

# Museums n'That Series 2 Episode 6 Transcript

Meg: Welcome to the Museums n'That podcast, where each episode – stop laughing! – where each episode, we have a chinwag and serve you the steaming hot tea on the things that museum people love the most. We're your hosts Meg and Sara from Leeds Museums & Galleries, and we get to know the people behind the objects, by asking them the questions that you really want to know.

*(theme music)*

Meg: Doing a little dance.

Sara: Yep.

Meg: Brilliant. Hello Sara.

Sara: Hello Meg. How are you?

Meg: Hello, er to be honest –

Sara: *(laughing)* hello, ok! To be honest what? Sorry go on.

Meg: Are you having a stroke?

Sara: Maybe, I don't know. It's really hot in here *(laughing)*.

Meg: Yeah I know this is what I'm saying, I'm really sweaty. I feel like – you know when pregnant women... I'm not pregnant, but when pregnant women like sit and have fans and ice.

Sara: Yeah. Have a minute.

Meg: Because they're like, creating a person. I feel like I need that.

Sara: MY sister sent a message to our family group the other day, and she said – top tip – if you fill a hot water bottle with freezing cold water and put it in your bed or take it around with you, it obviously has the same effect and cools you down. And I was like, why have I never thought about that.

Meg: Oh my god.

Sara: Isn't that good. Shout out to Hayley for that.

Meg: Hayley god bless you my child.

Sara: A stroke of genius.

Meg: Amazing yeah I'm definitely going to go and do that. How are you, what's been going on?

Sara: Yeah good. I keep thinking it's Wednesday today and I don't know why – I think it's because I'm at home today and I've been out on site quite a lot so I've got myself a little bit confused. But yeah. I'm good. That's all I have. How are you?

Meg: Fine, yeah. I feel really deflated. Do you feel deflated?

Sara: Yeah, I go through fits and bursts with it and then – actually, this week I have something to look forward to though because I'm going to get my hair cut. And it hasn't been cut since January and I'm going to get it lobbed.

Meg: In one podcast episode, I can't remember which one it is, but you say January really weird, and every time someone says January I hear it in your voice. You were like, 'Jaaanuary'.

Sara: I don't know, how strange.

Meg: I hear it in all of my nightmares.

Sara: Quite haunting yeah. Yeah I get that.

Meg: Anyway, I text Sara this week because I was watching a programme and I was like, remind me to talk about this on the podcast because it is ridiculous. It's a programme behind the scenes at The Ritz. Have you seen it, did you watch it?

Sara: I still haven't watched it, no. I am going to watch it, I keep doing this. I've got my list of things that I'm going to watch.

Meg: Right, it's literally insane. It's just like, everything that goes on behind the scenes at The Ritz and all the people that work there are wild and it's got like, firstly, the music for it is the same as the theme tune for It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia, which is just funny, so everything's just a bit funny. And they have on random celebrities.

Sara: Right so Alistair Cook, why was he there? Alistair Cook off of cricket. Why was he there.

Meg: A good looking man. He was just having an afternoon tea or something and then random celebrities are there that they just film – so Penny Lancaster turns up, but the whole thing behind all of them is that they're just like 'yeah The Ritz is really good'. None of them have anything to say other than that it's great. And then I was watching it and out of nowhere Mo Salah off of football turns up and they're interviewing him, and he's like 'yeah I absolutely love The Ritz' and Mo Salah's favourite thing is The Ritz's beef wellington.

*(laughing)*

Sara: That's hilarious. And kind of weird.

Meg: And I was like, is literally anyone else watching this I don't understand.

Sara: I've watched programmes like that in the past, like behind-the-scenes at the world's most luxurious hotels and things, and often I think it was somewhere in the Middle East, because hospitality is a totally different thing over there to how we work in the hospitality industry and I do find it fascinating how they have to operate as a family because it's just relentless. And it's hard work and it's just all the time.

Meg: Have you ever worked in hospitality?

Sara: No, so my previous role when I worked for an agency in Leeds I looked after a group of hotels. So I worked with them and got behind the scenes and things and brilliant people, but absolutely bonkers. For good reason.

Meg: Yeah. I did a stint as a barista and a waitress, and I truly think that everyone... You know how in... is it in Switzerland that everyone has to go into the army or something? Iceland? There's a country where everyone has to go into the army. Basically I think that here, everyone should have to go into hospitality and work as a waitress or a waiter for at least 6 months. Because it really teaches you to be a nice person, but also just how awful human beings can really be to you. It's a special kind of person that can talk badly to a waiter. That's one of my pet peeves actually. That, and being late.

Sara: Yeah, which I always am. I'm surprised we're still friends because I'm generally late to everything.

Meg: You're not late!

Sara: I try really hard, but things just crop up you know.

Meg: If anyone's ever late to meet me for anything, I'll probably act nice about it and like it doesn't bother me but I will never ever forget it. I will never forget it and you'll never be able to claw it back with me. Anyway, enough about The Ritz. Who have we got on today? Finally! I'm excited. Not that I wasn't excited about anyone else but I've been really looking forward to this one.

Sara: Well that's because this is one of your favourite parts of our collection. The favourite part of our collection?

Meg: Yeah it's pretty much my best one.

Sara: Archaeology with Kat Bax. Katherine Baxter who is our curator of archaeology and numismatics which is medals and coins and things. So she's coming on today and she's going

to talk to us more specifically around human remains and death. So yeah, we have got a bit of a disclaimer on this one.

Meg: Yeah so disclaimer for this one is that this episode contains discussions about death, burials and human remains in the context of museum collections, ethics and conservation. So yeah basically, please skip this episode if that isn't for you. Which would be a shame because it's going to be a really interesting one to be fair. Also a disclaimer is that this is a really long episode because basically we couldn't stop asking questions, we had too many. And by we, I mean me.

Sara: Yeah and Kat is really passionate about it and the ethics as well. So yeah. It's Kat Bax's episode of Museums n'That.

Meg: Enjoy!

*(theme music)*

Meg: Kat Bax, you're here! Welcome!

