



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## To sell or not to sell: the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarcheology's position on the trade and sale of human remains in the UK

Squires, K.; Birch, W.; Goold-Jones, G.; Huffer, D.; Mant, M.; Mills, S.H.; ... ; Biers, T.

### Citation

Squires, K., Birch, W., Goold-Jones, G., Huffer, D., Mant, M., Mills, S. H., ... Biers, T. (2025). To sell or not to sell: the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarcheology's position on the trade and sale of human remains in the UK. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*, 1-19. doi:10.1080/17567505.2025.2492398

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4248384>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).




## To Sell or Not to Sell: The British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology's Position on the Trade and Sales of Human Remains in the UK

Kirsty Squires, Wendy Birch, Georgia Goold-Jones, Damien Huffer, Madeleine Mant, Sophia H. Mills, Charlotte Primeau, Sarah Schrader & Trish Biers



To cite this article: Kirsty Squires, Wendy Birch, Georgia Goold-Jones, Damien Huffer, Madeleine Mant, Sophia H. Mills, Charlotte Primeau, Sarah Schrader & Trish Biers (22 Apr 2025): To Sell or Not to Sell: The British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology's Position on the Trade and Sales of Human Remains in the UK, *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/17567505.2025.2492398](https://doi.org/10.1080/17567505.2025.2492398)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17567505.2025.2492398>

 [View supplementary material](#) 

 Published online: 22 Apr 2025.









 [Submit your article to this journal](#) 

 [View related articles](#) 

 [View Crossmark data](#) 



# To Sell or Not to Sell: The British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology's Position on the Trade and Sales of Human Remains in the UK

Kirsty Squires <sup>a</sup>, Wendy Birch <sup>b</sup>, Georgia Goold-Jones<sup>c</sup>, Damien Huffer <sup>d</sup>,  
Madeleine Mant <sup>e</sup>, Sophia H. Mills <sup>f</sup>, Charlotte Primeau <sup>g</sup>, Sarah Schrader <sup>h</sup>  
and Trish Biers <sup>i</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Health, Education, Policing and Sciences, University of Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, UK; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Life Sciences, University College, London, UK; <sup>c</sup>School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University, UK; <sup>d</sup>School of Biological Sciences, University of Adelaide, Australia; <sup>e</sup>Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Mississauga, Mississauga, USA; <sup>f</sup>Department of Archaeology, University of Reading, Reading, UK; <sup>g</sup>Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG), University of Warwick, Coventry, UK; <sup>h</sup>Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands; <sup>i</sup>Duckworth Laboratory, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

## ABSTRACT

We introduce the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology's 'Trading and Sale of Human Remains Task Force'. This member-based subgroup started in 2016 and brings together professionals from a range of fields, including osteoarchaeology and forensic and biological anthropology, across academia, curatorial roles, and cultural heritage management. Subgroup members are concerned with and actively monitor the proliferation of human remains sales online. Here, we describe the history, goals, and current mission of the group, how we approach sellers and what assistance we provide to encourage donation over sale, alongside the challenges associated with this form of trafficking. We illustrate this discussion through select anonymised case studies to show the types of sales we respond to. These examples ultimately demonstrate that improved legislation is required if we are to end this industry in the United Kingdom (UK). Furthermore, the cases in this article exemplify the need to raise greater public awareness of the ethical implications associated with the sale and trade of once-living individuals.


## KEYWORDS

Human remains trade; trafficking; e-commerce; social media; legislative reform

## Introduction

The trade (facilitating the exchange of items or services) and sale (the exchange of a commodity or items for money) of human remains in the United Kingdom (UK) has a long and troubled past. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Indigenous human remains, primarily from colonised countries,<sup>1</sup> were taken or traded for the purpose of 'scientific investigations',<sup>2</sup> while human skeletal remains mainly from India were principally acquired for the purpose of medical education.<sup>3</sup> Revisions to the 1857 *Burial*

**CONTACT** Kirsty Squires  [Kirsty.Squires@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:Kirsty.Squires@staffs.ac.uk); Trish Biers  [tmb40@cam.ac.uk](mailto:tmb40@cam.ac.uk)

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17567505.2025.2492398>.

© 2025 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Act<sup>4</sup> and other pieces of legislation made it increasingly difficult to procure bodies from graveyards (or other means) in the UK<sup>5</sup> which may, in part, have contributed to the increased collection of bodies from overseas.

Over recent decades, skeletal remains held by medical professionals which are no longer in use have been sold or traded, increasingly online. This has contributed to the inclusion of human remains within the broader marketplace for modern curio and 'oddities' collectors, a pastime that has become increasingly popular in the last two decades as social media and e-commerce has flourished, especially on Meta (e.g. Facebook and Instagram) platforms. Not only are skeletons, or parts thereof, being traded and sold on various e-commerce and social media platforms,<sup>6</sup> but auction houses and other private forums, including shops and markets, are knowingly selling human remains. In some cases, these skeletal remains may be archaeological in nature or originate from historic contexts, such as ossuaries, cemeteries, or crypts.

The trade and trafficking of human remains poses significant ethical, legal, and cultural concerns. These issues are further complicated by the online world facilitating private sales, making such activities more prevalent and increasingly difficult to regulate due to more international activity. Therefore, in response to the ever-increasing concerns associated with the sale and trade of human remains, a group of members belonging to the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology (BABAO) formed the Trading and Sale of Human Remains Task Force in 2016. The main aims of the Task Force are to:

- Collate information about the commodification of human remains in the UK
- Track how human remains are sold/collected/trafficked in an international market
- Offer guidance on the transfer of human remains to Human Tissue Authority (HTA) licenced or appropriate<sup>1</sup> institutions where relevant
- Offer guidance on the use of human remains to all appropriate institutions
- Monitor the use of human remains in social media associated with sale/trade/collecting
- Research claims of 'ethical collecting' by traders and concerns over provenience
- Raise public awareness about the ethical ramifications of a private commercial trade in human remains on and off-line.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, we will introduce the work carried out by the Task Force and its position on the trade and sale of human remains, alongside its vision for the future. Case studies will be presented to demonstrate how members of the Task Force approach and offer guidance to sellers. Prior to delving into these examples, we outline the current legislative landscape in the UK.

## Legislation

Cultural heritage trafficking (which encompasses archaeological, historic, and Indigenous human remains) within, to, and from the UK is, in its broadest sense, legislated for by very

---

<sup>1</sup>For the purpose of this paper, an 'appropriate' institution is defined as a UK scientific and educational institution that has dedicated personnel and policies covering the care, storage, and ethical use of human tissue.

few and quite specific Acts. These include the *Customs and Excise Management Act 1979*, *Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003*, and *Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Act 2017*. The *Proceeds of Crime Act 2002* also allows for the confiscation of assets and money obtained through illicit means, including (but not limited to) money laundering, sale of stolen or illicitly imported property, and false advertising. Complicating the matter further is the definition of 'property'. In general, human remains in the UK are not considered to be property except under specific circumstances where 'skilled work' is applied, for example, if human remains are modified in some way and are then stolen from someone's possession.<sup>8</sup> These conditions allow for a wide range of alterations and manipulations to occur to human remains, transforming skulls, bones, teeth, and ash into art, jewellery, weapons, decorations, and furniture (e.g. see case study 2).

Despite the existence of some legislative frameworks within the UK, many challenges remain associated with monitoring, detecting, and policing cultural heritage trafficking in general, and human remains trafficking specifically. Even where cognisant of the issue, or where assigned to front line policing in a location known to have heritage assets or large antiquities markets, heritage crime is not deemed to be a priority at present.<sup>9</sup> This is clear from the lack of a standardised methodology for recording incidents, and the lack of funds and resources when compared with other forms of trafficking, such as modern slavery and controlled drugs.<sup>10</sup> What makes the matter even more challenging is the near-absence of archaeological human remains in discussions of heritage crime more broadly.<sup>11</sup> A small number of studies have examined if, and how much, the Dark Web seems to be a haven for illicit markets outside of drugs, weapons, wildlife, and child sexual abuse material (CSAM).<sup>12</sup> Little has been uncovered, particularly in relation to antiquities and human remains, but this is unsurprising, given how much black or grey market trade flourishes on surface or 'deep' web e-commerce and social media platforms.

