

Resolving the Human Remains Crisis in British Archaeology: The Counter Argument

King Arthur Pendragon*

Introduction

In 2008 ancient cremated human remains were re-exhumed from Aubrey Hole 7 at Stonehenge, licensed under the Burial Act of 1857 for a two-year period of study.

These remains had been removed previously from a number of the Aubrey Holes encircling the Temple/Monument of Stonehenge by the archaeologists of the day and replaced at a later date in one of the cremation pits that they had been removed from. We, the Council of British Druid Orders, the wider Pagan community, and My Order in particular were assured by the 'powers that be' that under the current legislation they would be returned to what was and should have remained, in our opinion, their final resting place encircling what we believe to be 'our' Premier Temple.

Moves by the archaeologists and their supporters were afoot to change or reinterpret this legislation as is set out in the paper above. And for this reason we, and my Order in particular, set about a legal challenge of our own. I for my part, two years later when a five-year extension was granted, sought a Judicial Review of the Ministry of Justice's decision to grant such an extension.

Our Reasoning

We do not consider ourselves, as do some of the archaeologists, as a 'new religion', but

the re-emergence of a far older one. Pagan and the Druid Priest Caste are the indigenous beliefs of these Pre-Christian Isles. It is, however, not our belief structure that is in question here but 'Belief' itself. These People, and it should be remembered that when archaeologists talk about remains they are talking about the earthly remains of what were once people like you or I - walking talking folk with all the same needs and hopes, fears and imaginations as we have to this day - these people buried thousands of years ago should be treated in death with the same respect as those who passed over just last week.

There can be no 'time limit' on human remains ceasing to be the earthly remains of what was once a human. Human remains are human remains whether they died three thousand years, or three hours ago - they are still the remains of what was once a walking talking person and should be given the same due respect.

You would, I am sure be deeply offended, at the thought of the Druids (or any other religious sect) digging up your parents or your grandparents, in order to do some ancient rite, so why so alarmed or surprised when we are equally offended when you dig up 'our' ancient dead for your rites of study? When I speak of our ancestors I include you in the 'our' for that is what we are talking about and, in the case of Aubrey hole 7, perhaps the very founding fathers of this Nation.

We were not and are not against the 'testing' of such remains, but from the outset set out our belief that a sample would have been

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sufficient for such purposes. Nor were we against the study of these remains 'after the fact', but we soon realised that any extension was to be used as a ploy to await a change in/ or amendment to the law, in order to allow museum retention.

To 'us' the removal of these ancestral remains is akin to the removal of the 'Holy relics' (the Saints bones) on which the Christian Cathedrals are built, but more than that it was and still is in our view a matter of common decency and respect.

Our Action

As I have said, this was never about 'our beliefs' but belief itself, and for that reason we started a petition, including on it a column for 'Religion' to show that this was not simply a Pagan or Druid issue but one of 'common decency' which members of all and no belief structure could agree with. We were joined by a large number of differing faiths who signed and agreed with our simple call "Let those we lay to rest - stay to rest".

The archaeologists have tried to muddy the waters by suggesting that in referring to these as the Ancestors we are claiming direct decent - we are not - and that in referring to them as 'The Guardians' that we are somehow claiming disempowerment of our Temple; that may be so, but we are not claiming it.

Mike Parker-Pearson, for whom I have the greatest respect both personally and professionally, has enhanced his professional career by his interpretation of Stonehenge as a site dedicated to the dead, and it therefore figures that an ancient circle of burial pits encircling the 'Henge' would have been placed there for some reason. Perhaps as a physical token of some belief structure, which in our interpretation would appear to be the placing of boundary Guardians, and in Mike's own interpretation "they were very important people, either a Royal line or the Priest caste". Maybe they were the builders or the architects of Stonehenge, as was claimed in proofs of evidence when applying for an extension of the licence.

