

**A Sea Road Arts Publication
for
Sussex Heritage Community**

**DISCOVERY OF
HUMAN REMAINS**



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Introduction

This Guide details the action you should take if you discover what may be human remains. You may be shocked. You may not know if they are animal or human remains, but you have become distinctly uncomfortable and concerned by what you have found. You may not know immediately if the remains are recent or of archaeological value.

You may be at home digging in your garden – perhaps a new home you have just moved into. You may be out in the woods or open country walking your dog or taking children for a fun day out. You might walk in the mountains and find air crash wreckage or a fallen lone climber or hillwalker. You may be on the shore and find someone who has drowned after falling from a passing ship. You could come across a body at the foot of steep cliffs.

All these discoveries will be shocking, but you need to be calm and follow the guidance on pages 7 and 8.

Once you have noted the key actions to take, please read on in the guide to see the wide variety of circumstances in which human remains, both old and new, have been found in England.

About this Guide

This is one of a series of guides published by Sea Road Arts to support the work of Mr Daryl Holter of Sussex Heritage Community to preserve our great heritage. Sea Road Arts welcomes comments and suggestions for improvement or correction. You may contact Sea Road Arts via the following email address:

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kind regards

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WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND POSSIBLE HUMAN REMAINS

Finding potential human remains when walking in the countryside can be a shocking and emotional experience. If you have found a body, then call police using 999. Stay in the vicinity if you can, until police arrive. Try to give the police a clear location. If you are with family, especially children, they may understandably be distressed, and you may feel that you must leave the immediate area – then do so, but ensure you know exactly where you made the discovery and call 999. However, sometimes we may find bones on our own property.

Human Bones

Occasionally we may find a bone in the ground, you may dig over a veggie patch or have builders in digging foundations for an extension. And then

‘I’ve found something that looks like human bones.’

Often animal bones can be confused with human bones, it is difficult to know unless you have had any training in this area, so:

- The very first thing to do is **STOP** if you believe you have unearthed human remains.
- Can you safely take a photo of them with an object (spade, glove) close by for scale?
- Note your exact location, the ‘what three words’ location system can help.
- Consider the depth the bones are at – shallow or deep.
- Are the bones in company with any other objects, for instance, pottery, beads, coins, or more modern items, such as buttons, zips, or personal items?
- Do the bones look to have been cut; are they all on top of each other or appear to be pushed or bent together?
- Are you looking at a complete limb, skull or even skeleton, can you still see skin, hair, or teeth, are there clothes attached?
- Can you see tree roots through the bones, how big are these roots?
- Can you keep the area safe from interference, human, weather or an interested dog or wild animals?

Do you have any local history in the area? For instance, do you know if there have ever been any graves found locally? Is your house built on or near to a church?

Once you have gathered this information, please call **the Police as soon as possible using 999**. They will want as much detail as you can provide. Be prepared for a visit. If there is any possibility, they are maybe human then an officer will need to attend, assess, and stand guard until a decision is made based on photo identification.

If the belief, is they are human you may well get a further visit from the Police's CID department and Crime Scene Investigator. They will ask you questions, such as how long have you lived in the property, has anyone else access, is it a shared garden? A Coroner, an Osteo-archaeologist and possibly the County Archaeologist will probably visit too, these people will try to find out the age of the bones - are they from a recent burial?

If they are very old it is highly likely the County Archaeologist will then take control, they will discuss all the options with you, for instance who will examine them further and what will happen next.

If they are believed to be from a recent burial, they could form part of a Police Investigation.

Burial Remains Act 1857

Please remember that burials are protected in law by the **Burial Remains Act 1857**, it is an **offence** for a body, or any human remains which have been interred into a place of burial to be removed without licence from the Ministry of Justice.

The ground where burials have taken place is subject to earth movement. The ground may slide, fall or be otherwise disturbed. Bones within these burials will often move, sometimes spreading out some distance as they slowly break up from the skeleton. Some burials are not documented, resulting in an unexpected discovery. These burials, locations and items discovered within them can all add to the historical record. They tell us how we buried our ancestors, what they were buried with and when.



Disturbed ground – Combe Valley, East Sussex

Remarkable Finds

We now move on to look at some ancient and more recent discoveries of human remains.