Growing numbers of countries are recognising the need to protect and respect the rights and dignity of human beings, not only in life but also in death.<sup>13</sup> The UK is a rare example of implementing national legislation that specifically relates to the storage, care, and disposal of human remains. In the early twenty-first century, the Human Tissue Acts<sup>14</sup> were passed into law due to several hospital scandals which took place in the late twentieth century. The most notable of which occurred between 1988–1995 at the Alder Hay Children's Hospital, Merseyside, where human tissues primarily obtained from the autopsies of children were retained without the permission or knowledge of their parents.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, an investigation into excessively high mortality rates among children undergoing heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary between 1984–1995 revealed the removal and retention of human organs without the consent of the patient or their parents. This incident further highlighted the urgent need for legislative reform relating to the removal, retention, and storage of human tissue.<sup>16</sup>

The *Human Tissue Act 2004* was introduced to address the concerns that emerged from the Alder Hey and Bristol Royal Infirmary scandals and to establish a legislative framework regulating the removal, storage, use, and disposal of human bodies, organs, and tissue samples. Applicable across the UK (except for Scotland, which is governed by the *Human Tissue (Scotland) Act 2006*), the *Human Tissue Act 2004* applies solely to human tissue derivatives less than 100 years old. Consequently, human bodies (or parts thereof) older than 100 years fall outside the scope of these regulations. Despite the implementation of the Human Tissue Acts, the trafficking, trade, and sale of human remains is currently not

prohibited in the UK. This is particularly problematic as sellers and collectors are often not aware of the origins of the remains in their possession, nor how to discern basic aspects of the biological profile, or the ethical implications of their actions. Furthermore, very few individuals are aware of guidelines set out by the BABAO Trading and Sale of Human Remains Task Force.<sup>17</sup>

When the Task Force is notified about a potential human remains sale, it takes several steps to try and educate the seller(s) in the ethics surrounding the sale and provides information to encourage donation of these remains to a licenced institution instead. Initially, all publicly available details regarding the sale are recorded in our 'tracker' spreadsheet, including any information about the seller, sale location, prices, and descriptions of the item from both the seller and observations of the Task Force. If the seller is UK-based and contactable (e.g. an auction house) the Task Force will collaborate to draft correspondence (see Supplementary Materials). This letter will be tailored accordingly, considering the specifics of the remains for sale, for example whether the materials derived from medical education collections or is a potential archaeological find. The letter will also set out and explain the ethical issues that surround selling human remains. The Task Force has an up-to-date list of HTA licenced or appropriate UK scientific and educational institutions that are not only willing to accept donated remains, but have dedicated personnel and policies covering the care, storage, and ethical use of human tissue. The letter and list are emailed directly to the seller by one of the Task Force members, to open a channel of communication where the issue can be discussed without prejudice. The requests to withdraw sales or auction lots rely upon an appeal to the good nature of the seller. It is an approach which has led to mixed results.

## **The Trade in Human Remains**

Since September 2020, the Trade and Sale of Human Remains Task Force has recorded 107 instances (some comprising multiple lots) of human remains advertised for sale from within the UK, with additional sales recorded in the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, and throughout Europe. UK sellers were contacted in 74 cases (69%) by the Task Force, pointing out the ethical dilemmas of selling or trading human remains. On a number of occasions, sales came to light after the auction date meaning it was not possible to save the remains from falling into private ownership. However, in 54/74 of the contacted cases (73%), remains were successfully removed from sale. In 33/107 UK recorded cases (31%), sellers were not contacted for various reasons, including sale via e-commerce sites (e.g. eBay and Gumtree) or on social media pages and, in some instances, it was not deemed safe for members of the Task Force to contact sellers directly. The following case studies have been included as they illustrate the diversity of remains sold and the variety of platforms and outlets they are sold through.

### ***Case Study 1: Sale via Online Auction***

This case study involves the attempted sale of human remains and cultural artefacts by an auction house in Oxfordshire in early October 2024.<sup>18</sup> Twenty-two lots of human remains from a range of Indigenous communities were put up for sale online via 'The Saleroom' and 'Easy Live Auctions' websites, with prices averaging several hundred

pounds (GBP). The specific auction featured a wide range of items, including Indigenous material culture (not containing human remains), as well as many examples of faunal remains in the form of skins, taxidermy, and wildlife products incorporated into cultural heritage items. There were evident ethical issues (e.g. the Naga people view the auctioning of human remains to be an act of dehumanisation and a continuation of colonial violence against them<sup>19</sup>) with the human remains advertised for sale, with some lots including a *tsantsa* from the Jivaro People of Ecuador, skulls from the Etoi People of Nigeria and Cameroon, and a '19th century horned Naga human skull' from Nagaland, India.

There was significant backlash to this auction by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR), church leaders, representatives from the museum sector, and members of the public both on and off-line. Several individuals and organisations, including our Task Force, approached the auction house itself and/or local media, including the B.B.C.. Professor Laura Van Broekhoven (Director of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford) was interviewed by the B.B.C. and called for an immediate halt to this auction.<sup>20</sup> Professor Van Broekhoven is well placed to promote repatriation efforts due to the ongoing decolonisation programme at the Pitt Rivers Museum, which has led to the development of ties between the museum, Indigenous groups, and a broader network of scholars with direct ties to Nagaland. The FNR wrote to the Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio to raise concerns about the auction, who in turn brought the case to the attention of India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. Mounting public pressure in the Indian and international press, and presumably an ongoing email campaign, convinced the auction house to withdraw the human remains from sale on October 9th, beginning with the Naga lots. While other items of Indigenous material culture from around the world were auctioned off, the controversy around the attempted human remains sale seems to have served as a watershed moment. The case substantially increased public and political awareness that human remains of Indigenous people were still being collected in 2024 and formed but one part of a much bigger problem.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Case Study 2: Sale via Bricks-And-Mortar Store and Associated Webpage***

At the time of writing, one UK-based 'curiosity' retailer currently features over 90 listings for human remains or objects made with human tissue on their webpage. Skeletal material is their primary sales focus, offering 'medically prepared' articulated joints and skeletal elements, and individual skulls. Prices range from £45 for a human scapula to £4,950 for a 'Solomon Islands fish', a reliquary containing a human skull (Figure 1). Most of the material appears to derive from adult individuals, although the skull of a child 'with dwarfism', two foetal skulls, and one particularly shocking listing of a preserved human penis claimed to be that of an infant or juvenile were also available to purchase (Figure 2).

