

Job Description and Person Specification

1. Job Details

Job title: Human Remains Provenance Researcher

Department / Directorate: Heritage Department, Surgeons' Hall Museums, Heritage and Estates Directorate

Project: Recovering Histories: The McNab Human Remains Provenance Research Project. Funded by the John Winton McNab Legacy and Museums Galleries Scotland.

Reporting to: Curator

Job Grade: G4

Salary: 30,412 to 38,015 per annum, depending on relevant specialist experience

Hours: 35 hours per week, Monday to Friday

Contract: Fixed term, 24 months

Location: Surgeons' Hall Museums, Nicolson Street, Edinburgh, with periods of onsite work at partner institutions in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen

2. Dimensions

Budget responsibility: No delegated budget or expenditure authority. Monitors project expenditure relating to digitisation, archival storage materials, travel and professional development, and contributes to financial and progress reporting to the project funders.

Number of direct / indirect reports: None. The postholder may supervise volunteers, interns or visiting researchers supporting the project.

Scope of service: Provenance research across the human remains collections at Surgeons' Hall Museums, comprising approximately 8,000 human remains, together with associated archival and documentary records, and the provision of research support and guidance to three Scottish partner collections and to smaller Scottish museums holding human remains.

Communication Requirements

Internal: Curator, and the Provenance Research Working Group comprising the Human Remains Conservator, the College Archivist, the Head of Museum, the Learning and Interpretation lead and the Director of Heritage and Estates. Regular interaction with collections, conservation, library, archive, learning, digital and marketing colleagues.

External: Partner medical collections at the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow and the University of Aberdeen, smaller Scottish museums holding human remains, Museums Galleries Scotland, the Scotland and Medicine Subject Specialist Network, the Museums Data Service, academic researchers, community and descendant community representatives, and sector colleagues at conferences and workshops.

3. Job Purpose

Surgeons' Hall Museum cares for one of the largest and most historically significant collections of human remains in the world, with material primarily focused on surgical pathology and anatomy. The collection spans several centuries and includes remains acquired for medical education and research, primarily from Scotland and the wider United Kingdom, together with a smaller number from international locations. Much of the material predates modern standards of consent and documentation, which makes provenance research critical to understanding, interpreting and caring for the collection today.

The Human Remains Provenance Researcher leads a 24 month project to redefine how human remains are documented, interpreted and ethically cared for at Surgeons' Hall Museums, and to share that learning with partner collections and the wider Scottish museum sector.

This work forms part of the commitments set out in the Museum's Human Remains in Collections Policy, approved by the RCSEd Heritage Committee and Trustees in March 2026. It contributes directly to the associated Human Remains in Collections Plan. All work is undertaken within the Policy's three Guiding Commitments: to Minimise Harm, to Promote Transparency and Accountability, and to Encourage a Reflective Culture.

The postholder assembles and analyses documentation from diverse sources, including historic catalogues, case notes, museum and college minutes and archival records, and integrates findings into the Museum's Collections Information System. The role supports a person centred approach that recognises human remains as the physical remains of once living individuals rather than as specimens or data, and strengthens public access, readiness for Return, and sector wide standards.

The project, *Recovering Histories: The McNab Human Remains Provenance Research Project*, is generously funded by the John Winton McNab Legacy and Museums Galleries Scotland. The postholder contributes to funder reporting and ensures both funders are acknowledged in project outputs.

Activity is phased, with the emphasis in the first eighteen months on the Surgeons' Hall collections and in the final six months on partner collaboration and sector engagement.

4. Key Accountabilities and Responsibilities

Activity is phased, with the emphasis in the first eighteen months on the Surgeons' Hall collections and in the final six months on partner collaboration and sector engagement.

Collection review and documentation

- Review the human remains collections and their documentation, synthesising evidence from collection files, historic case notes, Museum and College Minutes, supporting catalogues and archive records.
- Verify and enrich records in the Collections Information System, Axiel Collections, recording the date and source of new information in line with Spectrum standards and undertake location checks.
- Handle person and clinical information in accordance with Museum Policy and data protection law.

Person centred research

- Investigate the origins, acquisition contexts and life histories of the individuals represented in the collections, recovering hidden narratives and supporting an approach that prevents dehumanisation.
- Draw out themes such as consent, collecting practices and wider social history to inform ethical interpretation, and contribute to interpretation planning.

Human Remains with Additional Identified Sensitivity

- Identify remains that may meet the Policy definition, assemble the evidence to support designation decisions by the Museum, and contribute to the Human Remains Risk Assessment Tool.
- Undertake essential provenance research on designated remains only where a documented risk based assessment has determined that the work may proceed without harm.
- Prepare brief descriptions, excluding images, for the online database and the dedicated list, and provide the evidence needed to support any assessment under the Procedure for Return from the Collections 2026.

Digitisation and data

- Apply respectful and inclusive language throughout Collections Information System entries, updating outdated terminology while retaining the original wording for transparency.
- Digitise associated archival documentation, request imaging through the Museum's formal application process, and prepare revised records for the Museum website and the Museums Data Service.

Partner collaboration and sector engagement

- Work on site with partner medical collections in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, and provide short consultancy visits to smaller Scottish museums holding human remains.
- Contribute to the final project publication and the end of project conference at Surgeons' Hall.

Reporting and ways of working

- Report regularly to the Curator and the Provenance Research Working Group, prepare papers for the Collections Committee, and contribute to funder reporting and to blogs, articles and presentations that share findings publicly.
- Work at all times within the Human Remains in Collections Policy and related procedures, relevant legislation and sector guidance, and participate actively in the Museum's reflective culture and training programme.