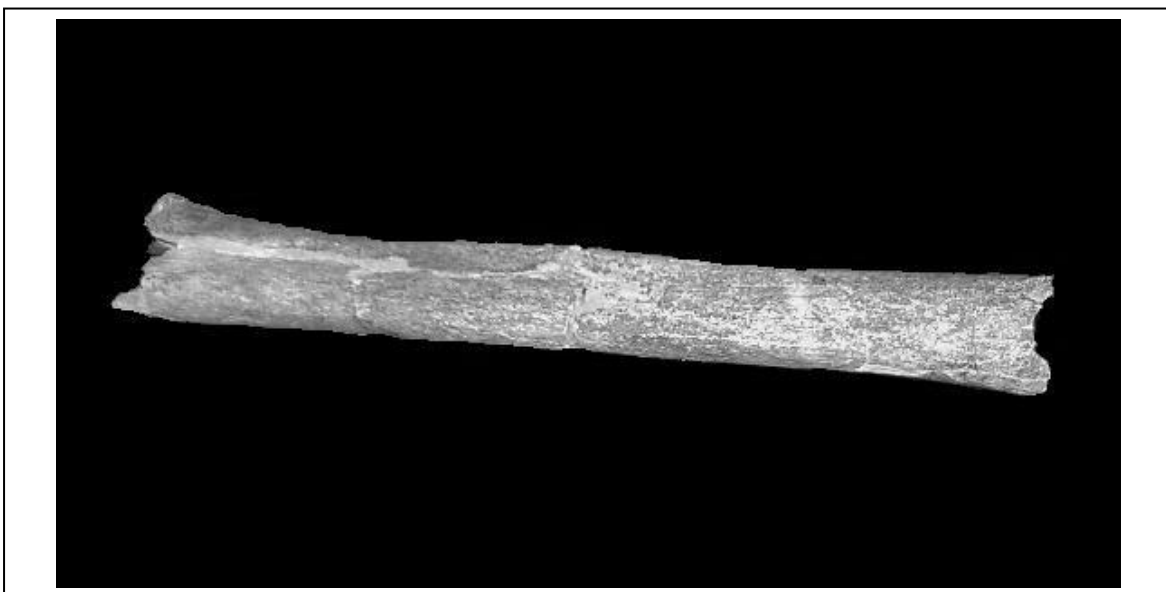
Ancient discoveries

Our heritage in England covers a vast timespan from Boxgrove Man 500,000 years ago, through the Neolithic, Iron Age, Roman, Saxon, Viking, Norman and medieval periods and subsequent periods including the First and Second World War. During this period millions of people have been deliberately or accidentally interred.

We must not forget the discoveries of Sutton Hoo, Grimes Graves and many more fantastic sites that give us a window in to our past. These burials and those interred can still speak to us, through their own bones we can tell the story of their lives. How tall they were, what their diet was like, how old they were, where they lived and even the reason for death.

Wikipedia explains that:

Boxgrove Man is a fossil thought to belong to either a female or male [Homo heidelbergensis](#), an extinct relative of modern humans ([Homo sapiens](#)), and dated to roughly half a million years old. The fossil was discovered in 1993 in [Boxgrove](#), West Sussex, near the south coast of England, by archaeologist [Mark Roberts](#) and his team of the [Institute of Archaeology at University College London](#). Only two pieces of the [tibia](#) (shinbone) and two teeth were found, so little is known about the characteristics of the human to whom the fossil belonged. It may be that this was a strongly built woman, the gender cannot be determined, and the species was robust in adaptation to the cold. The subject was about 40 years old, 1.8 m (5 foot 11 inches) tall, and weighed roughly 14 stone (200 lb; 89 kg). It is thought to be the oldest human fossil ever discovered in Britain.^[2]



