, summary of available information and contact information for staff. The relevant museum service for each county, area or country is also provided; please note that due to funding cuts, some museums have stopped accepting archives (<http://www.socmusarch.org.uk/docs/Archaeological-archives-and-museums-2012.pdf>).

Information has been provided by country at county/region level, which where possible, also includes metropolitan counties.

### ENGLAND

Name of County	Historic Environment Record (HER) contact information	Museum Service
Bedfordshire	<a href="#">Bedford Borough Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Central Bedfordshire and Luton Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Bedford Borough Council</a> , <a href="#">Luton Culture</a> ,
Berkshire	<a href="#">Berkshire archaeology</a> ; <a href="#">West Berkshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Berkshire Record Office</a>
Buckinghamshire	<a href="#">Buckinghamshire Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Milton Keynes Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Buckinghamshire County Council</a> ; <a href="#">Milton Keynes Council</a>
Cambridgeshire	<a href="#">Cambridgeshire Historic Environmental Record</a> ; <a href="#">Peterborough City Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Cambridgeshire County Council</a> ,
Cheshire	<a href="#">Cheshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">East Cheshire</a> ; <a href="#">West Cheshire</a>
City of London	<a href="#">Museum of London</a>	<a href="#">Museum of London</a>
Cornwall	<a href="#">Cornwall and Scilly Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Dartmoor National Park Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Cornwall Museums</a>
Cumbria	<a href="#">Cumbria Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Lake District Historic</a>	<a href="#">Cumbria Museums</a>

	<a href="#">Environment Record</a>	
Derbyshire	<a href="#">Derbyshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Derby Museums Trust</a>
Devon	<a href="#">Devon Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Plymouth Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Torbay Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Devon Museums</a>
Dorset	<a href="#">Dorset Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Dorset County Museum, Dorset Museums</a>
Durham	<a href="#">Durham County Council Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Tees Archaeology</a>	<a href="#">Durham County Council, Northumberland County Council</a>
Essex	<a href="#">Colchester Urban Archaeological Database</a> ; <a href="#">Essex Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Southend Borough Council Sites and Monuments Record</a>	<a href="#">Museums in Essex</a>
Gloucestershire	<a href="#">Bristol City Council</a> ; <a href="#">Gloucestershire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives, Gloucestershire revealed,</a>
Greater London	<a href="#">Greater London Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Museum of London, London Government Directory</a>
Hampshire	<a href="#">Chichester District Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Hampshire Archaeology and Historic Building Record</a> ; <a href="#">Isle of Wight Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Portsmouth City Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Southampton Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Winchester Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Hampshire Cultural Trust, Isle of Wight Heritage Service, Portsmouth Museums and Visitor Services, Southampton County Council,</a>
Herefordshire	<a href="#">Herefordshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Museums and galleries in Hereford</a>
Hertfordshire	<a href="#">Hertfordshire Historic Environment Record and St Albans Urban Archaeological Database</a>	<a href="#">Hertfordshire Museums</a>
Kent	<a href="#">Canterbury Urban Archaeological Database</a> ; <a href="#">Kent Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Kent County Council,</a>
Lancashire	<a href="#">Greater Manchester Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Lancashire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Lancashire County Council</a>

Leicestershire	<a href="#">Leicester City Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Leicestershire &amp; Rutland Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Leicestershire County Council</a> , <a href="#">Leicester City Council</a>
Lincolnshire	<a href="#">Lincoln Heritage Database</a> ; <a href="#">Lincolnshire Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">North East Lincolnshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Lincolnshire County Council</a>
Merseyside	<a href="#">Merseyside Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">National Museums Liverpool</a>
Norfolk	<a href="#">Norfolk Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Norfolk Museums</a>
Northamptonshire	<a href="#">Northamptonshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Northampton Borough Council</a>
Northumberland	<a href="#">Northumberland Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Museums and Archives of Northumberland</a>
Nottinghamshire	<a href="#">Nottingham City Council</a> ; <a href="#">Nottinghamshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Nottinghamshire City Council</a>
Oxfordshire	<a href="#">Oxford Urban Archaeological Database</a> ; <a href="#">Oxfordshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Oxfordshire County Council</a>
Shropshire	<a href="#">Shropshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Shropshire Museum Service</a>
Somerset	<a href="#">Bath and North East Somerset</a> ; <a href="#">North Somerset Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Somerset Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Bath and North East Somerset Heritage Services</a> , <a href="#">North Somerset Council Museum Services</a> , <a href="#">Somerset Archives and Local Studies</a> ,
Staffordshire	<a href="#">Staffordshire Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Stoke-on-Trent SMR</a>	<a href="#">Staffordshire County Council</a>
Suffolk	<a href="#">Suffolk County Council Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Suffolk Museums</a>
Surrey	<a href="#">Surrey Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Surrey Museums and Galleries</a>
Sussex	<a href="#">East Sussex Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">West Sussex County Council Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Sussex Museums Group</a>
Tyne and Wear	<a href="#">Tyne and Wear Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Tyne &amp; Wear Archives &amp; Museums</a>
Warwickshire	<a href="#">Warwickshire Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Heritage &amp; Culture Warwickshire</a>
West Midlands	<a href="#">Birmingham City Council</a> ; <a href="#">Coventry Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Dudley Historic</a>	<a href="#">Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery</a> , <a href="#">Coventry City Council</a> , <a href="#">Dudley</a>

