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RURAL MUSEUMS NETWORK

**RURAL MUSEUMS:
TEN YEARS ON**

HILARY McGOWAN

September 2011

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Foreword

Rural museums used to have an image problem. Many saw them as introspective, with a tendency to pedal a nostalgic view of the past. However the Rural Museums Network has made considerable progress to counter this. Work on the Distributed National Collection of Agricultural Heritage Material now helps inform what we collect. Our website lets people know who we are, what we do, and where we can be found. By commissioning work on new audiences and sustainability we have moved to make the sector more relevant.

Rural museums have changed significantly in a decade. We have lost some well known personalities and welcomed new faces. When the Network was approached by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council to commission a report on the sector, we welcomed the opportunity, and Hilary McGowan has brought a wealth of experience and a critical eye to its creation.

I find her report authoritative and informative, and it will be a great help to us as we tackle the challenges of the future.

David Walker
Chairperson
Rural Museums Network

RURAL MUSEUMS NETWORK

RURAL MUSEUMS: TEN YEARS ON

1. INTRODUCTION & BRIEF

“God made the country, and man made the town.”

The Task, Book 1
William Cowper
(1731-1800)

The Rural Museums Network has been funded by MLA through their Sector Specialist Network grants to examine how rural museums in the UK have developed over the last ten years. The Network was formed as a result of the recommendations in Rob Shorland-Ball's report Farming, Countryside and Museums, commissioned by the then Museums & Galleries Commission and published in the year 2000.

The Rural Museums Network

helps museums, private collectors, and anyone interested in rural life, to work together in partnerships to preserve our heritage and to make links between people, products, the land and a sustainable economy.

definition from
RMN website

The Rural Museums Network (RMN) felt that the museums sector had undoubtedly changed since 2000 and that it was important that any new work be directed towards current needs. To achieve this, they believed that the current state of members needed to be assessed and fresh conclusions drawn. They were also looking for feedback on how the Network was operating and what should be its priorities in the immediate future.

I was commissioned in 2010 to carry out this research through site visits, interviews and analysis of a questionnaire circulated to all Network members. The RMN Steering Group comprised Duncan Dornan (then Chairman), Gareth Beech (then Secretary) and David Walker (then Treasurer). We agreed a definition of rural museums at the commissioning meeting and which site visits were essential, and they helped me to prepare the questionnaire.

The definition of a rural museum which we have used throughout this project is:

A rural museum is one which has collections – including objects, buildings and sites – which primarily illustrate a rural way of life, and can be from any period of human history. The collections may include farming but not all may do so. Other museums may have rural collections but if they are not their prime focus of interpretation and collecting, then they are not rural museums. For example, the Yorkshire Museum of Farming is a rural museum but York Castle Museum is not, although it holds Dr Kirk's collection of rural artefacts, now it is primarily focused on urban history.

On this basis, several large collections were excluded, such as York Castle, Beamish, and Ironbridge. We agreed to exclude industries such as fishing and lead mining even though many of these museums are in rural areas.

The MLA grant did not permit research to be as wide ranging and in depth as that carried out by Rob Shorland-Ball. The Steering Group gave me guidance on where and who should be the priorities. I carried out nine site visits (these form the case studies in section 3 plus Chedham's Yard and Melton Carnegie) and 27 structured interviews of varying lengths, in addition to clarifying some of the comments on questionnaires. (Full details are in Appendix III.)

We hesitated at circulating a postal questionnaire as people are weary of them but we decided that it was essential to give all the members of RMN a chance to have their say. We also needed to collect basic information like visitor figures and opening hours, so questionnaires were the most effective way of doing this.

The questionnaire is in Appendix I. We circulated 53 and 28 were returned (after some cajoling). This is a good, statistically robust response (47%) though the sample we used is self selecting as they were all members of the Rural Museums Network. Some of the conclusions undoubtedly apply to all types of museums in the UK. Unfortunately, the response was patchy geographically with four responses from Scotland but none from Northern Ireland, Jersey or the Isle of Man. The analysis of the questionnaires is in section 5 with more detail given in Appendix II.

The Steering Group have been unfailingly helpful and supportive and I am grateful to them all. All the rural museums to whom I have talked have been very generous with their time and genuinely interested in the research. Those attending the RMN AGM in May this year took part in discussions which have informed this report (especially section 4.5). The Society for Folk Life Studies also allowed me to talk to them about this at their annual conference in September 2010 at the start of the work, and they made some perceptive and helpful comments.

Thank you to everyone who has helped me. The conclusions and errors are my own.

2. FARMING, COUNTRYSIDE & MUSEUMS

“Sandwich sales are worth more than farming”

Sunday Times

26th September 1999

cited Rob Shorland-Ball, page 15

In 1998, the late Chris Zeuner, Director of Weald & Downland Open Air Museum explored the idea with the Museums & Galleries Commission (MGC) that rural and open air museums should work closely together and they hosted a joint meeting for representatives of these museums. Out of this came the commission to Rob Shorland-Ball to research and write Farming, Countryside and Museums¹, published by MGC in 2000. That year also MGC (a UK-wide body) was replaced in England by *Re:source, the council for museums, libraries and archives* (now MLA). The devolved nations all had their own bodies: the Scottish and the Northern Ireland Museums Councils (both evolving from the previous area museum councils), and CyMAL, now part of the Assembly government in Wales incorporating what was the Council for Museums in Wales.

In the news in the year 2000 was the Millennium Bug which was supposed to stop our computers working at midnight; the Millennium Dome; it snowed in April; Leo Blair was born to the Prime Minister; the new Harry Potter book (Goblet of Fire) was published in July; Harold Shipman was sentenced to life imprisonment and Jonathan Aitken was released from prison early following his conviction for perjury. At the cinema you would have watched *Chicken Run*, *Gladiator* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

In museums, there were major openings: the New Art Gallery Walsall, the Lowry Salford, Tate Modern and in December, the Great Court at the British Museum.



The Great Court at The British Museum²

¹ Farming, Countryside and Museums. Museums of farming and rural life at the beginning of the 21st century, a study for the Museums & Galleries Commission, Rob Shorland-Ball, 2000.

² photograph © Trustees of the British Museum

In 2000 also Di Lees moved to the Museum of Childhood; Neil MacGregor was still at the National Gallery, Gordon Rintoul in Sheffield, and Roy Clare in the Navy. Scotland and Wales got their first culture ministers.

As Rob Shorland-Ball's report was published at the same time as MGC was being dissolved, it did not have as much of an impact as it deserved. Many in rural museums were determined that it should not sink without trace, given how important were its conclusions. Under the auspices of the Society for Folk Life Studies (SFLS), the Rural Life Museums Action Group was created in 2001 and this evolved into the Rural Museums Network (RMN) in 2005. The Network is now formally constituted as a charitable Trust.

In his report of 2000, Rob Shorland-Ball's main conclusions were:

“Whilst the Study found ... much that is good in the UK's rural life museums, and a few that are bright, lively and attractive to visitors, there are many others where the displays are tired and poorly interpreted. Stores are over-filled .. visitor numbers are dwindling and ... questions of viability will be asked.”

“Generations are growing up with knowing little, and understanding even less, of the countryside or of the source of much of our food that we eat. Rural life museums have the skills to make connections, ... to explain, to entertain .. but most are still locked in the nostalgia of the horse-drawn era on the land.”

Executive Summary
Shorland-Ball, *ibid*

Shorland-Ball used the Distributed National Collection (DNC) for one of his main recommendations (page 54). The concept of the DNC was not new but it has informed much of the RMN's work ever since.

Shorland-Ball had five specific recommendations which can be summarised as follows:

- “a first imperative is to make connections and encourage networks and partnerships” [hence the establishment of the RMN];
- a database of principal collections, then identify the DNC;
- recognise the community of museums in each home nation, all helping each other as needs and resources allow;
- promote sharing of expertise, knowledge and skills [the JISC mail discussion group now does this];
- develop the potential for lifelong learning and community engagement.

page 10
Shorland-Ball, *ibid*

Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff³ in 2004 examined how the DNC might be identified and information shared. This year a Plough Survey⁴ is being undertaken, funded by a grant from the MA/Esmée Fairbairn's Effective Collections project.

Possibly the most significant change in the sector has been the change of emphasis from farming to rural life, where farming is only part of the story. To a large extent this was stimulated by Shorland-Ball's well justified criticisms but also by the increasing emphasis on accessible interpretation in museums.

The fox hunting debate which was in the news when Shorland-Ball was writing has now been succeeded by the culling of badgers to prevent the spread of Bovine Tuberculosis. So, rural life is still relevant today, even in an urban-dominated Britain.



Fox hunting is a major theme at Melton Carnegie Museum in Melton Mowbray⁵

³ Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff: the DNC, Catherine Wilson and David Viner, MERL, 2004

⁴ Digging Deep: the DNC Plough Survey, Catherine Wilson, RMN, 2011

⁵ all photographs are © Hilary McGowan 2011 unless stated otherwise

3. CASE STUDIES

“Anybody can be good in the country”

The Picture of Dorian Gray
Oscar Wilde, 1898

3.1 THE MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE

The Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), part of the University of Reading, has long been the leader in folk life and rural social history studies. All its collection is Designated, reflecting not only the importance of the objects but the quality of the Museum’s library and archive which are held alongside the other collections.

As this report was being finalised, MERL celebrated its 60th anniversary, having opened in 1951. It grew out of the University’s tradition of academic excellence in agriculture. It pioneered a new field of museum activity, before the advent of the new independent museums in 1970’s, rapidly accumulating material relating to the great social and technological changes taking place in the countryside during 1950’s, represented especially by mechanisation.

In 2005 MERL moved to new premises as part of a £10m scheme. Now based in a former Hall of Residence, the HLF-funded project created a new extension to house the museum displays and give MERL a more accessible public face with greater emphasis on public interpretation than ever before. This summer, landscaping is taking place at the front of the Museum to extend the existing outside space and make it more wildlife-friendly and attractive.



MERL from the gardens, showing the new extension on the left⁶

⁶ all MERL photographs © University of Reading

The new displays within the Museum were hailed as a success by the sector:

“The museum displays occupy the ground floor of the new extension, which feels clean and contemporary with its angular structures and white walls. The displays are organised according to material - straw, wood, metal and leather - which works well and avoids the safer, more traditional but less stimulating chronological approach.

Objects dominate the space, from wagons, ploughs and tractors to baskets, wheels and tools. Some hang from above or are displayed at unusual angles. Avoiding reconstructions and mannequins was a brave decision. Keeping the museum free of conventional re-creations of countryside scenes could have resulted in collections being displayed out of context and the displays being less meaningful for visitors. But it pays off; the uncomplicated grouping of the objects, clear zoning and beautiful images work together to show how people and technology have shaped rural life over time.”

review in Museums Journal
February 2006



The large “luggage labels” containing information about the objects and the sheer number of objects have also proved very popular. This was indeed a new view of rural life. It put into practice many of Shorland-Ball’s recommendations to forget nostalgia, updating the traditional view of the rural past with information about rural poverty and the difficulties of making a living from farming in the early 21st century.

Shorland-Ball criticised the lack of post-1950’s collecting but this has recently been corrected by the then Keeper Roy Brigden’s collecting project, *Collecting 20th century Rural Cultures*, funded by a grant from HLF’s Collecting Cultures Initiative. Brigden kept a blog⁷ during the project and gave a summary at the Society of Folk Life Studies conference in September last year. He collected round the whole theme of rural life, both its reality and its image, aiming to represent each decade after 1950 and bring the Museum’s collections up to date.

⁷ the link to Roy’s blog is <http://collecting20thcruralculture.blogspot.com/>

Brigden collected a wide variety of objects ranging from toys and advertising ephemera through posters and button badges for many different causes, to a Barbour waxed jacket and *The Archers*' board game (see illustration below). The remaining funds will go towards more acquisitions, interpretation and learning resources. Though initially drawing a line at collecting a complete Land Rover Series 1, the Museum is currently exploring the possibility of doing so as Land Rover has just announced that they are redesigning the Defender for the 21st century.



It used to be unusual for a museum to collect something other than what they hoped represented reality but now museums do seek to represent many different sides of particular themes. Brigden's analysis of the "countryside phenomena" was accurate and has now given the Museum an unrivalled post-WWII rural collection.

Brigden remained a key figure in rural history throughout his working life and was instrumental in creating the RMN, taking a lead where the Science Museum seemed not to wish to tread. He retired last year and has, according to some staff, left a huge gap in the Museum's connections and networks. The new Curator of Collections & Engagement and the Assistant Curator are determined to put MERL once again at the centre of rural studies; the latter is now active in RMN, having joined the Committee at the AGM this year.

One person being so intimately associated with a museum can be positive (see also MEAL in 3.2 below) but there is also a danger as the sharing of information and the ability of that person to hand over and pass on their knowledge and contacts is often limited. MERL recognised that this was a danger and is ensuring its profile and connections do not disappear to enable it to retain its pre-eminent place in rural social history studies and research.

3.2 MUSEUM OF EAST ANGLIAN LIFE

The Museum of East Anglian Life (MEAL) occupies 80 acres of what was the Abbott Hall estate in Stowmarket in Suffolk. The Longe family bought the estate in 1904 and the last two members of the family gave the land and the Hall in trust to be a museum alongside Suffolk Local History Council's collections. The Museum opened in 1967, during Shorland-Ball's "summer of rural museums".

The Museum has 16 historic buildings, including its medieval tithe barn, and many buildings moved to the site and reconstructed there, such as the wind pump and a 19th century mill, the latter moved to the site in 1973 when a new reservoir was built.

By 2000, it was an example of Shorland-Ball's rural museums whose sites looked run down and depressed and it was losing more of its modest numbers of visitors. It certainly was not a national leader or breaking new ground in interpretation and business development, which is where MEAL is now.

By 2003, the County Council recognised that it was expected to keep MEAL afloat and took action, "encouraging" most of the Trustees to resign and beginning to recruit new ones who were less of the enthusiast and more business minded. They appointed a new Director in Tony Butler who came from Ipswich where he ran the public services and who had a curatorial background in social history. This far sighted appointment was the turning point for MEAL, though by his own admission, Butler questioned why he was there once he understood the scale of the problems. As he memorably puts it "we had more horses than computers". Now, nearly seven years on, MEAL is re-inventing the social enterprise model which many Victorian founders of museums would recognise, though without their paternalistic condescension.



Mr Pink the volunteer printer at MEAL⁸

MEAL's renaissance is well documented⁹ so a brief summary is sufficient here, though this is not to suggest that what Butler and his team are achieving is any less admirable for that.

⁸ all MEAL photographs courtesy of Trustees of the Museum of East Anglian Life

⁹ e.g. *Museums Journal*, July/August 2011 pp 38-41

The Museum has a turnover of over £500,000, with grant aid from Suffolk County and Mid-Suffolk District Councils accounting for 30% of this and visitor admissions 15%. Although the museum was created as an independent charitable trust, it is also a social enterprise company which brings in additional income through grants to run work based learning programmes for the long term unemployed, those with learning difficulties and the traveller community. MEAL is also in discussion with Suffolk County Council, a pioneer in divesting itself of directly delivered services, to create a new cultural trust with the Museum, the County Record Office and the Arts and Archaeology Services.

MEAL's current Happy Museum project, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, has gained them many column inches. Last year, they were part of a pilot Hamlyn project, called *Our Museum*¹⁰, to assess how the sector has embedded audience development and participation into their organisations. MEAL has been invited to apply to take part in the next stage from this autumn.



MEAL supplies flowers to the Town Council

MEAL also runs training funded by HLF's *Skills for the Future* in partnerships with both Colchester & Ipswich Museums Service, and Gressenhall Farm & Workhouse in Norfolk. These opportunities are for people to develop skills and knowledge in specific areas of traditional or heritage skills. The participants are all employed by the Museum during their time, some progress to an Accredited qualification and all work alongside members of staff and volunteers under the supervision of mentors. Formal learning includes short taster courses of three months and 12 month internships. For example, MEAL currently has two Heritage Documentation Trainees, and they will be undertaking a NVQ in Cultural Venue Operations at Level 3 while they are with MEAL. (For more on Gressenhall, see 4.3.3 below.)

MEAL's projects with its partners are as varied as it is possible to be: in 2010, they worked with the London Sinfonietta on a project encouraging Middle School children in rural Suffolk to compose and play music inspired by the culture and landscape of their region. This year they are working with Robert Pacitti, a conceptual artist, who created a regional cookery book and a feast for 350 at the Museum in July as part of the *Artist Taking the Lead* Cultural Olympiad commissions.

¹⁰ see Whose cake is it anyway? a summary report, Bernadette Lynch, Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2011

Next year (2012) they are planning projects with the Museum of British Folklore and Venice Biennale, exhibiting Romany artist Delaine LeBas. In 2013, one of the temporary exhibitions will be about outsider art created in partnership with the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester. It is a measure of Butler's success and the standards he achieves that this down-to-earth, independent rural museum with its high level of reality and shoe string budgets can partner a fine art gallery in leafy Sussex. But these themes fit with the ethos of the social enterprise model which Butler is making sexy for museums for the first time.

MEAL is currently implementing an HLF-funded £3m capital project to restore the Hall on the site and use it for interpretation of the social history of the house and immediate area, alongside the temporary exhibitions programme.



Abbott Hall at MEAL

When I visited, I asked Butler about his Trustees. He assured me that they are right behind him, pushing him, setting the strategic direction of the organisation. But he is the undoubted leader, the driver and the public face of MEAL. We had an interesting discussion about how much of what MEAL is doing is directly transferable to other museums or even to other cultural organisations. We did not reach a conclusion as he believes it is transferable in principle if the surrounding environment and communities are right but I am not so sure. Transferring it to somewhere larger may not be possible or even desirable.

Butler believes that all museums run as charitable trusts should see themselves as social enterprises but I think it has particular resonance for rural museums. He believes that for too long rural museums have been seen as “safe” and primarily as tourist attractions which has limited their ambition and their achievement. At MEAL the heritage can help to heal, build confidence, teach skills and help those who have forgotten how to find joy in their lives. Butler believes museums must continue to do all this and more.

What Butler is achieving (and he would be the first to say this is a team effort from the Trustees to their 140 volunteers) is admirable and few people in the sector would have had the vision or courage to embark on such enterprises. His creativity needs to be channelled to other projects in the future, and I hope that he can continue to inspire others and teach those who are more timid, not to be afraid. Is MEAL the model of the new rural museum? Independent in governance, independent of mind, loved by many, admired by even more, a partner of local government but still a true pioneer.

3.3 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF RURAL LIFE

National Museums Scotland's rural museum is the National Museum of Rural Life near East Kilbride. It was founded by the former National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh which established a Country Life section and created displays at Ingliston on the western edge of Edinburgh. This was prior to the creation of the National Museums of Scotland (NMS) as one organisation in 1985 (in 2006 it fashionably dropped the "of" alongside many other cultural organisations divesting themselves of definite articles and prepositions).

As Shorland-Ball was writing his report, NMS was moving from Ingliston, to its new site, in partnership with the National Trust for Scotland (NTS). Ingliston was dated and tired so NMS had been searching for some time for a new site as the rural museum had for too long been the bridesmaid within NMS. The move changed all that.

The new site is a triumph; as this report was being finalised in the summer of 2011, it celebrated its 10th anniversary. Unusually as a national museum, it has an admission charge though NMS and NTS members have free entry. In the current year the adult charge is £6.50 (in 2001 it was £3). The Museum has a robust income target to meet.

Its visitor figures in 2001 when it first opened were 45,000 but last year had risen steadily to 75,000. Duncan Dornan, the General Manager, believes that the figures will continue to rise and the events which take place are focussed on bringing new audiences in and encouraging repeat visits through an increased uptake of NMS membership.

In 1992, the 110 acres of land were given to the NTS by Mrs Margaret Reid whose family had farmed there since at least 1567. The site is important in itself, which is why NTS accepted it, as a rare survival from the age of the horse. Shorland-Ball writes eloquently about the history and importance of the site¹¹ as "the land and buildings form a three-dimensional diary of farm development from the beginning of the Agricultural Revolution to within living memory". He states that the Georgian house also reflects "a comfortable, modest and pleasant prosperity".

The site is near to large numbers of population in the Central Belt, and is north west of East Kilbride, so is probably more accessible to more people than the Museum was at Ingliston. HLF contributed nearly £4m of the total £8m cost of creating the new Museum.

The events which take place are designed to appeal to the local population, particularly to families, though they are less important than they were according to the General Manager. The Sheilings Café, run in-house, serves traditional and local Scottish fare and is a regular venue for local young mothers and their children. It quickly seems to have become accepted, and loved, by the local populace.

¹¹ Appendix 9, pp 106-111, Shorland-Ball, op cit

The new main Museum building looks like a large agricultural shed and the silvery tone of its oak looks completely natural in the landscape. The view below, taken from the farmhouse's garden shows how it looks beneath a glowering autumnal sky, as though it was always meant to be there.



The building is spacious inside and built on a slope so the main entrance is on first floor level, reached by a bridge across the lower part of the area round the building. Huge, full length windows (on the right below) look across to the historic farmstead.