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boxgrove_Man

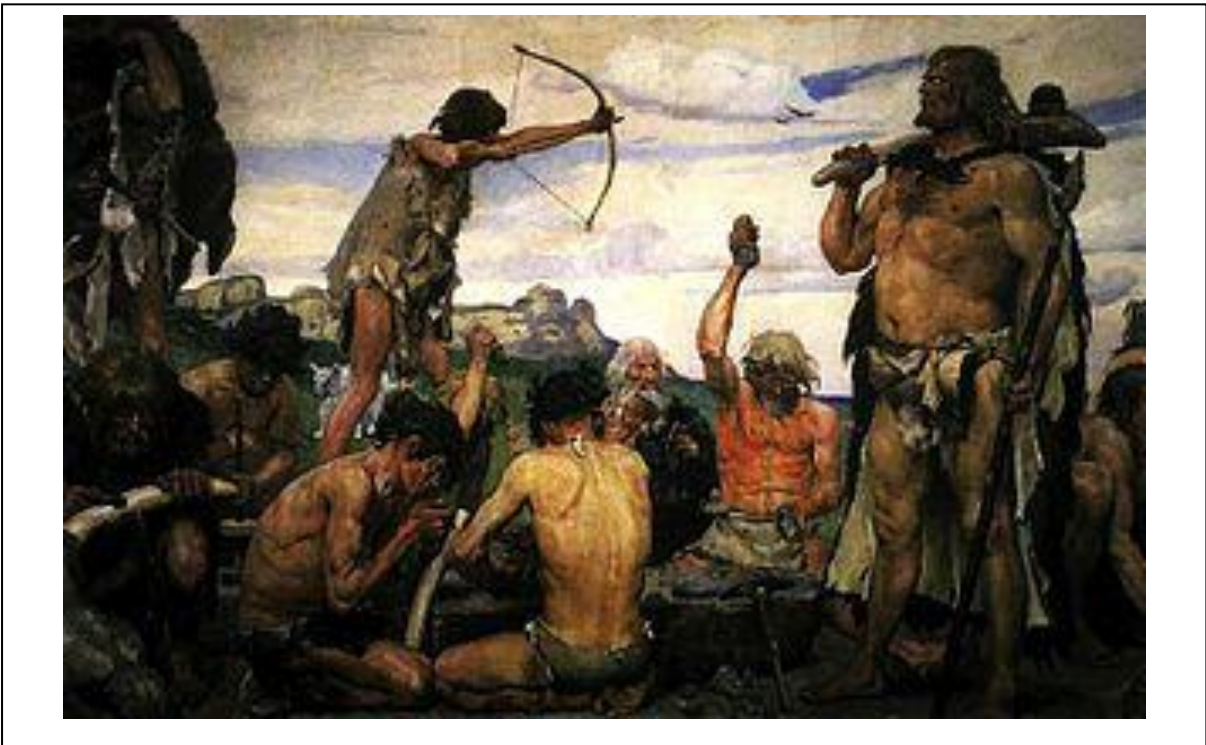
Iron Age Activity - Grimes Graves

English Heritage explains:

There is little evidence for settlement at Grime's Graves during the Iron Age (about 800 BC–AD 43), but the site was used as a burial ground between about 390 and 150 BC. This practice followed a regional tradition of reusing existing hollows and pits as graves.

The two most significant burials were discovered in the upper levels of a shaft excavated in 1971. The first was of a young adult woman with a decorated chalk plaque by her hip. This was later disturbed by the burial of an adult male with a necklace (or earrings) comprising two iron beads.

Both burials appear to have been accompanied by ceremonies at which fires were lit and offerings placed beside the bodies. It is possible that other undated skeletons previously found in the upper levels of shafts, such as a female skeleton in Pit 2, may also be of Iron Age date.



<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/grimes-graves-prehistoric-flint-mine/history/>

Fishbourne Roman Palace

Wikipedia explains:

Fishbourne Roman Palace (or Fishbourne Villa) is located in the village of [Fishbourne](#), [Chichester](#) in [West Sussex](#). The [palace](#) is the largest residential Roman building discovered in Britain^[1] and has an unusually early date of 75 CE, around thirty years after the [Roman conquest of Britain](#).

Much of the palace has been excavated and is preserved, along with an on-site museum. The rectangular palace surrounded formal gardens, the northern parts of which have been reconstructed.

Extensive alterations were made in the 2nd and 3rd centuries when many of the original black and white mosaics were overlaid with more sophisticated coloured work, including the perfectly preserved dolphin mosaic in the north wing. More alterations were in progress when the palace burnt down in around 270 CE, after which it was abandoned.