Kat: I am here! I'm really excited.

Meg: Also I keep calling you Kat Bax and I feel like that's literally not your full name. So please could you tell our podcast listeners your name and what it is you actually do.

Kat: My full name is Katherine Baxter but everyone calls me Kat. I'm the Curator of Archaeology at Leeds Museums and Galleries, so I look after all the archaeological collections for the museum service and the numismatics collections as well, all the coins and medals. So it's my job to look after them and to research them and to get everybody really excited and engaged with them as well.

Meg: And that you definitely do.

Sara: You love archaeology.

Kat: I do.

Meg: I feel like archaeology is my best one as well. I literally love it, and also I live really close to Kirkstall Abbey, so...

Kat: It is an absolutely dreamy site to have for Leeds Museums isn't it. It's amazing. It's just an honour to work there I think. Sometimes I go there and I think 'I can't believe I work here'.

Meg: It's pretty wild. In the last episode Sara was like, 'oh, Kat looks after the biggest thing in our collection'. Smez, you were going for Kirkstall Abbey right?

Sara: Yeah, because I always forget that it's part of the collection. Like, all the sites are in a way but it's different because it's one of its own.

Kat: It is, and it's certainly the biggest single object I suppose that we have to look after. But luckily we have a whole team of people there to look after it so it's not just me on my own.

Meg: Kat, this one time I was in the store with Neil, Neil who used to be our Geology curator, and he was like 'Meg, guess what this is, can you have a little guess what you think this is'. In our store, 1.3 million objects, literally could be anything. I was like... pfft, looks a little bit like a rock, is it a piece of Kirkstall Abbey. And he was like 'it's a dinosaur vertebrae'. I was like, 'it's close, it's close though'.

Kat: They do look quite similar to be fair.

Meg: Ok so Kat today, you are coming on to talk about human remains. Which is very exciting and very interesting and I feel like we've got lots of questions for you.

Kat: Ok.

Meg: So obviously we have human remains in our collection, right?

Kat: Yep, we certainly do.

Meg: So, I want to talk about the ethics of that because I know we're really big on that, you're really big on that, and obviously we've got a human remains working group and stuff like that. So to kickstart really – why do we have human remains in our collection, and what kind of value do they have to the collection I guess?

Kat: So, the human remains collection is actually quite broad. I think usually we just think about archaeological remains as in, human skeletons, or mummified remains, particularly Egyptian mummified remains. But actually there's human remains in lots of different collections in the museums, because basically it's any material made up of human material. So it can be teeth, hair, objects that are made out of human bone. But also it can be human skeletons, so it's quite broad. And it's all in the museum for lots of different reasons. In terms of archaeology people have always been interested in human skeletons for as long as the museum service has been going, if you look back through the registers 200 years ago, people were going out into different areas of the world and bringing back human skulls, or acquiring human remains from all over the place for scientific interest. It's completely different today. We would never do that, we would never go and seek to acquire human remains from different places – but if there's an archaeological excavation in the Leeds area and human remains are in the way of commercial development, so just say they're building a road and there's a graveyard there. The skeletons have to be removed for their own protection because they're going to get destroyed. So then the choice is are they reburied, or do they come to the museum. And that's a discussion that has to be had – it depends on what license they have for that. So then they may come to the museum because they're seen as being scientifically important, and that we can look after them and

actually it's better for the skeletons that they're not destroyed in building the road or the housing development, and that they're protected. So there's a lot of reasons why we would collect human remains, but obviously human remains are not museum objects like other objects. They are the remains of once living people and we are really aware of that, and archaeologists in the field are really aware of that as well. So we have to balance the ethics of is it ok to have these human remains, because we don't have consent, we don't have that person's consent to take them out of the ground. But then the needs of the living outweigh the needs of the dead persons resting place because as a species, as people today, we need to also build houses and build roads and move people out of the way who have been buried there in the past. So it's a real balancing act I think. More and more I would say that human remains are excavated and given a couple of years to analyse them, and then they're reburied. That usually happens more and more now. But occasionally we will take in human remains from an excavation.

Meg: When there's been an excavation and there are human remains, how do you decide how many you collect or how – what kind of questions do you ask, is the question I have.

Kat: If we're going to take human remains from a site, we would probably take them all unless there were huge conservation issues with them, because we couldn't really choose which individuals were more important. But during an excavation process there'll be an osteoarchaeologist, so a specialist in human bone, who will analyse those remains. So we don't just get human skeletons with no information, we also get all the information with those skeletons which we can then use those skeletons for education for display for research and all the other wonderful things that we can do and can tell about the past from these wonderful individuals in our collection.

Meg: So one of the most popular exhibitions that we've had was the Skeletons: Our Buried Bones exhibition which you worked on at Leeds City Museum.

Kat: Yes I did, that was great.

Meg: Yeah so that was I think the year that I started, that was one of the first exhibitions that I worked on and I was so excited. I took my grandparents to see it when they came to visit. But it was amazing because I think people have such a fascination with human remains and with death and with graves and what graves can tell us. And the thing about that exhibition you could see how people had died they had wounds on the skeletons and it was all about the stories that the bones could tell us, right?

Kat: Yeah that's right, it was all looking at pathologies and sadly, the stories you can tell from human bones are often sad ones you know. Which isn't great but we can tell so much about living conditions and diet and movement of people, so they can tell us an awful lot. Not just about individuals but about populations, that's really important. A lot of what we know comes from that information.

Meg: Yeah. I know one of the things in that exhibition was we asked the public for – (*dog barking*) – oh my god that's Sunny from next door, can you hear him?

Sara: Yeah I can hear him!

Kat: Aw I had a dog called Sunny.

Meg: Really? He's really sweet. Sorry. One of the things in the exhibition was we asked visitors to share their thoughts on how they felt about having human remains on display. So what kind of things did people have to say about it? Because I know you did some research on that from the results and feedback we got. What kind of things did people have to say?