The displays in the Museum building on the whole are good, though some look as though the money ran out near the end. The feel of the place is right and the spaces have an agricultural and utilitarian air about them. The themes of the displays address agricultural history, rural life and Scottish invention but still have sufficient detail to interest the agricultural anorak. There was a conscious decision to incorporate more social history in the interpretation, moving away from agricultural history *per se* as other museums have also done. The emphasis on learning has also moved to incorporate the environment and the landscape.

The Tools gallery in particular is attractive with the metal infrastructure of the building painted bright red and large parts of machinery suspended above the visitor.



The Picture gallery overlooks the Tools gallery
© NMS

The picture gallery overlooks the world's earliest surviving threshing mill, from Orkney, dating from 1803 and there is a fine collection of agricultural models of ploughs and reapers. Dolly the Sheep was a star exhibit when I visited, bringing the story up to date with topics such as genetic engineering and GM crops¹².

The stores are impressive, clean and business-like. Tractors and combine harvesters are massive to store and many museums have stopped collecting machinery. NMS takes its national responsibilities very seriously and is considering how it will continue to deal with recording and not collecting future machinery.

To get to the farmstead itself, it is a walk uphill for 10 minutes and a tractor-pulled "bus", called the Farm Explorer, gives lifts to those who are unable or unwilling to walk.



The Georgian farmhouse

The farmyard looks and feels like a working farm, which it is, and smells pleasantly like a working farm should do. The farm breeds Tamworth Pigs – a sow had recently given birth when I was there – Scots Dumpy hens and Kittochside Ayrshire cows. There is also a Clydesdale horse called Mairi, a gift to the Museum in 2002, and two cats.

¹² Dolly went back to Edinburgh and since July has been on display in the new National Museum of Scotland



The visitor is invited to enter the farmhouse though the back door from the farmyard. Cheery volunteers – even on a damp, windy day in November – engage you in conversation in the kitchen c.1930. They are not in costume but do not appear quite so incongruous as at other museums (see 3.4 below).

Because they are furnished as the family left them, the rooms of the farmhouse feel authentic in a way which traditional period rooms in museums do not. The furniture is not all of one period but is a mixture: a mahogany dining suite would have been stylish to the Reid's parents; the Victorian partner's desk in the farmer's office is full of papers next to a 1970's anglepoise lamp and the fireplace is of black

Georgian marble but with tobacco-coloured tiles from 1930's inserted round the grate.

Note the armchair has an additional cushion from 1970's to support its sagging seat, a touch of reality not normally seen in museum displays. If there was a way to ensure these touches can be harnessed in all reconstruction displays, our museums would be much the better for it.



The farmer's office in the farmhouse

The whole site feels loved and cared for; it has an onsite Manager and does not bear the marks of remote senior management, nor is it old enough to look tired and in need of investment like parts of St Fagans. Perhaps it will in time but at present, the new National Museum of Rural Life is a success and it looks as though it will continue to be so well into its second decade.

The investment and maintenance problems facing St Fagans (see next section) may also be relevant for NMS in ten years time. The biggest problem in the future for all the new HLF-funded museums will be financing new displays. We have all set the bar very high for ourselves and public expectations have risen along with our aspirations. We may struggle to refresh these museums in the future.

With the Scottish National Party in power and a promised referendum on independence on the horizon, the political climate in Scotland at the moment suits museums such as this one. The current government is putting its stamp on cultural matters very firmly and is taking an active role in steering the current Museums Strategy for example. So for NMS and museums which tell a Scottish story, despite the economic difficulties, the times are encouraging.



Visitors in the Tools gallery
© NMS

3.4 NATIONAL HISTORY MUSEUM: ST FAGANS

“What’s in a name? that which we call a rose,
By any other name would smell as sweet”

Romeo & Juliet,
Act II, Scene 2

St Fagans was founded in 1948, making it an early British open air museum on the Scandinavian model. It has had several names including the original Welsh Folk Museum (putting it firmly in the folk life category), the Museum of Welsh Life (when Shorland-Ball wrote his report) and since 2005, the National History Museum.

Is there any significance in a name change? In St Fagans case there is, yes, though the decision was a controversial one, not directly stimulated by the Assembly Government, and still remains a matter of debate. It was also connected to the plans to re-develop the main museum and art gallery site in Cathay’s Park, moving the archaeology collections to St Fagans. As one curator said to me, “we only reflect a small part of Welsh life; what about mining?” Though with the resurgence of the Welsh language, this change chimes with the Welsh times. The Welsh Assembly Government would like St Fagans to be a museum where visitors can learn about the history of Wales. It will become a gateway to other heritage venues throughout Wales, a theme of the HLF re-development project (of which more later).

The National Museum of Wales¹³ was established by Royal Charter in 1907 and St Fagans is now one of its seven sites. Set in the grounds of St Fagans Castle, a late 16th century house given to Wales by the Earl of Plymouth in 1946, the Museum is now on the outskirts of Cardiff. The whole site is over 100 acres, which includes 18 acres of Castle gardens and 42 acres of woodland. There are over 40 buildings re-constructed from different parts of Wales. Visitor numbers soared from 380,000 in 2000 to 700,000 in the first year of free admission. Since 2004, they have levelled off at between 650,000 and 610,000. As a result, the site has clearly continued to expand beyond the resources to maintain it.

The re-constructed buildings include a school, a chapel, the Oakdale Workmen’s Institute, a row of iron worker’s houses, shops (grocer, post office, clog maker, tailor), and a bakehouse and craft workshops most of which house present day craftsmen who talk to the public and sell their wares. There is also an Iron Age Celtic village and Oriel 1 is a temporary exhibition gallery in the main entrance building which currently houses an exhibition called *Belonging: Voices, Beliefs, Family and the Nation*.

But it is the rural buildings, collections and their interpretation which most concern us here. The buildings are displayed to interpret a wide range of dates and ways of rural life. Two specific examples serve to illustrate what St Fagans does well and what its problems are:

¹³ the shorthand name of this body now is *Amgueddfa Cymru* but as this report is about the whole of the UK, I refer to St Fagans’ parent body as National Museum Wales

Kennixton Farmhouse was built in 1610, its bright red walls glow in the sun, to ward off evil, and they stand out against the browns, creams and greens of the St Fagans site. It was extended in the later 17th century, with a new back kitchen added in 1750.



Kennixton Farmstead

Its immediate outbuildings have recently been added (on the left above) to create a complete farmstead, and in front of the farmhouse is an attractive garden. It has a new thatched roof whose workmanship can be admired from the first floor rooms.



Beautiful thatch in Kennixton farmhouse

The farmhouse is clean and well displayed with the oak tester bed dressed with hangings made with exact reproductions of a 17th century vegetable-dyed original; meticulous research and well presented, as you would expect from a national museum.

On the surface it could be Weald & Downland but once you enter, all suspension of belief is shattered as the member of staff on duty is dressed in a modern day museum attendant's navy blue uniform as though he was in Cathay's Park. He was not in costume, baking bread or sewing, he had no conversation to enliven the interior and could not answer my questions about the cottage garden, just grumbled about how cold it was in the house in contrast to the warm spring sunshine outside. The final touches are sometimes the most important to the experience.

Llwyn-yr-eos Farm is, unusually, on its original site and was built from 1820 onwards. It was a tenanted estate and is displayed as a substantial farm of 1930's. The farmyard surrounding it has a barn of 1820, a brewery, pigsties, calf pens and a stable. Geese, ducks, hens and pigs are kept here.

The farmyard however is very clean and tidy, and looks so empty that it implies this is not a real farm (in contrast to Kitchside in 3.3 above). It lacks atmosphere, warmth and life, and appears sanitised (see illustration below).



Llwyn-yr-eos farmyard

Inside the farmhouse, the member of staff on duty was brighter and more welcoming than his colleague but still dressed in the standard uniform. It must be expensive to kit out all members of staff in different types of period dress (assuming they would be happy to wear it) and this would prevent staff moving to other sites, but nevertheless, given the high standard of the collections, research and curatorial work of St Fagans, the interpretation and the visitor experience should be much better.

Shorland-Ball criticised the Agricultural Gallery displayed in the main entrance building. When these displays were created in 1970's, the cut off date for interpretation was 1950 (and probably no objects had been collected to illustrate a later date). But by 1999, when Shorland-Ball visited, the displays appeared not to have changed. He quotes from the 1976 St Fagans guidebook and notes that interpretation in the gallery is scholarly and dated "like the open air site" and "presupposes a knowledge that many present day visitors probably lack"¹⁴. Some improvements have been made and space created for the Oriel 1 gallery but there is still too much hessian on show, as the curators wearily acknowledge.

There has been considerable expansion over the last 25 years at St Fagans. There was a great deal of activity in 1980's which Shorland-Ball's report reflects, e.g. the school in 1984, the row of ironworker's terraced cottages in 1987 and the atmospheric St Teilo's Church was re-opened in 2007.



St Teilo's Church

¹⁴ Appendix 6, page 87, Shorland-Ball, op cit

Since 2000, Ty Gwyrdd, or The Green House has been built (see 4.3 below) and is used for activities for pre-booked groups; the 1948 prefab. bungalow was re-erected; the Castle's Rose and Italian gardens were restored to their Edwardian splendour in 2001 and 2003 respectively; the Oriel 1 gallery was opened sponsored by the Principality Building Society.

Then the emphasis of the Museum moved to the Collections Care and Access Project, to improve the care and knowledge of the collections, and create some excellent storage. The storage project was £4.3m, funded by the Assembly Government but including the whole of the National Museums, not just St Fagans. The main Collections Centre at St Fagans is an exemplary store though the objects moved in too recently for curators to be sure about the detailed fluctuations of the environment. To a curator there is something inherently beautiful about clean objects labelled and well laid out in a clean store, so I enjoyed looking round very much indeed.



Bridles in the main St Fagans store

However, to illustrate the scale of the collections, the Curator also took me to the Large Object Store down by the mill. A light industrial shed, it is crowded with carts and ploughs, in a poor environment. The store was extensively refurbished as part of the Collections Care and Access Project, including adding a new mezzanine, shelves and lighting. It was designed to store large and relatively hardy objects (such as ploughs) and for these, it works reasonably well, although the environmental conditions are not ideal.



76 ploughs on the mezzanine in St Fagans' Large Object Store

The continuing problem is that the funding was inadequate to do all that was required to solve all the storage problems on site, not surprisingly considering the scale of the collections. As carts and other vehicles are being moved out of other poor storage, they are being squeezed into other stores including the Large Object Store, which is now very crowded with limited access to parts of it. So the storage problems have not been solved completely.



Too much stuff: St Fagans' Large Object Store

There is a need to collect in order to record the late 20th century in Wales but this collecting must be selective, relevant, representative and useable. In the future, there will be a greater emphasis at St Fagans on a working collection for a living, working museum, including collecting to interpret process and the end product, e.g. raising sheep and providing the leg of lamb to your dining table. This is sensible and makes it easier for the urban visitor to connect to the farming story, as Shorland-Ball pointed out.

St Fagans should be in a strong position with the wealth and variety of its buildings to interpret many different periods of Welsh history but these are also challenging to maintain, renew and re-interpret for each new generation. While the collecting policies may be moving in the right direction, presentation and infrastructure on the site indicate that care is not lavished on the public face of the museum as much as it deserves. My initial welcome was warm and helpful but the site is massive and with over 600,000 visitors, it needs regular maintenance and investment to keep it looking smart.

Three photographs overleaf illustrate this problem.

The Tollhouse (dating from 1772) is one of St Fagans' most attractive buildings, standing at the cross roads in the centre of the site, with the road to the shops along to its right. On the opposite side – one of the toll gates can be seen on the left of the photograph – is this sad sight:



This is not only shabby but it is a poor choice of corporate identity which leads to black metal posts and bright green signs in what should be a sensitive environment. While the signs clearly stand out as of the present day, they appear as a harsh contrast to their vernacular surroundings. The whole setting of this site map, right in the centre of St Fagans and next to the attractive Tollhouse, is a mess.

Throughout the site I saw barbed wire and orange plastic netting round holes or areas of work, and ugly plastic lighting columns; all these are inappropriate and insensitive and do not help the visitor to suspend belief that he is understanding a vanished way of Welsh life.



Beside the cross roads between the Institute and St Teilo's Church is this untidy sight.

These photographs appear to illustrate the perils of being part of a larger organisation where inappropriate decisions are being made remotely from St Fagans and where the implementation on the ground is not as sensitive as it should be to the needs and potential of the site.

The Curator: Rural Life who was my main contact at St Fagans and, as RMN Secretary, a member of this project's steering group, talked to me about his current

work and responsibilities. He listed many current projects, some of them short or longer term and some involving his colleagues. Like the rest of the Museum, there was the impression throughout my visit of many things not achieved to a satisfactory level, completed in an ideal timescale, or adequately funded. Aside from the lack of engaged front-of-house staff, the problems are those of a large museums service where many decisions are made remotely.

Everything happens too slowly, so change is often introduced too late. As the Curator said in his paper at the SFLS Conference, “it’s the analogy of turning around a supertanker, or an appropriate agricultural equivalent!”

With the new name - the National History Museum - there does need to be a visible, tangible pride in the St Fagans site. Currently, a major HLF bid is being created to implement a development plan, update much of St Fagans, redevelop the entrance and create new galleries. A new building will combine displays of crafts, archaeology and traditional building skills with hands-on activities and demonstrations. Llys Rhosyr, the thirteenth century court of one of the princes of north Wales, will be re-created. The historical buildings will be re-interpreted and the aim is for St Fagans to become a year round visitor attraction with the creation of more indoor spaces. Replacing the present 1970’s entrance building will be a good initiative as currently it cuts off the visitor on arrival from the site he has come to see. And adding the archaeology collections is logical if the Museum aspires to tell the whole story of Wales and become a gateway for other heritage sites.

David Anderson, the relatively new Director of National Museums Wales, told Museums Journal that national identity was central to the re-development of the Museum: “St Fagans was conceived as a mirror to the nation but also as a mirror to a particular interpretation of Welsh identity rooted in a politically liberal and rural context”.¹⁵

In 2009, a new post was created titled Head of St Fagans responsible for visitor services and operations, though not the curatorial and conservation aspects. I interviewed the first postholder, Bethan Lewis, and she acknowledged as valid the criticisms I made about the visitor experience and the standard of presentation. She was appointed to draw together all the different aspects of the site, to view the Museum holistically rather than departmentally, and to achieve Investors in People (IiP) for St Fagans. She believes that through IiP she can improve the standard of the front-of-house experience but stressed that all of these staff must be bi-lingual in English and Welsh. This requirement reduces the numbers of people available which can mean that some people are not employed who may be very well suited to a front-of-house role. Another challenge is that it is not easy to put the front-of-house staff into appropriate costume as the site covers such a broad range of historical periods. Weald & Downland concentrates on a narrower time frame, but St Fagans has a much larger problem with commensurate financial costs.

Lewis felt that when she was first appointed, many things had not been done at St Fagans because the re-development project was going to improve them anyway. She did not agree with this, especially if something had a negative impact on the public and could easily be improved or changed. Unless there was a significant capital cost, she did not accept that the public experience should suffer. Lewis has created zones

¹⁵ Museums Journal, April 2011, *Nation Building*, page 24

within the site so that one person is responsible for everything in that zone. Too often in the past, no one person has appeared to hold this responsibility and she told me that there were too many grey areas, hence some of my criticisms. In addition, there is a great deal of reactive work as over 600,000 visitors create a great deal of wear and tear on a site such as this, as the orange netting bears witness.

Lewis's great challenge is to draw the site together to work as one unit and instil a shared ethos of good public service into everyone. Her approach is undoubtedly the right one and her joy in her job was good to hear. Her maternity leave meant that she has not made as rapid progress as she wanted but with the re-development project, her vision can be articulated clearly. She believes that the Museum should be a real experience which takes you into another world, into several worlds in fact. She knows that it could reach out to all types of visitors and she believes that no one should be immune to the magic of St Fagans.

The re-development project's Round 2 bid to HLF will be submitted in February 2012. It is to be hoped that Lewis and her colleagues can inject some love into the day-to-day management of the Museum at the same time as the investment. Successful museums need more than simply money. I wish the re-development well and would be very interested to take up Lewis's invitation to see the site again in another ten years to review this report in its turn.



Kennixton Farmhouse from the Bridgend milestone

3.5 WEALD & DOWNLAND OPEN AIR MUSEUM

In 2010, Weald & Downland Open Air Museum celebrated its 40th anniversary. Richard Harris, its Director retired at the end of the year and his successor, Richard Pailthorpe, took over in January 2011. I visited twice during the research for this report, the second time as a delegate of the Society of Folk Life Studies conference, held at West Dean College next door in September 2010. I also interviewed both directors.¹⁶

Weald & Downland was founded in 1967 by Dr Roy Armstrong and opened in 1970, on a site offered by Edward James, the owner of the nearby West Dean Estate. It was modelled on the principles of European, and particularly Scandinavian, museums which moved traditionally-built vernacular buildings onto one site in order to preserve and interpret them. It belongs to the second great flowering of open air museums, identified by Rob Shorland-Ball as between c.1960 and c.1985¹⁷. The Museum's collections were Designated in 1998.

In 1991, the Museum branched out into lifelong learning in partnership with the new Bournemouth University. These courses developed into MSc's and post-graduate diplomas focusing on traditional building skills such as repair and construction of timber framed buildings, using traditional tools and materials. This was ground-breaking for a museum. These programmes moved to being completely delivered on site as they were very successful, using the Downland Gridshell from 2002. The initial building courses were widened into Lifelong Learning courses on traditional rural skills and crafts. Numbers have grown from 200 student days for the initial courses to over 3,000 now.



Ploughing with bullocks

Weald & Downland recently won a Europa Nostra Award for its training and was complimented on its “exemplary initiative and long-standing commitment”. Long standing commitment is not something many museums can invest in as too often new initiatives are dependent upon short term grant programmes. Now other museums, such as Acton Scott, also deliver similar training courses (see 3.6.3 below). Once again, Weald & Downland has been a pioneer.

¹⁶ Weald & Downland Open Air Museum 1970-2010 – the first forty years, Diana Zeuner, ed., 2010

¹⁷ Chapter 3: Rural Life Museums c.1960 to c.1985, Shorland-Ball, *ibid*

Weald & Downland is one of my favourite museums but this does not prevent me seeing its drawbacks which Pailthorpe is keen to address. It has many strengths but car parking can be complicated if you arrive on a busy day and you are not familiar with the site. The car parks are ingeniously landscaped into the hillside, but the top ones involve a steep climb. If you park up the hill, the Downland Gridshell is the first building you encounter and this could be mistaken for the entrance.

The 16th century farmhouse which houses reception and the shop is welcoming but after this, there is only a limited opportunity to orientate yourself. The recent addition of an introductory film and some displays in the barn as you turn right out of the reception building has helped, though it is easy to walk round the building and go straight down to the market place.



The market place

Volunteers and staff alike all engage with the visitors whether selling you a guidebook or baking in Bayleaf farmhouse. Volunteers in the buildings wear costume but always talk in the present. They are an important part of the visitor experience and most of them can communicate with all age groups. Their high standard is a credit to the Museum. (In contrast, see also St Fagans in 3.4 above.)

I talked to Richard Harris, the then Director, about the Museum's third person interpretation. He was adamant that first person interpretation was much less effective as it was more difficult to train the volunteers, more of a problem to maintain high standards and more of a challenge to both research and write. He also believed that the public can be intimidated and, if able to ask questions about today, they find the interpretation more accessible and so are most likely to learn about the past.

Last year visitor numbers at Weald & Downland were 143,600 and of those 36,000 came in groups. Ten years ago, numbers were around 130,000, having averaged over 160,000 during 1980's, and early 90's. Adult admission in 2000 was £6 and last year it was £9.

Since 1980's, the Museum has pioneered a number of special activity days centred on its core themes of heavy horses, rare breeds, traditional country life and rural crafts. In addition, it supplements these with family activity days which take place at major times of the holiday season: half terms, Easter and the main summer holidays (in contrast to Acton Scott, see 3.6.3 below).

The major changes in Weald & Downland over the last ten years have been the introduction of the Tudor kitchen, demonstrating cooking of the period, the new vehicles and implements display, and most spectacularly, the completion of the Downland Gridshell. This is a beautiful green oak timber structure which narrowly missed winning the 2002 RIBA Stirling Prize for Architecture (something which still rankles with many of us).



Timber framing students in the Downland Gridshell

It is used as a workshop, for storing and handling collections, demonstrations and training courses and is still one of the best museum buildings in the UK. The building was an integral part of the project however, not just a way of housing some museum functions. The Museum demonstrated that sustainable natural materials can be used in modern buildings in the countryside.

A significant development since 2000 has been a full time post of Head of Interpretation who has developed the site-wide interpretation, expanded the cooking and food demonstrations and training, and instituted the clothing project, making more replica clothing but based directly on studying originals.