5. Impact of the Role

- This role directly supports work to translate the Human Remains in Collections Policy into demonstrable change in practice, with measurable progress against the associated Plan.
- Creates a lasting improvement to the College's collections information through enhanced records, digitised archives and agreed documentation standards.

- Establishes the evidence base for future interpretation, research, public access and any decisions on Return.
- Builds specialist knowledge across the heritage team and positions Surgeons' Hall Museums as a national resource for the responsible care of medical human remains collections.

6. Innovation and Problem Solving

- Works with fragmented and inconsistent historic records, reconciling conflicting evidence and recording uncertainty honestly.
- Designs proportionate, repeatable approaches that the Museum can sustain after the project ends and adapts them to the differing systems and capacity of partner institutions.
- Exercises judgement on ethically complex material and recognises when a matter requires institutional or senior decision making and refers it promptly.

7. Knowledge, Skills & Experience

Essential

- Degree in a relevant discipline such as history, anthropology, archaeology, medicine, pathology or museum studies, or equivalent demonstrable experience.
- Proven experience conducting research using historical records, archives or museum collections.
- Understanding of the ethical issues surrounding human remains in museum or academic contexts, including consent and colonial collecting.
- Experience working with collections information or collections management systems and digital cataloguing, and familiarity with documentation standards such as Spectrum.
- Excellent analytical and organisational skills, with the ability to manage large volumes of complex data and produce high quality written outputs.
- Ability to handle sensitive, confidential or potentially distressing content with discretion and care, and a commitment to reflective practice.
- Self motivated and collaborative, able to plan and deliver independent research to deadline and to work across disciplines and institutions.
- Willingness and ability to work on site at partner institutions in Glasgow and Aberdeen, including periods requiring overnight stays.

Desirable

- Postgraduate qualification in a relevant field, for example museum studies, cultural heritage, archival studies or bioarchaeology.
- Experience of provenance research, particularly in relation to human remains, ancestral materials or contested collections.
- Knowledge of the legal and ethical frameworks governing human remains in Scotland, and of sector guidance on restitution, repatriation and repatriation.
- Experience working with medical, anatomical or archaeological human remains collections.

- Experience of terminology audits, inclusive cataloguing, digitisation workflows or collections data integration.
- Experience of community engagement, or of delivering training, talks or public facing writing.

8. Risk and Working Conditions

- The role involves sustained work with human remains and with records describing death, disease, disability and nonconsensual collecting practices, and the content may be distressing. Supervision, peer support, tailored wellbeing support and ongoing training are in place.
- Based at Surgeons' Hall Museums, with regular work in collection stores, back of house areas and the archive.
- Handling of human remains and fragile archival material under appropriate supervision and collections care protocols, with the guidance of the Human Remains Conservator. Designated remains are held in a restricted area and accessed only in accordance with the Policy.
- Periods of on site work in Glasgow and Aberdeen in the final phase, including overnight stays. Reasonable travel and accommodation costs are met by the project.

9. Person Specification

Qualifications

Criteria	Essential	Desirable
Degree in a relevant discipline such as history, anthropology, archaeology, medicine, pathology or museum studies, or equivalent demonstrable experience	✓	
Postgraduate qualification in a relevant field, or training in provenance research, collections documentation or the ethics of human remains		✓
Community engagement gained through professional, voluntary or lived experience, including working with or being part of relevant communities.		✓

Experience

Criteria	Essential	Desirable
Conducting research using historical records, archives or museum collections	✓	
Working with collections information or collections management systems and digital cataloguing	✓	
Producing written outputs including reports, summaries or catalogue entries	✓	
Planning and delivering independent research to deadline	✓	
Experience of community engagement gained through professional, voluntary or lived experience, including		✓

Criteria	Essential	Desirable
experience of working with, or being part of, communities connected to contested collections, challenging histories or human remains.		
Provenance research, particularly in relation to human remains, ancestral materials or contested collections		✓
Working with medical, anatomical or archaeological human remains collections		✓
Terminology audits, inclusive cataloguing, digitisation workflows or collections data integration		✓

Skills and knowledge

Criteria	Essential	Desirable
Understanding of the ethical issues surrounding human remains in museum or academic contexts, including consent and colonial collecting	✓	
Familiarity with museum documentation standards such as Spectrum	✓	
Excellent analytical and organisational skills, with the ability to manage large volumes of complex data	✓	
Clear written and verbal communication, adapting style for specialist and public audiences	✓	
Ability to handle sensitive or potentially distressing content with discretion and care	✓	
Commitment to reflective practice and willingness to engage critically with histories of empire and medical power	✓	
Knowledge of the legal and ethical frameworks governing human remains in Scotland, and of sector guidance on Return		✓

Behavioural competencies

Competency	Description
Integrity, and promoting transparency and accountability	Works ethically and transparently with sensitive material, documents decisions and their rationale, records uncertainty honestly and recognises when a matter requires wider institutional judgement.
Respect, and minimising harm	Approaches the individuals represented in the collections, and the communities connected to them, with dignity, care and cultural sensitivity, and anticipates the emotional impact of this work on colleagues and audiences.
Reflective practice	Identifies gaps and inconsistencies in historic records, develops proportionate approaches to resolving them, and reflects openly so that learning improves future practice.

Competency	Description
Attention to detail	Maintains accurate, consistent and well evidenced records across a large and complex collection.
Communication and teamwork	Communicates findings clearly for specialist, sector and public audiences, and builds effective relationships across the heritage team, partner institutions and the wider sector.
Inclusivity	Applies inclusive language and practice and supports the Museum to represent a wider range of people and histories.

10. Organisational Chart