The listings also include various made-to-order items, such as jewellery, 'occult' objects, guitar picks, and human leather available by the square inch (Figure 3). Skulls can be purchased and 'customised', stained black, carved with symbols, and/or set with brass or iron teeth and fangs. Custom orders are also available for skulls with removable sections of cranium for use as 'scrying bowls', while working lamps can be inserted into modified skulls which have been fashioned into lampshades (Figure 4). All modifications appear to be made in this person's bricks-and-mortar store. However, it is not clear whether the

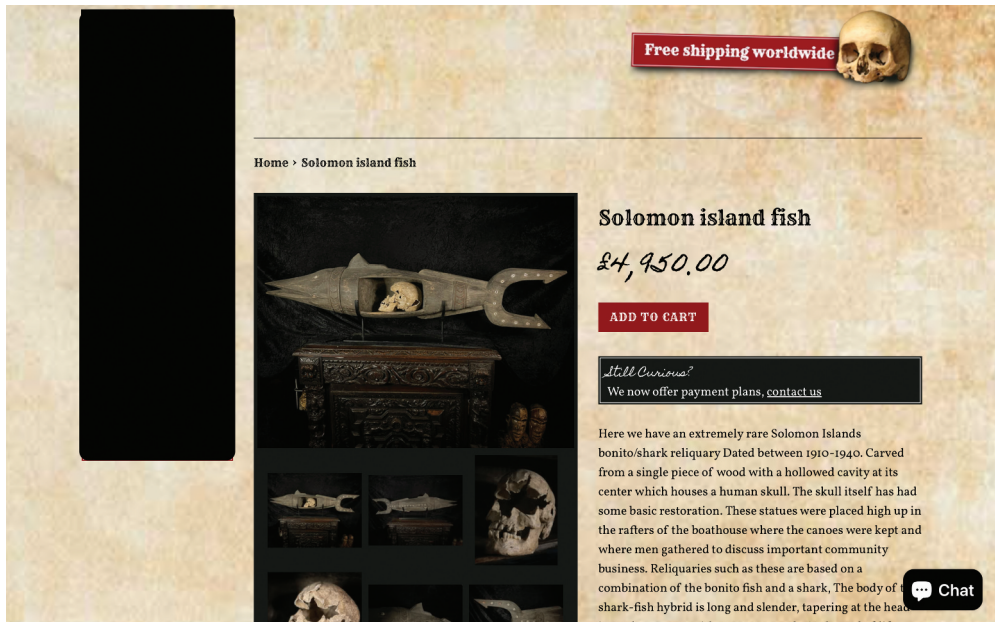


Figure 1. The “Solomon Islands fish” reliquary on sale by a UK-based seller.

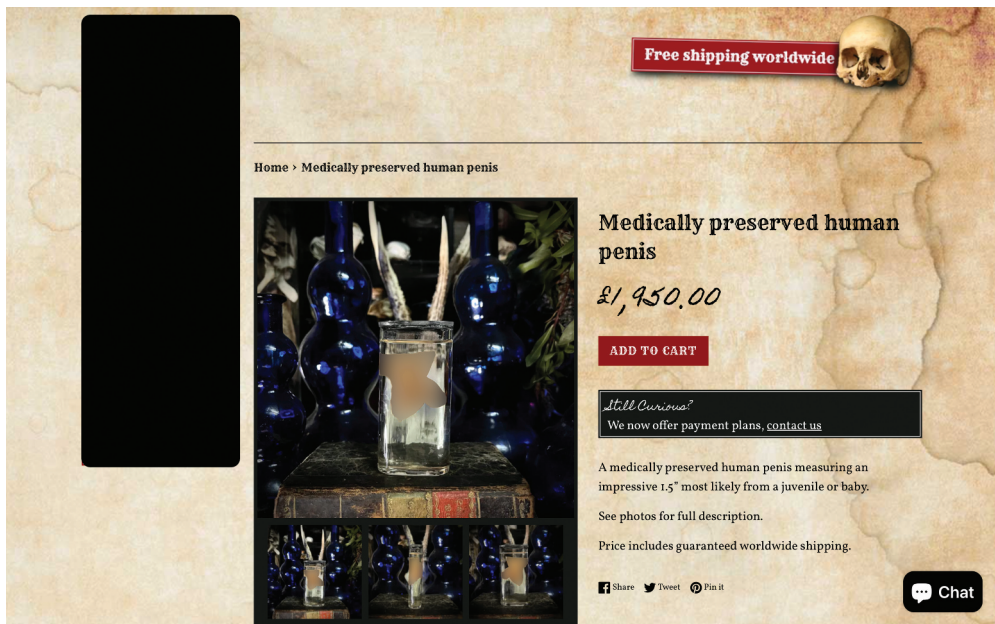
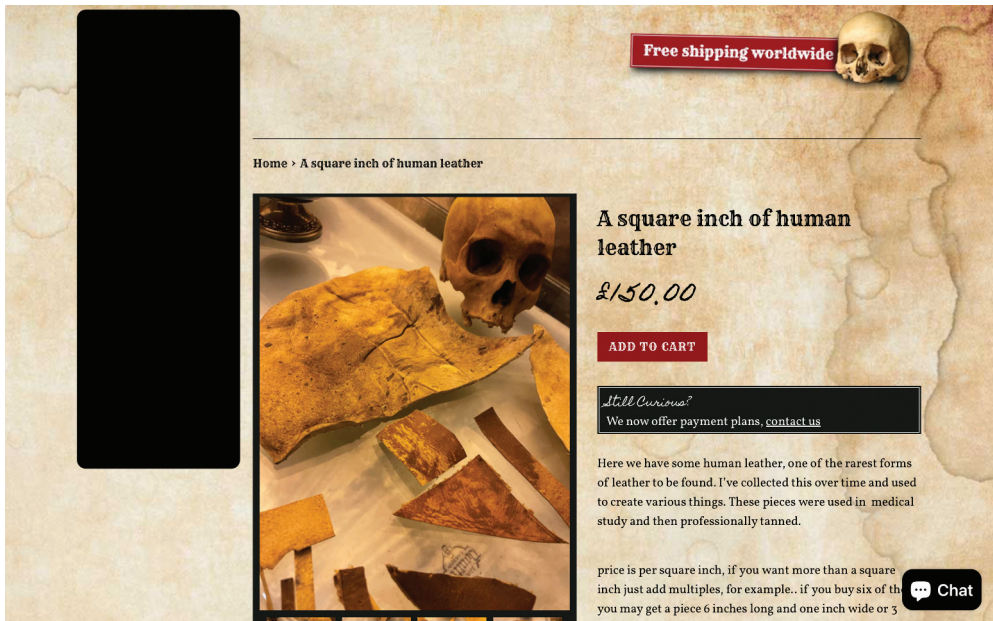




Figure 2. A preserved human penis currently on sale at the time of writing (please note, KS edited this image to make it suitable for publication).



Free shipping worldwide 

Home > A square inch of human leather



**A square inch of human leather**

£150.00

ADD TO CART

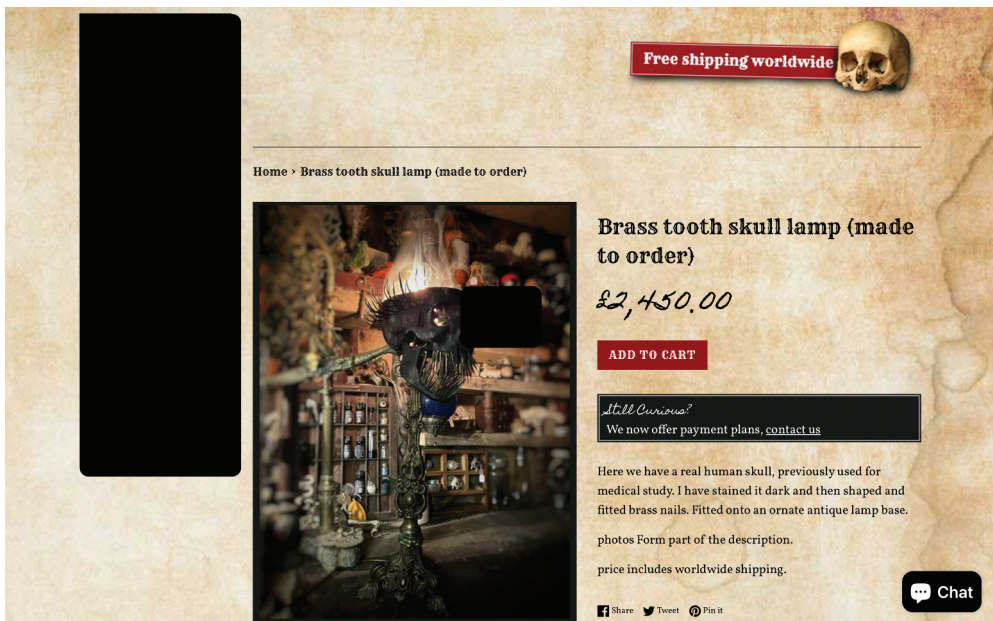
*Still Curious?*  
We now offer payment plans, [contact us](#)


Here we have some human leather, one of the rarest forms of leather to be found. I've collected this over time and used to create various things. These pieces were used in medical study and then professionally tanned.

price is per square inch, if you want more than a square inch just add multiples, for example.. if you buy six of the you may get a piece 6 inches long and one inch wide or 3


Chat

Figure 3. A UK-based seller advertising human leather that can be ordered by the square inch.