Therein is the irony, for if the archaeologists would have us believe 'our temple' is a monument to the dead then surely taking the premier Dead away, takes from it its very reason for its existence and gives credence to the American tourist heard to say "It's just a pile of rocks". When is a burial ground or graveyard no longer a burial ground or graveyard? The answer is surely when the dead are no longer *in situ*.

Mike Pitts co-director of the 2008 dig said that I could not prove that the people whose cremated human remains encircled Stonehenge wanted to be interred there, to which I replied "no I could not, but someone wanted it so". Just as you cannot with any certainty prove anyone wished the Churchyard to be their final resting place, you can say with certainty that *someone* wished it to be so.

And, that is what it comes down to, the respect of the wishes or the belief structure of the dead. Respect for the dead. We have a higher animal consciousness, and our civilisation may in some degree be measured by our respect for the wishes of the 'loved ones' who cared enough to cremate or bury our Ancestors. We should honour their wishes and allow the dead to 'rest in peace' whatever their belief structure.

We may not know with any great degree of certainty what exactly their belief system was. We do know however, with some far greater certainty, that they, 'the Ancient Dead', did not leave their bodies to medical science and that their 'loved ones' assumed that they would 'lay' there in perpetuity and did not give their verbal or written consent to their removal for the purpose of scientific study.

There is something almost voyeur-like about viewing the dead in museums and much to say about the double standards we attribute to so called science. Imagine the outrage if we were to 'dig up' those who lay in our church yards and crematoriums, the recent dead, and put them on display as some work of art, 'Man in formaldehyde' without consent. Yet we seem to think it's perfectly

acceptable to do so with the ancient dead, and to store them in dusty museum shelves in boxes. They were once people, whether they last walked this earth last year, last century or last millennium, and they should be treated with the same respect as those who last walked this earth last week.

As part of my campaign I asked three questions of the authorities, and it may be that your readership could give some consideration to answering them.

Double Standards

Why is it, if you were to put a Human skull atop a staff, you would be viewed as a barbarian, but put the same skull behind glass and you are viewed as a 'scientist'?

How is it, you get jailed for hanging off the cenotaph and applauded for 'digging up' the Ancestors at Stonehenge?

And why are 'the cremation pits' at Stonehenge allowed to be disturbed whilst those at Salisbury Crematorium are protected under British Law?

As yet they have not answered to my satisfaction.

The Way Forward

The archaeological community has to stop viewing 'us' and other similar pressure groups as the enemy and learn, as we will, to work together for a little 'give and take' from all sides.

The current legislation and the interpretation of it we all agree leaves a lot to be desired, and in my humble opinion the Judicial Review I sought would have given both sides better clarity. That was not to be, and Sheffield University engaged the services of the 'biggest' corporate law firm in the world to thwart my attempts to gain any such clarity.

So what now? Each side of the debate is expected to go 'cap in hand' to the Ministry each and every single time and ask "Please Mr can I have 'my' bones back?" and a new 'game' of Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust, if the Druids don't get them the Archaeologist must.

We have all seen how the Ministry will play one off against the other and rely on what? The opinions and wishes of current public opinion and the whims of the press as to which brand of morality they wish to champion at any given time. We have all witnessed the demonising of differing 'brands' of dog as tastes have changed and never a report of how many 'poodles' bit or savaged. So is that to be the battleground, the media and the social networking sites? I think not.

It would be far better for all parties to agree terms and unite against the bureaucratic tape that ties us all up and that serves no one save for the self serving politicians. And if we cannot agree terms, then let it be done through a court of law and let Justice be seen to be done.

And if the 'Fight' is to be settled by public opinion and through the Press, let us hope we can all put a rational point of view without animosity, as I believe I did in the following article:

'Who's Guarding the Guardians' (first appeared in The Western Daily Press)

On the twenty ninth of August two thousand and eight, cremated Human remains were removed from Stonehenge, in a sad little tupperware box. They had originally been excavated from the 'Aubrey holes' encircling the Henge, between 1919 and 1926.