Kat: Yeah so that was really important because we decided that we'd do this exhibition on skeletons with the Museum of London, and instead of having the human remains collection in the store, we thought if we have these remains, actually, we should really display them and tell these peoples stories and ask our visitors 'do you think this is ok'. And then that information would then feed into our human remains policy going forward in the future. Because you don't know how people feel if you don't ask them so that's really the bottom line really. So we displayed 12 individuals in the exhibition and we asked loads of questions. The two main ones were 'is it ok for the museum to have human remains in the collections and to display them and allow research on them' and the second main question was 'is it ok to let the public take photographs of human remains on display, and then to go and share photographs on social media'. Is that ok? So we had tonnes of feedback. And we asked people just to share their thoughts, and you know what, people were really thoughtful in their responses. We had really long really thoughtful responses to these questions – some people weighing it up on either side, some people feeling very very strongly either way. Really intelligent questions, some people saying 'can't you just 3D print the skeletons and bury the originals' 'what about their religious beliefs' but then a lot of other people saying, 'human remains aren't a person it's just what's left over, you can take my skeleton'. We had several offers of peoples skeletons during this exhibition. So it was wonderful in terms of education. We had medical students coming in saying it was a great resource for them to come in, all these human remains and evidence of diseases from the past. So we had a huge range of responses. I collated all of the responses that we collected through lots of different ways, and it was about 82% of people were generally in favour of human remains in museums but that was really encouraging for us. That gave us the confidence going forward that actually, we know it's controversial and we know there are lots of ethical considerations about how we use human remains, but our public in general are quite behind us which is very good to know. Interestingly the photography question was much lower support, it was about 62% of people supported it. People were way more conflicted over photography, which I find really interesting actually.

Sara: I was just going to say, we went to the catacombs in Paris and things and there were people taking selfies with them and stuff and I felt that that was wrong, especially because it's about place and context. And it's like these people are buried here, but then again am I hypocritical because I went and visited that and saw it and I actually have no connection to that

space? I just found it interesting and I wanted to know about why and how and what happened really. But then maybe in a museum context it's taking it out of those spaces, and I think that's the thing that people feel conflicted about. But then also, a bit like we have GDPR and all of that information – you're essentially taking pictures of strangers, and that's on your personal phone for a start. That's another consideration as well, like is that ok? And at what point are we crossing a line?

Kat: It is, completely. We put a big sign up during the exhibition and we put a sign up next to Nesyamun our Egyptian mummy, saying that respectful photography is permitted. And these are the remains of once living people, so just pause and have a think about what you're taking a photo of. And in a sense I have no problem with people taking photos of an exhibition and sharing them, because that's just how the exhibition looks. I think I'm more upset when people doctor images or take silly selfies, and you kind of think, come on – this is a person here. If this was a member of your family, would you think this is ok? So I think there are lots of questions about it definitely.

Meg: This leads me on nicely to talking about something that I've been wanting to ask you about for SO long, and it's Mummifying Alan, Kat.

Kat: Yes. Mummifying Alan (*laughing*).

Meg: So basically everyone, there was this documentary on channel 4 probably like – 8, 9 years ago called Mummifying Alan, right. Kat, have you seen it yet?

Kat: I have. I have seen it yes.

Meg: Ok great. So, in summary, this man called Alan who was sadly terminally ill was married to an Egyptologist and they were both really interested in mummification. And after he died, it was his wish to donate his body to – I can't remember which University it was...

Kat: It was the University of York. Well basically, Stephen Buckley and Joann Fletcher who work at the University of York were the two that actually mummified him, who we work with quite closely actually, and they have done work on Nesyamun as well, they're really interested. But I think his actual mummified body was actually donated to Kings College London maybe. I think he's in London, yep.

Meg: But one of the things, like I was reading up because I've always been really fascinated by it and when I first watched it I was like woahhhh – it's something that I never thought would be on tv. And the weird thing about it was – maybe not weird is the right word – but at the beginning, Alan knows that he's going to pass away because he's terminally ill, so he's in the programme at the beginning. And as the scientists and the people who are working on his body are working on it, you can hear Alan's voice and you see his body throughout the whole of his body, you see everything that they're doing to it. And that's what he wanted – like he knew that his body was going to be that way, so I've seen people online talking about the programme and



enjoying it and finding it fascinating, I think no-one would argue that it (isn't) a fascinating thing, but it's just so strange to be sat in your living room and seeing the remains of a person who was on the same programme speaking, you know? It's an interesting thing.

Kat: Yeah, I agree.

Meg: I don't know, I think I feel ok about it because you know that it's his wishes...

Kat: Yeah, I think that's it. I think it's that matter of consent that I mentioned earlier, this idea of it being somebody's wish. So human remains in museums, we don't have their consent for them to be in a museum. We think maybe Nesyamun in his lifetime, if he knew he was going to end up in Leeds and that people were still going to be talking about him in 3000 years time, maybe he would have thought that was amazing or maybe he would have been absolutely horrified. But we'll never know the answer to that or any of the human remains in our collection. But with Alan, you know that's exactly what he wanted. So in a way, it's quite beautiful that you know that he got his wish. But I did find it slightly uncomfortable at times watching it on telly. Because the thing is it's part of our culture as well isn't it, we're not used to being this close to death. We're distanced from death in our everyday lives, so when we're confronted with it – and I think this is another one of the issues around human skeletons in museums, but also preserved bodies in museums that have been mummified either in the Ancient Egyptian practice or naturally mummified, like bog bodies for instance, I think when people are confronted with that, it's almost like being confronted with your own mortality. That you know you're going to end up like that too, and that's difficult for a lot of people. But with Alan, I think he had the death that he wanted, so I feel – although I did find it difficult to watch, I got very upset, it's very emotional – I feel like he got the death that he wanted so I was happy for him at the same time. But that's one way really, going off on a slight tangent, but it's one way that archaeology can really feed into debates today. Because back in 2016, it might have been a bit before you started, but I worked on an exhibition called Dying Matters and we worked with an organisation called Dying Matters who are amazing. They support people to talk about death, just to talk about death and everyday life, to plan for their own deaths. We should all be planning for our deaths, we should all be talking about death, dying, bereavement, because it's going to happen to everybody. So why don't we talk about it all the time? And it's using archaeological objects and different objects across the museum departments to talk about things like: make a death plan, make a will, think about organ donation, you know. All these practical things you can do to organise your own death. And I think they're a really fabulous organisation – this idea of taking control over your own end of life. And I think that links back to Mummifying Alan because he got what he wanted. And he made it really clear and he talked about it.