Even Weald & Downland finds it a challenge to display and interpret ploughs

Weald & Downland Museum is still considered a leader in rural museums and it has a strong international profile. In recent years, its profile in the British museum sector has not been as high or as influential as it was during Chris Zeuner's Directorship as Richard Harris concentrated in developing the volunteer programmes (there are now 500 volunteers), expanding the visitor and learning offers (through the Head of Interpretation's work), building partnerships with the new National Park and other Sussex organisations, and securing the Museum's financial sustainability.

The new Director, Richard Pailthorpe, is well acquainted with the Museum having been Assistant Director to Chris Zeuner between 1979-95. He took up his post at the beginning of 2011. He is committed to being an active part of the museum sector and is now getting out and about as much as he can do. When I interviewed him, he outlined three main aims for the Museum: a new entrance building with a new shop; a new car park and better orientation for the visit, and continuing to ensure the Museum's financial sustainability. The Development Plan which the Museum is now working on will become a bid to HLF to improve the arrival and reconstruct more of the buildings now in store. In addition, partnerships and collaboration are becoming more important, as with many other museums, and more focus will be on these in the future.

Pailthorpe is quite rightly aiming to address the problems of arrival I outlined above and raise the standard to that of the rest of the Museum. But he is also ensuring the Museum keeps the special quality of Weald & Downland which draws so many of us back time and again.



Bayleaf farmstead , dating from 1405-30

3.6 COUNTY MUSEUM SERVICES

Many County museum services have now disappeared with local government reorganisations and museums leaving the local authority fold.

3.6.1 Oxfordshire County Museums Service

Oxfordshire, touched on indirectly in 4.1 below, has now dwindled to a shade of its former size and influence. The County's financial problems in 1990's meant that they successfully sought partners in the district councils for most of their sites while retaining ownership of the collections. The County Museum in Woodstock and the central store at Standlake are now all that remains of the Service, though in themselves they are large, important and substantial. All other museums are either independent or run by district councils. Many have flourished or had considerable investment. In particular, Cherwell District Council moved Banbury to a new site in a new shopping centre in 2002 and this Museum is now heading to an independent trust. Martyn Brown, the County Museums Officer (actually Heritage & Arts Officer) took redundancy in the summer of this year (2011) so the head of service, based at the County Museum, will be the only officer in the County to have any cultural knowledge and expertise.

The biggest problem in this scenario is the central store at Standlake. Built in 1993, its running costs were funded by contributions from all the museum partners and it housed central services of curatorial expertise and conservation laboratories. The store must remain attached to the County Museum and be available to all in Oxfordshire. Fifteen years ago shared storage such as this was hailed as the future. The County has recently completed an extension, funded by HLF, but the *left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing*-style of local authorities means that the store is still at risk. This is completely illogical and an example of the rabbit in the headlights reaction of local authorities to saving money, rather than a planned strategy bearing in mind the context and the history. It is understandable why trusts are considered if they can save museums from these knee-jerk reaction situations.

Sadly this is a familiar picture in what have been dominant and highly professional county services. A perceptive comment from Martyn Brown was "the network of local authority museums which county services created is being destroyed. What I fear is that if all the museums are independent, lots of boards of strong trustees may not pull together but pull apart".



Two of the remaining county services, Somerset and Shropshire, both have important rural collections and have had interesting experiences over the last ten years. They serve to illustrate many of the themes of this report.

3.6.2 Somerset Heritage & Libraries: Rural Life Museum

Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury is now part of Somerset County's Heritage & Libraries Service, another former traditional county museums service which has seen considerable change over the last ten years. Museums sit alongside Archives and Somerset Studies, Historic Environment, and the Victoria County History, in the Heritage & Libraries Service within the Community Directorate.

This new grouping dates from 2005 and it has been a very positive move for the Museums Service. They are now less isolated and benefit from a shared learning team working across all the services. This has allowed a more integrated approach to a consistently higher standard.

The Rural Life Museum is open all year round in contrast to many rural museums which are open seasonally but then it is situated in a town. It is also closed on Mondays but open on bank holidays.

The Museum used to have an admission charge which was removed in 2003 as figures were falling. Dropping charges for national museums, introduced by central government in 2001, seemingly demonstrated the wisdom of this and in easier economic times, many local authorities followed suit. Visitor figures at this Museum have doubled since the charge was removed, from approximately 14,000 in 2000 to over 33,000 last year. Figures have been higher though and have been levelling off since 2007.



The Orchard of Somerset Rural Life Museum

The Museum is on the edge of the town of Glastonbury and housed in an attractive setting of a Victorian farmhouse, farm buildings and cider orchard. In the farmhouse, displays illustrate the social and domestic life of Victorian Somerset in reconstructed rooms and an exhibition which tells the life story of a farm worker, John Hodges, from the cradle to the grave. Outside, the Barn and the farm buildings surrounding the courtyard hold displays showing the tools and techniques of farming in Victorian Somerset.



The orchard and Abbey Barn as you arrive
at Somerset Rural Life Museum

Regular craft demonstrations are held throughout the year with *have-a-go* drop in sessions on spinning and weaving, lace making, basket making and Victorian wash days for children in school holidays. There is a temporary exhibition gallery in the farmhouse; this summer's exhibition was a photographic celebration of Glastonbury Music Festival's 40th anniversary.

The shop is managed by the Friends of the Somerset Rural Life Museum who promote and support the work of the Museum. The Friends have always managed the shop, but more profitability came when it was moved from an out-of-the-way position to its prime location in Reception in 2005. This has made the shop much more cost effective and income last year was £11,600 (compared to £3,500 in 2001). The Friends were formed thirty years ago when the Museum first opened and they regularly give grants to various projects.

The County Council funded a new Crafts and Industries gallery in 2009, at a total cost of £15,000 including a SW Film grant of £6,000 for the audio-visuals in the gallery.



Crafts and Implements gallery¹⁸

¹⁸ © Somerset County Council

Other major physical improvements to the entrance, shop and tearoom improved the layout and made them compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Most display improvements have taken place over the last ten to twelve years on an incremental basis, particularly outside. The recent success of the HLF Round 1 bid for £625,000 will allow further significant improvements in the next few years, if the match funding can be found.

I remember the Museum from regular visits ten years ago. I was struck on my most recent visit how much better the whole museum looked. The many changes since that time have added up to a brighter, more attractive museum where the welcome was just that and where you wanted to explore. When you arrive, you know that someone cares about this Museum. This is in contrast to many other local authority rural museums which have sometimes lost that sparkle of a museum which is loved.

The problems of others can deliver a benefit to museums though: the need for the County to replace its Record Office led to the creation of the Somerset Heritage Centre. This opened in the autumn of last year. It is purpose built, and cost c.£11m. It affords the very best conditions for storage and study of a huge range of collections and records on one site, including the agricultural history collections which moved from the Museum. This not only improved the conditions in which the objects are stored but also freed up valuable space on the Museum site.

The centrepiece of the Museum is the magnificent 14th century Abbey Barn which previously housed collections; this is now available to be part of the public Museum. It opened for the summer of this year. It is the most striking building on the site. Repairs funded by the County Council in the early spring included some new doors for the barn and improved lighting inside. The Barn will be used for events and is likely to stimulate demand as a venue for corporate hire and weddings.



The Abbey Barn doors, during and after construction

When I made my site visit in the early spring, the Barn's new doors were being built. Of oak, they were too large to be pre-fabricated and so were being built on site in situ. To the delight of the Keeper of Social History, they were created using traditional woodworking techniques which have not changed since 14th century when the Barn was first constructed. This work, though traditional in its skills, is being undertaken in the context of 21st century Health & Safety legislation alongside aluminium scaffolding, ladders and safety barriers. This is a wonderful example of how rural museums can combine the historical with present day skills. Had it been a busy time of the year, the work would definitely have drawn a crowd.

As a result of the stored collections moving from Glastonbury, the previous Assistant Keeper of Social History is now the Keeper of Textiles in addition to the manager of the Museum site. She spends most of her time on operational matters rather than as a curator managing researchers and volunteers working on the collections.

The savings made by the County overall have reduced the staff on site to 6 from 8 ten years ago. The professional staff in the whole Museums Service is now almost half the number of those in 2000. They are "thin on the ground" to quote the Keeper of Social History, have to travel more and be more flexible, so there is little in-depth work on anything. Those staff who are primarily collections focussed are now officially based at the Heritage Centre. Expertise has been lost in some subject areas but so far, the two social history posts which were based full time at the Glastonbury site, are still with the Service. In contrast, the appointment of a Somerset MDO, funded partly through Renaissance, has made a positive difference allowing County curators to concentrate on collections, as the MDO is the first point of reference for the small independent museums.



In the RMN member questionnaire which started this project we asked "what one word would you use to summarise how you feel about the immediate future?" The Somerset Keepers' answer summarises how traditional County services are faring:

they were torn between *optimistic* and *apprehensive*.

3.6.3 Shropshire County Museums Service: Acton Scott

Acton Scott Historic Working Farm is part of Shropshire County Museums Service. The site is in the south of the County in the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (ANOB). It illustrates agriculture in an upland farm in Shropshire at the turn of the 19th century. It aims to reflect pre-internal combustion engine agriculture and still operates with shire horses, very typical of the rural museums which Shorland-Ball criticised. But in Acton Scott's case, it is interpreting the site, rather than dodging topical issues.

The site still belongs to the Acton family who live in the 17th century Hall on the Museum site. The Hall is an important building, as one of the earliest brick built houses in Shropshire, but it is not part of the public Museum. The Museum centres on the Home Farm, its buildings and its surrounding fields. There is also the Victorian former school house, an attractive black and white, mock Tudor building which houses a café.

In 2002, following a Best Value exercise¹⁹ a review was commissioned looking at the economic, educational and interpretation potential of the Museum. As a result of the conclusions of this report, a full development plan was commissioned the following year²⁰; the recommendations were implemented in 2008 and completed for the visiting season of 2009. The project was funded by HLF and the County Council, with a small amount of funding from the Rural Development Agency.

Visitor figures were fairly static at Acton Scott with a successful season ticket, which allowed unlimited access, bringing local families regularly throughout the season. Annual figures had settled down at around 30,000 (in 2000, they were 29,000) which given the reasonably high admission charge and its rural location away from the main centres of population in the County, was acceptable but the potential to do more was always present.

Despite its attractive setting and warm brick buildings, there was a lot wrong with Acton Scott. The main problems were:

- you could arrive and not pay if the man on the gate was busy;
- muddled visitor flow which meant many visitors missed a great deal of the site;
- patchy interpretation;
- low levels of expenditure in the shop and the café, both of which were of a poor standard.

The development plan provided solutions and improvements.

The Museum stayed open in 2008 once the work on site started to implement the development, and visitor figures dropped to just over 20,000. However, they shot up immediately from 2009 onwards once the development was complete and last year

¹⁹ I must declare a personal interest in Acton Scott as I have carried out two pieces of consultancy work which led to the developments and improvements which this section describes.

²⁰ Acton Scott: Design and Development Plan, Hilary McGowan and Jon Hall, 2003

(2010), they were 42,000. Current prices are £6.40 for adults and £18.60 for an adult season ticket.

Now the Museum has a fine entrance building where tickets are sold. It is built of oak and houses a spacious meeting room with a small kitchen which is often hired out to external organisations. This structure clearly marks the beginning of the Museum and acts as a time portal, taking you back to the late 19th century.



The new timber framed entrance building with its meeting room

The route round the site is now clear and well signposted, the paths and the railings alongside them are new and bespoke. There is much new interpretation, replacing the many ad hoc, home made notices, often held together with string or casually nailed to a fence. The shop is still in the dairy building next to the farmhouse as the new building could not be big enough to accommodate it (the planners would not agree to a first floor, given that the farm buildings are much lower in height). But it has been refitted with wooden units and is displayed not only more professionally but with a wider and more thoughtful range of lines. Spend per head has improved.



Bespoke gates and railings at Acton Scott in the estate style

The mock Tudor Victorian school is still the café but has been rebuilt (there was much wet rot in the building) with windows replaced and the school bell on the top of the gable restored. Inside the building has been refitted more appropriately, though still to modern health and hygiene standards.



One of the best touches is the place mats which are printed to look like school slates containing stories about children who had been taught in the building and quotations from the head teacher's registers. This is one of many details which bring a smile to your face and complete the Museum.



"A wet day. Very heavy storms. Low attendance for the day of 20 and 22. The absent ones are those living at a long distance, and 2 of them have to walk through nine fields."

As mentioned in 3.5 above, Acton Scott has run traditional rural craft and trades courses for adults since January 2009. This was something identified as a potential income stream in the 2002 Review report. These courses include laying and repairing brickwork, repair and conservation of decorative plasterwork, blacksmithing, bee keeping, hedge laying, leatherwork, and domestic crafts such as lace making, patchwork, smocking, whitework and samplers. Some are one day courses but some last five days. The Institute of Historic Building Conservation held its annual conference here in 2010; the staff at Acton Scott thought this the ultimate accolade. From this autumn, Acton Scott is also delivering one day per week teaching on the environmental and land-based studies diploma for 14-16 year olds, in partnership with the South Shropshire Consortium of five local schools. As with Weald & Downland Museum, these courses have been so successful that this year (2011) the Museum has branched out into baking, preserving and wine making.



This open fronted shed now has collections stored above the ploughs

Events are still important for Acton Scott, as for all rural museums, but they now ensure they are organised away from major dates such as bank holidays. As there is so much competition, the events were not cost effective in either time to organise them or money spent. Acton Scott is not open on Mondays but has always opened on bank holidays, costing a great deal of money given the terms and conditions of local authority employees²¹. For bank holiday Mondays now, Acton Scott runs what they call “Grand Days Out” aimed at families with admission reduced to £2.50, all serious museum interpretation suspended and just operational staff on duty. The special events are described by them as “*daily tasks are replaced with fun and games. Travelling tradesmen will be visiting the farm and visitors can take part in seasonal activities*”. This year, each of the bank holidays had themes such as spring or celebrating local food.

²¹ normally, double time and a day off in lieu

The staff of Acton Scott believes that this is the most cost effective way of providing events on bank holidays. Their visitor numbers are easier to manage than if special events were organised on top of the increased visitor numbers associated with a bank holiday. Staff can concentrate on operational matters without worrying about the butter making or if the bread would have over cooked in the farmhouse oven.

In the last ten years, the County service has merged with Shrewsbury Borough Council's museum service, giving the County Service more critical mass. The County Council has set a target for Acton Scott not to need any subsidy from them by 2014. Given that the Museum has to weather the current recession, and still has to fund the County's central re-charges, this is a challenge.

When I visited the site in the spring of this year, the County Museums Officer, Nigel Nixon, and his site Manager Mike Turner, talked very positively about the achievements and their success. Nixon spoke about success breeding success and how so many other individuals and organisations now approached them for partnerships whereas ten years ago, they were considered a liability and the County Council was keen to close them down. A good example of this is that the RSPB had just suggested to them that from the 2011 season, they would put a member of staff on site for four days per week (Acton Scott is open 6 days). This is part of a drive to widen the audience attracted to the site and get visitors to appreciate the natural beauty, part of the Shropshire Hills ANOB, not just the human history.

Since my visit however, the cuts in the current financial year led to discussions of redundancy with the County Museums Officer. He is still employed however but has been "moved sideways" and is now called the Museums Manager.

It seems that even successful museums are not immune from cuts, savings and redundancies in local authorities. Redundancies or re-assignments of the most senior staff, just because they are more experienced and therefore cost more, is very short sighted and gives many museums a significant loss of expertise, especially at the top. Decisions like this only add to my concern about the loss of corporate memory in museums generally.



The names of Acton Scott's fields decorate the meeting room's walls in the new building

4. TOPICS

4.1 GOVERNANCE

“Farming looks mighty easy when your plough is a pencil,
and you’re a thousand miles from a cornfield.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower
President of USA
speech at Peoria, September 1956

4.1.1 In recent years, governance has become a hot topic with many local authorities putting their museums into charitable trusts, sometimes as independent museums, sometimes as part of cultural or leisure trusts (Luton and Glasgow are respective examples). This trend has picked up speed following the creation of the Coalition government in May 2010 as public spending cuts have been implemented.

Two rural museums are good examples of this trend, both of which opened in their new guise this summer (2011), and both run by volunteers: Cogges Manor Farm Museum in Witney, Oxfordshire and Church Farm Museum in Skegness, Lincolnshire. The third museum considered in this section is perhaps another option for some sites: the former Museum of Kent Life.

4.1.2 Cogges Manor Farm, Witney

Cogges Manor Farm is a scheduled ancient monument with all its buildings listed Grade II*. Farmed since Saxon times, it has a medieval and later manor house (1250 onwards), a walk down to the river incorporating the moat of a Norman castle, and mainly 18th and 19th century farm buildings. Next to the site are the medieval church, and the vicarage which incorporates parts of the Benedictine priory founded in 1103. A rare and unusual collection of buildings indeed, and a complex site. The warm honey coloured stone of the buildings, the walled garden beside the house and the peaceful setting give it a very special atmosphere and a strong sense of place.



Cogges Manor Farm Museum was part of Oxfordshire County Council's Museums and Heritage Service. Section 3.6 above summarised Oxfordshire's recent history but omitted Cogges. Cogges Manor Farm was first acquired by the County in 1974 because it was such an exceptional collection of buildings. It became a museum as there were limited uses for such a site but gradually modern housing spread to surround it.

Popular perception is that Cogges has been regularly under threat; Martyn Brown, then the County's Heritage & Arts Officer, put me right on this. From its acquisition, there was a common expectation that Cogges would cover its costs. It always attracted what Brown described as "decent" visitor figures but some years, it did not meet its income target. In the early years, it attracted strong political support but more recently, this has not been the case (although now it lies in the Prime Minister David Cameron's constituency).

From the late 1990's, the County ran the site in partnership with West Oxfordshire District Council. The County retained ownership of the collections, and ownership and maintenance of the buildings because of their outstanding importance, with the District operating the site. West Oxfordshire viewed Cogges as a tourist asset rather than a museum, their costs rose and in 2005, they handed it back to the County.



Part of Cogges' site showing the proximity of modern housing²²

In 2004, the site was identified in a Best Value review for the County as badly in need of investment, with a poor layout and lacking good visitor facilities. When Continuum was considering sites in which to invest (see 4.1.4 below), it considered Cogges. It concluded that it needed a great deal of investment to re-organise the site, improve the visitor offer and the visitor flow. In addition, the restrictions of the site meant that the changes needed to get a commercial return would not have been possible. As the County was not looking at investing to the level required, they decided that Cogges did not offer them an opportunity.

Cogges closed to the public in 2009 as the County worked to divest itself of the site while still safeguarding it. A shadow Board was created that year with the purpose of establishing Cogges Heritage Trust, chaired by Julia Holberry, a museum consultant who lives nearby.

²² all photographs of Cogges are courtesy of Oxfordshire County Council

It took a year longer than expected to set up the Trust, conclude an agreement with the County and make decisions about exactly what to offer on the site. A sweetener of £250,000 in capital investment was initially offered by the County though disappointingly, this was more than halved by the time the Trust was ready to go.

Cogges Heritage Trust's stated vision is that Cogges will be:

- a place to learn about food;
- a place to use the past to inform food decisions now and in the future;
- a source of information on food and eating;
- a place to experience at first-hand the growing of crops and rearing of animals for, and the preparation of, food;
- a place that focuses on food to encourage good health, well-being and self-sufficiency;
- a place for relaxation and enjoyment.



The Trust also plans to use the collections to highlight the differences and similarities in food production in the past, now and in the future. Only this is a direct museum function. The Cogges Heritage Trust admits its links to heritage and collections are weak at the moment, but feel that this will get stronger as they get into their stride. They feel strongly that they are not “doing the story of food” just anywhere, but at Cogges, so the strong sense of place which Cogges has must imbue the food stories. This is a challenge for any new Trust and I am sure the rural museums sector will watch progress at Cogges with great interest.

The Trust now runs the site, primarily with volunteers. The Trust appointed a Director earlier this year but she left after six weeks, making me question the demanding mix of skills and commitment which many museums seek and need. A Director of a small independent museum has not only to lead strategically alongside the Trustees, and be the public face of the site, but be able to be present on site much of the time especially when there were any major events, lend a physical hand when necessary and generally roll up their sleeves. The new Trust now admits that they should have started with their immediate operational needs, not their strategic ones, and trying to find all these skills in one person was asking too much. This is another example of a new Trust finding its feet and taking time to get it right.

The new Trust has dropped the word *Museum* from its title, a significant and seemingly sensible change. Martyn Brown however is still concerned about the

museum collections which remain and now have limited links with the site, particularly the large Witney loom.

Cogges Manor Farm re-opened on 17th July 2011 with a Real Food Market. The Trust is recruiting partners such as the Natural Bread Company to support the development of the business.

The Shorland-Ball report correctly identified that where food came from was crucial in educating children (loaves come from fields of wheat, not Tesco). Ten years on, this is even more important as debates about cooking versus ready meals, healthy eating and obesity, GM crops and how to feed the world's growing population feature regularly in our newspapers and on our televisions. So the topic of food is likely to be a good one for the new Trust.

The site had 1500 visitors on its first day but it is too early to say if the new Trust will succeed, given the need of the site for investment and the likelihood of it not being financially secure in the short term. Those of us who know Cogges however, will wish the new Trust well and hope that the County can still offer as much support as possible to help them to longer term success.



