



Collecting 20th century rural cultures

Contemporary collecting at the
Museum of English Rural Life



Main cover image

MERL P FW PH2/
H22/3

Side cover images

MERL 2009/82
MERL 2009/41
MERL 2009/51

Main this page

Artist Norman
Neasom
working at his
Worcestershire
farm. (Private
collection –
Reproduced by
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Neasom Fine Art)

Museum of English Rural Life
University Museums and
Special Collections Service
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The project

In 2008 the Museum of English Rural Life, at the University of Reading, was awarded a grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund as part of its *Collecting Cultures* initiative.

The fund aims to enable museums to collect objects relating to a particular theme which will enhance their collections. The fund was designed not only to support acquisitions, but also to build curatorial skills, enable research, and increase public involvement in contemporary museum collecting.



Main Objects in the Museum's gallery are currently displayed by material and craft. The objects collected during this project more often embody opinions and representations.

Inset Arts and Crafts designer Elizabeth Waterhouse set up an evening metalwork class for young men in the village of Yattendon, Berkshire. The Arts and Crafts movement forged a strong link between art and the countryside. (MERL 2009/24)



The project at MERL was *Collecting 20th century rural cultures*, which aimed to acquire material that builds a picture of the English countryside in the twentieth century, decade by decade. We have tried to collect objects that speak powerfully of their day and illustrate the wider cultural influence of the countryside in twentieth century England. This process also encouraged us to consider the concept of 'rural Englishness' and how it changed throughout the course of the century.

The Museum of English Rural Life was founded in 1951 by academics at the University's Department of Agriculture, and its collections traditionally focus on materials, crafts, and objects used by rural people and communities. As well as filling in gaps in the 'timeline' of objects at MERL, *Collecting 20th*

century rural cultures has enriched the collections with objects that have a greater focus on representations, opinions and perceptions within and about rural places and people. It has also encouraged greater engagement with the public about what we should be collecting.

In the initial stages of the project, a number of keywords were chosen to represent each decade of the century, in an attempt to focus the collecting and ensure a representative spread of objects from different eras. Three over-arching themes were also devised to tie the objects together. These were:

- Representations of the countryside, because our collecting has previously been characterised by technology, technique and tradition

Main *Woolas Hall*, 1954, by Norman Neasom. The artist was inspired to paint rural scenes which were very familiar to him. (MERL 2010/163. Reproduced by kind permission of Neasom Fine Art)

Inset Lilliput Lane models often reflect an idealised view of the quaint English country cottage. Each design is carefully researched to show the materials and architecture of different parts of the country. (MERL 2009/81)



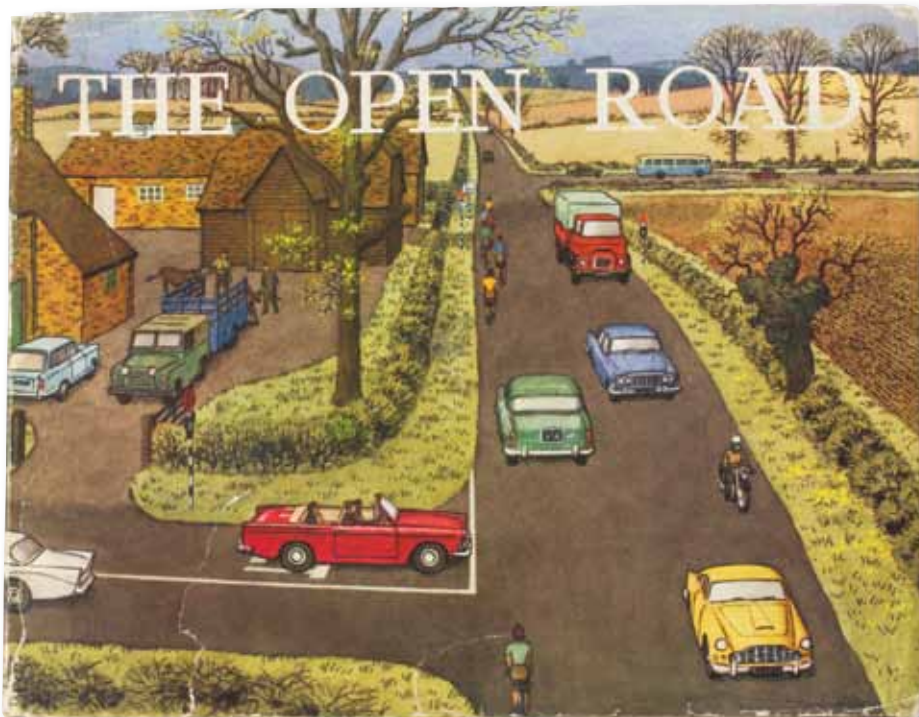
- Objects reflecting attitudes to the past
- Rural icons of the twentieth century: material with a strong rural association or origin which has crossed over into mainstream culture

The actual process of collecting proved that it was quite difficult to fit objects into any one decade, keyword or theme, but these initial thoughts provided the crucial starting context for thinking about how rural cultures can be represented by collecting material culture.



Main Now a common sight in towns and cities, the Land Rover was originally marketed as an all-purpose agricultural vehicle. (MERL PPF PH2/1/691/72D)

Inset The Barbour jacket also crosses multiple collecting 'themes'. It is an everyday item of use in rural communities but more recently also a mainstream urban fashion icon. (MERL 2009/2)



1

The objects

The best way to get a representative picture of the objects we collected is to read the project's blog, which was written by the Museum's Keeper at the time, Dr Roy Brigden.

Roy regularly updated the blog with his own thoughts about new and potential acquisitions, and explained his rationale behind them. The blog was a good way to engage with interested people outside the curatorial world, and many people commented with their own thoughts and suggestions.

