

The Royal College of Surgeons of England: A Brief History of Its Collections and a Catalogue of Some Current Holdings

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Towards the end of the nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth, the Royal College of Surgeons of England probably contained the largest and most geographically varied collection of human skeletal remains in Britain. The history of this collection dates to the time of John Hunter, the celebrated surgeon-anatomist (1728-1793), whose private museum was acquired by the Government after his death and subsequently given to the Royal College.

Hunter's museum consisted mostly of soft tissue specimens which illustrated human and animal pathology, physiology and anatomy. However, he also collected human skeletal remains, and is recorded as having "numerous specimens showing racial variation" (Causey 1955: 3) (including a Maori skull and preserved head, five skulls of Australian Aborigines and one skull of a Tasmanian Aborigine and a "series of adult skeletons showing racial types" (Causey 1955: 3).

Throughout his life, Hunter was dedicated to the collection of specimens for his museum. He was renowned for his tenacity in obtaining the specimens he desired, a reputation well demonstrated in his acquisition of the skeleton of Charles Byrne, "The Irish Giant". Byrne (measuring 7ft. 7in.) arrived in London in April of 1782, where he resided for about a year, earning a living by exhibiting himself for money. During the last months of his life Byrne is known to have feared that his body would fall into the hands of the anatomists, and to deny them their prize, he requested burial at sea. Upon his death in June 1783 many of the surgeons in London tried to get his body by one means or another. It was Hunter, however, after bribing the undertakers (who were already in the process of carrying Byrne to the coast), who eventually secured Byrne's body (Dobson 1971: 199-206). Byrne's skeleton today still forms the centrepiece of the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

After Hunter's death in 1793 his collection lay unclaimed until it was bought by the Government, in 1799, for £15,000. Hunter himself had invested £70,000 in his museum, but as Grey Turner remarks, "at all times medical museums have proved very bad investments" (1945: 360). In 1806 the collection was moved from Hunter's old house into the premises of the Corporation of Surgeons - soon to become the Royal College of Surgeons in London (and later of England) - where a special museum was built to hold it, which opened in 1813. Hunter's museum formed the nucleus of the College collections, which grew

rapidly over the next century. Apart from the Human Osteological Series, the collection contained a huge variety of material, from pathological and anatomical preparations of humans and animals, to stuffed animals, early anatomical instruments and the articulated skeletons of giraffes, elephants and whales.

The College Museum acquired its human skeletal remains from many sources. Expeditions to the new world brought back the remains of the peoples whose lands they visited, individuals living in the colonies sent back specimens, and remains were traded between different institutions. Although acquiring much of its contents through individual donation, the Human Osteological Series was greatly enlarged by the purchase of Joseph Barnard Davis's private collection in 1867 (consisting of about 1,540 human skulls and other parts of the skeleton) and by the acquisition in 1890, for £100, of the collection belonging to the Anthropological Society (now the Royal Anthropological Institute), which consisted of about 300 skulls from different areas of the world.

In addition to the osteological remains of non-European peoples, the College also acquired their soft tissue remains. The Royal College of Surgeons of England, *Conservator's Reports* state that in 1910 the College acquired the brain of a 60 year old Australian Aboriginal woman (donated by Professor A. Watson, accession number: D 703.5) and the tongue, soft palate and labial glands of Bush people (1910: 18.19). In 1912 the College acquired a dissection of the muscles of mastication of an Australian Aborigine (accession number: Ac 1.12) which included the tongue, soft palate and larynx (*Conservator's Reports* 1912: 34). Acquisition was not confined to body parts - in 1933 the College collections apparently contained the preserved bodies of two, if not three, Australian Aborigines since Waring's *Reports to Council* (1933: 12) contain the following entry:

Australian Aborigines - A slate tank of convenient size has been fitted in one of the basement rooms to receive the bodies of the two Australian natives acquired by the Museum more than 20 years ago and hitherto stored in a tank difficult to access.

In his autobiography Sir Arthur Keith (1950) describes one of these bodies as being an Aboriginal woman whom he calls "Lady Adelaide". She was sent to the museum in 1910 by Archibald Watson (then Professor of Anatomy in the University of Adelaide):

She had been embalmed. Her every feature and part were as fresh as on the day on which she had died... She was given a sarcophagus half filled with preservative fluid and became a 'private exhibit'.

(Keith 1950: 344-345)

These bodies do not appear to have been accessioned by the College, nor have they been referred to in published osteological catalogues. A further deficiency in documentation surrounds the whereabouts of the head of Aboriginal ("chief") Pemulwye. There seems to be no doubt that Governor King sent Pemulwye's head "in spirits" in 1802 to Joseph Banks in London and that it arrived there safely since, in a letter written to King on April 8 1803, Banks thanks King for the head, saying that it "is said to have caused some comical consequences when opened at the Customs House, but when brought home was very acceptable to our anthropological collectors, and makes a figure in the museum of the late Mr Hunter, now purchased by the public". Pemulwye's head does not appear to feature in any of the College's catalogues. Whether or not the manuscript entry of "two human heads from N.S. Wales", donated by Everard Home in December 1802, in a list of donations to the museum referred to the remains of this important historical figure currently remains unknown.