Threshing at Cogges

4.1.3 Church Farm, Skegness

Church Farm Museum opened in 1976. The house at Church Farm was built in 1760 (it is the second oldest building in Skegness). The farm was tenanted and held from the Earl of Scarborough. In the early 1870's the ninth Earl began the redevelopment of Skegness as the railways brought people on holiday to what was becoming a seaside resort. He used his farmland to build houses so by 1974, Church Farm was less than 3 acres and was sold to the district council for £48,000. At the same time, the County Council had acquired a collection of farm implements and machinery from the late Bernard Best of Bratoft. Church Farm was offered as a home to display the collection.

Church Farm was part of Lincolnshire County Council's museums service. Following a Best Value review, Jonathan Platt the head of service commissioned a fundamental service review in 2009. Nine heritage sites were scored according to visitor numbers, users, costs and whether the site was owned by the County. Church Farm, as a seasonal site, came at the bottom of the list. When the revenue budget was set in February 2010, the decision was taken to close the site though no announcements were made until after the elections in May.

In June 2010, the County announced it was closing the site at the end of the season, the following October. The County invited proposals for three sites: Church Farm, Grantham and Stamford. Very quickly, there was public support for saving public access to Church Farm and in December last year, proposals were accepted by the County's Executive for both Church Farm and Grantham. Though it has taken a long time and negotiations have been described to me by a third party as "difficult", a new Trust has been formed to run the site.

The County has promised a capital sum of £35,000. The Trust is now approaching the District and Town Councils for additional funding to match the County's offer.

The site is currently leased by the County from the District but the County did not give the requisite amount of notice to the District to terminate the lease. Consequently, the County is still responsible for the site, perhaps until next summer (2012). It is however negotiating with the District to achieve a quicker transfer. Then the District is expected to use a community asset transfer to move the site to the Trust.

Matt Stephens, the County's local District Manager and a museum professional, has supported this process, giving much of his own time for evening meetings, though he is no longer directly involved. The whole process has taken much longer than is ideal and has not been conducted without heartache. Establishing a new body takes time (see also Conclusions in 4.1.5 below).

This year, 2011, the new Trust re-opened the site to the public the weekend before Easter. Rebranded as Church Farm Village, and run by volunteers, the site has a lively new website but has only a link on the County's own website, alongside many other museums and historic sites. At first it was open five days per week but in August they opened seven days per week; already numbers of volunteers are short of what is actually needed for this level of operation. Some level of employed staff may be needed to maintain regular opening in the future.

Earlier this year, the County agreed to lend the collections on the site to the new Trust, though the collections agreement has not yet been signed so the promised capital sum has not been handed over. The County remain responsible for the care and conservation of the collections and there is a commitment to give collections care time, averaging a day per week to help the new Trust. One of the team of Collections Care assistants will be responsible for the site and I hope that the County is able to retain the capacity to be able to deliver this support. This is an important precedent and one which all local authorities should be obliged to offer new arms length organisations.

I hope that this and the other case studies can help others to learn before they are put into such situations again. This charitable trust route for museums is not without its difficulties. Local authorities must not see it as an easy option which does not endanger their collections, sites and buildings. These young and usually voluntary-run organisations require assistance and appropriate support as they find their way through new territory. Despite the difficulties which local authorities face, do they offer as much help as they can?

4.1.4 Museum of Kent Life

The Museum of Kent Life, an open air museum in Kent, has been run by Continuum since the 2010 summer season. It has been re-branded as “Kent Life: family fun you’ll remember” and like Cogges and Church Farm, has dropped the word *Museum*.

The site is on the River Medway and is now next to M20. The site was Sandling Farm, part of a private estate given to Maidstone Borough Council. The Museum opened in 1985. In addition to the original farmhouse and buildings, during 1980’s many other buildings were rescued and rebuilt at the Museum, particularly during construction of M20. It had been a struggling site for some time and the Council were putting £200,000 a year into it. At this time, Continuum was looking for new investment opportunities.

Continuum are a private equity owned group based in York, originally specialists in design and interpretation. They grew out of the Past Forward company which was formed to repeat the success of the Jorvik Viking Centre in York which opened in 1984. During the boom years of museum and heritage site expansion, Continuum as the group of companies became known, were market leaders. Five years ago, they took over the operation of the Spinnaker Tower in Portsmouth, which was designed originally to be a major Millennium project. They also created and operate the attraction *Unlocked!* in Oxford Castle’s 18th century prison wing.

In 2008, as the heritage boom seemed to be drawing to a close, Continuum withdrew from directly employing designers and started to look for new investments. Struggling museums which were tired but had potential were possibilities for them. Many local authorities had rural sites and could grant peppercorn rents as their contribution to a new partnership which would solve a headache. Continuum’s business development team talked to officers about both Cogges (see 4.1.2 above) and the Museum of Kent Life.

This is the new management's second summer season at Kent Life and it is going well. The barn where a display of tractors used to sit is now a Play Barn and the tractors are now for riding on. It is a value-for-money day out aimed firmly at families with young children. The main attractions are still based on farming, food, seasonality and animals but a large element of noisy fun rather than learning pervades the place. The site and the website are bright and cheerful. But, as a leading museum director who had taken his young family said to me with a sigh "but it's no longer a museum".

Does this matter? No and yes is the answer. No in the short term, because the site is open, popular with families and not a drain on the local authority, otherwise it might have closed. The historic buildings are less at risk if they are on a site which is busy than if the site was effectively mothballed. But yes in the medium and longer term: there needs to be a robust curatorial and conservation monitoring regime for the site, and funding needs to be available for future maintenance. Kent's museum service was dismantled in the 1990's and although they maintain a Portable Antiquities Scheme Officer and a Historic Environment Record, they have no museums service. Maidstone Borough Council runs a museum and there are many independent museums in the County so it is to be hoped they can maintain a watchful eye. For more on collections at risk, see section 4.5 below.

Kent Life *Family Fun You'll Remember*

4.1.5 Conclusions on new governance

Local authorities have a very difficult balancing act as they strive to do more with less and museums, as non-statutory services, usually get squeezed at the bottom of the spending pile as a result. While local government is often cast as the villain, many are still supporting and investing in their museums; several case studies in this report illustrate this. But this report asks the question: in their apparent rush to save money and divest themselves of sites and collections, are local authorities doing as much as they can do to support the new trusts which they are in effect creating? They may be most interested in saving money in the short term, but the creation of a new charitable body requires more than simply attention to their own finances.

It is also clear that when local authorities decide to move historic sites (whether museums or not) to arms length bodies, they should not try to do so at high speed. Voluntary groups who may wish to support a particular site need time to learn about their new responsibilities, to grow into a coherent organisation, and to understand the heritage sector and their potential audiences. To do this effectively, as we have seen above, they need professional help. Where this has been available, it has still taken longer than originally planned to complete the handover to a new Trust.

In section 4.5 below, I examine the concept of orphaned collections. The collections of these new Trusts could easily become so, as the professional expertise in the local authority may no longer be present to monitor the new organisation (as in Kent Life

and possibly in Lincolnshire also) or it may be outside the knowledge of those staff who remain. These slightly odd or unusual situations are those which relevant bodies should be watching carefully and the RMN should monitor them as best they can. In addition to members of the Network, where Museum Development Officers (MDO's) still exist, as the public service cuts are implemented, they should provide useful eyes and ears on the ground for these collections and sites at risk.

In such harsh times, an independent museum (whether new or not) will stand or fall by its own efforts, by its business sense, so the MDO must be aware of not only collections care and Accreditation standards but of whether a group or museum is financially stable and conducting its affairs sensibly. However, the absence of a MDO will not stop community groups collecting and setting up museums, or rushing enthusiastically into setting up a Trust to operate an ex-local authority site. The risk here is that the local authorities will still be expected to pick up the pieces in the future again, if or when such a museum collapses after the first flush of enthusiasm, or when a new Trust fails. Significant heritage will need to be safeguarded and the local authority will be expected to provide a safety net to care for it, even if it no longer has the expertise.

It has been difficult to establish in detail exactly what is happening at some sites and I do not wish to publish unsubstantiated gossip on particular situations. The descriptions are given here as warnings to future volunteers and local authorities that this route for museums is not without its pitfalls and difficulties, nor is it a quick fix or a short term option. Additional appropriate support is needed for any new organisation which is taking over the management of a local authority site or collection, and the medium and longer term care and interpretation of the collections must remain a central concern.

4.2 FIFTEEN MINUTES OF FAME

“in the future, everyone will be world famous for 15 minutes”

Andy Warhol
1968

4.2.1 This line from a Warhol exhibition catalogue in Stockholm has been used ubiquitously to describe reality TV, the YouTube phenomena, generation Y and the democratisation of information and opinion by the world wide web. But appearing on television in particular has always been a reliable way for museums to find a wider audience.

4.2.2 Acton Scott Historic Working Farm

In 2007, a television series was filmed at Acton Scott by Lion Television entitled *Victorian Farm* which was broadcast on BBC2 in early 2009. The farming team was historian Ruth Goodman and archaeologists Alex Langlands and Peter Ginn. It was one of BBC2's biggest hits of the year, attracting audiences of 3.8m viewers per episode. A book and a DVD were also published. As a consequence of the success of the programme, the BBC commissioned a three part follow up in *Victorian Farm Christmas*. This was filmed in August and September 2009 and broadcast in December.

Because of the popularity of both these programmes, Lion Television went on to produce a daytime series, *Ben Fogle's Escape in Time*. In this, families were given the opportunity to live at Acton Scott for a week, learning about farming and competing in historical skills. Many of the experts and craftsmen featured on *Victorian Farm* also appeared on it along with several members of staff. The series was filmed back-to-back with *Victorian Farm Christmas* in September 2009 and shown the following July. The *Victorian Farm* programme has been shown at least twice and it undoubtedly brought a boost to numbers of new visitors to Acton Scott.



Shire horses at Acton Scott

The Museum staff view it as valuable publicity and were pleased with how Acton Scott was shown in the programme. For the visiting public, seeing filming taking place is exciting, but it demanded much staff time and patience. The filming of the Christmas programme was particularly difficult as some of it took place in the busiest month of the year, August but on balance, the staff now believe it was worthwhile for Acton Scott.

4.2.3 Chedham's Yard

Chedham's Yard won BBC2's *Restoration Village* in 2006. This was the third series of *Restoration* which included a first prize of being able to apply for a grant from HLF and receive the money managed by the Restoration Trust from the telephone calls of those who voted in the series. Made by the production company Endemol, this series moved the emphasis on from the individual buildings which had featured in the previous two, to collections of buildings which had importance for villages. This story is a case study in how publicity can almost overwhelm a project.

Chedham's Yard is in the village of Wellesbourne, six miles from Stratford-upon-Avon. Bill Chedham, a fifth generation wheelwright, retired in 1993 and still lives in Wellesbourne. The Yard had been in his family since 1820's. It had closed in 1965 when Bill's father died and Bill worked elsewhere. The area round Wellesbourne is fertile agricultural land so the business had developed by providing wheelwright and later blacksmithing to the farmers. The original Chedham, Thomas, born in 1789, was a wheelwright.

The Yard is a long, narrow piece of land in the centre of the village whose only access is from a gateway between houses.



The buildings on the site are traditional long, open fronted brick sheds. From the entrance gate is the wheelwright's shed, then a long drying shed, with the blacksmith's beyond that. The sheds have been repaired on an ad hoc basis over many years with roofing of both tiles and corrugated iron sheeting. The lead lined guttering is held on by wire. Some of the openings have had wooden doors fixed to them but the drying shed is still open and the stumps of ash trees stand right up against the sheds.

Wellesbourne Parish Council purchased the Yard from Bill in 2002. The immediate appeal of the Yard was that little had changed over two hundred years. Notes, messages and measurements were scribbled on the walls of the workshops. Bits of metal, wood shavings and parts of tools had been discarded and had built up in a deep layer. In 2005, Oxford Archaeology carried out an initial archaeological investigation and listed over 5,000 pieces of equipment and tools. Clearly, it felt as though Bill Chedham had just left, though there was also thick dust and spider's webs covering everything. This timeless quality of "the craftsman has just stepped out" was something to strive to capture and present to the visitors.

Robin Hill, Worcestershire County Museums Officer (an expert on rural crafts), raised its national significance with the Warwickshire County Archaeologist. He realised the Yard was fragile and vulnerable, that the tools were easily portable and he wanted to ensure everything was protected.

The Parish Council began considering what should happen to the Yard and the slow pace of the project is similar to the case studies cited in section 4.1 above. Apart from some expert advice from Robin Hill and Glynis Powell MDO for Warwickshire, the Parish Council were not knowledgeable about how to go about this and there was very little time available to those most interested as they had a lot to learn. At this stage, the Parish Council were determined to do this themselves and were not thinking of setting up a separate charitable trust.

In 2005 they appointed a part time Project Officer who was an archaeologist. They used the English Heritage Statement of Significance to appoint consultants to prepare a Conservation Management Plan (essential if HLF were to be approached for funding in the future) and to examine how the Yard could be developed to open to the public.

Later that year, the Friends of Chedham's Yard was formed after an open day in the summer. They began moving all the tools to a warehouse in Leamington Spa for safe keeping.



Volunteers cleaning and cataloguing objects

Villagers saw the advertisements in the national press for the new series of *Restoration*. The Yard was submitted for entry, was selected to take part, and won the Midlands heat.

However, it was at the moment of selection that the pressures of television first made themselves felt on the project's volunteers. The production company insisted that many of the tools which had so recently been removed be put back for their filming in May 2006. At very short notice, this happened, at some cost to the volunteers. Then Griff Rhys Jones, the presenter of the series, and the two *Restoration* building detectives, Marianne Suhr and Ptolemy Dean, came and filmed in July; the tools had to continue to be left on site.

Throughout the broadcast of the series in August and September, the BBC and Endemol put the Parish Council under pressure to hold regular open days to stimulate interest. Following their winning of the Midlands heat on Friday 11th August, they held an open day on the Sunday; 500 people came. However, on the Saturday too, the public were turning up to the site expecting it to be open. This began to cause problems in the village, especially from some (though not all) of the near neighbours who bore the brunt of the disruption. Parking is limited in the village, many of the roads are narrow and the access to the site is very cramped.

Members of the Friends were mobilised to be on site at weekends to deal with the visitors, and to sell them souvenirs. Local radio and television were very supportive of the project but this stimulated more visitors. Another open day was held the weekend before the final in September and a celebratory one in October after winning.

When I visited the site I talked to the Heritage Project Officer, funded by HLF on a three year contract, and two of the Trustees, one of whom is also a Parish Councillor so has been involved since the beginning. They spoke very candidly about the problems this huge public interest caused and admitted their naivety. They handled the problems with residents as Parish Councillors can, though some situations were unpleasant. But they regret that more support was not available to them or guidance on what was reasonable for the BBC to insist on and what was not. They had advice and help on curatorial and conservation topics, and the enthusiastic support of the local media but no mentor or wise counsellor who could hold their hand throughout.

The professional advice which the project has received however has been key to ensuring the project kept going, that the conservation and interpretation is of a museum standard and the volunteers did not give up. Naturally HLF would not be funding it if the standards were not high but in the early years, this advice was crucial. As mentioned before, Robin Hill and Glynis Powell have continued to support the project and everyone speaks highly of their valuable advice. As with Church Farm, the support of museum professionals has been vital to the project's success.

I doubt with the change in economic circumstances that another series of *Restoration* will be filmed but with the improved situation of HLF's finances post-2012, it may happen. If so, then I hope that the hard won lessons from Chedham's Yard can help others in a similar situation.

This year, 2011, a company and a charitable trust, Chedham's Yard Trust, have been created. The charity now leases the site from the Council who will also assign their contract with HLF²³. It has not yet been decided if the project will apply to be an

²³ Chedham's Yard website is a model and gives more detail about the history of the site and plans for the future: www.chedhamsyard.org

Accredited Museum: yet another rural site which may not use the word *museum*. HLF granted £780,000 in November 2009 and the *Restoration* prize was £160,000. Apart from repairing the buildings and replacing most of the tools and equipment, the plan is to erect a small ticket office by the gate. At the far end of the site, a small oak building will form a visitors' centre with space for education groups and a demonstration area. Planning permission was granted in November 2009 and an archaeological excavation uncovered part of the Yard floor in the spring of this year. The work on site has now begun. The Trust aims to open in the spring of 2012, six years after entering the *Restoration* competition and ten years since the Parish Council first bought the Yard.

Whether the site can earn its keep is another matter, given the restrictions of the access, the relatively slender visitor offer and that it will always need fine weather to be enjoyed. But the landscaping is well designed, it will offer something very different from most rural attractions and it will be very attractive once finished. Their business plan appears to be realistic and there is much optimism amongst the Trustees, volunteers and the current Project Officer. The Trust has been very generous in sharing their story and is happy that others could benefit from their experience. I wish them all every success.



4.3 TURNING GREEN?

“we learnt how the flour was made – it
doesn’t come in a bag from Tesco”

participant in *Growing Grain* event
Gressenhall, 2010

4.3.1 The UK is legally committed to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent by 2050, so you might expect most museums to be addressing green topics in their displays and educational work. In the members’ questionnaire’s section on how their interpretation had changed in the last ten years, no one mentioned this topic.

In 2007, RMN had their first SSN grant from MLA for a project called *Turning Green*. Jon Hall and I prepared a toolkit on environmental interpretation using museum collections²⁴ as part of this project. Some museums have started using it in their learning programmes and the East of England Hub is using sustainability as one of its major themes, which is described below. We also organised a conference on the theme of turning green in February 2008 and, working with the Centre for Alternative Energy in Wales, produced a carbon calculator for museums to use to work out their carbon footprint. Those who did this received a free vertical banner bearing their details to be used in a display of how they were reducing their carbon emissions. Disappointingly, only three museums took up this offer.

It is not clear why museums appear to be reluctant to interpret this topic in their displays as several rural museums are using these topics in education work and it links to several parts of the national curriculum in all of the UK’s nations.

An example of a museum which is using this theme in its education work is the Farmland Museum and Denny Abbey in Cambridgeshire. Working with a local waste management company, they have developed a day session for schools using some of the RMN toolkit themes such as recycling through rag rugs; they also explore contemporary topics such as modern packaging and visit the waste company’s site to look at landfill, recycling and composting.

While HLF encourage any new buildings to incorporate as many green technologies as possible, sometimes it is more expensive so the initial design needs to incorporate this from the beginning. Most museums occupy historic buildings which are often very expensive to maintain and especially to heat but the majority of them are not well insulated and are full of draughts. Those in local authorities should cash in with the corporate energy-saving initiatives (see Gressenhall below) and even independents can often benefit from this, especially if their local authority has particular expertise or is bulk buying materials from which the museums could benefit.

Stockwood Discovery Centre in Luton which opened in 2008, is an example of a “green” designed new building. It was funded by HLF with a £3.7m grant and other funding came from Objective 2, Luton Borough Council, a local waste management

²⁴ *Turning Green: a collections toolkit*, Hilary McGowan & Jon Hall for RMN, 2008 and available to download from www.ruralmuseums.specialistnetwork.org.uk

company and the Garfield Weston Foundation. The new structure has a sedum roof, a biomass boiler, solar water heating, low wattage and sensor-activated lighting and was built from mainly sustainable materials. Although Stockwood has many rural themes, it has not been classed as a rural museum, but it is an example of a recent building project which has been designed to be as sustainable as possible.

Weald & Downland Museum has the Downland Gridshell, described in 3.5 above. This is a green oak timber structure, organic in shape, built of sustainable natural materials. A beautiful example of a sustainable modern building in the countryside.

4.3.2 National History Museum, St Fagans

At St Fagans there is Tŷ Gwyrdd Learning Centre, the Green House. Built in 2000, it is situated to the right of the main entrance building. Although not especially rural, it combines the vernacular tradition displayed by the older buildings on the site with cutting edge technology (for 2000). Timber is the main building material as with most of the traditional buildings so it has strong links with the historic collections of the Museum. Tŷ Gwyrdd is open to pre-booked groups as part of the Education for Sustainable Development programme at St. Fagans. It is also available to organisations and community groups wishing to promote sustainability.

Strangely, although it is described in the guidebook, it is not promoted overtly on the site and the public are not encouraged to look at the house, even from the outside. Its location is also out of the main public thoroughfare. Maybe this is because too many visitors could disrupt educational groups but some holiday activities are sometimes based here for families. It appears to be only a quiet statement of interest in green topics.

4.3.3 Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse: Museum of Norfolk Life

Gressenhall is the rural life site of Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service, part of Norfolk County Council and one of the largest local authority museum services. It is situated near Dereham, in the centre of the County. In addition to a working farm with rare breeds including Suffolk Punch heavy horses, there is also a workhouse of 1777 on the site which focuses on stories of Victorian rural poverty and hardship often neglected by other museums.

Norfolk is the lead of the East of England Hub funded by grants through the Renaissance in the Regions programme, administered by MLA. Since 2008 the service has had Sustainability as one of its major themes to unlock “the potential of rural life museums to engage the public in debate around environmental and social issues, as well as joining forces with other organisations to find ways of reducing the sector’s carbon footprint”²⁵.