Mr Daryl Holter explains further:

After the site was abandoned, then people came to the ruins to bury their dead, moving masonry and digging pits. Here is a photograph of a deeply interred post-Roman human.



Anglo-Saxon Burials

Wikipedia explains:

Burial in Early Anglo-Saxon England refers to the [grave](#) and [burial](#) customs followed by the [Anglo-Saxons](#) between the mid-5th and 11th centuries CE in [Early Mediaeval England](#). The variation of the practice performed by the Anglo-Saxon peoples during this period,^[1] included the use of both [cremation](#) and [inhumation](#). There is a commonality in the burial places between the rich and poor - their resting places sit alongside one another in shared cemeteries.^[1] Both of these forms of burial were typically accompanied by [grave goods](#), which included food, jewellery, and weaponry. The actual burials themselves, whether of cremated or inhumed remains, were placed in a variety of sites, including in [cemeteries](#), [burial mounds](#) or, more rarely, in [ship burials](#).

Within the areas of Anglo-Saxon settlement, there was both regional and temporal variation while burial practices.^[2] The early Anglo-Saxons were followers of a [pagan religion](#), which is reflected in their burials from this time, while they later converted to [Christianity](#) in the seventh and eighth centuries CE, which was again reflected in their burial practices, when cremation ceased to be practised and inhumation became the sole form of burial, typically being concentrated in Christian cemeteries located adjacent to churches.

In the eighteenth century, [antiquarians](#) took an interest in these burials, and began excavating them, although more scientific excavation only began in the twentieth century with the development of [archaeology](#). Prominent Anglo-Saxon burials that have since been discovered and excavated include the early cemetery of [Spong Hill](#) in [Norfolk](#) and the great sixth-seventh century ship burial of [Sutton Hoo](#) in [Suffolk](#).



Sutton Hoo – Phase 2

Sutton Hoo - The Great Ship Burial

Sutton Hoo is the site of two [early medieval](#) cemeteries dating from the 6th to 7th centuries near [Woodbridge](#), in [Suffolk](#), England. [Archaeologists](#) have been excavating the area since 1938. One cemetery had an undisturbed [ship burial](#) with a wealth of [Anglo-Saxon](#) artefacts. Most of these objects are now held by the [British Museum](#). Scholars believe [Rædwald of East Anglia](#) is the most likely person to have been buried in the ship. The site is important in establishing the history of the Anglo-Saxon [kingdom of East Anglia](#) as well as illuminating the early Anglo-Saxon period which lacked historical documentation.

See more at the National Trust site here:

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo/features/the-royal-burial-mounds-at-sutton-hoo>

Viking Burials

Wikipedia explains:

The **Ridgeway Hill Viking burial pit** at Ridgeway Hill near [Weymouth, Dorset](#), was a mass grave of 54 skeletons and 51 heads of [Scandinavian](#) men executed sometime between AD 970 and 1025. The men are believed to have been [Vikings](#) executed by local [Anglo-Saxons](#). The dismembered skeletons were discovered by [archaeologists](#) in June 2009, and their identity and approximate ages were later confirmed by [forensic analyses](#). Although the immediate circumstances of the deaths are unknown, the event occurred at a time of conflict between the native Anglo-Saxons and Viking invaders, and it has been suggested that the Vikings had been captured during an attempted raid into Anglo-Saxon territory.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ridgeway_Hill_Viking_burial_pit



Earl Godwinson's Massacre at Guildown – possible site of 220 murdered Norman troops

<https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/nostalgia/anglo-saxon-burial-site-guildford-10168337>

Wikipedia explains about this massacre:

In 1035, Canute died, and during the uncertainty that followed, the heirs of the former Anglo-Saxon rulers attempted to restore the [House of Wessex](#) to the throne of England. Alfred Ætheling landed on the coast of Sussex with a Norman mercenary bodyguard and attempted to make his way to London. However he was betrayed, captured by [Earl Godwin](#) of [Wessex](#), and blinded; he died soon afterwards.^[3]

In the [Anglo-Saxon Chronicle](#) there is an account of this fateful encounter:

