

## Avebury Reburial Request: Summary Report Response from Paul Davies

### 1. Introduction and Background

In 2006, as reburial officer to the Council of British Druid Orders (a group in existence for over 20 years), I submitted a request for the reburial of human remains of our shared ancestors currently displayed and archived at the Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury. The request focussed upon the prehistoric ancestral remains of Charlie, a 3 year old child displayed in a glass case, along with the human remains of children and adults archived in the museum store. On behalf of the reburial committee responsible for the original request, I wish to thank National Trust, English Heritage and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for trying to understand and address the complex issues that underlie this request, and for addressing this request through wide public consultation and with professional scientific interest. This request was denied by EH who have a mandate to manage the Avebury complex, and by the NT who own the museum. Issues surrounding display and reburial remain unresolved, and we wish to object to the conclusions reached by NT and EH and seek a review of the advice granted by DCMS.

### Complex Relationships

Throughout the time that NT, EH and our group met to discuss and plan the public consultation, COBDO experienced internal anxieties and the group divided. Throughout this period of anxiety, NT and EH continued to work toward a public consultation with the reburial committee without prejudice. Such balanced thinking must be applauded. During meetings, views concerning ancestors were openly discussed, clearly considered and robustly defended. Working concurrently, but through their own processes, groups around Britain began working toward greater recognition for our shared ancestors and, to some extent, toward reburial. Most notable among these groups were Emma Restall Orr and the executive of Honouring the Ancient Dead (2004), Philip Shallcrass of the British Druid Order (1979) and Tim, Miranda and Graham of the Secular Order of Druids (1984).

### 2. Consideration

In attendance at the 1st meeting, held in Bath, was Dr Sebastian Payne, Chief Scientist with EH and Dr David Thackray, Head of Archaeology with NT, Paul Davies, Secular Order of Druids, Denise Price AD of Glastonbury, Brian and Mary of Glastonbury Outer Order, Steve Best, AD Outer Order of Druids, Exmoor. Later meetings were supported by Miranda Young of the Secular Order of Druids who attended many meetings, and by Jherick Jones and Howie Davis. The request was initiated and strongly supported by Tim Sebastian prior to his death on 1st February 2007.

At the 1st meeting in Bath, Dr Payne and Dr Thackray suggested the request for reburial follow the DCMS Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (2005). Although the guidance was written for overseas requests and we were requesting to remove the ancestral remains from the museum and were not requesting better care for them in museums, we were keen to demonstrate that we

were a group willing to co-operate and negotiate with NT and EH. We therefore agreed to use the guidance as a basis from which to work. I was well aware of the difficulties involved in working with the DCMS Guidance and trusted to a reasonable and flexible working relationship.

#### Criterion A: An Unfair Contract to the Detriment of Those Requesting Reburial

Concerned at the rigidity and inflexibility of the DCMS guidelines, I sensed that our requests for reburial would be denied and raised concerns both formally in meetings, and through e-mails. I asked NT and EH if it were possible to scientifically demonstrate a familial, spiritual or cultural link with a Neolithic or Bronze Age past through skeletal material (criterion A). The answer was 'no'. Is it not then, I asked, 'unreasonable to ask us to prove the impossible'. The reply was 'yes, because you are making the request'. I disagreed. As we are unable to demonstrate a relationship to the satisfaction of the guidance, NT are also unable provide an argument for retention. The DCMS guidance offers unreasonable advice and does not state law. Where conflicts of opinion suggest such an impasse and where law is vague or non-existent, flexibility permit resolution.

The decision by NT and EH, supported by the DCMS Guidance, to refuse the request on the basis of a criteria A clearly demonstrates unreasonable inflexibility. In response to our request, in the document Avebury Reburial Request: Summary Report (2010) NT and EH stated 'no further evidence to support a familiar link was given'. It is impossible to provide this. Neither can NT provide evidence to support continued retention without a mandate or to disregard our request without empathy. We are therefore of the opinion that Criterion A is inapplicable to this request. It is clearly designed as a framework document advising NT how best to care for 'artefacts', and how best to disregard requests for reburial.

I refuse to believe that Science and scientists are as cold hearted as this.

Finally, Dr Payne and Dr Thackray, with the support of the DCMS, concluded 'there is no basis [in relation to criterion A] for giving preferential status to COBDO's request on the basis of continuity with [our shared ancestral human] remains'. At no time did I, or other initiates of the reburial committee request preferential status. However, NT have assumed a preference permitting retention while not meeting the same criteria or providing further evidence in their defence. This is difficult to understand, especially as modern Druidry formally came into existence in 1717 (some state 1789), over 100 years before the birth of archaeology. In short, the significance of ancestral heritage is the sum of spiritual and archaeological meaning.

On the basis of the criterion A alone, the response of NT and EH and the too rigid criteria may be reconsidered.

#### Criterion B: The Need for an Ethics Committee

During meetings with Dr Payne and Dr Thackray, it became clear there exists within NT and EH a respect for the ethical and spiritual views expressed by the reburial committee. This is to be commended. It also became clear in meetings that Dr Payne and Dr Thackray were unable to fully appreciate concepts such as stone as

bone, and earth as flesh (OBOD). Admittedly, understanding both ancestral landscapes and archaeology was easy for the reburial committee that consisted of Druids with an interest and/or academic training in history, archaeology, social anthropology, physical anthropology.

