

Submission to DCMS Working Group on Human Remains

from

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- 1: I am a professional archaeologist, working as a consultant. I am a member of the Institute of Field Archaeologists, elected in 1983, and hold degrees from the Universities of Oxford and Durham.
- 2: I would wish to make two brief points to the Working Group, one personal and one professional.
- 3: Last month I took my six-year-old son to the British Museum for the first time. We visited the Egyptian galleries; what turned them into something more than a collection of painted sarcophagi, into the remains of real people with real beliefs and real lives, was the display of a skull which had lost all its teeth in life. The idea of an Egyptian with false teeth proved to be the connecting point that brought the museum display to life. Later we visited the Prehistoric galleries and looked at Lindow Man. Once again the opportunity to gaze on the real face of a real person from the Iron Age gave the rest of the display a relevance to my son it might not otherwise have had.
- 4: My professional point is related to the operation in England of Planning Policy Guidance 16: Archaeology and Planning. This document is the basic policy document guiding the way in which archaeology is handled in the planning process. Central to its philosophy is the concept that, if a site cannot be preserved *in situ*, it should be preserved by record (that is, excavated) and that the site archive (the notes, photographs, plans and finds from the excavation) should be permanently available for study in its stead, usually in a museum. Among the site archive of some sites are human remains, either as the principal focus of the site if it is a cemetery, or as incidental finds in other categories of site. In either case they form an integral part of the archive of the site. Recent developments in biochemistry, notably but not exclusively the understanding of DNA, have increased the potential of human remains as a source of information, but the cost and relative novelty of these techniques have meant that they have not been extensively used; however, since the information is latent in the site archive, it can be extracted from it when circumstances change, when new techniques are developed, when more money becomes available. Any policy toward human remains in museums which would cause the break-up of a site archive and the loss of potential future information from it would be the equivalent of destroying a book unread, and reduce the rationale for preservation by record.
- 5: Finally, I would like to comment that it would be unfortunate if the long history of racism and racist assumptions in physical anthropology, which has created the present climate of mistrust of the way human remains might be used in museums, should threaten our ability to understand our past properly through archaeology.