Meg: You touched on it briefly then but one of the questions I wanted to ask you was about preservation, and I know you mentioned bog bodies and mummification we've been talking about. Is it the University of – or sorry, the Museum of Dublin, Dublin Museum – that have bog bodies?

Kat: Yep, Ireland. Ireland have bog bodies.

Meg: Yeah and they're just so preserved and you can see their hair and stuff like that. So basically, what... how... how... do... are some bodies more preserved than others?

Sara: Got there Meg.

Kat: I understand (*laughing*). It completely depends on the conditions of burial. So early Egyptian mummies were naturally mummified in hot sand. And later on, people intervened to mummify individuals. There are ways you can be naturally mummified, and what are known as bog bodies are these natural mummies. So, because they're preserved in peat bogs, there are specific conditions in peat bogs where there's anaerobic conditions, there's no oxygen, low temperatures are ideal, there's high acidity. And the alkaline levels are similar to vinegar. So the body doesn't break down – it's not allowed the conditions for bacteria and things to break it down. So it's been described to me in the past as a bit like pickling a fruit. You can think of bog chemistry as a delicious chutney, if you like. So you have these really specific conditions that mean that the bones may actually decompose because of the acidity but things like the organic material, your skin, your nails, your hair, that will preserve incredibly well, and it also causes the leathery-ness of the skin as well. So they've got a very specific look. And it means that the objects preserved with these people, like leather sandals for example, will also preserve really well. But it means that when they're taken out of the bog, the minute they hit the ordinary atmosphere they will start to decompose, so you have to be really really careful about preservation, they're really fragile.

Sara: Because unlike Meg, I haven't stood in the office with you at length and discussed bog bodies, so forgive me if this is a very obvious question, is it in specific cultures or did it happen everywhere, just over a certain time period?

Kat: In terms of European bog bodies, we're talking about mainly the Iron Age period across Europe. It tends to be the colder climates as well because the lower temperature aids that preservation as well, in the bogs. Closest to home is probably Lindow man, who was found in the North West of England near Manchester. I believe he's on display in the British Museum. He went to the Manchester Museum many years ago now for an exhibition, so I went to see him then. So again, there's lots of ethical issues. And actually, Manchester Museum address these issues really well, in terms of how people feel about the preservation. I find that more people find it more difficult the more preserved a person is. And I don't know – maybe this is something I should ask you two. Do you feel different about seeing a human skeleton on display, or seeing a mummified person in whatever form, with hair and skin and nails?

Sara: I do.

Kat: Yeah?

Sara: I feel like it's easier to contextualise and see that body as a person with a life and a soul and a family and whatever else, whereas a skeleton feels so far removed – especially because I have no scientific background, and I've not broken bones and things as well so I can't relate to it at all. And it almost becomes depersonalised I suppose, is the best way I can think about it. I don't know about you Meg?

Meg: I feel like I'm more affected by being in the presence of human remains when I know who the person is. So like, maybe seeing a bog body in a museum wouldn't affect me as much as if I – like I went to Sudeley Castle last week in the Cotswolds, and it's where Katherine Parr lived. And it's where her tomb is and the story about her tomb goes – I say it's a story, literally historical fact – in the 1700s I think it was some people discovered her tomb and opened it up and her body was really well preserved. It was in some cloth or something, Kat you might know more about that than me...

Kat: I don't know, I don't know what her specific preservation was would have been.

Meg: So she was really well preserved and there's clippings of her hair and stuff was taken from her grave that they now have in the collection there, and I think they have a couple of her teeth. That really affected me like, looking and seeing a lock of Katherine Parr's hair in a case. That really affects me more so than potentially seeing a skeleton or seeing a bog body or someone that I didn't know, because I know more of the history of that person. You know?

Kat: It does completely make sense, and the research we did throughout the Skeletons exhibition really echoed that: the closer somebody is to human remains in terms of time, you know... people tend to think it's ok to display someone who died 2000 years ago, but 150 years ago maybe not so much. If you know they're name or not, people seem to be affected by that. You know, even that level of engagement of someone being from where you're from or not from where you're from affects peoples responses. It's really complex and emotional as well, there's no right or wrong response. But that's what makes human remains so powerful as well, as a means of engagement. Because you're looking at yourself in a way, it's universal. And it is crazy that we don't address death more considering that's the end point of all of us, you know. It's a shared experience that we all have, and I think human remains are very powerful in that way. But I will say as well, even if you don't know who somebody is, they can have a profound impact. I'm just thinking of the ways that human remains are used to have discussions about life today, and there's the remains of a woman in the Yorkshire Museum who's known as Ivory Bangle Lady, for instance. And she was unearthed in York and lived in York in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and she was buried with really nice grave goods so she's quite an elite person, and they did lots of scientific analysis on her and they found that she was originally from North Africa. So actually, even though we don't know anything about her apart from that, the fact is that we can use her remains in a way to talk about things like immigration and the fact that there were people of North African origin living in York in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and immigration is nothing new, and it's cosmopolitan even back in the Roman times. And so, we can be really robust in our arguments about the way people move around all the time, it's not a new concept. But we can use

specifically archaeology and specifically human remains to inform that kind of conversation, so they are really important in lots of ways.

Meg: Just thinking about knowing the stories behind human remains – when you discover a grave, how important is it or how much research goes into trying to find out who that person was? So researchers would try and put a name to that person always?