By the late 1930s the Human Osteological Series was immense, and included the remains of people, both ancient and modern, from all corners of the world. As the usefulness of any human skull collection at that time was considered to be dependent upon its size and variety, the College's collection was considered to be the most important in Britain, if not in Europe, and was constantly utilised by the scholars of the day.

Although the card catalogue for the museum was almost completely destroyed by bombing during the war, its contents can be roughly pieced together using the various published catalogues and an annotated copy of the 1907 catalogue, currently held by the Huntcrian Museum. At this time the museum included the remains of the following people (as well as, of course, many hundreds more from different areas of the world): 113 "skulls" (here used to refer to skulls, crania or calvaria), one skeleton, two skulls with partial skeletons and one foetal skeleton of North American Indians (including the remains of six named individuals); 68 skulls, eight heads, and one mandible of the Maori people (including the remains of one named individual); 57 skulls, two skeletons, two lower jaws of the "Eskimo" people; 187 skulls, two lower jaws, five femurs, 18 skeletons, four skulls with partial skeletons, two incomplete skeletons, one very incomplete skeleton, various bones, at least one head and two bodies of Australian Aborigines (including the remains of four named individuals); 36 skulls, three skeletons, seven teeth and seven mandibles and various individual bones of Tasmanian Aborigines (including the remains of two named individuals); ten skulls, and one skeleton of the "Hottentot" people (including the remains of two named individuals); 17 skulls, 11 skeletons, and one head of the "Bushmen" people.

War Damage

On the night of May 10th/11th 1941 the Museum received a direct hit. Although precautions had been taken before the war-specimen cases had been boarded up and the skulls packed into smaller areas and secured- this proved not to be enough to prevent considerable damage to the collection. Although it is **estimated** that over 39,000 out of the total museum holdings of some **65,827** specimens (which includes all the museum's non-ostcological material) (Cave 1941: 15) **were** destroyed, over 6,300 specimens (Cave 1941: 15) in the Human Osteological Series survived. Although apparently **no** list of destroyed material was made, we do have some idea of the geographical origins of the human ostcological remains which survived from the following statement made by the **then** Assistant Conservator, A.J.E. Cave:

The Osteological Series (Human) sustained **particularly selective** loss. In general, its European, Asiatic, New World and Polynesian specimens escaped injury, but its African, Veddah, Tasmanian and Australian material was **destroyed**. Minor losses include a special collection of some 150 pelves of known race, age and sex, a select collection of 80 trephined crania, and a graduated series of 30 human fetuses....

(Cave 1941: 8)

The College Mummification Series, which had contained **"200" items**, including the mummy of a child from the **Torres Straits**, tattooed **Maori** heads and a "unique collection of **preserved** and decorated heads from **Melanesia** and Polynesia" (Cave 1941: 10), was entirely destroyed.

After the bombing, it was decided to empty the Museum as quickly as possible and disperse its surviving contents around the country. This was carried out, under difficult conditions, and in July and August 1941 **"the Human Osteological Series** was listed, transported, and rearranged in its new temporary quarters" (Cave 1941: 13).

For a number of years after the bombing, while still in **storage** outside **London**, many damaged human crania were repaired, although some were "affected by dirt and damp; disarranged or even broken through the agency of intrusive jackdaws and owls [and] several skulls have lost their teeth in Part" (Cave 1945: 11). Human osteological material damaged in the bombing **was** "from time to **time...worked** over, and those fragments deemed **impos-** **sible of either** identification or restoration [were] **discarded**" (Cave 1945: 11).

After the war, material was gradually returned to the Museum, and by 1946 **all** the dispersal centres had been cleared. and Wood Jones (1946: 3) reported

that "Most of the returned specimens were found to be in good condition". In the years after the war negotiations were held with the authorities of The Natural History Museum for them to take the College's surviving cranial collection ("with the exception of certain historical and teaching specimens" [Wood Jones 1948: 4]), and this was accomplished in various stages during the years 1947-1948, 1950-1951 and 1954-1955 (and possibly in later years also).'

From 1945 to 1952, the College Museum was reorganised into separate museums: the Hunterian, the Odontological, the Anatomical Museum, Today, the Hunterian Museum retains a number of skulls from Hunter's original collection, while the Odontological Museum holds a substantial skull collection based upon the collection of the Odontological Society of Great Britain, a few skulls from the pre-war College Museum, a number of post-war acquisitions, and skulls and crania from Australia and New Guinea donated by Professor F. Wood Jones to the College Museum in 1946, and transferred to the Odontological Museum in 1951.