Free shipping worldwide 

Home > Brass tooth skull lamp (made to order)



**Brass tooth skull lamp (made to order)**

£2,450.00

ADD TO CART

*Still Curious?*  
We now offer payment plans, [contact us](#)

Here we have a real human skull, previously used for medical study. I have stained it dark and then shaped and fitted brass nails. Fitted onto an ornate antique lamp base.

photos Form part of the description.

price includes worldwide shipping.

Share Tweet Pin it

Chat

Figure 4. A stained and modified skull has been made into a lampshade for a working antique lamp by the seller who is based in the UK.

stated provenance and age, where given, of any of their so-called 'products' can be evidenced by the retailer. No indication of verified authenticity is given in individual item descriptions, nor is there indication that any has been obtained in the process of acquisition or would be given at point of purchase. This is evidenced in two specific cases (1) a Peruvian skull exhibiting cranial modifications; and (2) a Solomon Islands fish reliquary where the remains are claimed to have originated overseas and relate to specific cultural practices, though evidence of provenance is unavailable.

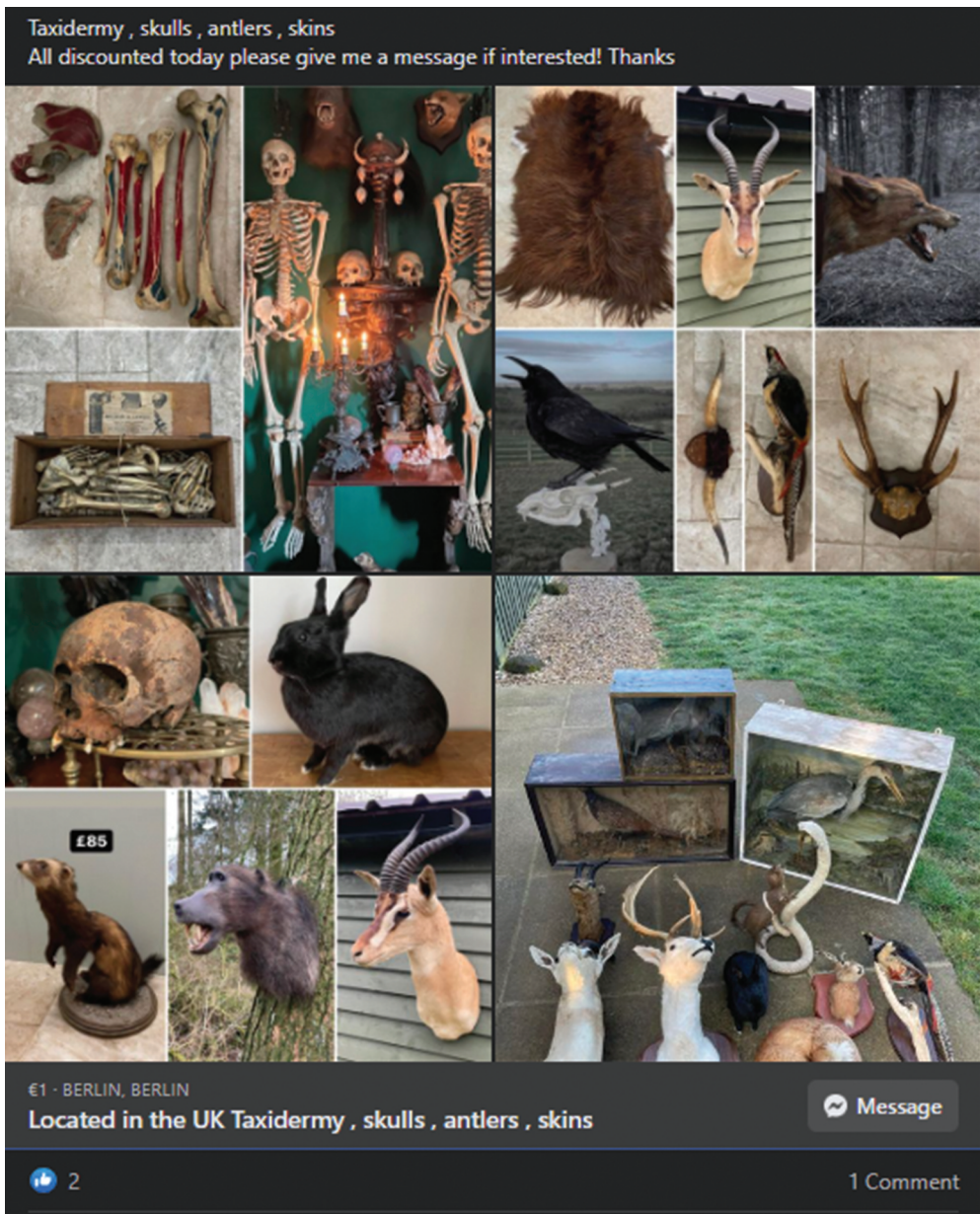
Almost all human remains purchased from this storefront can be paid for by an instalment plan, arranged directly with the retailer via a contact form, and shipped to the customer for free. Despite assertions of guaranteed free worldwide shipping, it is unclear which couriers are utilised by the retailer, nor is it clear whether any territories are excluded from this offering on the basis of local legislation. The website's shipping page states only that shipping information is 'coming soon' and encourages the customer to contact the retailer directly using Facebook Messenger for further details. Major courier services in the UK, including the Royal Mail, generally prohibit the shipping of all human remains both domestically and internationally, though guidance in this area could be strengthened<sup>22</sup> and its implementation better enforced.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the lack of explicit information regarding shipping policy compliance, the store owner is more forthcoming on other aspects of policy. In one sentence asserting the legality of their trade the owner briefly engages with the legal framework set out by the HTA, though does not specifically cite the *Human Tissue Act 2004*. In the FAQ subsection of their website, they pose the question: '[I]s it legal to sell bits of dead people?'. Here, they state that provided the remains are over 100 years old, are sourced ethically (though what this constitutes is not defined), and not used for transplant, it is legal to sell human remains. This further highlights how current legislation is insufficient, and sellers can use loopholes to reassure buyers that their trade is legal and above board when in fact, they have little evidence to support their claims.

### **Case Study 3: Sale via Social Media**

This case study provides three examples of human remains sales on social media (specifically, the Meta platform, Facebook) from three different dealers. These examples have been selected from hundreds of cases, which are securely stored in the archives of BABA O subgroup members. The examples outlined here illustrate some of the categories of 'worked' and unworked human remains (bones and 'wet specimens') routinely offered for sale on social media by UK-based vendors or bought and imported into the UK.

Each example post was obtained via manual screen capture using a non-participant observation 'lurker' account within UK-specific or global Facebook groups devoted to human remains and/or 'oddities' in general (in which human remains can be listed), or from public business or personal pages maintained by specific dealers. Use of non-participant observation via 'covert ethnography' methods is a standard practice in digital sociological and criminological research in public or semi-private spaces where criminality may or may not be occurring.<sup>24</sup> An overview of how one of us (DH) and colleagues have negotiated the ethics of this form of data collection previously has been published elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> All identifying information and metadata associated with each post has been anonymised, but the original posts are securely stored in group members' archives.