Kat: It's possible. I mean, just say that a Methodist burial ground had just been excavated from the 1800s, then there may be burial registers, and there may be research to try and match up who these people are absolutely. And even contact living relatives if that's possible. So there's all sorts of routes, but with archaeology, generally speaking, you're not going to find a name, because it can go back so far. But certainly in the last few hundred years, it's possible yeah.

Meg: If you could discover or connect human remains to a particular historical figure that hasn't yet been discovered, who would it be?

Kat: You know what, that's a really difficult question and there are loads of archaeologists out there searching for quite high profile people, but I'm not personally that interested in famous elite people, I'm more interested in ordinary people, and what ordinary people are up to. I'm more fascinated by somebody who lived in the Leeds area a thousand years ago who was just a standard person. Because archaeology is so skewed, it's the more elite objects that are always going to be found, I feel like the more ordinary people need more of a voice. So for me, finding Joe Bloggs from the early middle ages would be for me would be an absolute dream. In an ideal world we'd rebury him, I'm just saying... as well.

*(laughing)*

Sara: I think that's really interesting just on what you were saying about the nurse from the 4<sup>th</sup> century who came over from North Africa – that speaks more to me and makes me feel a bit more humble and sound about... you know, because immigration has always been a sore subject and with everything else that we've got going on at the moment, what with Brexit going on, not to dwell... but I find that more interesting than a King of a Queen because arguably their history is kind of written to an extent. And yes, it can be rewritten and changed, but I don't know – I don't have any link to it. And especially for what we do, at LMG, which is really we concentrate on our local history and we're a civic service and that's kind of our objective, to look after those people's stories.

Kat: Yeah it's really important to us, and I think because of the skeletons exhibition, most skeletons were from Yorkshire, and we only knew the name of one of them. So we were trying to tell the stories of ordinary people who lived around here in various periods of history and I think that's really important because often their voices are lost in the grander stories that often museums tell, and I think it's our – what we should be doing more of is connecting stories of normal people as well. But it's just the nature of archaeology, what survives and what doesn't. We have a very skewed picture of the past, and we built up a picture of the past based on

evidence we have, but we're also very aware that that evidence isn't always complete and it's quite biased.

Meg: Kat this doesn't have to be human remains specific... but. Just generally in terms of archaeological excavations and digs. What do... what's your best one? I guess...

*(laughing)*

What do you think has been the best thing that's ever been discovered?

Kat: You know, recently I think one of the best things that has been discovered is Must Farm, I don't know if you've heard about Must Farm. It's a Bronze Age settlement, it's down near Peterborough way. It was only discovered I'm going to say like 5 years ago-ish. It's just a really well preserved Bronze Age settlement, and it's sort of – the roundhouses have sort of collapsed in position so you can still see the way that they fan. I'm doing this weird thing with my hands that nobody can see, but they sort of fan out... and you know what, it's like a snapshot, it's a snapshot through time. I think it's probably 2000 BC. And you just think, wow, that's a snapshot of our ancestors right there, that's really really exciting. But exciting things are uncovered all the time – there's excavations going on around Leeds all the time where people find really great things. It's great, and this is how the stories grow in the museum and how new objects are added to the collection.

Meg: What's been the best thing that you've found on a dig?

Kat: That's a great question. I've been on lots of digs... I've never found one object that's been sort of 'wow' that's changed our view of history. But one of the most exciting digs I've been on was in Bahrain, in the Middle East, excavating around a 14<sup>th</sup> century mosque. That was pretty amazing. But I've been on a whole range of excavations before I gave it up to be more comfortable inside.

Sara: Yeah, it's not very glamorous is it.

Kat: *(laughing)* Erm yeah not so much outside. I did dig a fair bit in sunny countries but then museum life was calling.

Meg: Brilliant. As it always does. *(laughing)* Sara I'm really conscious that I've just hogged all of the questions because I feel like I've just not shut up about it...

Sara: No, it's your best thing, it's fine.

Meg: It's my best one but I am actually going to shut up. You can ask some questions now.

Sara: I think we've kind of covered some things that I was interested in, because we talked a lot about mummification - I didn't watch the Mummifying Alan programme I have to say, but I will do. But I find it really conflicting having heard about it, just in terms of having a right to decide

what happens at the end of life and things. Because in our culture we make ourselves very removed from death in comparison to other cultures and things. So in terms of preserving or indeed burying bodies, how does it differ across cultures and continents and things and do we have evidence of that in our collection?

Kat: How the dead are treated varies enormously throughout time and across the world. You have your standard burials, you have your mummifications which can be either on purpose or naturally. We do have in the collection cremations as well. So we have cremations from the Roman period and the Anglo Saxon period. So we have a cremation vessel and the remains of the cremated person inside that vessel. And the cremations themselves can then be either buried or put into some sort of tomb structure as well. So that's how we usually find individuals. Lots of different choices there. So there's a whole range, really of ways, but they're the main ways really. It's either human skeletons, mummified remains or cremations I would say.

Sara: I wonder if over time... Because I don't know about you, but I'm all for being burnt to ash. For want of a better phrase.

Kat: Well I always say, throw me in a skip and go for a curry.

(laughing)

Sara: Yeah but you'll end up being found and they'll be like, well what happened to this woman? And they'll be like, well, we found her in a skip. But I don't know whether over time that will change and human remains will become less of a thing from a museum aspect as well because of the ethical concerns but because of the decisions people make about their end of life choices. And certainly in this country - I don't have any scientific fact for this - but I would assume it's less popular now, because cremation is so easy to come by.

Kat: I think as well, people don't necessarily want to take up space. There's a lot of land issues with burial. I think as well there's this idea that once you're buried, you stay there for all time. But as we know that won't happen, and in several hundred years time if somebody wants to build a road through where you are, that may happen. So, there is no guarantee. And I think there's also lots of other choices now, people want to be buried under a tree with nothing to mark you at your grave. There's lots of different ways for people to dispose of their bodies, depending on your belief system a lot of the time.