Norwich hosted a major national conference in the autumn of 2008 called “Museums, Sustainability and Growth”. Since then, Norfolk Museums Service, and particularly Gressenhall, has led the sector in its work on environmental sustainability.

²⁵ Studies in Partnership: Sustainability Project, Renaissance East of England, 2010

Over the last ten years, Gressenhall has grown and has had significant investment, particularly £3.5m in a development funded by HLF and Objective 2 European grants. The site was re-branded as Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse: Museum of Norfolk Life²⁶, infrastructure was improved, facilities for meetings and conferences were created and an adventure playground was built. Physical DDA improvements were made, with a new shop, ticket reception and café. Displays now focus on not only the Workhouse and the life of the farm but there is a new exhibition on the Land Army and the Timber Corps.

Visitor figures in 2000 were 36,000 but rose to 80,000 in 2002 after the development. The figures have now settled down at between 70 and 75,000 per year. This Easter, visitor numbers were a third down on last year and renewals of the Museum Pass, a season ticket, are dropping. With the possible reduction in Renaissance funding, a review of activities may need to take place as they have only a minimal core staff and already rely heavily on volunteers. A significant proportion of the curatorial work is carried out by volunteers and 80% of the Curator's time is spent managing them.

The Service as a whole has been very successful at tapping into the County's corporate priorities, demonstrating their relevance. Gressenhall's new facilities have hosted County Chief Officer and other corporate meetings, raising the Service's profile. The Service bid for a slice of the corporate Carbon and Energy Reduction Fund, leading to an investment of £300,000 to reduce their carbon footprint and energy costs.

Gressenhall has also actively engaged with corporate priorities around Looked After Children and older people. The site is currently working in partnership with MEAL (see 3.2) to deliver a range of traditional skills apprenticeships and paid internships, funded through HLF's *Skills for the Future* programme.

The staff at Gressenhall has worked to integrate environmental sustainability into the core operation and daily running of the Museum. A Green Team comprises a selection of different staff and volunteers from across the Museum who bear environmental sustainability in mind at all times. They work with the support of senior managers who, they say, believe that environmental sustainability is as much about behavioural change as it is about policies. This encourages everyone to address the issues for their own particular work areas and also embrace change and future direction.

On the ground, new graphic panels are made from recycled aluminium and a full range of environmentally themed events supporting biodiversity is organised. In 2007 and 2008, Gressenhall ran a series of events entitled "Go Green". These single days focused on topics of environmental concern with retail stalls, information, demonstrations and activities.

These environmental days were superficially successful but, following evaluation, the Service realised these events could have been hosted anywhere and had little museum content, so were preaching to the converted in terms of the people who came. (The Museum Service is very keen on evaluation and all events are now sensibly targeted at specific audiences.) In the last two years therefore, Gressenhall has developed a Green Stream which runs throughout the annual events programme. This allows the

²⁶ it was called Norfolk Rural Life Museum and Union Farm, page 101, Rob Shorland-Ball, op cit

events to incorporate more of the collections and the site, and reach audiences who might not be attracted to an overtly environmental day.

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Clearly there is much “green” activity in rural museums in capital developments, learning programmes and events. I hope that this will soon translate into more displays which interpret these themes using historic collections and linking them to their present day equivalents.

#### **4.4 UP AND DOWN: capital investment and financial (in)stability**

“I have no relish for the country; it is a kind of healthy grave.”

letter to Miss G Harcourt,  
Rev. Sydney Smith  
(1771-1845)

**4.4.1** Every museum which returned the RMN members’ questionnaire had had some capital investment, and many of these grants were major HLF-funded developments. In the case studies in section 3, several examples are given from these museums but these tend to be the larger museums with the most spectacular examples.

Three museums illustrate themes of investment and financial (in)stability:

- Melton Carnegie, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire
- Highland Folk Museum, Newtonmore, Inverness-shire
- Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, Stoke Heath, near Bromsgrove

#### **4.4.2 Melton Carnegie Museum, Melton Mowbray**

Melton Carnegie Museum in Melton Mowbray is part of Leicestershire County Council’s Museums Service and while it is not located in the country, its collections and displays cover rural life and rural issues, notably fox hunting, making pork pies and stilton cheese. The Museum is housed in an attractive red brick Carnegie Library in the centre of Melton Mowbray, built in 1905.

The Museum generously hosted the RMN’s AGM in May so members saw for themselves the recent transformation of the Museum which had re-opened in November 2010. Following on from a £500,000 refurbishment of the galleries in 2002, a £1.1m project built an extension at the rear housing a new gallery, fine new meeting and education rooms and installing a lift. The galleries are not only more spacious but cover a wide range of local history in a very attractive, lively and accessible display style. The new Museum has proved very popular and visitor figures are going up.



Melton Carnegie's new timber framed extension

Despite this major capital investment, as the AGM took place, the County were undertaking public consultation on options to reduce revenue costs. The outcome of the public consultation, now approved by the County, will take effect from the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2012 and includes closing completely from mid-December to mid-January, in addition to closing on Sundays and Mondays throughout the rest of the year. The Museum will open for special events on some Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays.



The village communications display complete with lily pond



The local history displays were created by community groups: this one is about pubs

The County's public consultation focused on one museum, one historic house and the Record Office. Ironically, the consultants' report which reviewed Libraries, Heritage and Arts used a picture on its front cover from Michael Wood's 2010 BBC4 programme about Kibworth in Leicestershire<sup>27</sup> which used the history of one village to illustrate the whole history of England.

Given the recent re-opening of the Museum and the considerable capital investment, it seems completely illogical to suddenly start consulting on opening hours. Given that

<sup>27</sup> Libraries, Heritage and Arts Review, BOP Consultants and Shared Intelligence, November 2010

the public service cuts have been anticipated since the general election in the spring, it would have been logical to consider the opening hours in advance of re-opening and prevent the public from becoming very confused about when the Museum is open. Closing from mid-December to mid-January is understandable however as all museums are quiet outside the Christmas school holidays but the Museum is a great success and it deserves better treatment.



Melton Carnegie Museum:  
more traditional outside than in

#### 4.4.3 Highland Folk Museum, Newtonmore

The Highland Folk Museum was founded on Iona by the historian Dr Isabel Grant in 1935, moving to Kingussie in Inverness-shire in 1944<sup>28</sup>. The Museum expanded onto an additional 80 acre site at Newtonmore, three miles away in 1987, opening in 1995. In 2007, the Kingussie site closed to the public but the main collections store still remains there. Over the last ten years, the visitor figures have continued to rise initially at a steady pace but since 2007, they have grown “astronomically” to use the Principal Museums Officer’s (Curator’s) word. In 2000 the Museum had 16,000 visitors, in 2009 it was 40,600 and last year (2010) 51,000 (their year runs from April to the end of October each season).

As at July, this year’s figures were also up on last year too. It is families who have increased in number the most. One stimulus for the rise in figures has been the dropping of admission charges in 2007. The drawback to this had been that there is increased pressure from their parent body, The Highland Council, to earn income from elsewhere.

The three words the Curator used to describe the last ten years were *dynamism*, *confidence* and *family* (*family* here being a close, proactive support group).

<sup>28</sup> Chapter 2, 2.2 Healthy Plants, pp 26-27 and Appendix 7, Rob Shorland-Ball, op cit

Each year, the Museum has added additional vernacular buildings rescued from elsewhere and has maintained and raised standards, setting a premium on high standards of customer service, a warm welcome, and good interactions with visitors. They have brought their interpretation up to 1950's to make history more relevant.

The Museum has won an impressive array of awards, most recently the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions' *Best Visitor Experience Award* for 2010. Word of mouth has accounted for many increased visitors and where many are on holiday, the recommendations of B&B's/hoteliers count for a great deal. Donations last year amounted to £31,700, a sure sign that visitors are happy and satisfied.

The Highland Council has just funded an extension of the car park which was completed in time for the 2011 season. Also, expenditure of £3m has recently been confirmed to build a new collections store at Newtonmore to replace the existing one at Kingussie which is in a very poor condition and is putting the collections at risk.

But despite all this good news, and the capital investment, over the winter of last year, the Council consulted the public about closing the Museum all together as part of Highland-wide budget savings. This consultation took place at the same time as the capital spending on the car park was being implemented; another example of the *left hand, right hand* thinking of local authorities. The feeling of the staff is that the more the Museum improved, the worse the staff's situation became, and the public agreed.

The huge public outcry in support of the Museum surprised the Council and they decided that they had to take notice of it so shelved plans to close the Museum. But what the Council do not take into account is how unsettling this is for the staff and how the public do not understand how you can be building a big new car park at the same time as contemplating closure.

Earlier this year (2011) the Council decided to put the Museums<sup>29</sup>, Archives and the Libraries into an arm's length organisation called "High Life Highlands" to take effect from 1<sup>st</sup> October this year. The Curator is concerned that as there has already been a 15% budget cut this financial year, there will be an additional strain on the new organisation and the resources to both run and continue developing the Museum. Staffing is a further concern, particularly replacing the Operations Manager who retires at the end of October with no handover. The Museum has no education staff and needs an assistant curator with particular expertise in buildings to ensure skills succession from the Curator. He is anxious given the potentially unsettling yet coincidental timing: the inauguration of the new organisation, major staff changes, the potential for further budget cuts and the continuing need for major interpretive development.

However he is buoyed by the indicated support from the new organisation; has great faith in his team and in the public support the Museum enjoys. When asked what word he would use to describe the future, he selected:

*optimistic.*

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<sup>29</sup> since 2006, the Highland Museums have also included the Inverness Museum & Art Gallery and the Highland Photographic Archive

#### 4.4.4 Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, Stoke Heath

Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings is an independent museum and since 2006, the last regular grants from a local authority (less than £5,000) were withdrawn. Situated in Stoke Heath near Bromsgrove, it opened in 1967 following the rescue of a Bromsgrove merchant's house from demolition. The range of 25 buildings which are displayed is very wide and includes a 1946 prefab. and the National Collection of Telephone Kiosks, acquired from British Telecom's disposal in 1994.

The three words the Director, Simon Carter, used to describe the last ten years were

*rocky, then improving*

He has been in post since early 2007. His mission was to improve the financial stability of the Museum in the light of an annual deficit and losing the remaining local authority grants; this he has achieved, and more.

Changes for the better over the last ten years have included more earned income and reduced expenditure: total expenditure in 2000 was £246,000 and in 2009 it was just £40,000 more. Income has doubled from £123,000 in 2000 to £256,700 in 2009.

Visitor figures were 38,200 in 2000, then they rose to 43,220 the following year, falling to 25,800 by 2007. By the end of 2010, they had risen back to 30,800.

The Museum now employs 45 staff (mainly in part-time roles with only 5 full time) compared to 17 in 2007. This is 10 full time equivalents (FTE), up from 8.5 in 2000, with 12.5 FTE staff for the opening season. Volunteer numbers have risen from 10 in 2000 (with 20 seasonal volunteers) to 40, with 80 seasonal.



Toll House interior: children discovering the contents of a spice box<sup>30</sup>

A Project Planning Grant from HLF's Stage 1 pass funded Buildings Maintenance and Audience Development Plans. Then a capital project of £443,000 was funded by £365,000 from HLF and the balance from charitable trusts and volunteer time. This project improved interpretation: each building has new interpretation panels and the Museum is now emphasising the people stories of the buildings, as well as explaining the techniques of the structures and their rescue and relocation. Other improvements have included better buildings conservation, marketing and website, improved

<sup>30</sup> Avoncroft photographs are courtesy of Avoncroft Museum of Buildings

infrastructure especially general presentation of the site and better paths, and a new Edwardian Tea Room (funded by the Museum with a £5,000 AIM/Esmée Fairbairn Foundation Sustainability grant).

HLF funded three fixed term staff posts which have recently been made permanent ensuring that there are more professional staff and a more effective staffing structure. The Museum now uses more volunteers and their involvement is more effective. They also use freelance teachers to deliver the learning programmes. Recent changes have improved the presentation and marketing of the programmes and the rise in school groups in the last year has been the first for ten.



A Worcestershire granary and thatched threshing barn from Herefordshire;  
new signage on the right

The Museum is to be congratulated at what they have achieved since 2007 and these achievements should be more widely known within the sector. The Director believes that the Museum has found its much needed stability through a mix of different things, not just earning more income but also controlling costs. The word he chose to describe how he feels about the immediate future was *improving*.



The Edwardian tearoom  
achieved with an AIM Sustainability grant



## 4.5 COLLECTIONS

“MCC Syndrome: it’s always easier to lead England  
from the comfort of the pavilion  
than it is from the middle of the field.”

Brian Johnson  
Test Match Special  
BBC Radio 3, 1974

### 4.5.1 Collecting the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

Ten years ago, collections would have been at the heart of a report such as this. The steering group made the decision not to include them in the questionnaire and this also reflects the more pragmatic approach of most museums where collections have been re-balanced with the business of earning their keep. As the DNC has driven much of the RMN’s work over the last few years – the Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff<sup>31</sup> report gave a strong direction to this which is still valid today – the Steering Group felt that this research should include collections but not be dominated by them.

Most of my conversations about collections have concerned the problems of collecting from the later 20<sup>th</sup> century and how to represent the massive changes and mechanisation which took place in farming, and the impact on rural life generally.

The National Museums of Scotland and Wales both take their national responsibilities very seriously. But collecting late 20<sup>th</sup> century combine harvesters in Scotland or Wales is not different from collecting them in England or Northern Ireland. The machines will be exactly the same, only the sites on which they were used will be different. And given the shifting of interpretation emphasis from farming to rural life (as seen throughout this report), what place do these massive machines have to play in museum collections?

Most museums collect up to 1950’s and the Yorkshire Museum of Farming has closed its collecting at 1950. As we have seen, the Highland Folk Museum has begun to interpret the 1950’s on its site to make it more up to date for visitors. But this is still over 50 years ago and is therefore the childhood of the grandparents who visit, like the ubiquitous Victorian Parlour was in 1930’s. It is still ancient history for children.

Urban social history museums have collected and displayed 1950’s onwards for some time, beginning with York Castle Museum’s 1953 Coronation Sitting Room in 1981 and SHCG’s national *Contemporary Collecting* Conference in 1984. Roy Brigden’s MERL project collected rurally associated social history objects up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see 3.1). But the MERL project is unusual; why is this?

Many rural museums have historic buildings which they interpret and post-the prefab., there are no traditional rural buildings to save. As at National Museums Scotland’s Rural Life Museum, the buildings of a previous century can be interpreted

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<sup>31</sup> see page 4

as to how they have been adapted but collecting a modern farmhouse has not been attempted as it differs so little from other modern domestic buildings. I believe that most rural museums have been frightened by the mountain of machinery they associate with collecting the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and by the fact that social history in the countryside has grown to be almost identical to urban life, as UK life in general has become more homogenised. I believe there is a place to explore the topic of whether life in the countryside is different from the town through collections, and taking a lead from MERL's project.

However, it is not just collecting and documenting the late 20<sup>th</sup> century which is challenging the rural museums but caring for increasing fragile collections and ensuring expertise and knowledge is not lost.

#### **4.5.2 The disposal debate**

The last four years – since the MA amended the disposal wording in the Code of Ethics in 2007 – have seen museums coming under new pressures to “rationalise” their collections to which the recession and public spending cuts have given new impetus. I spoke in favour of the amendment of the Code as I have seen too many stores of decaying furniture, crumbling bulk archaeology and leaking soil samples. But I did not vote for it in order that local authorities could sell their Pre-Raphaelites to balance the corporate budget. This may seem only tangentially connected to this report but fine art sales in particular, command the attention of the media and so set the topic in the mind of the public<sup>32</sup>. Tractors do not command the high prices of paintings but some agricultural equipment would have equal value to the museum sector and to rural history.

The high cost of good museum collections storage is also being questioned by governing bodies. Oxfordshire is questioning the role of their central store in Standlake (even though they have just completed an extension and it is still an exemplar), and every store with air handling or full conditioning will cost more to run as energy costs continue to rise. So rationalisation, disposal, whatever it may be called, is here to stay on the agenda of any museum which is trying to save money and do more with less.

I hope that despite the last decade of investment and expansion – through the expenditure of HLF, Renaissance in the Regions (in England) and other initiatives – the next decade is likely to be much more sober and pragmatic, ensuring that growth will be organic and sustainable, not boom and bust.

#### **4.5.3 Orphaned collections**

However, investment is not worthwhile if there is no expertise or curatorial knowledge to ensure that interpretation can make the objects understood and appreciated. Over the last eighteen months, since the election of the UK Coalition Government, public service cuts and the squeeze on consumer spending coupled with high inflation have contributed to the acceleration of museums losing collections expertise. Now there are many rural collections which are orphaned, with no curator who is knowledgeable about them or who can fight for their cause.

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<sup>32</sup> see my Comment column in Museums Journal, September 2011

Museums of important rural collections have closed, particularly Cotswold District Council's Northleach Museum. During this project, some questionnaires were returned to me or emails sent with comments that no one had knowledge of the rural collections. A particularly disturbing example is from Hampshire County Museums Service: the Senior Keeper of Social History wrote stating that their rural collections were in store and had had no curator for "a few years". She stated that she was trying to identify solutions for several issues, and the rural collections were one of them. To complicate matters, the recent re-structuring had meant that several posts had been made redundant increasing the loss of expertise.

Somerset, as mentioned in section 3.6.3, has a curator who is now a site manager more than she is a curator. National Museums Scotland's site has one curator who is the social history curator for the whole national service. Everywhere professional expertise is being squeezed so that work can only be undertaken at a superficial level without neglecting something else.

It is not only local authorities though who have orphaned collections; Lackham is a typical example. Near to Lacock in Wiltshire, the site is owned by Wiltshire College. The House is available for private hire for weddings and corporate events and Lackham Country Park is now only open for special event days in high summer. Still described on a website as "an attractive rural life museum centred in an historic thatched barn and granaries", the collection has no curatorial staff. It has been impossible for even David Viner to establish who is caring for it and he believes it is now in store in Devizes as the College has no interest in it. There are other collections which are now part of teaching establishments which also have no champion. The National Trust has many historic houses which are Accredited Museums (rather than the entire site) but they also hold rural collections. Many of these are used largely as set dressing or for demonstrations. These collections are below the RMN radar; should they not be considered at risk (albeit not at high risk) and included in the DNC work?

Collections such as this could benefit from the ideas discussed in the next section.

#### 4.5.4 Private collectors

In parallel to the disposal debate, the last ten years have also seen increasingly regular sales of private collections of agricultural and industrial archaeology machinery and equipment; these appear to have accelerated over the past 18 months. Many of them have been documented by David Viner and others in both print and through the RMN's Joint Information Service Mail (JISC) discussion group. In an article twelve months ago, Viner commented:

"Against that oft heard comment that objects are 'locked away' in museum stores, the museum curator in me responds that much material of great value would not otherwise have been preserved, and also that stores are not actually no-go areas!"<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *To keep or not to keep?* David Viner, *Vintage Spirit*, WW Magazines, August 2010

However, when all museums are now actively examining their stored collections (unless they have recently moved sites or built new stores), and with the Science Museum disposing of collections stored at Wroughton, what can a museum do if it decides it cannot keep a piece of equipment or machinery? And how does a museum respond to a sale of a private collection if it is in their geographical area?

If we cannot afford to keep everything of value in the public domain, then can our private collectors and preservation societies help?

I think they can help a great deal. I am grateful to recent exchanges in the JISC mail group, to the discussions at the SFLS conference and the RMN AGM this year for stimulating my thinking on this.

The value and potential of the DNC model is that it can be used to help the assessment of how important is a particular object. The situation Shorland-Ball envisaged was that the DNC work would identify where significant items are held, by whom, and in what condition, but a wide range of types of lists would be needed to achieve this. However, without museums (or other interested bodies) taking responsibility for the management of such information, listings run the risk of becoming out of date. There was a feeling in my consultations that RMN's work on the DNC is invaluable but it is far from complete. The JISC mail group was unsure if the level of recent activity could be maintained in order to finish it (if such a thing was possible). But this work must include the wider rural life sector, not just Accredited museums.



How to solve your plough display problem:  
Acton Scott paints them pink and blue

I believe we should face up to the fact that rural museums collectively are unable to care for everything of value and significance adequately and professionally. So the additional capacity of private collectors and preservation societies must be harnessed to help.

I recommend that RMN considers a system of designation such as that used by the Railway Heritage Committee (now about to be administered under the auspices of the

Science Museum). Objects considered to be of national significance from the railway network are designated as such, and offered to an Accredited museum. If none can house it, it can be given to a non-Accredited collection or preservation society on condition that they must notify the Committee if they want to modify or dispose of it in later years. The object and its whereabouts can be tracked therefore. This system is not foolproof or perfect but it works. It is similar to the system used for historic ships, many of which are in private hands<sup>34</sup>.