As deciding judges, it became apparent during meetings, and very likely, that any decision for our request may not fully consider or act upon our ethical or spiritual views and the request would be unlikely to succeed. It is therefore important that future requests involve all interested parties in the form of an Ancestral and Reburial Ethics Committee. Such a panel would safeguard the needs of both museum and requester. Future requests for reburial will only succeed when public authorities and their governing bodies take into account the holistic significance of our shared ancestral heritage. Bones have meanings that extend beyond data and an ethics committee would help safeguard and maintain a balanced view.

#### Criterion C: Reconsidering the Default

NT are unable to prove a close or continuous links with a prehistoric 'past' and are unable to meet the remit of criterion C. Retention may not be assumed as the standard.

#### Criterion D: The Embracing Earth

It is accepted that the human remains of our shared ancestors were, probably, lawfully obtained and retained by NT for research. However, deeming provisions in archaeological practice (the old PPG16, and the new PPS5 that refer to recent MoJ Guidelines) accept a requirement for reburial may arise and, when required, openly considers leaving human remains in situ where possible. The MoJ have produced options within their guidance also permitting retention and the needs of advocates for reburial and those preferring retention are both reasonably considered. No such options are seriously considered within the current DCMS framework, thereby permitting NT to lawfully retain our shared ancestral remains but unreasonably deny, with the help of EH, groups requesting reburial.

#### Criterion E: Status

In death, there is no ownership. This is clearly stated in Human Tissues Act. The human remains of our shared ancestors are the property of Earth, and specifically, Avebury. At no time were the human remains of our shared ancestors in the ownership of Mrs Keiller or hers to give away. The fate of the nations' ancestors rest with the public, and surveys alternative to the NT and EH consultation indicate support for reburial. These questionnaires are detailed in the original request, and on the website of Honouring the Ancient Dead and question the conclusions of NT and EH.

#### Criterion F: Value

The human remains of our shared ancestors remain in good condition owing to favourable chalk loam around Avebury. These ancestral remains exist after 4-6000 years, and are likely to remain safe if reburied. This Earth protects. Reburial is highly

unlikely to lead to metal detecting grave robbers removing the human remains of our ancestors contrary to their wishes. To retain our ancestors on the basis of undeveloped and non-existent techniques is bad science. Further to the above, the value of statistical data, demonstrating inadequacies in diet and illness suffered from the imposition of lifestyle, must be questioned.

While retained in the NT museum, the remains of our shared ancestors have been marked with ink and have suffered salt damage. This disrespects their memory.

#### Criterion G: Consideration

The processes and needs of education, and the never-ending acquisition of knowledge, should be re-considered within more flexible and empathic frameworks. NT and EH refuse to act upon their stated respect for the spiritual thoughts of those making the request, and again, we state our understanding and respect for archaeology and musology. Reciprocation would be welcome.

#### Criterion H: The Future

NT and EH have misunderstood our reburial request. The DCMS have been misinformed of our intention.

The document states 'The group wish the [human remains of our shared ancestors] to be permanently reburied' and to be put beyond 'use'. This is untrue. A small body of Druids formed a reburial committee and this group reflected diversity of opinion. 3 thinkers favoured total reburial with no further access (including myself). 3 thinkers favoured reburial with continued access when negotiated. Here, 'access' included museum retention of a small sample of bone permitting research. Skeletal models suffice in education. Such options were not available on the consultation document. Although comments were certainly noted by NT and EH within the responses, these alternatives were not fully considered or discussed in the conclusion. A missed opportunity. The last 2 options, retention of a sample and model making, were strongly favoured by Tim Sebastian of the Secular Order of Druids as a peaceful compromise to potential conflict.

Considering the above, our group intention was to explore all possible options and never to deny destructive or non-destructive research. To state otherwise is a clear misunderstanding of our focus, views and spiritualities.

Further to the above, consent for reburial, where required within a scheduled monument in public ownership, may be granted by the Secretary of State.

#### Criterion J: Alternative Options - Land, Ancestor, Self

Options available to respondents were limited to 3 in total; reburial, reburial with access, and retention. Conclusions (below) did not fully consider further negotiation, and the decision was placed with NT and EH, two organisations unable to fully consider the complexities of embodied landscapes within the ancestral self. Quantitative data predominated over qualitative feedback.

## Criterion L: Games of Precedent

The document states that no precedent is set by this refusal to rebury, yet goes on to state at 5.4 that other museums may use the DCMS Guidelines to retain rather than rebury our ancestors. These two statements need clarification. Has a precedent been set or not?

### 3. Public Image

Druids and archaeologists / museum curators are not representative of the general public. For this reason, we welcome the decision of NT and EH to commission a BDRC / ICM opinion survey.

Meetings with NT and EH discussed how the results of the public consultation would follow the DCMS as a basis to work from, and responses would be considered on their own merit. Our belief was that the consultation was intended to focus upon quantitative data (and possibly include quantitative data as supporting evidence). As stated previously, qualitative feedback was certainly considered but given mere lip service, disregarded in favour of NT and not acted upon. This could possibly be viewed as bad science from a select group and supported by the survey.