Meg: Kat is there any historical reason why people would open up a grave? So you know like, Shakespeare's grave, for example, has a curse written on it and I watched a programme on it the other day where they were doing research on it and x-raying the floor and trying to work out what the deal is with the grave, and it's buried a bit deeper than the ones around it and things like this. But the summary of the programme actually was, we're never going to know, because we're never going to go into the grave, so we don't know. What would be an overpowering reason for someone to open up..

Kat: I think the only reason why you would excavate someone out of their grave would be if there was threat of it being destroyed by something and you wanted to preserve those remains, or there was a very strong scientific question that you wanted to answer. I think archaeologists particularly would always prefer to leave bodies where they are if possible. There are a lot of dead people. They're everywhere. They're in places that you wouldn't even imagine. I can't imagine that it would be allowed that you can go into an actual cemetery and just excavate out of someone's grave. But then you look at Richard III he was found wasn't he in Leicester and they were looking for him...

*(laughing)*

Sara: This is one of Meg's best ones.

Meg: This is my best absolute one Kat I can't believe it. Were you involved in that in anyway?

Kat: I was not involved in it. Antonia's husband Bob was involved in it from the Royal Armouries. Shoutout to Bob! And he was involved. I was not involved in it at all, but I just watched with fascination at the battle between York and Leicester.

Meg: Where's he been buried? Is it Leicester?

Kat: Yeah. The Yorkshire Museum put an exhibition on about him and I think they're going to do another one. Obviously there's a strong connection. But yeah that's a really good example of someone high status that they were actually looking for, and they found him and excavated him. Which doesn't usually happen.

Sara: How did they find him?

Kat: I believe there was a society - was it, Bob's going to tell me this is completely wrong if he listens to this - but I believe there was some Richard III society who were actively looking for his burial place. And I think they had it narrowed down to several sites, and I can't quite remember how they figured it out but they did.

Sara: Mad.

Meg: And they did this thing where they could tell from samples that they'd taken from bones or from his teeth, what kind of diet the person had had.

Kat: Yeah so if you do isotope analysis you can tell not only about past diets but about where somebody actually grew up, because the chemical signature is quite unique in different parts of the world. So You can tell a lot by carrying out different analysis on bones.

Meg: My favourite thing about that was that they reconstructed what his face looked like by looking at the way that the muscle was attached to the skull. Or something.

Sara: People are so clever aren't they.

Kat: Well we have a facial reconstruction that was done in the 1990s I believe of Nesyamun as well in the gallery. So that was made by x-raying his skull and then building up the tissue the way that the muscles would have attached to the skull. And to give a likeness - obviously we'll never know if it was actually that accurate - but it gives a likeness of what he may have looked like. And I think that's quite a powerful thing as well, because as you say, it kind of humanises people. If you have a skeleton but then you show a face, you're like 'oh right yeah'.

Sara: I think the first thing they always say as well is 'look how small they were'. They weren't that small. But they were smaller than people are today. But that is everyone's first thing.

Kat: What's really interesting though is that if you look at Iron Age skeletons, when we displayed 2 Iron Age skeletons - we're talking about 2000 year old skeletons from the Leeds area in the Skeletons exhibition - the man, we could barely fit him into the case because he was so tall. He was taller than any of the other skeletons on display, we only just got him in. We were worried that we were going to have to miss out a few digits or something because he was so tall. And actually, the woman who we displayed them together, she was also really well preserved and actually quite tall. So sometimes this idea that people in the past were short isn't always true.

Meg: The thing with the reconstruction of Richard III, obviously the thing about Richard III in history is that he's been demonised by Shakespeare and everyone thinks that he's the bad guy, and they reconstructed his face and everyone's just sort of like 'ahh, doesn't he look nice? He looks really lovely actually, he was fine'.

Kat: *(Laughing)* They've changed their minds about him completely.

Meg: Yeah he looks really smiley.

Sara: Yeah but if you listen to any of the serial killer podcasts, a lot of serial killers - women liked them and it was weird and it doesn't make them any less bad.

Kat: Ted Bundy had a following of women didn't he. He was a real celeb and he was horrific obviously,

Meg: Yeah.

Kat: No it's interesting because facial reconstructions are also quite controversial, because people will say that it's crossing a line to try and reconstruct what somebody looked like, just let them rest. And there is value in all of these opinions. And we'll never get consensus on it - we just have to try and navigate through it as best we can. And I also think what you said earlier Sara was really interesting about how our idea of human remains and our ideas around it will change and they always will. The ethics on human remains and how we view death changes all



the time. If you look back at the Victorian period and how people viewed death then, compared to now, it's changed a lot. So I'm sure it will continue to change.

Meg: Kat I swear to God I could literally talk to you for about 3 hours.

Kat: I think this is the longest podcast ever. You'll have to cut loads of this out.

Meg: I don't care, people can moan I don't care this is going to be so interesting.

Sara: Yeah, it's fascinating.

Meg: My last actual question about this is just a really - I say it's a really quick one... - have you ever been to the tombs in Egypt?

Kat: I have. Well, I've been to the pyramids and the Valley of the Kings in Egypt yes, a couple of times. Purely as a tourist, I've not worked up there.

Meg: Is it good? What's your best one?

Kat: *(laughing)* what's my best one?

Sara: Number 2.

Kat: *(laughing)* You can't not think it's amazing. It's absolutely incredible in fact. You go and you are absolutely blown away by it - I mean, you see it on the telly and then all of a sudden it's in front of you and obviously it's amazing and it's inspiring. And the Egyptians have been a source of fascination for everybody. But then that's the downside of that, is that that's why so much Egyptian material is spread around the world and why there's so much controversy because it's always been viewed as the cradle of civilisation almost. And almost adopted by Westerners and taken out of context - the objects are appropriated and then spread around museums. So there's admiration and then there's appropriation and that's a really fine line, and obviously it's something that we're all trying to address with the collection through the heritage all the time. As a country now it's fascinating, amazing, there are wonderful people and obviously it's probably an unparalleled heritage that you can go and see. Absolutely amazing, I recommend it.

Sara: Next time we can jump on a plane.

Kat: Yes, do.

Sara: Not now. Give it a miss for a bit.