There are drawbacks to this however, not least the conservation aspect but some initial thoughts are as follows, courtesy of Fred van de Geer, Conservator at MERL, with my editing and additional comments:

- the enthusiasm and knowledge of an individual often lasts one (working) life time, it does not continue indefinitely. So although a highly regarded individual (often already middle aged) will look after an object adequately, the next generation may not have any inclination to continue the care, resulting in neglect. What is acceptable for one person may not be so for another. Recent dispersal sales of large collections bear witness to this;
- private owners will not document all changes they make to an object. Where in museum collections, treatments are always recorded, this will not be the case when an object is in private ownership. It would become more problematic to decipher the 'originality' of an object if or when it returns into the public realm; however if it did not do so, would it matter?
- private owners are more likely to want to demonstrate the object and keep it in working condition. How do you prevent the private owner from altering an object beyond recognition? (The counter to this is that keeping something working, such a tractor or a steam engine, is often a good way of preserving it);
- to operate a machine safely, maintenance will need to be carried out, original material will get replaced and if not recorded, information is then lost.

While it undoubtedly would be more difficult to control the good stewardship of objects once in private ownership, is this not better, even with the concerns outlined above, than losing the object completely? Many museum stores, as this report outlines, are far from perfect. It should be possible to encourage the collector community to take ownership of such an idea, and gain recognition that they are at heart, trying to do the same preservation job as museums. Creating a register of objects in private hands/at risk would be a massive task but if the private sector registered transfers of ownership on it, it would be a valuable tool.

Members of the Network themselves could be the monitors of significant objects, using Museum Development Officers or other similar posts (where they still exist) to assist to identify them. Conservation Officers in local authorities maintain a Buildings at Risk register, in association with those maintained by English Heritage,

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<sup>34</sup> see page 35, Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff, op cit

Historic Scotland and Cadw. Could the RMN not do the same with important objects?

Clearly, options need to be explored. I recommend that the RMN investigates how the concept of the DNC can be extended to embrace objects in private ownership, the NT and NTS, using the historic ships and railway examples as the beginnings of a template.

In the words of the Assistant Curator at MERL, “in this age of Web 2.0 and online databases we could pool our expertise and come up with a workable solution!” Given that he has recently joined the RMN Committee, I recommend that this be his first task.



NMS' collection of livestock rosettes



## 5. MEMBERSHIP CONSULTATION

“Good God, did ever woman, since the creation of the world,  
interrupt a man with such a silly question?”

Tristram Shandy  
Vol. I, Chapter 1  
Laurence Sterne, 1759

### 5.1 QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

In 1999, Rob Shorland-Ball circulated 66 questionnaires of which 61 were returned, an astonishingly high response rate. Of these, 27 were independent museums (charitable trusts), 28 were local authorities, 7 were sites run by national museums, and one each were from a university, a national park and The National Trust. These were selected from MGC’s database as having collections of primarily rural significance. Although the research for this report was much smaller in both scope and reach, 53 questionnaires were sent out to members of the RMN and 28 were returned. The numbers are necessarily smaller as the questionnaires were restricted to members of the Network. A comparison of the numbers of different types of museums in both projects appears in Appendix II with the detailed analysis of the complete questionnaire.

Of the 28 museums in the current research project, the breakdown of their status was as follows:

- 14 independent
- 11 local authority (incl. 1 national park)
- 2 national
- 1 university

There are also associate members of the Network who are mostly working independently – and include Rob Shorland-Ball himself – or who wish to keep in touch in their own right with the Network, rather than through the official membership. Of the total associate members, 11 replied to the questionnaire which only comprised section 8, the questions about the Network itself.

#### **Questionnaires returned:**

**NB:** of 28 returned, 3 did not complete the whole of the questionnaire. Where fewer than 25 replied to any question, the number is given in the analysis.

The first section established basic data about the Museum, the details of which are in Appendix II. There was an almost equal split between those who had been in their museum ten years ago and those who were not there:

**Were you at the Museum ten years ago?**

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| at museum 10 years ago            | 11 |
| at museum but in another position | 3  |
| not at museum                     | 13 |

For opening hours and seasonality details, see Appendix II.

The second section looked at the last ten years and firstly asked for three words which would describe them.

The numbers after the words denote how many people used the same words; the adjectives below are in descending order:

**Positive words:**

- development/growth/updating/refurbishment 9
- challenge 6
- professionalism/Accreditation 4
- successful 4
- outreach/education/partnerships 4
  
- change 2
- consolidation 2
- creative 2
- good/attractive 2
- improving 2
- investment/enterprising 2
  
- active 1
- confidence 1
- diversify 1
- dynamism 1
- “family” 1
- focus 1
- hopeful 1
- interpretation 1
- popular 1
- productive 1
- progress 1
- purposeful 1
- solvent 1

All the negative and neutral words are mentioned only as single comments:

**Neutral words:**

- interesting
- survival
- uncertainty

**Negative words:**

- bad
- complicated
- difficult
- hard
- rocky
- ugly

The questionnaire then asked what had been the major changes, firstly for the better, then for the worse. The numbers after the words denote how many people used the same words.

**Positive words:**

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| ▪ collections                       | 10 |
| ▪ more staff/volunteers             | 9  |
| ▪ new partners/better business mgt  | 8  |
| ▪ new displays                      | 7  |
| ▪ new buildings/site/infrastructure | 7  |
| ▪ development plan                  | 7  |
| ▪ learning                          | 7  |
| ▪ HLF                               | 5  |
| ▪ Accreditation                     | 5  |
| ▪ free admission/more visitors      | 4  |
| ▪ survival                          | 3  |

**Neutral/negative words:**

|                               |    |
|-------------------------------|----|
| ▪ <b>reduced:</b>             |    |
| – staff numbers               | 10 |
| – school visits               | 2  |
| – opening hours               | 1  |
| – subsidy                     | 5  |
| ▪ <b>more:</b>                |    |
| – red tape                    | 2  |
| – demands on site             | 2  |
| – increased wear and tear     | 3  |
| – need for regular investment | 5  |

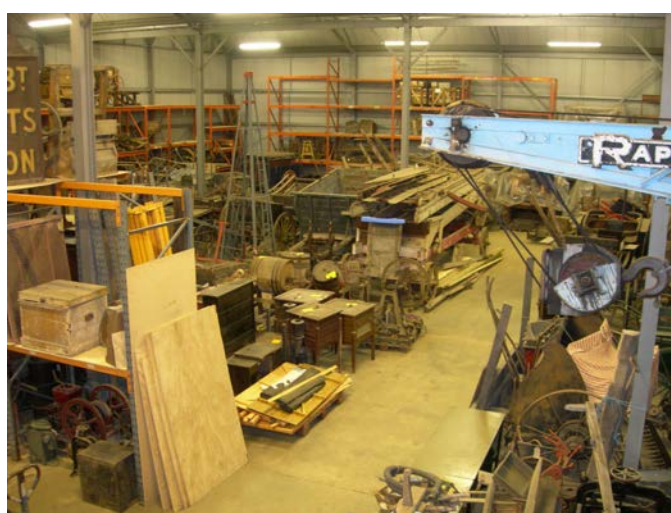
## Staff and volunteers

How many staff and volunteers, both seasonal and all year round, was the focus of the next section. The volunteers are all active volunteers. Staff numbers have hardly changed, considering how much everything else has changed (rising by 22%).

|                                         | 2000 | last complete year | % rise |
|-----------------------------------------|------|--------------------|--------|
| <b>staff (all year FTE)</b>             | 245  | 298                | 22%    |
| <b>staff (seasonal FTE)</b>             | 144  | 150                | 5%     |
| <b>individual volunteers (all year)</b> | 244  | 1,134              | 365%   |
| <b>individual volunteers (seasonal)</b> | 147  | 326                | 122%   |

The staff who work seasonally are 50% of those employed all year, compared to 59% in the year 2000. This demonstrates that as many rural museums only open for the main season, their contribution to the seasonal economy is substantial.

Using HLF figures to cost the value of the time volunteers give, those working in UK rural museums give over £10m of value per year, even working on a very conservative basis to estimate the number of days volunteers work per year<sup>35</sup>. It is striking how many volunteers are working in museums now. It has grown exponentially over the last ten years and the numbers of volunteers is now over four and a half times what they were in 2000. Are rural museums the original inventors of the Big Society?



MEAL's exemplary new store, all the work carried out by volunteers

<sup>35</sup> this figure is calculated conservatively on each volunteer averaging 4 days per month for 10 months of the year, with seasonal volunteers doing 6 days each per month for 7 months, costed at an average of HLF's figure of the value of volunteer contributions (averaging £184 p/day).

### Visitor numbers & admission charges

There were 23 responses in total, however of these, three did not give visitor numbers for the year 2000, so the total number of museums in 2000 is 20 with 23 in 2009/10 column.

There are four museums whose visitor figures are much larger than other museums: St Fagans, NMS Rural Life Museum, Weald & Downland Open Air Museum and Shugborough whose museum does not keep individual numbers but gives those of the whole estate. These distort the overall average, so below the figures are shown with and without the four largest totals.

|                      | 2000           | 2009/10          |
|----------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Total overall visits | <b>922,472</b> | <b>1,393,179</b> |
| Average per museum   | 46,124         | 60,573           |
| Big 4 totals         | 666,932        | 959,852          |
| Total minus big 4    | <b>255,540</b> | <b>433,327</b>   |
| Average per museum   | <b>15,971</b>  | <b>27,083</b>    |

The overall rise in visitor figures since 2000 is 51%; the rise for the top four museums is 44% and the rise for the rest is a huge 70%.

### Of these, how many were in organised groups including schools?

The detailed response to this question was disappointing with reasons ranging from “we don’t keep separate records” through “many parties come without booking and get counted as individual visitors” to “we’re not sure”. The last year (2009/10) saw a total of over 207,000 in group bookings, including schools.

### Do you have an admission charge?

**Yes** 15  
**No** 8

Of these, 3 said *Yes* in 2000 but now they were free admission.  
 One of the free admissions charges for their car park (St Fagans).

In 2000, charges ranged from £1 to £6 or £8 (Shugborough, complete estate). The average admission charge was £3.53. Not every museum knew what they charged in 2000. In 2010, charges ranged from £3 to £9 or £12 (Shugborough). The average admission charge was £5.50.

The next sections of the questionnaire looked at interpretation, learning and events, what was provided and how, if at all, they had changed.

### **Interpretation**

The emphasis of interpretation had changed significantly in 18 museums. Three said they were in the process of changing and four said no.

Of these 18, the following was what had changed:

Generally, the emphasis on interpretation has moved away from technology to people, involving more social history, specific information about individuals, and in some cases, first person interpretation. “Telling the whole story” was the phrase used by one museum. This also applies to the open air museums who interpret buildings: ten years ago their emphasis was on the structure and materials, whereas now they tell the story of who lived in and created the building, how it was used and how it has been altered over time.

Most of the replies outlined how the interpretation was now more professional, was layered, aimed at specific target audiences and had input from learning colleagues. The standard of the physical interpretation had also improved with professionally designed and produced graphic panels for example.

### **Learning**

Learning was very similar to interpretation. Most museums now have more emphasis on learning, and more structure so that learning staff and volunteers had a direct influence upon the interpretation. A greater emphasis on outreach was also present in nine museums. This was because of the high cost of transport which many museums found had depressed their school visit numbers. For both local authority and independent museums, visits by, and contact with, school children are a key performance indicator, so outreach is another method of reaching as many as possible.

### **Events**

Events are organised at all the museums and focus very much on attracting a family audience, with other events attracted specific groups. (See the table in Appendix II for details.) The majority of these events are directly linked to the sites and collections, focussing on seasons, rural crafts, skills and demonstrations, with harvest celebrations such as Apple Day, beer and cider making and traditional food. All museums have specific events at Easter, those which are open also at Christmas and some at Hallowe'en.

Two museums have medieval jousting and Wars of the Roses days, but these are open air museums with medieval buildings. Some events are not connected to the period of the site however, such as the vintage and classic cars, the WWII Home Front, open air cinema and theatre; clearly these have an audience development focus.



Five museums stated that events were less important than they used to be but no museum said they were too much work for limited benefit.

One conclusion here is that events which rural museums run are still very much mainstream and predictable in their focus: rural, family visitor attraction-types of events. The cutting edge work which urban social history museums undertake with racial minority groups, marking important anniversaries (e.g. 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the Slave Trade in 2006, 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11 this year) or interpreting the recent English civil unrest<sup>36</sup> does not appear to happen in rural museums. MEAL is alone in having traditional music and Gypsy days, and Gressenhall touches on global climate change.

Why is this? While it is undoubtedly true that the racial mix is largely different in the country and differs across the UK considerably, there are likely to be more tourists in the rural museum's visitors and more competition from other rural attractions. This apparently constrains most rural museums which pursue safer themes, particularly for events, as they chase the popular and family markets. Is the trend for local authorities to allow their museums to be handed over to independent trusts mostly run by volunteers going to encourage even more "safe" interpretation? Does it matter?

The challenging rural topics which are covered, e.g. poverty at MERL, Traveller communities at MEAL, the privations of the Victorian workhouse at Gressenhall, are just as important as the equivalent urban topics but are largely unrepresented in the majority of rural collection displays and events. Learning, especially with primary schools, does address the hard lives of children particularly and many rural museums have Victorian-style classrooms where typical lessons are delivered. But these types of educational work also take place in many urban museums, especially those which specialise in social history. Even though these topics may be addressed in displays, they do not feature in events which appear to be solely aimed to boosting visitor numbers.

Tony Butler's belief (see 3.2) – for too long rural museums have been seen primarily as tourist attractions, something which has limited their ambition and their achievement – supports this view. Only a few museums, such as MEAL, are making progress in re-inventing the rural museum, finding new local partners and making a bigger impact on their surroundings than museums did ten years ago. Some rural museums however would take issue with this. I found many museums who have strong and suitable local partners, such as Weald & Downland with the National Park and Acton Scott with the RSPB. So does this matter? Is the broad church of rural museums all the better because of the mix; do we want all museums to be as socially active as MEAL? I believe the broad church approach is better and that the sector is stronger because of its variety.

Every one of the 23 museums who answered this question, stated that events are important or essential (and in 7 cases, it was both). Eight considered them vital for income, 13 thought they were an important source of new visitors, and 15 thought they were a main source of income. So, if they are so important, as audience development, as contributors to income and as sources of publicity, should rural museums not be allowed to play safe to achieve these targets?

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<sup>36</sup> see Museums Journal, page 5, September 2011

I have no clear recommendations to make about this especially as learning and in depth discussions about events were not a major part of the brief. I feel it is sufficient here to say that some museums may read this and think again about the main themes of their interpretation and events but some may rightly disagree and continue doing what they are already doing very successfully, bringing in new visitors and entertaining many.

In 2000, despite the Heritage Lottery Fund being established in 1994, only 19 of the 61 responses had had any capital funding. These mostly addressed physical access and visitor facilities, not displays and interpretation. However this research established that all of the museums who responded had had some funding over the last ten years, mostly for capital projects but also for learning and collections-focused projects.

### **What have the improvements been?**

|                                              |    |
|----------------------------------------------|----|
| ▪ HLF projects                               | 13 |
| ▪ Front of House – shop, café, reception     | 8  |
| ▪ Disability Discrimination Act improvements | 4  |
| ▪ collections/stores                         | 10 |
| ▪ redisplay/interpretation                   | 10 |
| ▪ buildings/infrastructure/repairs           | 11 |
| ▪ heritage trail/outreach                    | 2  |
| ▪ learning projects                          | 2  |
| ▪ new museum (NMS)                           | 1  |
| ▪ new expertise/staff (Avoncroft)            | 1  |

Independent museums were asked if they received any funding from their local authority (either cash or in kind).

Of the 16 independent museums (14 + 1 national park + 1 university) who returned questionnaires, 7 said no they did not receive local authority funding and 5 said yes, they did. Of these 5, three of them thought this situation would continue and two thought it would decline in the next financial year.

### **How do you feel about the future?**

17 replies (14 are independent museums)

- optimistic x 6
- emboldened
- hopeful
- improving
  
- cautious
- challenging
- concerned
  
- apprehensive
- pessimistic
- worried
- uncertain x 2

It is striking that the independent museums used more positive words to describe how they felt; many local authority museums did not answer the question at all and some local authority officers did not wish to be quoted in the case studies with the word they had chosen. This begs the question: are independent museums the answer? Is local government's drive to hand over their museums to charitable trusts and other arms length bodies, the right one for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Section 4.1 however has many lessons for these local authorities on this topic.

I am very concerned about the lack of corporate memory in museums generally. This is a significant barrier to learning and organisational sustainability. At least three questionnaires were returned with apologies about not being able to complete visitor figures or expenditure from 2000, a very recent year in museum terms. These questionnaires were all from local authority museums. This is closely linked to loss of specialist collections knowledge (see 4.5) and leads to less experienced curators struggling to identify and learn about their rural collections. The JISC mail discussion group (see 5.2 below) is invaluable for them here. There seems to be little or no staff or volunteer memory being passed to younger members of the profession to learn what has happened in the past. Do we record our objects more effectively and how valuable are these records if there is no curatorial memory?



Rural life collections stored at Somerset Heritage Centre

## 5.2 THE RURAL MUSEUMS NETWORK

The last section of the questionnaire explored the Network itself and its member's opinions of its priorities both in the past and in the future.

### What is your view of the Network? how do you use it?

|                                | museums | associate members |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------------------|
| ▪ essential/important          | 5       | 3                 |
| ▪ helpful occasionally         | 6       | 4                 |
| ▪ attend the AGM               | 3       | 3                 |
| ▪ AGM only if near by          | 5       | 0                 |
| ▪ JISC mail is essential       | 11      | 6                 |
| ▪ keeps us up to date          | 15      | 10                |
| ▪ <i>Turning Green</i> helpful | 5       | 2                 |
| ▪ wish it could do more        | 7       | 1                 |

### What should the Network make its priority over the next three to five years?

mus = museum members

indiv. = individual associate members

|                                                                            | very important |        | important |        | not a priority |        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------|-----------|--------|----------------|--------|
|                                                                            | mus.           | indiv. | mus.      | indiv. | mus.           | indiv. |
| work on the DNC                                                            | 9              | 7      | 10        | 3      | 0              | 0      |
| advice and help with disposal                                              | 9              | 5      | 7         | 3      | 0              | 1      |
| support for curators, such as the JISC mail discussion group               | 13             | 8      | 6         | 1      | 0              | 0      |
| support for collections interpretation, such as the sustainability toolkit | 2              | 4      | 17        | 6      | 0              | 0      |
| support for developing learning materials on rural topics                  | 4              | 4      | 12        | 6      | 4              | 0      |
| advocacy for the sector                                                    | 20             | 7      | 1         | 2      | 0              | 0      |

These results are very clear; the past and current Committee of the RMN should be congratulated for getting it right in the opinion of the Members. Nothing the Network is currently doing is considered to be not a priority (except by one associate member).

The **JISC mail discussion group** is considered to be of high importance by 19 of the 25 museums who returned completed questionnaires, and 8 out of 11 associate members. And some of the interviews I conducted mentioned that while this was useful and important, it could be even more so if it covered other topics apart from curatorial queries. I replied to all that it was up to them to raise topics, the discussion group did not have a life of its own. One example was from Acton Scott when the site Manager stated that the *e coli* outbreak of 2009 caused them a lot of Health & Safety problems as visitors are in direct contact with their animals. He thought that sharing this experience and learning how others had coped would have been helpful to him.

He agreed that he should have raised it himself and hopefully will do so with other topics in the future.

**Collections interpretation** is seen as important but not as high a priority as other areas and there is less support for **learning materials** development than might have been expected (and four thought it not a priority at all).

Clearly although there is much “**green**” **activity** in rural museums in capital developments, learning programmes and events, there needs to be encouragement to interpret these green themes using historic collections and linking them to their present day equivalents. I recommend that RMN continues to encourage museums to use the *Turning Green* project to do so – indeed the toolkit could easily be adapted for urban social history museums too; a possible future link with the Social History Curators’ Group perhaps? The Network should consider commissioning an evaluation of the project’s impact in the coming year. As further SSN funding will be available from the Arts Council, an independent evaluation would strengthen RMN’s case for additional projects.



RMN AGM 2011: in Melton Carnegie’s fine new meeting room,  
members discuss aspects of this report

**Work on the DNC** is still seen as a priority with advice on **disposal** closely following in popularity. These two things go hand in hand and if my recommendations in section 4.5 are followed, the two could become complementary parts of the Network’s vital work.

RMN must use the expertise of its members and its website more actively; it has a great deal to offer the museum sector generally and I hope that this report can be the spur to raise its profile with its peers. There is a strong argument for having a public face to the website, especially if private collectors are to be more closely involved but there still needs to be a member’s section too, as membership fees are too important an income stream.

The only new area of work for the RMN is **advocacy**. This is overwhelmingly important as an immediate priority for most members. This is meant as advocacy for rural museums but in my interviews I explored advocacy generally. Several directors commented that the RMN Committee’s capacity must be limited so it was not

practical to hope that major national level advocacy campaigns could be run. However, they did feel that the RMN had much to contribute to such as the MA or AIM, to put a rural “spin” onto the advocacy of others. Many other SSN’s may also be able to contribute and bring added value but as RMN is one of the most active, it should lead the way. Following a discussion about what sort of response the Committee might be able to offer, I recommend that RMN explores with the MA, AIM and the leaders of the home nation’s cultural bodies (ACE, CyMAL, the new MGS body and NI Museums Council) how it can contribute.