	<a href="#">Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Sandwell Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Solihull Sites and Monuments Record</a> ; <a href="#">Wolverhampton and Walsall Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Worcestershire City Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Metropolitan Borough Council, Sandwell</a> <a href="#">Metropolitan Borough Council, Solihull</a> <a href="#">Metropolitan Borough Council, Wolverhampton Arts &amp; Heritage, Walsall Councils, Museums</a> <a href="#">Worcestershire</a>
Wiltshire	<a href="#">Wiltshire and Swindon Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Wiltshire Council</a>
Yorkshire	<a href="#">City of York Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">Humber Archaeology Partnership</a> ; <a href="#">North York Moors National Park Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">North Yorkshire County Council Historic Environment Record</a> ; <a href="#">South Yorkshire Sites and Monuments Record</a> ; <a href="#">West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service</a> ; <a href="#">Yorkshire Dales National Park Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Yorkshire Museums, East Riding Museums, West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service,</a>

## WALES

<b>Region</b>	<b>Historic Environment Record (HER) contact information</b>	<b>Museum Service</b>
Clwyd-Powys	<a href="#">Clwyd-Powys Historic Environment Record (CPAT)</a>	<a href="#">Powys museums</a>
Dyfed	<a href="#">Dyfed Archaeological Trust Ltd</a>	<a href="#">Cadw historic environment service</a>
Glamorgan-Gwent	<a href="#">Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust's Historic Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Abertillery &amp; District Museum</a>
Gwynedd	<a href="#">Gwynedd Historical Environment Record</a>	<a href="#">Gwynedd Museums</a>
Wales (national): The Historic Environment Records of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts	<a href="#">Archwilio</a>	<a href="#">Cadw historic environment service</a> <a href="#">National Museum Cardiff</a>



## SCOTLAND

Region	Historic Environment Record (HER) contact information
Aberdeen	<a href="#">Aberdeen City Council</a>
Aberdeenshire	<a href="#">Aberdeenshire Council</a>
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles)	<a href="#">Comhairle nana Eilean Siar</a>
Dumfries and Galloway	<a href="#">Dumfries and Galloway Council</a>
Dundee City	<a href="#">Dundee City Council</a>
East Dunbartonshire	<a href="#">East Dunbartonshire Council</a>
East Lothian	<a href="#">East Lothian Council</a>
Edinburgh City	<a href="#">Edinburgh City Council</a>
Falkirk	<a href="#">Falkirk Council</a>
Fife	<a href="#">Fife Council</a>
Highland Council	<a href="#">Highland Council</a>
North Lanarkshire	<a href="#">North Lanarkshire Council</a>
Orkney Islands	<a href="#">Orkney Islands Council</a>
Perth and Kinross	<a href="#">Perth and Kinross Council</a>
Scottish Borders Heritage	<a href="#">Scottish Borders Heritage</a>
Shetland	<a href="#">Shetland Amenity Trust</a>
Stirling	<a href="#">Stirling Council</a>
West of Scotland (Ayrshire, Argyll, Dunbarton, Lanark, Renfrew and the City of Glasgow)	<a href="#">West of Scotland Archaeology Service (WoSAS)</a>
<a href="#">SMR Forum Scotland</a>	
<a href="#">Scotland's Historic Environment Data Strategy (SHED)</a>	
<a href="#">Museums Galleries Scotland</a>	

## Northern Ireland

Historic Environment Record (HER) contact information
<a href="#">Northern Ireland Environment Agency</a>
<a href="#">National Museums, Northern Ireland</a>

## **Archaeological contractors**

Commercial archaeological contractors play an important role in holding cemetery populations they have excavated until they can be deposited with an institution. Curation is not, however, their primary role and although they will often assist (particularly where research may be of benefit to the archaeological project), they are under no obligation to provide access or deal with research enquiries. They are businesses whose work is often governed by client-confidentiality agreements, which may mean that samples **are not** available for access - often for many years - until they have been fully recorded and/or deposited with a curating institution.

Contact information for commercial archaeological contractors operating in the United Kingdom, and who are professionally registered, is provided by the [Chartered Institute for Archaeologists](#). They also provide links to contractors working in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

## **Other institutions**

The majority of holdings are curated by museums and institutions funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport or the Arts Council for England, such as the Natural History Museum, The British Museum, Museum of London and Historic England. These institutions provide information about the human remains in their care.

Increasingly, a large number of archaeologically derived human remains are held by non-Governmental institutions. These include independent museums (those not funded by the Government whether at local or national level), universities, medical and dental schools and museums. Many of these institutions provide online information about their holdings; for example, The Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons (London).

The BBAO website has a list of institutions that are able to receive skeletal collections, and many already have holdings (<http://www.babao.org.uk/index/institutions-receiving-skeletal-collections>).

## **Advice about accessing collections**

In England, [Dr Simon Mays \(Historic England\)](#) may be able to assist with enquiries, and the Government bodies [Historic Environment Scotland](#), [Cadw](#) (Wales) and the [Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure](#) (Northern Ireland) may also be able to help with an enquiry.

The Human Remains Subject Specialist Network can also be contacted, as their members represent museums and institutions across the UK.

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