As Alfred and his men approached the town of [Guildford](#) in [Surrey](#), thirty miles south-west of [London](#), they were met by the powerful [Earl Godwin](#) of Wessex, who professed loyalty to the young prince and procured lodgings for him and his men in the town. The next morning, Godwin said to Alfred: "I will safely and securely conduct you to London, where the great men of the kingdom are awaiting your coming, that they may raise you to the throne." This he said in spite of the fact that the throne was already occupied by the son of [Knud](#), [Harold Harefoot](#), and he was actually in league with King Harold to lure the young prince to his death. Then the earl led the prince and his men over the hill of [Guildown](#), which is to the west of Guildford, on the road to [Winchester](#), not London. Perhaps the prince had insisted on continuing his journey to his original destination, his mother's court in Winchester, in any case, Godwin repeated his tempting offer; showing the prince the magnificent panorama from the hill both to the north and to the south, he said: "Look around on the right hand and on the left and behold what a realm will be subject to your dominion." Alfred then gave thanks to God and promised that if he should ever be crowned king, he would institute such laws as would be pleasing and acceptable to God and men. At that moment, however, he was seized and bound together with all his men. Nine tenths of them were then murdered. And since the remaining tenth was still so numerous, they, too, were decimated. Alfred was tied to a horse and then conveyed by boat to the monastery of [Ely](#). As the boat reached land, his eyes were put out. For a while he was looked after by the monks, who were fond of him, but soon after he died, probably on February 5, 1036.

When [Harthacnut](#) succeeded his half-brother Harold, he prosecuted Earl Godwin and [Lyfing](#), Bishop of Worcester and Crediton, for the crime against his half-brother; the Bishop lost his see for a while and Godwin gave the king a warship carrying eighty fighting men as appeasement and swore that he had not wanted the prince blinded and that whatever he had done was in obedience to King Harold.^[4] Tradition holds that like Harthacnut, Edward the Confessor considered Godwin guilty.^[5]

The House of Wessex was restored through the accession of Alfred's brother [Edward](#) in 1042. Alfred's death was one of the main reasons for the mistrust and resentment shown by many members of Anglo-Saxon society, and particularly from Edward himself, towards Earl Godwin and [his sons](#).

Norman Invasion – 1066

Archaeology Magazine explains:

EAST SUSSEX, ENGLAND—A skeleton bearing six fatal sword injuries to the back of the skull has been radiocarbon dated to 28 years on either side of 1063, suggesting that the man may have been involved in fighting at the time of the Norman invasion of England and the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The bones had been found in Lewes on the grounds of a medieval hospital, and so it had been thought that the man died at the Battle of Lewes, which occurred in 1264. “There is no record of any skirmishes happening in Lewes or any other towns in Sussex at the Norman Conquest, but this suggests that the Normans didn’t just turn up and say, ‘We’re in charge’ and everyone said, ‘OK, that’s fine.’ It begins to paint a picture of what might have happened in the aftermath,” Edwina Livesey of Sussex Archaeological Society told [BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55555555). The new dates make the bones the only human remains ever recorded that are related to the Norman invasion.

<https://www.archaeology.org/news/2126-140521-england-norman-invasion>



Battle Abbey, said to have been built on the spot where King Harold Godwinson was butchered by four Norman Knights.

Modern Discoveries

The grave of Major Peter Labelliere – a man buried upside down in 1800.

<https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/nostalgia/major-peter-labelliere-strange-history-13643026>

Bodies found inside a Truck

39 Vietnamese people found dead inside a truck trailer.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-55074784>

Romford Murder

<https://news.sky.com/story/romford-murder-investigation-after-womans-body-found-in-shrubbery-12299250>

Two Bodies washed up on beaches in Sussex

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/mystery-two-bodies-washing-up-21286944>

Conclusion

There are many more sad stories about the discoveries of human remains. However, as you saw on pages 7 and 8, it is vital for the authorities to be notified so that they can tell human from animal and date the human remains to see if they are modern or of archaeological interest.

So please do call 999 if you find what could be human remains. Thank you.



Heritage Expert
Mr Daryl Holter
conducting
archaeological
investigations.