The chard fragments of bone were re-interred into one of the excavated pits, (Aubrey hole seven) in the 1930s and it was this cache that the archaeologists re-exhumed as part of the 'Riverside project' in 2008.

Pagans and Druids were asked to 'bless' the dig, but on learning that the archaeologists had no intention of returning the remains (referred to by the Pagans as the Guardians) to their resting place at Stonehenge, they refused. For, after all, as the archaeologists themselves asserted, they had laid there for thousands of

years before their disturbance in the early twenties.

Enter King Arthur Pendragon, Frank Summers, and Kazz Smith, three Druids so appalled at the prospect of these ancient remains being permanently removed from the Sacred Site they had guarded since before time immemorial, that they set about challenging the decisions that allowed this unacceptable development.

Frank, as is his forte set about finding what right for redress, was provided to challenge under British Law, looking also into the funding of such projects and where pressure, if any, could be brought to bear.

Arthur and Kazz for their part took the message to the people as part of their 'Stonehenge Picket' for better access at Stonehenge. They also fired the first shot in their battle with the authorities, by invading the temple at night for a 'naked' Ritual. Vowing to fight for the Guardians return, a vow they would later renew at a full Druid ceremony Vernal equinox 2009, and again a year and a day later at Aubrey hole seven.

The morning after the 'naked Ritual' a meeting was hastily called, the senior archaeologists and disgruntled Druids attending with attendees from English Heritage who manage the site.

The archaeologists for their part put the case for retaining the remains for future research and informed the druids that they would apply for 'variance' to the existing order that allowed them two years for analysis.

The Druids for their part suggested retaining a sample for future analysis or looking into the possibility of reburial in air tight biodegradable plastic containers so, should forensics move on in the next century as the scientists would have us believe then

they could be re exhumed, before returning to the earth. The archaeologists disagreed.

They did agree however (later to be put in writing) to inform the Druid, in good time to appeal, to the Department of Justice, who would be granting such an order. By all accounts a 'rubber stamp' formality.

The Stonehenge Picket came to a close after the government intervened with the promise of a new visitors centre and better access for all.

Still the Archaeologists insisted on retaining the remains for future testing, still the archaeologists refused to listen to the pleas' of Arthur, Frank and Kazz to return the guardians to what should have been their final resting place.

So, on the sixth of June 2009 the three Druids reinstated the Stonehenge Picket. Robed Druids, Banners flying, enlisting the support of, unsuspecting, and in the main, ill-informed, tourists.

Many archaeologists visited the 'Picket' and many came to agree with the Druids position, from Inspectors of scheduled monuments to Heads of Department, it is even rumoured that the co-director of the 'dig' in question is supporting a Druid 'Bring back the ancient Dead' badge. As are a number of English Heritage employees at Stonehenge and wider a field.

There is no great animosity between the two camps and the Druids are regularly updated on the progress made at the lab of Sheffield University where it has been ascertained that all were male and in relatively good health. All that remains now is to carbon date them and return them to the temple they once guarded according to the Druids petition.

To show this was and is not a purely Druid or Pagan issue religion was

included on the petition aimed at the Department of Justice, who will decide as to whether or not the archaeologists may retain the remains permanently. Nationality was also included to show how widespread it was and is, this belief in what the Druids called 'common decency': "Let those we lay at rest - stay at rest" reads their banner.

They're still there, at Stonehenge, the Druids gathering signatures,

Agnostic, Anglican, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Evangelist, Spiritualist, Druid, Hindu, Jew, signing along side Presbyterian, Unitarian, Taoist,

Islam, Muslim, Sikh, to name but a few. People from every Nation and every faith agreeing without rank on this one issue. If only their leaders could see it the same (or should that be sane?) way.

It looks like the Druids have happened upon the Alchemical mix that could eventually lead to World Peace. Common Decency-respecting the Dead, the one thing WE can all agree on. It's a start...

Nb, In the event it was I and not Frank who sought redress under law and it is I that shall continue to do so until this situation is resolved.