Thus, it can be seen that the human skeletal collections of the Royal College have had a long and eventful history, spanning the entire period of time during which anthropological remains were collected for scientific purposes in Britain. By 1941 the College had amalgamated the human skeletal collections of many other museums and private owners, and was, in effect, the national repository for such material. After the bombing of the collection in 1941, this position appears to have been taken over by The Natural History Museum.

Note

1] Published records and information provided by the museums concerned confirm that a large number of specimens were destroyed in the war; for example, the College no longer has any of the following Australian Aborigine remains from the Barnard Davis Collection and there is no record that they were ever received by the Natural History Museum:

13. Imperfect male calvaria; used as water vessel; S.A.—"Adelaide Tribe": presented by Mr. Matthew Moorhouse.
14. Imperfect male calvaria; used as water vessel; S.A.—"Adelaide Tribe"; presented by Mr. Matthew Moorhouse.
338. Imperfect female calvaria; used as water vessel; S.A.—"Adelaide Tribe"; presented by Mr. Matthew Moorhouse.
339. Imperfect female calvaria; used as water vessel; S.A.—"Adelaide Tribe"; presented by Mr. Matthew Moorhouse.
340. Female calvaria; S.A.—"Adelaide Tribe"; presented by Mr. Matthew Moorhouse.
- 99] Male calvaria; "Has a large sword-cut on the left parietal, which has sliced off the bone (probably during life) to one half its thickness"; S.A.
671. Male skull; "died of phthisis in the Melbourne Hospital; hence believed to have been of a tribe near Melbourne." S.A.; presented by C.P. Layard]

- 776 Female calvaria; Lake Timboon, Victoria; presented by W Tolson. Esq
- 777 Female; Lake Timboon, Victoria; presented by W Tolson. Esq
- 778 Imperfect male calvaria; Lake Timboon, Victoria; presented by W Tolson. Esq
- 900 Male skull. "MALGOEY BOB". N S W , previously in collection of Mr James Deville
- (915) Female cranium; originally in museum of Joshua Brookes, then in collection of Mr James Deville
- 916 Female calvaria; N S W.; brought from Australia by Major Morrison and presented to Joshua Brookes by Dr Henry Davis, then in collection of Mr James Deville
- 917 Male; originally in museum of Joshua Brookes, then in collection of Mr. James Deville
- 931 Female calvaria; previously in collection of Mr James Deville.
- 1021 Male skull. "CARBON WILL.". "It is inscribed 'Carbon Will, Chief of the Moreton Bay Tribe, N S W , supposed to be the man who killed Gpt. Logan, the Commandant, by spearing him'" Moreton Bay, N S W , previously in collection of Mr. James Deville.
- 1060 Male skull. Gobei Island. Bass Strait, Victoria; presented by George Rolfe. Melbourne
- 1122 Male skull. Mcleay River, N S W.; purchased from the Commissioners for the N S W Department of the International Exhibition of 1862
- 1123 Male skull. Wclay River, N S W, purchased from the Commissioners for the N S W Department of the International Exhibition of 1862
- 1142 Male; "Piccaniny Creek Tribe"; presented by the Commissioners of the Victoria Department of the International Exhibition of 1862.
- 1195 Male; Queensland; previously in collection of Mr A Watson
- 1261 Female skeleton. S.A.; presented by Mr Matthew Moorhouse and his son Mr J Moorhouse
- 1262 male skeleton. S.A.; presented by Mr Matthew Moorhouse and his son Mr J Moorhouse
- No number; female skull. "Victoria Tribe"; found in 1863; lent to Bernard Davis by Mr. L.N Fowler
- 1365 Male skull. collected by Prof Reinhardt; previously in collection of Prof Van Lidth de Jeude
- 1509 Female calvaria; presented by Dr J Immprey
- 1765 Male; Queensland - "Jamba Tribe"
- 1766 Male skull. Port Fairy, South Australia
- 1767 Male calvaria; Queensland; purchased from Mr C H Allen
- 1768 ? Male calvaria; Queensland. purchased from Mr C H Allen
- 860 Male calvaria; Tasmania; previously in the collection of Mr James Deville
- 861 Male calvaria; Tasmania; originally in museum of Joshua Brookes and presented to him by Mr Goodwin, Surgeon. R.S. previously in collection of Mr James Deville
- 862 Female calvaria; Tasmania; originally in museum of Joshua Brookes, presented to him by Mr Goodwin, Surgeon, R N , previously in collection of James Deville
- 863 Female calvaria; Tasmania; originally in museum of Joshua Brookes, presented to him by Mr Goodwin, Surgeon, R N , previously in collection of Mr James Deville
- 867 Female calvaria; previously in collection of Mr James Deville and presented to him by Dr Greig

