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
rapidly over next century. Apart from the Human collection of material, from pathological and anatomical preparations of humans and animals, to many articulated skeletons of giraffes, elephants and whales.

The College Museum acquired its skeletal remains from Expeditions to the world brought back remains of lands they visited, individuals living in the colonies back specimens, remains 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 remains of many non-European peoples, the College also acquired their soft tissue remains. Royal England, 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 Pans-om 1933 the College collections apparently the preserved bodies of two, if not three. Australian Aborigines since Waring’s (1933: 12) contain the following entry:

Australian Aborigines—A convenient tank of water has been fitted in one of the basement rooms to receive the bodies of 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 as one of Aboriginal be calls “Lady Adelaide”. She to the museum in 1910 by Archibald Watson (then Professor of in the University of Adelaide):

She had been embalmed. Her every feature and part were as on the day which she had died... She was given a sarcophagus 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 Hunterian Museum. At this time the museum included the remains of the following people (as well as, of course, many hundreds more from 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 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 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 osteological 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, Veddhah, 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 foetuses....

(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” (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 “from time to time...worked over, and those fragments deemed impossible of either identification or restoration [were] discarded” (Cave 1945: 11).

After the war, material was gradually returned to the Museum, and by 1946 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”. 1a

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 College in 1941, this position appears to have been taken over by The Natural History Museum.

Note

1. Published records provided by the Museum concerned confirm that many of the following Australian Aborigine remains from the Collection and History Museum:

13. Imperfect male used as water vessel; S.A.-“Adelaide Tribe”: presented by Matthew Moorhouse.

14. Imperfect male used as water vessel: S.A.-“Adelaide Tribe”; presented by Matthew Moorhouse.

338. Imperfect female used as water vessel: S.A.-“Adelaide Tribe”; presented by Matthew Moorhouse.

339. Imperfect female used as water vessel: S.A.-“Adelaide Tribe”; presented by Matthew Moorhouse.

340. Female calvaria; S.A.-“Adelaide Tribe”; presented by Mr. Matthew Moorhouse.

99. Male calvaria; “Has a large parietal, which has sliced off half its thickness”: presented by Mr. Matthew Moorhouse.

671. Male skull; “Died of phthisis in the Melbourne Hospital; hence believed to have been of tribe near Melbourne.” S.A. presented by C.P. Layard.
Female calvaria; Lake Timboon, Victoria; presented by W Tolson. Esq.

Male calvaria; Lake Timboon, Victoria; presented by W Tolson. Esq.

Imperfect calvaria; Lake Timboon, Victoria; presented by W Tolson. Esq.

Male skull. "MALGOEY BOB" N. SW, previously in collection of Mr James Deville.

Female cranium; originally in Deville.

Female calvaria; NS W.; brought from Australia by Major Morrison Brooks and presented to Joshua Deville. SW, previously in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male; originally in Deville.

Female calvaria; in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male; in collection of Mr James Deville.

Female calvaria; in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male; prescribed by Mr James Deville.

Male; prescribed by Mr James Deville.

Female calvaria; in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male; prescribed by Mr James Deville.

Female calvaria; in collection of Mr James Deville.

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Female calvaria; in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male; presented by W Tolson.

Female; presented by W Tolson.

Male; presented by W Tolson.

Female; presented by W Tolson.

Male; presented by W Tolson. Esq.

Male; presented by W Tolson. Esq.

Male; previously in collection of Mr James Deville.

Female cranium; originally in Deville.

Female calvaria; NS W.; brought from Australia by Dr Henry Tollson and presented to Joshua Deville. SW, previously in collection of Mr James Deville.

Female calvaria; in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male skull. "CARBON WILL Chief of the Moreton Bay Tribe. N. SW, supposed to be the man who killed Mr Gart, the Commandant, Moreton Bay, N. W.; previously in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male skull. Goolbali, Bass Strait, Victoria; previously in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male; previously in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male; previously in collection of Mr James Deville.

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Female; in collection of Mr James Deville.

Male; previously in collection of Mr James Deville.
928. Female skull; Tasmania; previously in collection of Mr. James Deville and presented to him by Mr. Espe, Surgeon.

1054. Imperfect male calvaria; Tasmania; purchased from Mr. J. S. Prout.

1119. Female calvaria; “found on the bush at Racecourse, Hills, the Island”, Tasmania; presented by Dr. Joseph Millipn.

1120. Female calvaria; Mary’s, Tasmania; and presented by Dr. Joseph Millipn.

1120a. Female calvaria; “a fragment of the right frontal and parietal bones, atlas, dentata, and the lower half of the right maxilla; “picked up on the north coast of the island, at which time [i.e., 1493], a white man had been into an encampment and wounded a man who was chopped off and 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; collected by and purchased from Dr. Joseph Millipn.

1763. Female skull; Tasmania; prepared with a string of Kangaroo sinew collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

1487. Calvaria; Tasmanir: collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

1488. Lower jaw; Tasmanir: collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

1489. Lower jaw; Tasmanir: collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

1490. Lower jaw; Tasmanir: collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

1491. Left tibia with lower extremity broken; Tasmanir; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

1492. Right tibia with lower extremity broken; Tasmanir; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

1493. Left radius; Tasmanir; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

1494. 2 ulnae. “with some soft parts tied up in little bag of bass”. Tasmania; collected by and purchased from George A. Robinson.

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

Note: Work on the records of the Royal College of Surgeons was 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
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.

References and Sources


* Address: 35-43 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3PN


New Zealand: MAORIS

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 New Holland" [H]
A. 53.125 to A 53.295 "Forty four skulls and fragments, and several cranial bones of Australian natives" donated 1950–1951 by Prof. F. Wood Jones. [OM]

A. 53.125 to A 53.295 "One skull, skull fragments, and several cranial bones of Australian natives"; donated 1950–1951 by Dr. EW. Fish. [OM]

A. 53.295 "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. EW. Fish. [OM]
A. 52.21 "Mandible of a young Red Indian (Pre-white)"; donated in 1951–52 by Dr. EW. Fish. [OM]