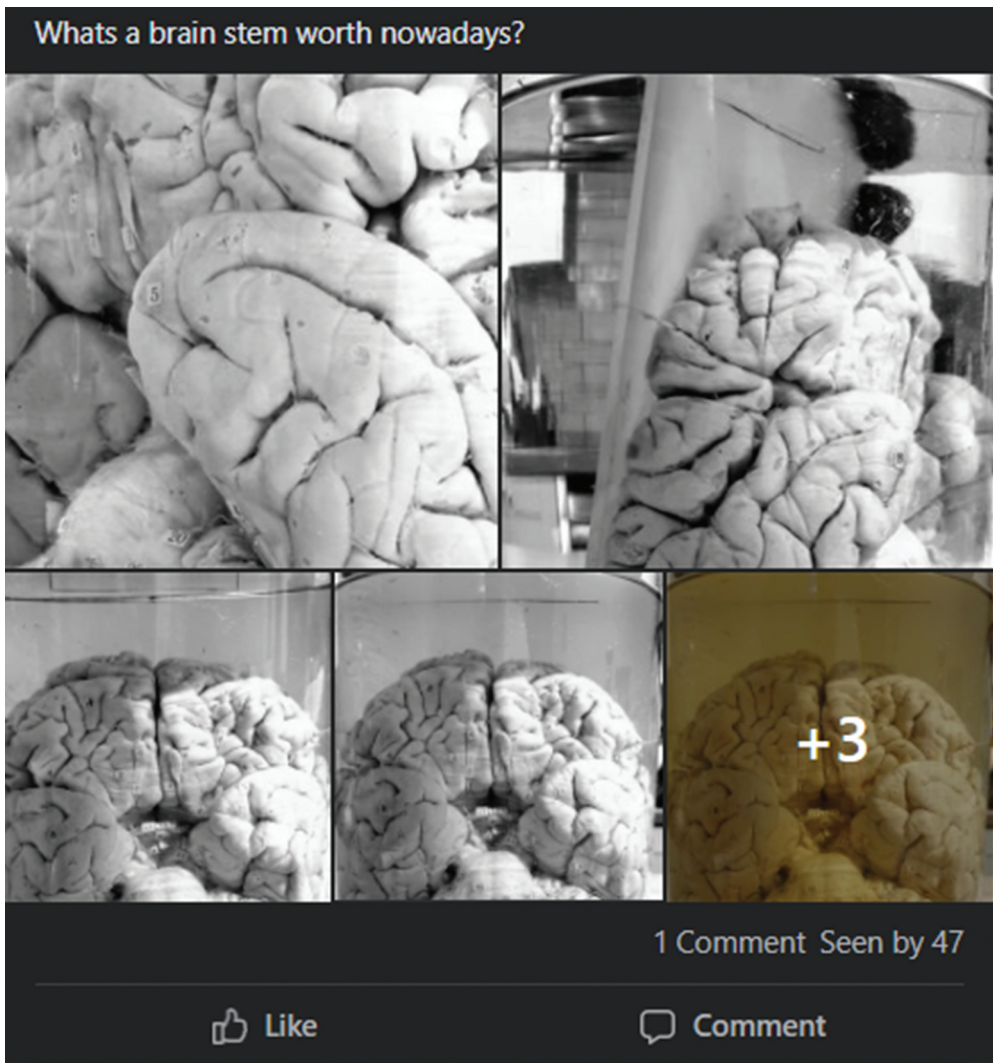
**Figure 5.** A Facebook user based in the UK selling a range of human and animal remains.

The first example selected is of a post from a private Facebook group and dates to March 2022 (Figure 5). It shows a diverse array of items for sale by one specific vendor, including human skulls, full skeletons, taxidermied heads of larger animals (e.g. antelope) and smaller animals (e.g. weasels and rabbits), as well as pelts. At the time of capture, it had been liked twice, not shared outside of the group, and had received one comment. Text under the photo mentions a stand-in price of one Euro and a location in Berlin, but further text below that stipulates a UK location.



**Figure 6.** Some human remains are sold at low price-points to entice a range of buyers. In this case, a single rib was priced at only £10.

The second example post is from a private group and dates to July 2022 (Figure 6). It illustrates an example of the lowest price-point advertised for human remains witnessed on social media to date. At the time of capture, the post had no likes, comments, or shares. The post is a screengrab of an Instagram homepage reposted to a Facebook page, likely the sellers. The page advertises (cheap!) human ribs for sale for £10 each or less, with free shipping within the UK. The post alleges the seller is based in Bristol. Viewers or potential

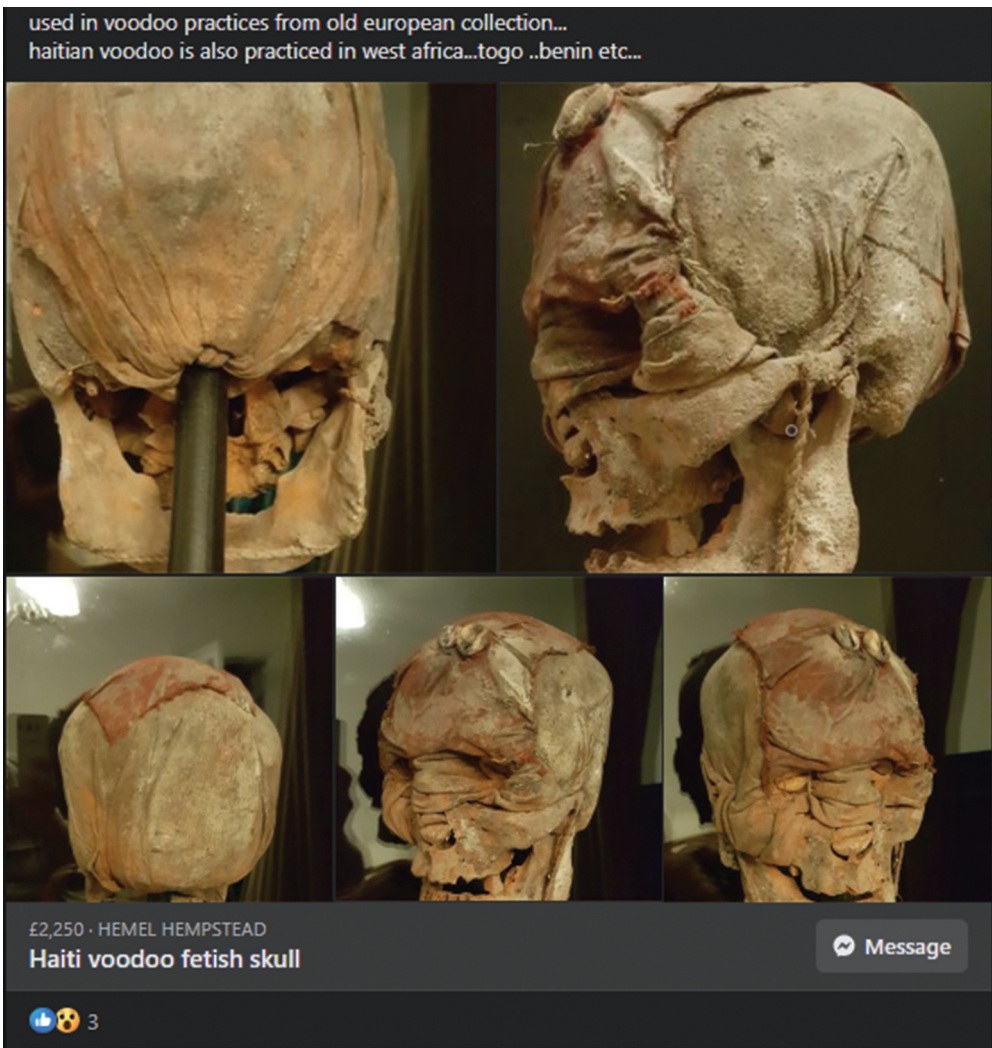


**Figure 7.** A UK-based seller advertising a preserved human brain in a glass jar on a personal public page.

buyers in the group can click on the eye symbol in the bottom-right corner of each frame for a closer look.