928. Female skull; Tasmania; previously in collection of Mr. James Deville and presented to him by Mr. Espie; Surgeon.
1054. Imperfect male calvaria; Tasmania; purchased from Mr. J.S. Prout.
1119. Female calvaria; "found in the bush at Racecourse, Surrey Hills, at the N.W. side of the Island", Tasmania; presented by Dr. Joseph Millipn.
1120. Female calvaria; St. Mary's, Tasmania; collected and presented by Dr. Joseph Millipn.
- 1120a. ^{2/3}roale: fragment of calvaria consisting of frontal and right parietal bones, atlas ~~2/3~~ ~~2/3~~ d dentata, and the right half of the lower maxilla; "picked up on the north coast of the island, at a spot at which long before, a white man had fired into an encampment and wounded a woman. Her head was chopped off and she was buried in the sand"; Tasmania; presented by Dr. Joseph Millipn.
1121. Male; Tasmania; presented by Dr. Joseph Millipn.
1297. Male; Tasmania; presented by George A. Robinson.
1481. Male skull; Tasmania; purchased from George A. Robinson.
1482. Female skull; Tasmania; purchased from George A. Robinson.
1761. Male skeleton; Tasmania; presented by Mr. Morton Allport.
1763. Female skull; Tasmania; prepared with
1487. Calvaria; a string of Kangaroo sinew collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.
1488. Lower jaw; Tssmanir: prepared by winding a sinew cord around it; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.
1489. Lower jaw; Tasmania; prepared by winding a sinew cord around it; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.
1490. Lower jaw; Tasmania; prepared by winding a sinew cord around it; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.
1491. Left tibia with lower ~~2/3~~ ~~2/3~~ sremity broken off; prepared by wrapping a sinew cord ~~2/3~~ ~~2/3~~ round Tssmanir: collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.
1492. Right tibia with lower extremity broken off; prepared by winding a sinew cord around it; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.
1493. Left radius; Tasmania; prepared by winding a sinew cord around it; Tasmania; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.
- 1494.2 femora and 2 ulnae. "with dried soft parts tied up in a littk bag made of bass"; Tasmia; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

**Some Current Holdings in The Hunterian Museum [H] and
The Odontological Museum [OM], The Royal College of
Surgeons of England z**

Note: Work on the records of the Royal College of Surgeons was on allowed "on the strict understanding that any articles, papers or books which refer to the collections or records...are sent to [the Osman H. Curator] for approval prior to submission for publication" (C. Grigson

13/4/92). I agreed to this stipulation unless any information derived from sources outside the College.

Subsequently, a full detailed list of the current holdings of the Hunterian and Odontological Museums was compiled, checked and agreed, with the assistance of Dr Caroline Grigson (the 1992 Osman Hill Curator, now Assistant Conservator, The Royal College of Surgeons of England), prior to being sent to the press.

At the last moment (7/1/93), Professor Norman Browse (President of the Royal College of Surgeons) has insisted that all unpublished information deriving from the lists and catalogues—which he claims not to be public documents—must be omitted from this **Bulletin**.

The Executive of the World Archaeological Congress decided (24/1/93) not to delay publication any further and, therefore, to include only a summary list of the Hunterian and Odontological Museums' holdings compiled from sources (referred to below). The Executive also decided to leave blank the number of pages which were to have been filled by the original catalogue entry.

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New Zealand: MAORI

F.C. 772; O.C. 5395. Skull

F.C. 773; O.C. 5396. Skull

F.C. 774; O.C. 5397. Skull

A. 49.62 to A 49.624 "Specimens of cranial and mandibles of Maoris"; donated in 1950-1951 by Prof. F. Wood Jones. [OM]

Australia: ABORIGINES

F.C. 86. Male cranium of "Native of New Holland" [H]

A. 53.121 to A 53.29 "Forty four skulls and cranial of Australian natives"; donated in 1950-1951 by Prof. F. Wood Jones. [OM]

A. 53.1% to A 53.296 "One skull, skull fragments, and several cranial of Australian borignes"; donated in 1951-52 by Dr. E.W. Fish. [OM]Cranium; Barmah. Victoria; presented 1951 by E.W. Fish. [OM]

A. 54.22 "Cranium of Tasmanian"; donated in 1945-46 by Sir Frank Colyer. [OM]

Northern America: INDIANS

A. 52.2. Mandible of a young Red Indian: donated in 1951-52 by Dr. E.W. Fish. [OM]

A. 52.21. "Mandible of a young Red Indian (Pre-white)"; donated in 1951-52 by Dr. E.W. Fish. [OM]