Meg: Sara I've literally hogged all of those questions but did you have any more before we get on to the final ones for Kat?

Sara: No I don't think so - I find it really fascinating and I always take the mick out of Meg because I always say 'uh, it's just pots' but only to wind her up because I actually love archaeology, and Kirkstall Abbey is like my favourite site. So it's all bants. No-one says that, don't put that in.

*(laughing)*

Meg: Did you just say it's all bants?

Sara: I did, and then immediately regretted it and felt like the millennial I am.

Meg: I'm going to leave that in.

Kat: You millennials, honestly.

Sara: Horrendous. But no, I do love coming and bothering you and chatting to you at your desk, so I'm sorry that I've not been able to do that for about 6 months.

Kat: No it's been sad not being able to see people in real life. Really sad.

Sara: It's hard isn't it.

Kat: I miss just - the general conversation in the office.

Sara: It's been nice from our point of view to be able to do the podcasts because we've got back in touch with people and found out fascinating things, which is nice. It's very condensed, but...

Meg: Condensed! Poor Kat has just spent half a day talking to us here.

Kat: It was absolutely my pleasure, you know I love the subject as well. Though I should say as well that the report that we wrote of all the results that we got from the visitor survey about Skeletons, about visitor opinions, is available on our website, so anyone can check that out and see what people thought about human remains.

Meg: I'll put a link in the description so everyone can check that out. Ok so before you go, you're a listener so you know what's coming Kat.

Kat: I do know what's coming.

Meg: What's been your favourite day at work?

Kat: Now you know I'm going to say as a caveat that I've been working in the service for 15 years, so it's really hard to choose a favourite day. And I think I've got an answer which sounds good and then an answer that's really honest.

Sara: Ok, go. Do both.

Kat: So one of my favourite days at work it really had nothing to do with the collection particularly. But it was me and Liz Chadwick - Liz Chadwick was our digital person back in the day - we went down to Crewe to get our Anglo Saxon West Yorkshire Hoard 3D scanned. And whilst I was there they 3D scanned me, and I was dead excited, as part of the process. They made a 3D me do a little dance on the screen. And then I was going off on maternity leave and they sent me 3D print of myself which now stands on my desk. It's a bit weird to have a statue of yourself.

Meg: I actually remember this, because I remember one of the first times I was in the office and I came to your desk and I was like is that.. A little... just you, right there?

Kat: It was a pregnant me. I took it home and put it on the mantelpiece but I thought it was really weird to just have a statue of you on the mantelpiece so then I took it back to work just to creep people out. So you know, you do get to do some really fun stuff. But you know, everyday is completely different. But what I absolutely love, and this is going to make me sound like a massive nerd, but I love days when I can do cataloguing and everyone kind of leaves you alone.

*(laughing)*

Meg: That's me isn't it.

Sara: Like yesterday you put that photo up on Twitter and it was all neat and tidy and I could just see you smiling on the inside.

Kat: It's because you know, we're all really busy and we do loads of really good exciting things, but sometimes you need to get your back of house sorted in order to use objects, you have to be able to use your catalogue and sort it all out. It has to be usable. So a day when I can sit on TMS, our catalogue system, and catalogue objects is like a pure joyful day for me. If ever I've got a massive smile on my face, it's probably because I'm on the catalogue system. I can see by your faces that you're like 'seriously, what is wrong with you'.

Meg: That is wild.

Sara: To be fair, Emii said that she loves spreadsheets, so there is a definite theme about organisation. But to be fair we kind of have to be when there's 1.3 million objects and 9 sites and it's just a lot.

Meg: To be fair as well, you showed me inside your drawers Kat. And they were so perfectly labelled inside. Little labels of the cities where each one was found, and the towns.

Kat: Honestly, it brings me so much joy. It really does. But you know what, if you don't know what you've got, and where it is, then you can't get people excited about it. It's all in a day's work.

Meg: Ok Kat, you know what's coming now. Firstly, what would be the main takeaway for our listeners from what you've said today. Like a 10 second quick fire, 'here's what you should know'.

Kat: Ok, I think one of the most important things about human remains in museums is obviously to be really respectful of them, but obviously it's about what they can teach us about death and dying today. So what I would say is, my takeaway message is, that everyone should check out Dying Matters online. Everyone should think about making a death plan, making a will, think about organ donation, and planning their own deaths.

Sara: Strong!

Meg: And do you know what, that's the most concise one we've had so far.

Sara: That's so good, everyone else has been like 'well, some...' - I mean everyone else has said good things - but you know. Yeah. Totally admire that.

Kat: It's a bit downbeat I know, but it's important.

Sara: It is important. You're right. What's your favourite takeaway? Food. Go.

Kat: Moortown Tandoori. I'm sorry curry is absolutely amazing. I'm going to say Moortown Tandoori which I'm slightly obsessed with, in Moortown in Leeds. They do amazing Chana Masala. Everything is covered in green chillies - if you have a jalfrezi from there it will blow your head off. It's amazing. Peshwari naan. There's nothing quite like it. Recently I introduced Moortown Tandoori to Vanessa Jones, our assistant curator of dress and textiles, and honestly we ordered so much food. I always decide I want every single side because I think oh it's only small, and then you end up with a massive banquet.

Meg: A feast.

Kat: And it's so good when you wake up the next day and you realise, 'I've got leftover curry in the fridge'. What a joy.

Sara: That's kind of another food hack I would say. Leftover takeaway for dinner the next day.

Kat: Yeah you can even crisp up your naans in the oven.

Meg: I also think - I can be holding a can of chickpeas and you will just pop into my head. Just anything chickpea related is Kat Bax. All over.

Kat: I'm slightly obsessed with chickpeas. I absolutely love them. Lentils.

Sara: So versatile.

Meg: So much protein. So much protein Kat.

Kat: Love it (*laughing*).

Meg: Brilliant. Right Kat, thank you so much for coming on the pod I feel like we can't take up too much more of your time, because we've literally just asked you a million questions. But we've been wanting to get you on for so long...

Kat: Aw it's been an absolute honour.