The third post is from the personal page of a well-known UK based dealer, and dates to December 2020 (Figure 7). This page is not private, meaning anyone can view and purchase from this seller. It shows a photo collage of a whole human brain within an unknown liquid in a glass jar.<sup>26</sup> At the time of capture, it had not been liked or shared by any other users but had been seen 47 times and had one comment (a wow emoji) in response. The text associated with the post implies the dealer is querying the audience for a suitable price.

The post presented in Figure 8 is from the same personal page as the dealer associated with Figure 7, and dates to January 2021. It shows several photographs of an alleged



**Figure 8.** A skull, described as a “Haitian voodoo fetish skull”, was being sold by a UK seller on their personal page.

‘Haitian voodoo fetish skull’. At the time of capture, it had been liked three times but had no associated comments or shares. Text above the images imply it reached the UK seller from an ‘old European collection’. Text below the images give an asking price of £2,250 and an alleged location of Hemel Hempstead.

Taken together, these examples drawn from the social media portion of the UK’s human remains trade (specifically, the Meta platforms Facebook and Instagram) illustrate that buying and selling in the UK exhibits the same relatively wide range of prices and diversity of remains (including alleged Indigenous Ancestors), as seen within online collecting communities in the United States, continental Europe, Australia, and elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> It has been well established that the UK remains a major source, destination, and transit country for an untold number of antiquities, ethnographic/Indigenous

heritage items, and human remains – all classified as ‘heritage crime’ in the eyes of law enforcement agencies and treated as such by researchers when evidence surfaces that the items have been looted and/or illicitly imported, exported, or sold.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, these are only four examples from among thousands archived over the years from Facebook alone, let alone Instagram and various e-commerce platforms. Given that a dealer’s public webpages can be found by anyone anywhere in the world, and most ‘private’ groups have very low barriers to entry and can have thousands of members (whether based in the UK or abroad), the display of human remains on social media and their advertisement for sale would constitute its own violation of the HTA’s public display rules. At present, it has yet to be tested in court, but this is an area in which HTA reform could be clear and targeted.

### **Future Directions: Reforming the Human Tissue Act 2004**

Rather than the implementation of new reactive legislation, which was enacted following the recent hospital scandals as discussed above, proactive enforcement of existing legislation is called for to meet current needs with respect to the sale and trade of human remains. Despite the benefits the *Human Tissue Act 2004* has had,<sup>29</sup> traders and sellers have identified loopholes in the Act. Under current legislation, it is an offence to hold or display human remains unless the HTA has issued a licence for human remains less than 100 years old. Such licences may be issued for a Scheduled Purpose as defined by the *Human Tissue Act 2004*, for instance, ‘the storage of an anatomical specimen’ or ‘for the purpose of public display, of– (i) the body of a deceased person, or (ii) relevant material which has come from the body of a deceased person’.<sup>30</sup> However, selling remains falls into a legislative grey area, as currently the sale of human bodies or body parts which are over 100 years old is legal, albeit ethically dubious.

Human skulls and other skeletal materials are often found for sale identified only as ‘antique’, a vague label with no actionable detail regarding origin or date. At present, the woefully absent burden of proof currently demanded from sellers, results in human remains without clear provenance or provenience continuing to be sold in the UK and abroad. This is problematic, particularly in archaeology, as both provenance and provenience are a critical part of context and plays an important role in the interpretation of evidence. The absence of this information leaves gaps in our understanding of the human past, while individual voices are ignored, and their stories are lost.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, under the *Human Tissue Act 2004*, it is not an offence to sell or trade human bodies, body parts, tissue, or remains that have been altered as they are not classed as controlled materials, that is, they are not for the purpose of transplantation.<sup>32</sup> This in part can be attributed to the origins of the Act following the hospital scandals explored earlier in this article. As such, it does not account for the other contexts in which human remains may be found and further demonstrates the need for reform, something the Task Force is committed to working towards.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite the ongoing challenges associated with the trade and sale of human remains in the UK and, indeed, further afield, positive changes are afoot. The creation of the Task

Force was pivotal as it allows specialists to raise awareness and educate the public about ethical issues associated with the commodification of the dead through direct contact with sellers and businesses (e.g. auction houses). The promotion of relevant guidance and advice has aimed to assist practitioners and members of the public should they become aware of human remains for sale online or in bricks-and-mortar stores. In December 2024, an infographic detailing the Task Force's work and how the group can help anyone who wishes to report the sale and trade of human remains in auction houses, shops, and online was presented at the 45th Annual Meeting of the Theoretical Archaeology Group at Bournemouth University. This resource will be uploaded to the BBAO website in 2025 so members of the public and others working within osteoarchaeology and related disciplines will have an accessible resource should they need it.

Finally, we continue to work with relevant parties to close loopholes in the law, which currently allow prolific and repeat offenders to sell and trade human remains. On Thursday 14 November 2024, members of the Task Force met with Bell Ribeiro-Addy, who is a Member of Parliament (MP) for Clapham and Brixton Hill, to discuss the practice of selling human remains and issues associated with the current *Human Tissue Act 2004*. On Wednesday 20 November 2024, Ribeiro-Addy MP called for an end to the sale of human remains both online and offline at Prime Minister's Questions.<sup>33</sup> The Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner, who was standing in for the Prime Minister, responded positively and agreed to meet with the relevant Minister to discuss the matter further. This exchange was picked up by a range of news outlets which has made the issue more visible to the general public.<sup>34</sup> While we await the outcome of future meetings within government, we will continue to raise awareness of the Task Force's collective work, re-home unwanted human remains collections for education and repatriation, and highlight the importance of treating deceased individuals and disassociated body parts from archaeological and more recent periods with the respect and dignity they rightly deserve.

## Notes

1. Turnbull, "Collecting and Colonial Violence," 452.
2. Turnbull, "Collecting and Colonial Violence," 453.
3. Jones, "Anatomists' Uses Human Skeletons," 611.
4. *Burial Act, 1857, section 25 (England)*. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/20-21/81>.
5. MacDonald, "Procuring Corpses," 380.
6. Huffer and Charlton, "Serious Enquiries Only, Please"; and Graham, Huffer and Simons, "TikTok Human Remains Trade"; Huffer, Graham, Brughmans and Simons, "Alleen voor studiedoeleinden"; Huffer and Graham, "These were People Once"; and Graham, Davidson, and Huffer, "Behind Closed Doors".
7. British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology, "Human Remains Task Force".
8. Department for Culture, Media and Sport, "Care of Human Remains."
9. Kendall Adams, "Rising Heritage Crime."
10. Home Office, "Crime Recording Rules," 45–47, 82–84.
11. Alliance to Reduce Crime Against Heritage et al., "Heritage Crime Guide"; Historic England, "Heritage Crime Prevention"; and Historic England, "Heritage Crime Risk Assessment"; and Historic England, "Heritage Crime Interventions".
12. Paul, "Ancient vs. Digital Artifacts"; and Stringham et al., "Dark Web Trades Wildlife."
13. Tidball-Binz, "Protection of the Dead," 3, 6–7.