NMS's Tamworth sow and her piglets



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

“It is my belief Watson, that the lowest and vilest  
alleys of London do not present a more dreadful record  
of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.”

*The Copper Beeches*  
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes  
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1892

This report is not full of recommendations as it is a summary of a research project. However, there are many conclusions which apply to rural museums and in some cases, to all museums in the UK. In addition, there are lessons for the Rural Museums Network itself which point to its priorities in the immediate future.

Although much of the evidence in this report is subjective as it comes from the questionnaires completed by RMN members, much of the questionnaire is factual and the case studies are more rounded as these museums have been studied in more depth. I believe that the evidence shows an accurate picture of where rural museums are in 2011 and some of the picture is surprising, perhaps more positive than might be expected.

**Governance** is a hot topic today. There are many new Trusts and arms length bodies being created to take over sites and collections from local authorities, and only in rural areas. The relevant bodies should be watching them carefully and the RMN should monitor the rural museums as best they can as their collections may or may not be at risk. If any of them fail, the local authority may not be able to pick up the pieces. While MDO's still exist in parts of the UK, they should be used to help to monitor collections and organisations.

The charitable trust route for museums is not without its pitfalls and difficulties; it is not the easy option for local authorities. Collections, sites and buildings can still be put at risk in these situations. These young, and usually voluntary-run, organisations require assistance and support as they find their way through new territory. Despite the difficulties which local authorities face, do they offer as much help and appropriate support as they can and will these new organisations be sustainable in the longer term?

I am very concerned about the lack of corporate memory in museums generally. This is a significant barrier to learning and organisational sustainability. This is closely linked to loss of specialist collections knowledge (see 4.5) and leads to less experienced curators struggling to identify and learn about their rural collections. There seems to be little or no staff or volunteer memory being passed to younger members of the profession to learn what has happened in the past. Do we record our objects more effectively and how valuable are these records if there is no curatorial memory?

Although there is much **“green” activity** in rural museums, there needs to be encouragement to interpret these themes using historic collections and linking them to their present day equivalents. I recommend that RMN still encourages museums to

use the *Turning Green* project to do so and considers commissioning an evaluation of its impact in the coming year. As SSN funding will still be available from the Arts Council in the future, an independent evaluation of the impact of *Turning Green* would strengthen RMN's case for additional projects. I believe there is a place for the Network to also explore the topic of whether life in the countryside is different from the town through collections, taking a lead from MERL's *Collecting 20<sup>th</sup> century Rural Cultures* project.

**Work on the DNC** must continue and the Network must publicise its activities more widely both to the sector and to governments. In the face of political and economic change, RMN needs to find a new more mature voice, as it moves from completing the implementation of the Shorland-Ball report to taking some of its work onwards to pastures new. It must use the expertise of its members and its website more actively and show that rural collections can be relevant to other types of museums too.

**Developing the specialist group** is an area where RMN could now take the lead. There is clearly a potential market amongst the membership for leadership and subject specialist guidance and advice, as summarised in section 5. SSN's and specialist groups in the past have focused their activities on seminars, conferences and training courses. With the advent of JISC mail, more widespread use of the internet even by the smaller museums, and limited resources for travel (both time and money), the specialist group needs reinventing; the RMN should take a lead here.

The AGM is still a point in the year where some of the members can meet and those annual gatherings with specific topics to discuss, like the *Turning Green* conference, have been the most satisfying, according to members. During the rest of the year, the website must remain the focus of activity, the first point of call for members to find resources and relevant case studies, not just get help to identify obscure objects. Gareth Beech, the former Secretary, has collated many of the JISC mail discussions about particular topics; suppliers in particular would be one of the most useful sections for members, especially new or young curators who work largely in isolation. The Network is a repository of knowledge about rural crafts, skills and suppliers and a supplier's directory, providing it was kept up to date, would be very useful.

In time, RMN should also consider a regular news email such as AIM and the MA now circulate; many of the Federations are now considering this in England with the demise of regional MLA offices, so the Network could benefit from a link here. Replacing physical meetings with Webinars (web-based seminars) is another approach to be investigated, with the sessions then available to members through the website; these are now accepted in business as a way of widening your market. The Collections Trust, which provides the SSN websites, is always keen to investigate new ideas, so this development is sure to interest them. As the Assistant Curator at MERL said about developing the website "we could pool our expertise and come up with a workable solution!"

There is considerable expertise within the membership which RMN should exploit. All museum professionals are generous in helping others so, providing that the Network is not impractical in its demands, all members would be happy to help according to their capacity. The Network needs to continue to develop and be responsive to the needs of its members. Having asked the members what should be the priorities, the RMN now needs to acknowledge that it has listened.

The only new area of work identified by members for the RMN is **advocacy**. This is overwhelmingly important to them as an immediate priority. I recommend that the Committee discusses what sort of response they might be able to offer, and then explores with the MA, AIM, and the leaders of the home nation's cultural bodies (ACE, CyMAL and the new MGS body) how it can contribute.

**The events** which rural museums run are still very much mainstream and predictable: rural, family visitor attraction-types of events. Though most of them are quite rightly directly linked to the sites and collections, they mostly focus on the seasons, rural crafts and skills, and demonstrations of ploughing. The cutting edge work which urban social history museums undertake does not appear to happen in rural museums. Does the different racial mix and the drive for tourists constrain rural museums to pursue safer themes? Is the trend for local authorities to allow their museums to be handed over to independent trusts mostly run by volunteers going to encourage even more "safe" interpretation?

Overall, I believe that rural museums and possibly most independent museums, are now more fit for the future and better equipped than they were ten years ago. Financial stability for the smaller museums is still not completely achieved, even for those of the most entrepreneurial spirit as MEAL. HLF's investment has been probably the most significant positive influence on museums but Renaissance also had an important effect. Even though this was only a programme in England, it has influenced how others think and established the important precedent of central government funding non-national museums.

Independent museums are definitely better able to respond to economic difficulties than local authority museums, and to a lesser extent, nationals which have to cope with the bureaucracy of governments. Their choices of positive adjectives outlined in section 5 demonstrates this attitude, always identified by AIM as why independent museums are the best museums. While many local authority-established trusts may not be financially robust, especially if the budgets have been decimated before the trust is established, at least having control of your destiny prevents a museum having to cope with the often illogical behaviour this report has outlined as local government looks to save money. The public service cuts which are now affecting museums, will continue to have an impact in the next financial year. Although many museums are able to manage the situation, particularly those which are independent, many will not be able to survive if they have not already worked on their resilience.

So whether rural museums are more **sustainable** in the widest sense, I am not so sure. **Economically**, many of them are more sustainable as they have had significant investment which has resulted in improved visitor numbers and earned income. Some, such as Avoncroft, have become financially stable without local authority grants. However many of them, including leading museums such as MEAL, are still dependent upon local authority income for a proportion of their expenditure.

Despite the investment, these museums will need to refresh and renew their displays and interpretation. How this will be afforded is another matter and in another ten years, it may have become a problem. Does HLF expect to be renewing these museums in which they have invested so much? Is this expensive re-creation of exhibitions sustainable?

**Environmentally** many museums are only dipping their toe in the water (see 4.3 above) though the RMN's *Turning Green* project has clearly had a significant impact.

**Organisationally**, many rural museums have made progress as their investment has changed them significantly but some are still paralysed by the illogical savings imposed by local authorities (see 4.4 above) or struggling to establish themselves as new independent organisations (see 4.1 above).

Rural collections which are part of larger organisations are only occasionally flourishing: be it as part of a national organisation (St Fagans, see 3.4), part of a county service with many sites (Hampshire, see 4.6) or loss of expertise where there has been little or no continuity or handover (e.g. North Lincolnshire Council's Farming Museum at Normanby Hall, and Hampshire again). While critical mass is important for an organisation to be financially stable, local empowerment usually means more motivated staff and volunteers, and more appropriate decisions.

There are three major, significant developments in rural museums over the last ten years. Firstly, the move of rural museums from agriculture to rural social history has been perhaps the most obvious sign of the impact of the Shorland-Ball report. I believe this demonstrates an awareness of the need to engage directly with the general visitor and not put too much emphasis on technology as the agricultural museums had done in 2000. Now many museums are also dropping the word *museum* and concentrating on village/rural life (see 4.1 – Cogges, Church Farm and Kent Life; 4.2.1 – Chedham's Yard and to a lesser extent, 4.3.3 – Gressenhall).

Visitor numbers have risen sharply over the last ten years, in some cases by 70%. This demonstrates the success of improved marketing and audience development in addition to the impact of the substantial investment by HLF and others. It appears to be more than a blip caused by the current economic pressures and speaks of a country eager to find its past and understand its future through shared history.

The staffing figures overall have risen slightly, though this is distorted as several museums did not know what these figures were for the year 2000. It is the number of volunteers which surprises. Museum volunteers are a huge value to the economy of the UK, giving more than £10m of time every year, and rural museums contribute at least £60m to local economies (see Appendix II for details of this). These figures demonstrate that rural museums invented the Big Society long before the Prime Minister and that they are major economic drivers.

It is clear from this research that rural museums are a great deal more pragmatic and more practically in tune with the realities of the modern world than most were ten years ago. The Shorland-Ball report was a wake-up call for most rural museums and many were shocked at its conclusions. Ten years later, Shorland-Ball's recommendations seem quite tame but still fully justified. How much museums have responded to him, even unconsciously, and how much it is changing society and the pressures of competition which have made museums more practical, it is impossible to judge. But the museum and cultural bodies of the home nations, should take note: some reports sit on a shelf or a hard drive, but Rob Shorland-Ball's report came at exactly the right time and has undoubtedly punched above its weight.

Rural museums are the better for his report, and for the support and expertise of the RMN which may never have been founded but for Shorland-Ball's recommendations. His last chapter is called "A new Spring? agriculture and museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century".

Shorland-Ball's thoughts are still as relevant in the next decade as they were in 2000:

"The rural life museums can offer a 'countryside platform' at a time when agricultural and countryside issues are widely discussed but not always widely understood.

The need for a contemporary relevance has been a continuing theme expressed throughout this Study, not least because rural life issues are very much in the public eye and mind. The opportunity for rural life museums to serve as a bridge between rural and urban issues has never been more apparent. The challenge for the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to build the bridge and to provide the ideas, the stimulus and the resources to allow museums to cross it."

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page 50

I trust that this report will help the Rural Museums Network to create and to cross that bridge, and to take at least rural museums with it, if not some of the urban ones too. I believe that the Network can make a significant contribution to sustainability of rural museums. Many of them will need help and support to recover from the recession and public spending cuts and find their own level of sustainable development. Despite being created to implement the recommendations of the Shorland-Ball report, the Network still has much to give today, bringing added rural value to the campaigns of others, contributing to sustainable organisations while also raising the standards of care and the interpretation of rural collections.

**Hilary McGowan**

**September 2011**

## Appendix I

**RURAL MUSEUMS: TEN YEARS ON**

Dear Network members,

Many of you will recall the very thorough review of the rural sector which Rob Shorland-Ball carried out in 2000, on behalf of the Museums and Galleries Commission. This work reported on the status of most rural museums in the UK at the time and was the foundation of the network and the basis for all of the work we have done over the last few years.

We have secured funding from MLA to carry out a review of this report to see how the sector has changed in the last decade and identify current strengths and weaknesses. Hilary McGowan has been appointed to carry out this work. This questionnaire is part of her work. We intend to present the results at this year's AGM in April. Particularly at this difficult time it is essential that we can point to current evidence of the excellent work being done in rural museums and also at examples of good practice in the sector.

**Please expand any section on a separate sheet where you have more to say.** I know that you are all extremely busy, but do please take some time to contribute to this project, it is certain to prove valuable over the next few years.

**Duncan Dornan**  
Chairman, RMN.

**Please return directly to Hilary McGowan** via email [hilary.mcgowan.t21@btinternet.com](mailto:hilary.mcgowan.t21@btinternet.com)

or post to her at: The Old Surgery, Oldmixon Manor, Oldmixon Road, Weston-super-Mare, BS24 9PB

or complete it on the RMN website [www.ruralmuseumsnetwork.org.uk](http://www.ruralmuseumsnetwork.org.uk)

**1. Basic Information:**

**Name of museum?**

**Name and position of person filling in this form**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Were you at the museum ten years ago?**

|                             |                                |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Yes                         |                                |
| Yes but in another position | <i>Please state title then</i> |
| No                          |                                |

**What type of organisation is yours?**

|                 |                     |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| Independent     |                     |
| Local Authority |                     |
| National        |                     |
| Other           | <i>Please state</i> |

**Please state opening hours (and seasonality if relevant)**

## **2. The last ten years:**

An important part of this survey is trying to get some accurate measure of how things have changed in the ten years since the last report. We appreciate that if you were not at your current museum then it may be more difficult to obtain the information, but it is important to have some guidance so we can assess just how things have changed.

**Which three words would you use to describe the museum's last ten years?**

**What are the major changes:**

a. for the better?

b. for the worse?

**Have you had any major investment/developments? If yes, what were they and how were they funded?**

**Have you had any project funding (if not mentioned above)?**

If yes how much?

from whom?

what was it for?

**How would you describe your visitor figures over the last ten years?**

|                     |                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Steady              |                          |
| Fluctuating wildly  |                          |
| Going up            |                          |
| Going down          |                          |
| Levelling off since | <i>Please state year</i> |

**Has any particular category of visitor bucked this trend?**

If so, which categories?

Why do you think that is? What have you done that has made this happen?



### **3. Vital Statistics: visitors, staff and money:**

If you are not sure about the exact figures for 2000 then an approximate figure will be fine. Please also quote the figures for your last complete year and state the date when this year started.

Year: 20..... to 20..... Start date.....

*approximate numbers are acceptable for the year 2000*

|                | 2000 | Last complete year |
|----------------|------|--------------------|
| Overall visits |      |                    |

Of these, how many were in organised groups including schools? (% or number)

|              | 2000 | Last complete year |
|--------------|------|--------------------|
| Group visits |      |                    |

**Do you have an admission charge?**      *yes*    *no*

| If yes, please state the adult charge | 2000 | Last complete year |
|---------------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Adult charge                          |      |                    |

**How many staff posts do you have? (please include seasonal staff if relevant)**

**How many active volunteers do you have?**

*approx. numbers for 2000 acceptable*

|                                  | 2000 | Last complete year |
|----------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Staff (all year FTE)             |      |                    |
| Staff (seasonal FTE)             |      |                    |
| Individual volunteers (all year) |      |                    |
| Individual volunteers (seasonal) |      |                    |

**What is your total expenditure for the last complete financial year?**

**What was your total earned income in the same period?**

|                                                                                 | 2000 | Last complete year |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Total expenditure                                                               |      |                    |
| Earned income<br>(e.g. admission fees, shop income, etc. but <u>not</u> grants) |      |                    |

**4. Displays and interpretation:**

**Have you had any major changes over the last ten years?**

If yes, exactly what were these?

**Has the emphasis in your interpretation changed significantly?**

If yes, how has it changed?

**5. Learning:**

**Has the emphasis in your learning programmes changed significantly?**

If yes, how has it changed and why?

**6. Events:**

**Do you organise events?**                      *yes*      *no*      *someone else uses our site to provide them*

**On how many days per year are events organised?**

**What type of events do you hold? Who is the main market for these?** (tick as many as apply):

| <i>Event</i> | <i>Market</i>   |                 |                      |                         |                           |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
|              | <b>Families</b> | <b>Children</b> | <b>Empty Nesters</b> | <b>Organised groups</b> | <b>Educational groups</b> |
|              |                 |                 |                      |                         |                           |
|              |                 |                 |                      |                         |                           |
|              |                 |                 |                      |                         |                           |
|              |                 |                 |                      |                         |                           |
|              |                 |                 |                      |                         |                           |
|              |                 |                 |                      |                         |                           |
|              |                 |                 |                      |                         |                           |

**Do you think that events are?** (circle/highlight/tick as many as apply):

*essential*                      *less important than they were*                      *our main source of new visitors*

*important*                      *vital for income*                      *our main source of publicity*

*too much work for limited benefit*                      *only bring our existing visitors back more often*

**7. Support from external agencies:**

If you are independent, do you receive any funding from your local authority (either cash or in kind)? if so, please state how much in the last complete year

In the coming financial year, do you believe that this support is likely to (circle/highlight/tick):

*rise**continue**decline**disappear*

What **one word** would best summarise how you feel about the immediate future?

**8. Rural Museums Network:**

What is your view of the Network? how do you use it? (circle/highlight as many as apply):

*essential for us**JISC mail is essential**helpful occasionally**keeps us up to date on what others are doing**never use our membership**only attend the AGM if nearby**always attend the AGM if nearby**always attend the AGM**Turning Green was very helpful**wish they could do more (state what you have in mind)*

What should the Network make its priority over the next three to five years?

|                                                                            | Very important | Important | Not a priority |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| work on the distributed national collection                                |                |           |                |
| advice and help with disposal                                              |                |           |                |
| support for curators, such as the JISC mail discussion group               |                |           |                |
| support for collections interpretation, such as the sustainability toolkit |                |           |                |
| support for developing learning materials on rural topics                  |                |           |                |
| advocacy for the sector                                                    |                |           |                |

**Please return by 24<sup>th</sup> December 2010.** Every questionnaire completed and returned will guarantee you a visit from Santa. Anyone not returning it by the deadline will be visited by his Elves when they are unemployed after Christmas.

**Thank you very much.**

**APPENDIX II****DETAILED ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRES**

28 questionnaires were returned but 3 did not complete the whole of the questionnaire and one of these was only open by appointment so some of the questions were not relevant. Where numbers other than 25 replied to any question, the number is given in the analysis below. The section numbering used here is from the sections of the questionnaire, which appears in full in the previous Appendix.

Of these 28 questionnaires, and the 66 which Shorland-Ball circulated, the following is an analysis of types of museums:

**1. Basic Information:**

| <b>type of museum</b>                    | <b>2011</b> | <b>2000</b> |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                          |             |             |
| agricultural college                     | 0           | 1           |
| independent                              | 14          | 27          |
| national                                 | 2           | 7           |
| local authority                          | 10          | 28          |
| national park                            | 1           | 1           |
| National Trust (none circulated in 2010) | 0           | 1           |
| university                               | 1           | 1           |
| <b>Total</b>                             | <b>28</b>   | <b>66</b>   |

The questions from the questionnaire are now given in bold, with the detailed responses below.

**Were you at the Museum ten years ago?**

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| at museum 10 years ago            | 11 |
| at museum but in another position | 3  |
| not at museum                     | 13 |

**Please state opening hours (and seasonality if relevant)**  
**26 completed questionnaires**

- all year round: 10
- by appointment: 2
- seasonal: 14 in total
  - 10 open from March/Easter/April
  - 1 x mid-March to mid-November daily
  - 1 x Nov. to March weekends only, then daily
  - 1 x Feb. half term to Christmas daily (Jan and early Feb. weekends only)
  - 1 x February to Christmas, daily

## **2. The last ten years:**

The second section looked at the last ten years and firstly asked for three words which would describe them.

The adjectives below are in descending order:

### **Positive words:**

|                                             |   |
|---------------------------------------------|---|
| ▪ development/growth/updating/refurbishment | 9 |
| ▪ challenge                                 | 6 |
| ▪ professionalism/Accreditation             | 4 |
| ▪ successful                                | 4 |
| ▪ outreach/education/partnerships           | 4 |
| ▪ change                                    | 2 |
| ▪ consolidation                             | 2 |
| ▪ creative                                  | 2 |
| ▪ good/attractive                           | 2 |
| ▪ improving                                 | 2 |
| ▪ investment/enterprising                   | 2 |
| ▪ active                                    | 1 |
| ▪ confidence                                | 1 |
| ▪ diversify                                 | 1 |
| ▪ dynamism                                  | 1 |
| ▪ “family”                                  | 1 |
| ▪ focus                                     | 1 |
| ▪ hopeful                                   | 1 |
| ▪ interpretation                            | 1 |
| ▪ popular                                   | 1 |
| ▪ productive                                | 1 |
| ▪ progress                                  | 1 |
| ▪ purposeful                                | 1 |
| ▪ solvent                                   | 1 |

All the negative and neutral words are mentioned only as single comments:

### **Neutral words:**

- interesting
- survival
- uncertainty

### **Negative words:**

- bad
- complicated
- difficult
- hard
- rocky
- ugly

The questionnaire then asked what had been the major changes, firstly for the better, then for the worse. The numbers after the words denote how many people used the same words.