By their own admission, NT and EH admit the purpose of the poll was to find out whether people thought that museums should be allowed to display human bones and retain them for research. 90% agreed with this question. 10% opposed. By my own admission, my own survey asked people if they 'agreed it would be beautiful to rebury Charlie, a 3 year old child, back into the Earth from where she was taken'. 90% agreed and 10% disagreed or were undecided.

Questions posed in the NT and EH consultation asked people to agree with retention. Question 6/7 are more balanced, but in view that consultees were pre-focussed upon voting in favour of stated views, the format remains suspect. Similarly, BDRC used ICM to ask potentially leading questions... 'are you interested in museums / archaeology?', as opposed to 'are you interested in our shared ancestors?', or 'how often do you visit meaningful / sacred landscapes?'. From the beginning of the survey, minds of respondents are focussed upon an inferred objective - the support of archaeology, museology and NT. The meta-narrative infers logic versus anti-logic / reasonability versus un-reasonability / science versus spirituality. Q3 of the survey fails to note that the most popular TV archaeology programme was the Time Team Special, Seahenge. A public opinion poll in the Daily Telegraph overwhelmingly showed support for groups campaigning against the permanent removal of an archaeological monument in Norfolk. In subsequent debates at the University of East Anglia, EH admitted a managerial process of public exclusion from which they would learn <http://druidry.org/obod/news/protest.html>. The consultation, guidelines and public survey may be viewed as prejudiced. This is my opinion.

£40,000 of public money was spent on this whole consultation process. In contrast, I spent £200-300. The ground was not even. I am of the opinion that any spending on such consultations should be fairly and evenly portioned £1 spent for every £1 spent

by both requester and defendant. Having stated this, NT were indeed responding to a reburial request and defending an assumed privilege without mandate.

#### 4. Conclusions

It is agreed that no modern group or museum can demonstrate any substantial continuity of the kind demanded in criterion A. It is agreed that no modern group or museum should be given preferential status with respect to the human remains of our shared ancestors.

4.2 We welcome the respect of beliefs stated and shown by NT and EH. We accept other cultural values ascribed to ancestral landscapes by other groups. We agree equality must be voiced and expressed for all parties with an interest in ancestry.

4.3 It is accepted that research techniques may or may not potentially evolve. Further to this, such potential may or may not add to our understanding of the 'past'.

It is denied that reburial would remove our shared understanding of the 'past'. It is denied that reburial with continued access would be unsatisfactory. It is denied that reburial with continued access is an expensive compromise. It is suggested that retention in artificially created atmospheric conditions is very expensive consuming both time and space.

4.4 It is strongly denied that reburial will harm anyone. Reburial pours our love and affection into meaningful landscapes.

It is denied that reburial at Avebury is irreversible. It is denied that 90% (54 million people) genuinely favour retention.

4.5 It is agreed that DCMS accept the recommendations of NT and EH, subject to review of the applicability of the guidance and the BDRC survey.

4.6 It is denied a relatively small number are disturbed by the decision to retain. Using the worst possible scenario, 10% of the British population is 6 million people and not a small group.

We welcome a review of museum display procedures.

4.7 We thank the AKM for permitting access to the museum for 2 small healing ceremonies. The request was greeted and dealt with sensitively with the full co-operation between the AKM and local police. For the avoidance of doubt, may I take this opportunity to, again, voice regret for any anxieties caused by myself to the AKM, NT or EH. Our intention was to raise an important issue and not to cause undue distress. We apologise if our intentions or actions were misplaced.

It is denied we seek to impose a modern belief system upon an unknown 'past'. We only seek reburial / reburial with access within modern, meaningful landscapes. We accept that past belief systems known through archaeological enquiry are disrespected through continued retention. A grave is a private place from the living

and archaeology supports this. Bodies placed within the grave do not belong permanently in museums. Such actions disrespect the memory of our shared dead.

## 5. Process and No Precedent

Given the probable bias of the consultation and survey, we remain disturbed that 50% of respondents considered the DCMS process inappropriate. This raises important questions in itself about the whole process. The DCMS Guidance may only be workable if approached and used with flexibility.

5.2 Throughout negotiations between EH, NT and our group, concern over the reasonability of questions were raised. That no 'other process was proposed' by those requesting reburial or by consultees does not make an unfair process just. This process remains unjustifiable.

5.3 We agree with NT and EH that the consultation has not been a total waste of time or money. With flexibility, lessons may be learned by both requesters and heritage trusts.

No precedent is set.

My Conclusions.

The DCMS Guidance reveals itself through its own processes and the revelation is one of (unintentional) institutional bias to the detriment of those requesting reburial. Bias is deeply embedded within advice that is not law. Alternative views are therefore disregarded. The process may be likened to an unfair contract that is not lawfully binding. A future ethics committee would safeguard against this.

For these reasons above, we formally object to the conclusions of NT and EH, and request a review on the basis of due process.

This text may be subject to amendment at a later date.

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