14. *Human Tissue Act, 2004 (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)*. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/30>; and *Human Tissue (Scotland) Act, 2006 (Scotland)*. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2006/4>.
15. Redfern, Keeling and Powell, "Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry."
16. Kennedy, "Learning from Bristol."
17. British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology, "Human Remains Task Force."
18. Davies, "Auction House Cancels Sale"; and Sarkar, "Auction House Halts Sale."
19. Press Trust of India, "Naga Human Skull."
20. Gudge, "Heads Withdrawn From Auction."
21. Kumar, "Efforts to Repatriate Skulls"; and Pester, "Auction House Pulls Remains."
22. For further details on prohibited items and exclusions when shipping human remains with the Post Office, Parcelforce Worldwide, DPD, and Evri see Post Office, "prohibited and restricted items." In their guidance, most of these companies, with the exception of DPD, specifically refer to cremated remains and not human remains more generally. Thus, it could be interpreted that some of these organisations do not place restrictions on unburnt human tissue or remains from archaeological or historic contexts.
23. Examples where shipping guidance have been misinterpreted, overlooked, and/or not enforced have been reported in the United States of America. In these cases, human remains were shipped with companies that prohibit consignments of this nature and subsequently went missing or were discarded while in transit, e.g. Chisholm, "FedEx Lost Package"; Rivera "Remains Thrown in Trash."
24. Calvey, "Covert Ethnography in Criminology"; and Marzano, "Ethics of Covert Ethnography."
25. Davidson, Graham, and Huffer, "Discourses in Closed Groups"; and Graham, Davidson, and Huffer, "Behind Closed Doors."
26. There is no indication what this liquid is, though it is likely to be formaldehyde. Failure to provide this information by the dealer is highly irresponsible as formaldehyde can be extremely harmful to human health. The buyer and, indeed, the shipping courier need to know what the jar contains so it can be safely transported and stored.
27. Huffer and Graham, "These were People Once"; and Pester, "Grave Robbing is Booming"; and Richards, "Crackdown on Commodification."
28. Berry, "Policy and Practice in Wales"; Blue Shield International, "Heritage Crime Task Force"; Fry, "Heritage Crime"; Interpol, "Cultural Heritage Crime"; and Low and Freeman, "The Approach in Scotland"; and Vannan and Matteo, "Heritage Crime, Forensic Archaeology."
29. McLean, Campbell, Guttridge and Harper, "Human Tissue Legislation."
30. *Human Tissue Act, 2004, section 16 (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)*. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/30>.
31. Agarwal, "Bioethics Skeletal Anatomy Collections"; and Agarwal, "Disposability and Inclusion."
32. *Human Tissue Act, 2004, section 32 (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)*. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/30/section/32>.
33. Bentley, "MP Calls for Ban"; and Ribeiro-Addy, "End Depraved Sale."
34. Burford "Deputy PM Vows Meeting"; and Huskisson, "Bones Sold on Instagram."

## Acknowledgement

We would like to thank past and present task force members that have been instrumental in achieving the goals of the Task Force, specifically, Lauren McIntyre, Alice Rose, Jess Thompson, Heather Bonney, Jelena Bekvalac, Benn Penny-Mason, Linzi Harvey, Charlotte Loy, Rebecca Whiting, Lauren Reid, Stephanie Frost, and the membership of BABAQ.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Kirsty Squires** is an Associate Professor of Bioarchaeology and MSc Forensic Science course leader at the University of Staffordshire. She is currently the Membership Secretary for the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology. Her research interests include non-adult bioanthropology, ethics in bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology, and the analysis and interpretation of cremated and mummified remains from archaeological and forensic contexts.

**Wendy Birch** is an Associate Professor of Anatomy and a Forensic Anatomist based at University College London (UCL). As a HTA Designated Individual, she is responsible for overseeing UCL's anatomy licences and ensuring compliance with the *Human Tissue Act 2004*. She also serves as the Vice President of the Institute of Anatomical Sciences and is a longstanding member of the UK Anatomy Association's Advisory Committee (AAAC). In this role, she has played a key part in developing HTA-compliant guidelines that have shaped best practice across the UK anatomy sector.

**Georgia Goold-Jones** is an MSc Archaeological Science student at Cardiff University, focusing on Human Osteoarchaeology and Biomolecular Archaeology.

**Damien Huffer** is an interdisciplinary illicit trafficking researcher, heritage professional and osteoarchaeologist. He is a Research Fellow with the Wildlife & Environmental Crime research hub, School of Biological Sciences, University of Adelaide. He held a Stable Isotope Postdoctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (2014-16) and was a postdoctoral fellow at Stockholm University (2017-19). His research over the last decade has focused on heritage crime and the online human remains trade. His research interests concern the on and off-line intersection of heritage crime and the illicit wildlife trade. He is a co-founder of *The Alliance to Counter Crime Online*.

**Madeleine Mant** is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Her research integrates bioarchaeology and medical anthropology to investigate the health experiences of people through time, with a focus upon trauma and infectious disease.

**Sophia H. Mills** is a Lecturer in Forensic Archaeology at the University of Reading, and a Gerda Henkle Stiftung Research Scholar with Archaeological Research in Kvemo Kartli (Project ARKK), based in Dmanisi Gora, Georgia. Her research interests centre around health and agency, particularly through senescence and frailty, with a focus on southwest Asian archaeological populations.

**Charlotte Primeau** is an Assistant Professor of Forensic Imaging and leads the forensic micro-CT work at the Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG) at the University of Warwick. She has a background as a forensic anthropologist and diagnostic radiographer, and her research is focused on abuse and understanding circumstances around the time of death.

**Sarah Schrader** is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University. As the Head of the Laboratory for Human Osteoarchaeology, she is responsible for ethically curating multiple Dutch skeletal collections. Her research interests include embodied inequality, frailty and resilience, stress, and osteoarchaeological ethics.

**Trish Biers** is the Curatorial Manager for the Duckworth Laboratory at the University of Cambridge, and is responsible for the ethical care, research, and repatriation of the human remains collections in the Department of Archaeology. She is currently the Museum Representative for the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology. Her research interests include museum curation of human remains, death academia and osteoarchaeology.

## ORCID

Kirsty Squires  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0565-9491>  
 Wendy Birch  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6313-7499>  
 Damien Huffer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4027-1772>  
 Madeleine Mant  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5370-9959>  
 Sophia H. Mills  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1347-5190>  
 Charlotte Primeau  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9648-7607>  
 Sarah Schrader  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0424-6748>  
 Trish Biers  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1467-7667>

## Bibliography

- Agarwal, S. C. "The Bioethics of Skeletal Anatomy Collections from India." *Nature Communications* 15, no. 1 (2024): 1692. doi:10.1038/s41467-024-45738-6.
- Agarwal, S. C. "The Disposability and Inclusion of Brown Bodies." *American Journal of Biological Anthropology* 186, no. 1 (2025): e25003. doi:10.1002/ajpa.25003.
- Alliance to Reduce Crime Against Heritage, National Police Chiefs' Council, Crown Prosecution Service, Historic England, Cadw and Department of the Environment. *Heritage Crime: A Guide for Law Enforcement Officers*. Welwyn Garden City: Hertfordshire Constabulary, 2016.
- Bentley, O. "MP Calls for Ban on Auction Sales of Human Remains." BBC News. November 20, 2024. Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm2zpx3gkelo>.
- Berry, J. "The Development of Heritage Crime Policy and Practice in Wales." *The Archaeologist* 122 (2024): 10–12. doi:10.11588/cifatamag.2024.1.105516.
- Blue Shield International. "OSCE Heritage Crime Task Force Partnership Continues." Blue Shield International. December 19, 2023. Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://theblueshield.org/osce-illicit-trafficking-workshop-partnership-continues/>.
- British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology. "Trading and Sale of Human Remains Task Force." British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology. Accessed December 6, 2024. <https://babao.org.uk/about/our-people/trading-and-sale-of-human-remains-sub-group/>.
- Burford, R. "Deputy PM Angela Rayner Vows Meeting Over 'Troubling' Cases of Human Remains Being Sold on Instagram." MSN News. November 20, 2024. Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/deputy-pm-angela-rayner-vows-meeting-over-troubling-cases-of-human-remains-being-sold-on-instagram/ar-AA1uqLYh>.
- Burial Act. "Section 25 (England)." 1857. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/20-21/81>.
- Calvey, D. "Covert Ethnography in Criminology: A Submerged Yet Creative Tradition." *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 25, no. 1 (2013): 541–550. doi:10.1080/10345329.2013.12035980.
- Chisholm, J. "FedEx Mocked Over Twitter Apology for Losing Package with Human Remains Three Years Ago." Independent. July 18, 2022. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/fedex-human-remains-twitter-bot-b2125839.html>.
- Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Act. "(United Kingdom)." 2017. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/6>.
- Customs and Excise Management Act. "(United Kingdom)." 1979. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1979/2>.
- Davidson, K., S. Graham, and D. Huffer "A Protocol for When Social Media Goes Private: Studying Archaeological or Heritage Discourses in Closed Facebook Groups." *Internet Archaeology* 67 (2024). doi:10.11141/ia.67.11.
- Davies, C. "UK Auction House Cancels 'Disrespectful' Sale of Shrunken Heads and Skulls." The Guardian. October 9, 2024. Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/oct/09/uk-auction-house-cancels-sale-of-shrunken-heads-and-skulls>.
- Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act. "(United Kingdom)." 2003. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/27>.