### Positive words:

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| ▪ collections                       | 10 |
| ▪ more staff/volunteers             | 9  |
| ▪ new partners/better business mgt  | 8  |
| ▪ new displays                      | 7  |
| ▪ new buildings/site/infrastructure | 7  |
| ▪ development plan                  | 7  |
| ▪ learning                          | 7  |
| ▪ HLF                               | 5  |
| ▪ Accreditation                     | 5  |
| ▪ free admission/more visitors      | 4  |
| ▪ survival                          | 3  |

### Neutral/negative words:

#### ▪ reduced:

|                 |    |
|-----------------|----|
| – staff numbers | 10 |
| – school visits | 2  |
| – opening hours | 1  |
| – subsidy       | 5  |

#### ▪ more:

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| – red tape                    | 2 |
| – demands on site             | 2 |
| – increased wear and tear     | 3 |
| – need for regular investment | 5 |

### How would you describe your visitor figures over the last ten years?

|                     |                                                                           |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| steady              | 8                                                                         |
| fluctuating wildly  | 0                                                                         |
| going up            | *12                                                                       |
| going down          | 1                                                                         |
| levelling off since | <i>Please state year: 3 museums, levelling off since 2000, 2005, 2007</i> |

\* one of these went free in 2009

also:

- free admission in 2003, levelling off since 2007
- fell rapidly 2001-7, now climbing
- up since 2005
- decline since 2007, then steady increase

**Has any particular category of visitor bucked this trend?****No:** 7

No answer: 6

**Yes:** 10**Why do you think that is? What have you done that has made this happen?**

The reasons mostly concerned better/more strategic marketing of both the museums and events, and HLF and other capital developments which improved the museums and gave valuable publicity. Six also mentioned more focused marketing to schools and a better learning offer more closely linked to the national curricula. Three cited the move to free admission. One independent museum added that it was the result of “a lot of hard work!”

**What are the major changes:****a. for the better?**

|                                             |    |
|---------------------------------------------|----|
| storage/conservation/collections management | 10 |
| more staff/volunteers                       | 9  |
| development plan: work began or implemented | 7  |
| new displays                                | 7  |
| learning/education/increased school visits  | 7  |
| Accreditation                               | 5  |
| HLF                                         | 5  |
| more visitors                               | 4  |
| free admission                              | 4  |
| new buildings/site                          | 4  |
| new partners                                | 4  |
| re-organisation/joint service               | 3  |
| infrastructure improvements                 | 3  |
| better management/better business           | 3  |
| new front-of-house facilities               | 2  |
| major investments                           | 2  |
| improved/maintained funding levels/income   | 2  |
| major investments                           | 2  |
| yes! [sic]                                  | 2  |
| new avenues of collecting                   | 1  |
| improved community relations                | 1  |
| improved profile                            | 1  |
| increased income                            | 1  |
| MDO                                         | 1  |
| fundraising                                 | 1  |
| good Trustees                               | 1  |
| survival (!)                                | 1  |



**b. for the worse?**

|                                             |   |
|---------------------------------------------|---|
| nothing significantly for the worse         | 2 |
|                                             |   |
| reduced staff numbers                       | 7 |
| reduced subsidy looming/loss of grants      | 5 |
| increased wear and tear/demands on site     | 3 |
| reduced schools (transport costs)           | 2 |
| legislation/red tape                        | 2 |
| displays now very old                       | 2 |
| expertise lost                              | 2 |
| cost of heating etc.                        | 2 |
|                                             |   |
| reduced opening hours                       | 1 |
| reduced events                              | 1 |
| outsourcing                                 | 1 |
| no full time educational/curatorial staff   | 1 |
| re-organisation took longer than expected   | 1 |
| more reliance on local authority funding    | 1 |
| poor management by local authority          | 1 |
| Accreditation needed to get funding         | 1 |
| Foot & Mouth legacy                         | 1 |
| less peace and quiet                        | 1 |
| competition from Renaissance-funded museums | 1 |
| no new premises                             | 1 |

In 2000, despite the Heritage Lottery Fund being established in 1994, only 19 of the 61 responses had had any capital funding. These mostly addressed physical access and visitor facilities, not displays and interpretation. However this research established that all of the museums who responded had had some funding over the last ten years, mostly for capital projects but also for learning and collections-focused projects.

**Have you had any major investment/developments?**

**Yes:** all (who answered this question)

**If yes, what were they?**

|                                              |    |
|----------------------------------------------|----|
| ▪ HLF projects                               | 13 |
| ▪ buildings/infrastructure/repairs           | 11 |
| ▪ collections/stores                         | 10 |
| ▪ redisplay/interpretation                   | 10 |
| ▪ Front of House – shop, café, reception     | 8  |
| ▪ Disability Discrimination Act improvements | 4  |
| ▪ heritage trail/outreach                    | 2  |
| ▪ learning projects                          | 2  |
| ▪ new museum (NMS)                           | 1  |
| ▪ new expertise/staff (Avoncroft)            | 1  |

### **3. Vital Statistics: visitors, staff and money:**

#### **Visitor numbers**

There were 23 responses in total, however of these, three did not give visitor numbers for the year 2000, so the total number of museums in 2000 is 20 with 23 in 2009/10 column.

There are four museums whose visitor figures are much larger than other museums: St Fagans, NMS Rural Life Museum, Weald & Downland Open Air Museum and Shugborough whose museum does not keep individual numbers but gives those of the whole estate. These distort the overall average, so below the figures are shown with and without the four largest totals.

|                      | <b>2000</b>    | <b>2009/10</b>   |
|----------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Total overall visits | <b>922,472</b> | <b>1,393,179</b> |
| Average per museum   | 46,124         | 60,573           |
| Big 4 totals         | 666,932        | 959,852          |
| Total minus big 4    | <b>255,540</b> | <b>433,327</b>   |
| Average per museum   | <b>15,971</b>  | <b>27,083</b>    |

The overall rise in visitor figures since 2000 is 51%; the rise for the top four museums is 44% and the rise for the rest is a huge 70%.

#### **Of these, how many were in organised groups including schools?**

The detailed response to this question was disappointing with reasons ranging from “we don’t keep separate records” through “many parties come without booking and get counted as individual visitors” to “we’re not sure”. The last year (2009/10) saw a total of over 207,000 in group bookings, including schools.

#### **Do you have an admission charge?**

**Yes** 15

**No** 8

Of these, 3 said *Yes* in 2000 but now they were free admission.  
One of the free admissions charges for their car park (St Fagans).

In 2000, charges ranged from £1 to £6 or £8 (Shugborough, complete estate). The average admission charge was £3.53. Not every museum knew what they charged in 2000.

In 2010, charges ranged from £3 to £9 or £12 (Shugborough). The average admission charge was £5.50.

**How many staff posts do you have? (please include seasonal staff if relevant)**  
**How many active volunteers do you have?**

|                                         | <b>2000</b> | <b>last complete year</b> |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| <b>staff (all year FTE)</b>             | 245.1       | 297.9                     |
| <b>staff (seasonal FTE)</b>             | 143.5       | 150.2                     |
| <b>individual volunteers (all year)</b> | 244         | 1,134                     |
| <b>individual volunteers (seasonal)</b> | 147         | 326                       |

The staff who work seasonally are 50% of those employed all year, compared to 59% in the year 2000. This demonstrates that as many rural museums only open for the main season, their contribution to the seasonal economy is substantial.

Using HLF figures to cost the value of the time volunteers give, those working in UK rural museums give over £10m of value per year, even working on a very conservative basis to estimate the number of days volunteers work per year<sup>37</sup>. It is striking how many volunteers are working in museums now. It has grown exponentially over the last ten years and the numbers of volunteers are now over four and a half times what they were in 2000. Are rural museums the original inventors of the Big Society?

The Association of Independent Museums (AIM) commissioned a toolkit to enable museums to calculate their economic value<sup>38</sup>. It is designed to be used by individual museums not for groups of them but I took the average contribution of the museum examples given (under the tourism and local economic impact headings), and split them across the small, medium and large museums which returned the questionnaire. Even on this estimated basis, these 28 rural museums contribute over £60m per year to the UK economy, with the medium museums generating at least £500,000 and the largest £4m per year. This demonstrates the economic muscle of rural museums. RMN should broadcast these figures widely.

<sup>37</sup> this figure is calculated conservatively on each volunteer averaging 4 days per month for 10 months of the year, with seasonal volunteers doing 6 days each per month for 7 months, costed at an average of HLF's figure of the value of volunteer contributions (averaging £184 p/day).

<sup>38</sup> the toolkit is available to download from the AIM website: [aim-museums.co.uk](http://aim-museums.co.uk)

#### **4. Displays and interpretation:**

**Have you had any major changes over the last ten years?**

|                                        |    |
|----------------------------------------|----|
| No                                     | 4  |
| Currently undertaking/planning changes | 3  |
| Yes                                    | 18 |

**Has the emphasis in your interpretation changed significantly?**

Of the 18 who said *yes*, the following was what had changed:

Generally, the emphasis on interpretation has moved away from technology to people, involving more social history, specific information about individuals, and in some cases, first person interpretation. “Telling the whole story” was the phrase used by one museum. This also applies to the open air museums who interpret buildings and ten years ago their emphasis was on the structure and materials, whereas now they tell the story of who lived in and created the building, how it was used and how it has been altered over time.

Most of the replies outlined how the interpretation was now more professional, was layered, aimed at specific target audiences and had input from learning colleagues. The standard of the physical interpretation had also improved with professionally designed and produced graphic panels for example.

#### **5. Learning:**

**Has the emphasis in your learning programmes changed significantly?**

Learning was very similar to interpretation. Most museums now have more emphasis on learning, and more structure so that learning staff and volunteers had a direct influence upon the interpretation. A greater emphasis on outreach was also present in 8 museums. This was because of the high cost of transport which many museums found had depressed their school visit numbers. For both local authority and independent museums, visits by, and contact with, school children are a key performance indicator, so outreach is another method of reaching as many as possible.

#### **6. Events:**

**Do you organise events?**

Everyone who answered this question holds events.

**On how many days per year are events organised?** answers varied from 10 to 364.

**What type of events do you hold? Who is the main market for these?**

XX indicates a majority of the respondents ticked these

X indicates more than five ticked these

| <i>Events</i>                        | <i>Market</i> |          |               |                  |                    |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|----------|---------------|------------------|--------------------|
|                                      | Families      | Children | Empty Nesters | Organised groups | Educational groups |
| transport and transport-related      | X             |          | X             | X                |                    |
| working demonstrations/skills/horses | X             | X        | X             | X                | X                  |
| crafts/toys                          | XX            | XX       | X             | X                | X                  |
| seasonal events (Xmas, Easter)       | XX            | XX       |               |                  |                    |
| Harvest/cider making/beer/food       | XX            | X        | X             | X                | X                  |
| markets and fairs                    | X             | X        | X             | X                | X                  |
| vintage/classic car shows            |               |          |               |                  |                    |
| natural history                      | X             | X        | X             |                  |                    |
| Big Draw, museums at night etc.      | X             |          |               |                  |                    |
| 1940's/home front/WWII/jousting      | X             | X        | X             | X                | X                  |

**Do you think that events are?**

| Events                                                                    |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| essential                                                                 | 15 |
| important                                                                 | 15 |
| less important than they were                                             | 5  |
| vital for income                                                          | 8  |
| our main source of new visitors<br>of which 3 said <i>one source only</i> | 13 |
| our main source of publicity<br>of which 4 said <i>one source only</i>    | 15 |
| too much work for limited benefit                                         | 0  |
| only bring our existing visitors back<br>more often                       | 5  |

23 museums answered this question and most ticked more than one category.

Events are organised at all the museums and focus very much on attracting a family audience, with other events attracted specific groups. The majority of these events are directly linked to the sites and collections, focussing on seasons, rural crafts, skills and demonstrations, with harvest celebrations such as Apple Day, beer and cider making and traditional food. All museums have specific events at Easter, those which are open also at Christmas and some at Hallowe'en.

Two museums have medieval jousting and Wars of the Roses days, but these are open air museums with medieval buildings. Some events are not directly connected to the period of the site or the collections however, such as the vintage and classic cars, the WWII Home Front, open air cinema and theatre; clearly these events have an audience development focus.

Five museums stated that events were less important than they used to be but no museum said they were too much work for limited benefit.

One conclusion here is that events which rural museums run are still very much mainstream and predictable in their focus: rural, family visitor attraction-types of events. The cutting edge work which urban social history museums undertake with racial minority groups, marking important anniversaries (e.g. 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the Slave Trade in 2006 or 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11 this year) does not appear to happen in rural museums. MEAL is alone in having traditional music and Gypsy days. The main section of the report considers why this might be the case (pp76-77).

Every one of the 23 museums which answered this question, stated that events are important or essential (and in 7 cases, it was both). Eight considered them vital for income, 13 thought they were an important source of new visitors, and 15 thought they were a main source of income. So, if they are so important, as audience development, as contributors to income and as sources of publicity, should rural museums not be allowed to play safe to achieve these targets?

## **7. Support from external agencies:**

Independent museums were asked if they received any funding from their local authority (either cash or in kind).

Of the 16 independent museums (14 + 1 national park + 1 university) who returned questionnaires, 7 said no they did not receive local authority funding and 5 said yes, they did. Of these 5, three of them thought this situation would continue and two thought it would decline in the next financial year. This is not surprising with the current public spending cuts but what is more surprising is that there were only 5 of the independent museums who receive any revenue funding.

## **What one word would best summarise how you feel about the immediate future?**

17 replies (14 are independent museums)

- optimistic x 6
- emboldened
- hopeful
- improving
  
- challenging
- concerned
- cautious
  
- apprehensive
- pessimistic
- worried
- uncertain x 2

It is striking that the independent museums used more positive words to describe how they felt and many local authority museums did not answer the question at all. This begs the question: are independent museums the answer? Is local government's drive to hand over their museums to charitable trusts and other arms length bodies, the right one for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## **8. Rural Museums Network:**

The final section asked about the RMN itself, how it was used and what should be its priorities in the next five years.

There are associate members of the Network who are individual members, not museums and 11 replies were received from them. They only answered the questions about the Network in section 8 and their opinions are included below.

### **What is your view of the Network? how do you use it?**

|                                | <b>museums</b> | <b>associate members</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| ▪ essential/important          | 5              | 3                        |
| ▪ helpful occasionally         | 6              | 4                        |
| ▪ attend the AGM               | 3              | 3                        |
| ▪ AGM only if near by          | 5              | 0                        |
| ▪ JISC mail is essential       | 11             | 6                        |
| ▪ keeps us up to date          | 15             | 10                       |
| ▪ <i>Turning Green</i> helpful | 5              | 2                        |
| ▪ wish it could do more        | 7              | 1                        |

### **What should the Network make its priority over the next three to five years?**

mus. = museum members

indiv. = individual associate members

|                                                                            | <b>very important</b> |        | <b>important</b> |        | <b>not a priority</b> |        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|------------------|--------|-----------------------|--------|
|                                                                            | mus.                  | indiv. | mus.             | indiv. | mus.                  | indiv. |
| work on the DNC                                                            | 9                     | 7      | 10               | 3      | 0                     | 0      |
| advice and help with disposal                                              | 9                     | 5      | 7                | 3      | 0                     | 1      |
| support for curators, such as the JISC mail discussion group               | 13                    | 8      | 6                | 1      | 0                     | 0      |
| support for collections interpretation, such as the sustainability toolkit | 2                     | 4      | 17               | 6      | 0                     | 0      |
| support for developing learning materials on rural topics                  | 4                     | 4      | 12               | 6      | 4                     | 0      |
| advocacy for the sector                                                    | 20                    | 7      | 1                | 2      | 0                     | 0      |



These results are very clear; the past and current Committee of the RMN should be congratulated for getting it right in the opinion of the Members. Nothing the Network is currently doing is considered to be not a priority (except by one associate member).

The **JISC mail discussion group** is considered to be of high importance by 19 of the 25 museums who returned completed questionnaires, and 8 out of 11 associate members. In some of the interviews I conducted mentioned that while this was useful and important, it could be even more so if it covered other topics apart from curatorial queries. I replied to all that it was up to them to raise topics, the discussion group did not have a life of its own. One example was from Acton Scott when the site Manager stated that the *e coli* outbreak of 2009 caused them a lot of Health & Safety problems as visitors are in direct contact with their animals. He thought that sharing this experience and learning how others had coped would have been helpful to him. He agreed that he should have raised it himself and hopefully will do so with other topics in the future.

**Collections interpretation** is seen as important but not as high a priority as other areas and there is less support for **learning materials** development than might have been expected (and four thought it not a priority at all).

Clearly although there is much “**green**” **activity** in rural museums in capital developments, learning programmes and events, there needs to be encouragement to interpret these green themes using historic collections and linking them to their present day equivalents. I recommend that RMN continues to encourage museums to use the *Turning Green* project to do so – indeed the toolkit could easily be adapted for urban social history museums too; a possible future link with the Social History Curators’ Group perhaps? The Network should consider commissioning an evaluation of the project’s impact in the coming year. If any further SSN-type funding may be available from the Arts Council, an independent evaluation would strengthen RMN’s case for additional projects.

**Work on the DNC** is still seen as a priority with advice on **disposal** closely following in popularity. These two things go hand in hand and if my recommendations in section 4.5 are followed, the two could become complementary parts of the Network’s work.

RMN must use the expertise of its members and its website more actively; it has a great deal to offer the museum sector generally and I hope that this report can be the spur to raise its profile with its peers. There is a strong argument for having a public face to the website, especially if private collectors are to be more closely involved but there still needs to be a member’s section too, as membership fees are too important an income stream.

The only new area of work for the RMN is **advocacy**. This is overwhelmingly important as an immediate priority for most members. This is meant as advocacy for rural museums but in my interviews I explored advocacy generally. Several directors commented that the RMN Committee’s capacity must be limited so it was not practical to hope that major national level advocacy campaigns could be run. However, they did feel that the RMN had much to contribute to such as the MA or

AIM, to put a rural “spin” onto the advocacy of others. Many other SSN’s may also be able to contribute and bring added value but as RMN is one of the most active, it should lead the way. Following a discussion about what sort of response the Committee might be able to offer, I recommend that RMN explores with the MA, AIM and the leaders of the home nation’s cultural bodies (ACE, CyMAL, the new MGS body and NI Museums Council) how it can contribute.



Somerset Rural Life Museum’s farmhouse kitchen

## APPENDIX III

### SITE VISITS AND INTERVIEWS

#### CONSULTATIONS

Rural Museums Network AGM, May 2011  
Society of Folk Life Studies conference, September 2010

#### SITE VISITS

Acton Scott Historic Working Farm, County Museums Service, Shropshire County Council  
Chedham's Yard, Wellesbourne, Warwickshire  
Kent Life, Sandling, Maidstone, Kent  
Melton Carnegie Museum, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire County Council  
Museum of East Anglian Life, Stowmarket, Suffolk  
Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading  
Somerset Rural Life Museum, Glastonbury, Somerset County Council  
National History Museum, St Fagans, Cardiff, National Museums Wales  
National Museum of Rural Life, Wester Kitchside, East Kilbride, National Museums Scotland  
Weald & Downland Open Air Museum, Singleton, Sussex



members of the Network tuck into Melton Mowbray pork pies  
for lunch at their AGM 2011, courtesy of Melton Carnegie Museum

## INTERVIEWS

*all titles are used as at the date of the interview*

Emma Banks, Heritage Project Officer, Chedham's Yard Trust  
 Gareth Beech, Curator: Rural Life, National History Museum, National Museums Wales  
 Roy Bridgen, Curator, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading  
 Martyn Brown, Heritage & Arts Officer, Oxfordshire County Council  
 Tony Butler, Director, Museum of East Anglian Life, Stowmarket, Suffolk  
 Simon Carter, Director, Avoncroft Museum of Buildings, Stoke Heath, Bromsgrove  
 David Close, Trustee, Chedham's Yard and Wellesbourne Parish Councillor  
 Heather Cox, Trustee, Chedham's Yard Trust, Wellesbourne, Warwickshire  
 Jenny Dancey, Curator, Melton Carnegie Museum, Leicestershire County Council  
 Duncan Dornan, General Manager, National Museum of Rural Life, National  
 Museums Scotland  
 Oliver Douglas, Assistant Curator, Museum of English Rural Life  
 Elaine Edwards, Curator of Social History, National Museums Scotland  
 Estelle Gilbert, Somerset Heritage & Libraries Service  
 Robin Hanley, Western Area Manager, Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service  
 Richard Harris, Director, Weald & Downland Open Air Museum, Singleton, Sussex  
 Julia Holberry, Museum Consultant and former Chair of Cogges Heritage Trust  
 Bethan Lewis, Head of St Fagans, National Museums Wales  
 Jef Maytom, former Director, Continuum Group  
 Nigel Nixon, County Museums Officer, Shropshire County Council  
 Richard Pailthorpe, Director, Weald & Downland Open Air Museum  
 Jonathan Platt, Head of Heritage and Libraries, Lincolnshire County Council  
 Bob Powell, Principal Museums Officer, Highland Folk Museum  
 Matt Stephens, District Manager, Lincolnshire County Council  
 Mike Turner, Farm Manager, Acton Scott Historic Working Farm  
 David Viner, Museum Consultant  
 David Walker, Keeper of Social History, Somerset Heritage & Libraries Service  
 Catherine Wilson, Museum Consultant



members of the Society for Folk Life Studies watch bullock ploughing  
 with Richard Harris at Weald & Downland,  
 annual conference 2010