

What to do if you Encounter Human Remains During Archaeological Investigations

Human remains may be encountered during the course of archaeological investigations although this is likely to be a rare occurrence. Understandably there is legislation in place which must be followed should this happen.

First Actions

If human remains are uncovered on site that is not currently undergoing an evaluation or excavation carried out by an archaeologist, then work on site should stop immediately and the police should be contacted. In this case, the human remains may be modern and continuation of work may remove vital information that could potentially be used as evidence in court. Once the police have been informed, a representative of the Coroners Office and also, in many cases, a forensic osteo-archaeologist will attend the scene to confirm that the remains are human and to determine whether they are modern or archaeological.

If the burial uncovered contains human tissue, the local Environmental Health Officer should be informed immediately. These are based at:

North West Leicestershire District Council

Tel: 01530 454545

Email: ehealth@nwleicestershire.gov.uk

Charnwood Borough Council

Tel: 01509 634636

Email: env.health@charnwood.gov.uk

Blaby District Council

Tel: 0116 272 7555

Email: env.health@blaby.gov.uk

Melton Borough Council

Tel: 01664 502502

Email: contactus@melton.gov.uk

Harborough District Council

Tel: 01858 828282

Email: customer.services@harborough.gov.uk

Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council:

Tel: 01455 238141

Email: esadmin@hinckley-bosworth.gov.uk

Oadby & Wigston Borough Council

Tel: 0116 288 8961

Email: customerservices@oadby-wigston.gov.uk

Leicestershire County Council staff with archaeological responsibilities should also be contacted:

Planning Team

planning.archaeology@leics.gov.uk

0116 305 8322

Museums

archaeology@leics.gov.uk

0116 305 8324

Licence

Human remains that are discovered within an archaeological context should only be excavated and removed once it has been decided that the remains will contribute towards further scientific understanding; if this is the case then an exhumation licence must be obtained from the Ministry of Justice before any remains are disturbed. A licence is required to remove, or 'exhume' human remains from the ground, either in the form of a body or cremated remains.

It is illegal to remove human remains without this licence.

The Coroner's licence required for excavating archaeological remains from non-consecrated ground is called the '*Authority to Exhume Buried Human Remains For Archaeological Purposes*' and can be obtained from the Ministry of Justice. Overall, the application form seeks to establish:

- Who the applicant is
- The nature of the archaeological site
- The regulations covering the site
- The size of the skeletal assemblage
- The persons responsible for advising on and working with the human remains
- The nature of any post-excavation analysis
- The storage location, if human remains are to be retained for any length of time

Scheduled Monuments

Some burial grounds may be scheduled as ancient monuments. Work involving exhumation will require consent under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.

Therefore, the Historic Environment Record should be consulted should human remains be discovered:

Tel: 0116 305 8323

Email: HER@leics.gov.uk

Ethical and Scientific Considerations

Human remains should not be removed if discovered during an archaeological evaluation of a site. In this case, the potential scientific value of remains is not seen as outweighing the importance of retaining an ethical approach to the disturbance of human remains laid to rest. However, evaluations may be carried out in a variety of contexts. The decision to remove human remains from an evaluation trench should be made according to the particular circumstances of the archaeological evaluation and the nature of the human

remains. Generally, remains should be left in situ unless reburial would cause excessive damage or degradation.

Excavation of human remains should only be undertaken by excavators trained in recording and recovering human remains. Unless recovered by experienced excavators, important information can easily be overlooked such as tiny bones, gallstones, evidence of parasites etc.

It should be emphasised at the outset to all people involved in handling human remains, both during excavation and during post-excavation, that human remains are parts of once living individuals and should at all times be treated in a respectful manner.

Health & Safety Issues

Any licence may have a public interest 'precautions' associated with it. In English conditions, preserved microbiological pathogens are extremely unlikely to survive in viable form for as long as a century. However, there are concerns about anthrax and smallpox, especially from sealed contexts such as coffins. The site will need to be overseen by environmental health officers (see section above). Sealed coffins are a major risk to public health and should under no circumstances be opened. Post-Medieval horsehair pillows have been known to contain anthrax spores and smallpox can survive.

Handling human remains can cause psychological stress in some individuals and any sites where remains are being excavated should be screened from passers-by for the preservation of public decency.

Lead coffins and coffin linings create a risk of lead poisoning and preserved potentially harmful soft tissue.

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