- Department for Culture, Media and Sport. *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*. London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2005.
- Fry, J. "Heritage Crime: A Police Officer's Experience." *The Archaeologist* 122 (2024): 15–17. doi:10.11588/cifatamag.2024.1.105519.
- Graham, S., K. Davidson, and D. Huffer "Behind Closed Doors: The Human Remains Trade within Private Facebook Groups." *Internet Archaeology* 67 (2024). doi:10.11141/ia67.14.
- Graham, S., D. Huffer, and J. Simons "When TikTok Discovered the Human Remains Trade: A Case Study." *Open Archaeology* 8, no. 1 (2022): 196–219. doi:10.1515/opar-2022-0235.
- Gudge, E. "Shrunken Heads Withdrawn from Auction After Backlash." BBC News. October 9, 2024. Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy4dwg0e0m2o>.
- Historic England. *Heritage Crime Prevention: Advice for Those Who Care for Heritage Assets*. Swindon: Historic England, 2023a.
- Historic England. *Heritage Crime Risk Assessment*. Swindon: Historic England, 2023b.
- Historic England. *Heritage Crime Interventions: Prosecution and Alternative Disposals*. Swindon: Historic England, 2023c.
- Home Office. *Crime Recording Rules for Front Line Officers and Staff 2024/25*. London: Home Office, 2024.
- Huffer, D., and N. Charlton. "Serious Enquiries Only, Please: Ethical Issues Raised by the Online Human Remains Trade." In *Ethical Approaches to Human Remains: A Global Challenge in Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology*, edited by K. Squires, D. Errickson, and N. Márquez-Grant, 95–129. Cham: Springer, 2019.
- Huffer, D., and S. Graham *These Were People Once: The Online Trade of Human Remains and Why it Matters*. New York: Berghahn, 2023.
- Huffer, D., S. Graham, T. Brughmans, and J. Simons "'alleen Voor Studiedoeleinden' (For Study Purposes Only): The Human Remains Trade on Marketplaats.NL." *Anthropologica et Praehistorica* 131 (2022): 37–53. doi:10.57937/ap.2022.008.
- Human Tissue Act. "(England, Wales and Northern Ireland)." 2004. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/30>.
- Human Tissue (Scotland) Act. "(Scotland)." 2006. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2006/4>.
- Huskisson, S. "Horror as Foetal Skeletons and Real Human Bones Could Be Sold on Instagram, eBay and Etsy." *Mirror*. November 20, 2024. Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/horror-foetal-skeletons-real-human-34150465>.
- Interpol. "Cultural Heritage Crime." Interpol. Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Cultural-heritage-crime>.
- Jones, D. G. "Anatomists' Uses of Human Skeletons: Ethical Issues Associated with the India Bone Trade and Anonymized Archival Collections." *Anatomical Sciences Education* 16, no. 4 (2023): 610–617. doi:10.1002/ase.2280.
- Kendall Adams, G. "English Heritage Trials Body-Worn Cameras Amid Rising Heritage Crime." *Museums Journal*. March 21, 2024. Accessed December 6, 2024. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2024/03/english-heritage-trials-body-worn-cameras-amid-rising-heritage-crime/>.
- Kennedy, I. "The Report of the Public Inquiry into Children's Heart Surgery at the British Royal Infirmary 1984-1995: Learning from Bristol." London: The British Royal Infirmary Inquiry, 2001.
- Kumar, S. "Indian Tribes Renew Efforts to Repatriate Ancestral Skulls from UK Collections." *Arab News*. December 3, 2024. Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://arab.news/ckd7j>.
- Low, J., and E. Freeman "Heritage Crime: The Approach in Scotland." *The Archaeologist* 122 (2024): 9. doi:10.11588/cifatamag.2024.1.105511.
- MacDonald, H. "Procuring Corpses: The English Anatomy Inspectorate, 1842-1858." *Medical History* 53, no. 3 (2009): 379–396. doi:10.1017/S0025727300003987.
- Marzano, M. "The Ethics of Covert Ethnographic Research." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethics in Critical Research*, edited by C. I. Macleod, J. Marx, P. Mnyaka, and G. J. Treharne, 399–413. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.

- McLean, S. A. M., A. Campbell, K. Guttridge, and H. Harper "Human Tissue Legislation and Medical Practice: A Benefit or a Burden." *Medical Law International* 8, no. 1 (2006): 1–21. doi:10.1177/096853320600800101.
- Paul, K. A. "Ancient Artifacts Vs. Digital Artifacts: New Tools for Unmasking the Sale of Illicit Antiquities on the Dark Web." *Arts* 7, no. 2 (2018): 12. doi:10.3390/arts7020012.
- Pester, P. "Grave Robbing is Feeding a Macabre Market Currently Booming in the UK." Live Science. October 7, 2022. Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://www.livescience.com/grave-robbing-for-uk-human-remains-trade>.
- Pester, P. "UK Auction House Pulls Human Remains and Signed Jimmy Saville Photo: Everything I Know." Patrick Pester. October 12, 2024. Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.patrickpester.com/post/uk-auction-house-pulls-human-remains-and-signed-jimmy-saville-photo-everything-i-know>.
- Post Office. "Prohibited and Restricted Items." Post Office. Accessed December 13, 2024. <https://www.postoffice.co.uk/mail/what-can-i-send>.
- Press Trust of India. "Nagaland Chief Minister Urges Centre to Help Stop UK Auction of 'Naga Human Skull'." NDTV. October 8, 2024. Accessed March 28, 2025. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/nagaland-chief-minister-urges-centre-to-help-stop-uk-auction-of-naga-human-skull-6746962>.
- Proceeds of Crime Act. "(United Kingdom)." 2002. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/29>.
- Redfern, M., J. W. Keeling, and E. Powell. "The Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry Report." Norwich: The Stationary Office, 2001.
- Ribeiro-Addy, B. "End the Depraved Sale of Human Remains." Bell Ribeiro-Addy. November 20, 2024. Accessed December 19, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYDO-fppxcM>.
- Richards, S. "Calls for Crackdown on 'Commodification of the Dead'." ABC News. October 11, 2024. Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-10-12/remains-for-sale-commodification-of-the-dead/104463822>.
- Rivera, M. "Family Sues After Father's Remains Allegedly Thrown in Trash During Shipping." ABC7 Eyewitness News. February 20, 2019. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://abc7chicago.com/shipping-human-remains-ashes-ups-usps/5147324/>.
- Sarkar, A. R. "Oxfordshire Auction House Halts Sale of Horned Human Skull After Outcry from Tribal Community." The Independent. October 9, 2024. Accessed December 23, 2024. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/naga-human-skull-auction-backlash-b2626323.html>.
- Stringham, O. C., J. Maher, C. R. Lassaline, L. Wood, S. Moncayo, A. Toomes, S. Heinrich, et al. "The Dark Web Trades Wildlife, but Mostly for Use as Drugs." *People and Nature* 5, no. 3 (2023): 999–1009. doi:10.1002/pan3.10469.
- Tidball-Binz, M. "Protection of the Dead. Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions." Geneva: United Nations, 2024.
- Turnbull, P., C. Fforde, and C. Timothy McKeown. "Collecting and Colonial Violence." In *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation*, edited by H. Keeler, 452–468. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.
- Vannan, A., and P. Matteo "Heritage Crime and Forensic Archaeology: An Integrative Approach." *The Archaeologist* 122 (2024): 21–23. doi:10.11588/cifatamag.2024.1.105521.