Sara: Miss seeing you in real life!

Kat: I know, me too. I really miss you both. Well you need to get me back on to talk about money at some point.

Meg: Oh yeah absolutely.

Kat: I'm plugging myself now.

Sara: Spoiler alert: we're going to get her back on to talk about money.

Meg: Well Kat, tell us about the exhibition that you're planning.

Sara: Ooh yeah.

Kat: So there's an exhibition called Money Talks which opens in February at Leeds City Museum. So it's stories about people and cash, so it's looking at collections across the museum. It's archaeology, it's social history, it's all different collections. And it's looking at all the different things we do with money in terms of traditions, counterfeiting, burying coin hoards... it's going to be really quite exciting. And Sara's working on the marketing so it's obviously wonderful.

Meg: Kat we'll book you in for another 4 hour interview for that one shall we.

Kat: I'm looking forward to that.

*(theme music)*

Meg: Right well, I basically hijacked that and asked all the questions. Sorry about that.

Sara: That's alright. I had a really good biscuit to eat, so.

Meg: Oh yeah. What was it?

Sara: It's very good. It's got chocolate and icing sugar and it's good and Amy made it and she's very good. There we go.

Meg: Brilliant. Well done. Yeah, I could honestly have just had Kat on for 3 maybe 4 hours just asking her endless questions about that, because literally I can't believe it. I can't believe how interesting it is.

Sara: It is, but it's a fascinating subject regardless of whether you work in museums or not. I think we're kind of obsessed with the macabre and how different death is treated across the world, and how it's something we can never escape from. It's one of those things that's kind of weird.

Meg: Death is kind of weird. Yeah. What was your best bit?

Sara: I really liked learning about - it was right at the end when she was talking about Richard III and how you can find stuff out from their teeth about where people have come from and where they grew up because the chemical analysis is so specific to different areas, and I kind of knew that but also I didn't at all. And I was like, woah, that's fascinating.

Meg: But also with that - I was going to interrupt her and then I didn't because that's just insanely rude - so the thing about his teeth was that they found out because basically back in the 1400s if you had a diet rich in fish which is what the teeth showed, you were a really high status individual.

Sara: Ah, fish was pricey.

Meg: What's that got to do with the price of fish on a Friday? Richard III that's what. That's why they were like oh he's a really high status individual, could be a King. Because if they were just eating like meat and like grains or whatever. I don't know.

Sara: God, pauper's food.

Meg: Isn't that amazing?

Sara: Yeah. That is amazing.

Meg: I love that, that is my absolutely best one.

Sara: What was your best learn? Was it that or was it something different?

Meg: I think the stuff about preservation. I find that really interesting. I didn't know that bog bodies were a thing until literally like 3 or 4 months ago and looked at pictures. Genuinely anyone listening I would really recommend looking that up, looking up and watching the documentary on Mummifying Alan, and watching the documentary on Richard III. It's called The King in the Car Park and it's my best one. But they're really interesting and really good context for what we've talked about today. So have a little watch of those if you haven't already.

Sara: Awesome. Sounds good.

Meg: God look at us, giving people resources.

Sara: Yeah I know right. But it is just a wealth of stuff and it's always changing and I think that's what's fascinating about it - I think people think about archaeology as just being in the past but its not. It's all the time it's everything. So there we are.

Meg: There we go. Who have we got on next time?

Sara: Next time we have Clare Brown. Yay!

Meg: She's so good. Right also - sorry, so Clare Brown for context, Clare Brown is one of our natural science curators. She job shares with Rebecca Machin. So she's going to come on and I think talk about how we collect natural science objects and talk a lot about the ethics of it and decolonisation - decolonising the natural science collection and what we need to do. I found a picture on my phone of where Clare Brown had made creme eggs.

Sara: Ah, I forgot about that!

Meg: Yeah. She went on like a bakery course with Betty's or something, and she is just ridiculous. She makes so many delicious things. And she made creme eggs, and it was like really thick chocolate and inside it was mascarpone creme with a passion fruit curd.

Sara: God that sounds incredible.

Meg: Unbelievable. So yeah tune in for that because that's going to be lovely.

Sara: Big thank you to Tim Bentley who does our delicious theme tune which Meg and I sing quite badly in between each of our bits between each edit. Also a big thanks to Alex Finney for our lovely cover artwork.

Meg: Going out for dinner with AI tonight.

Sara: Are you? Nice!

Meg: Yeah. Going to The Reliance for their eat out to help out thing.

Sara: Oh cute, I miss the Reliance. Say hello. Say hello from someone - i've literally never met either of these people. One day. We did have a date planned but lockdown happened.

Meg: We were going to take Tim and Alex out for a little dinner but then the pandemic and that so we couldn't.

Sara: Yeah, we'll get it reorganised. It's all good. It's on record now so we have to do it as well. So if you liked this and others please subscribe and leave us a review on Apple Podcasts, we know everyone doesn't have that but if you could leave us some nice messages anyway it just really helps our egos. But mainly means that we can carry on doing these which is great. Transcripts will be available on the website - we'll put links in to anything more specific that we've spoken about as well. And if you want to chat to us or ask us a question or have any feedback at all you can find us on the socials. We are @LeedsMuseums for the big one and then my handle is @saralmerritt and Meg's is...

Meg: ...@MuseumMeg.

Sara: Yeah that wasn't as smooth as I was hoping it was going to be but I also didn't tee you up so I apologise. I just ran away with it.

Meg: Do you know what, because I've been talking for such a long time, I just felt like I hadn't spoken and I was drifting off a little bit. Yep basically, I'm @MuseumMeg. Yeah so... what do we say now? Is that it?

Sara: That's it! Because normally you ask me who's coming up next and that's at the bottom and now we've already done that bit. So we're done.

Meg: Oh god we're a mess. Ok. Well... Thanks for doing the thanks Smez. Aaaand... yeah. Tune in next week when we've got Clare Brown kids. Cool, right. Have a good one.

Sara: Yeah, cya.

Meg: Bye.



*(theme music)*