1 The 1962 children's book *The Open Road* is full of enthusiasm about motoring and the countryside. Stronger transport links improved many aspects of rural life, but others saw cars and motorways as destructive and invasive. (MERL 2010/142)

2 Organisations such as the National Farmers Union promote the interests of and lobby on behalf of their members. (MERL 2009/58)



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Over four hundred objects were collected in total, ranging from Youth Hostels Association pin badges and Glastonbury Festival programmes to Arts and Crafts furniture and industrial advertising signs. Almost all of the objects span multiple themes and decades. The Barbour jacket, for example, is a commonplace item of practical countryside clothing, but it is also a rural icon which has crossed into mainstream and urban culture.

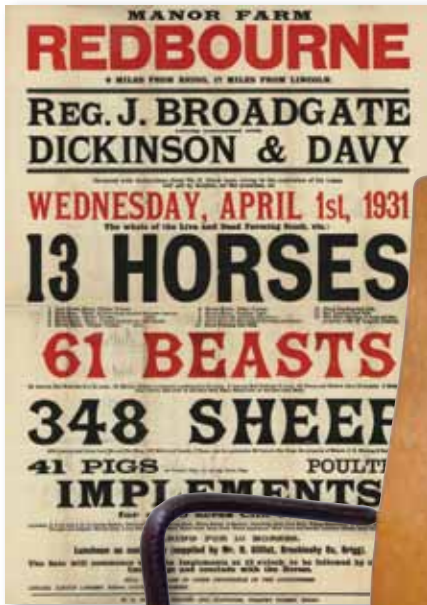
One major output of the project is a temporary exhibition which can be loaned to other museums. It features a small selection of the

objects collected as part of the project, and brings them together into five themes: rural and urban interactions, the countryside as inspiration, representations of the countryside, modernisation, and conflict. Like the starting themes of the project, these are not meant to be definitive, but are the result of a personal interpretation of the objects by the museum staff who worked on the exhibition. Different objects and stories in the exhibition will almost certainly mean something quite different to many visitors.

3 The twentieth century countryside cannot be understood in isolation from the history of towns and cities. Organisations such as the Youth Hostels Association encouraged urban dwellers to explore and experience the countryside. (MERL 2009/60 and MERL 2009/61)

4 Quentin Bell's pottery was influenced by the Bloomsbury set, a group of artists who were regular visitors to the farmhouse where he grew up. Their style made strong links between art and the countryside. (MERL 2010/69)

5 These signs were once a common feature at guesthouses and tea shops where Club members could receive a discount. The countryside was often seen as a place for leisure and holidays. (MERL 2009/63)



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6 Despite improved harvests and steady prices, the agricultural sector was heavily impacted by the economic depression of the inter-war years. Farm sales were common, with farmers selling off their land, stock and equipment. (MERL 2010/5)

7 The furniture designer John Makepeace was greatly influenced by the abundance of natural materials in the countryside. He ran the School for Craftsmen in Wood, which aimed to link modern craft to the revitalisation of indigenous woodland. (MERL 2009/22)

8 This cigarette card is one of a set called *By the Roadside*, which tells collectors about interesting rural places they can easily access from the road network. (MERL 2009/69/27)



9 Posters such as this, designed by Audrey Weber for Southern Railway, encouraged suburban commuters to use the train network to explore the countryside at weekends. (MERL 2010/150)

10 Corgi Toys introduced new models which reflected changes in agricultural machinery. (MERL 2010/14)

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Contemporary collecting

The fact that so many of the objects collected focussed on representations of rural life, rather than objects used in rural communities, highlights one of the main challenges of contemporary collecting.

To successfully collect objects which capture the essence of contemporary cultures it is necessary to build relationships with the communities that the museum aims to represent. But the countryside is not today, and probably never has been, a homogeneous unit. Many of the objects we collected highlight the conflict of opinions about what the countryside was, what it is today, and what it should be in the future.

As the project blog demonstrates, new technology makes it easier than ever before to engage with a wider audience about museum collecting. Contemporary collecting is also not simply about adding 'new stuff' to collections. It is a process that enables museums to gather objects which can cast new light on older collections, continue the stories and themes already present in museums, and gather together new stories from people concerned with the same areas of culture, but in a modern context.



Main

Technological changes even altered the appearance of the countryside. Combine harvesters required larger fields to reduce wastage and increase efficiency. (MERL P FW PH2/ C107/44)

Inset A caricature of anti-farming stereotypes, Farmer Palmer was created by the cartoonist Simon Thorp in the early 1990s. Farmer Palmer used toxic pesticides and had a penchant for shooting dogs. (MERL 2009/21)



Beyond the project

At MERL, the project has strongly influenced the future direction of collecting.

There is an increased focus on collecting objects that are about representations, ideas and change. This shouldn't, and won't, replace collecting objects that show the story of rural technology, crafts and tradition, but rather will supplement and enhance it.

This approach has gone on to influence more recent projects at the Museum. In particular, we are exploring the potential of inter-generational focus groups. These meetings will help us better understand our collections from a variety of viewpoints, and will also enable members of local

communities to make more use of the collections. The success of the project blog has also increased the use of social media to encourage debate and participation: other projects and special exhibitions now have their own blogs which are regularly updated. A dedicated Collections Blog is also due to be launched in the near future, and this will enable us to continue to inform and engage with the public about what and why museums do and should collect.



Main The 1953 coronation celebrations in the Berkshire village of Bucklebury. (Reproduced by kind permission of Roderick Bisset)

Inset *Collecting 20th century rural cultures* has been about collecting ideas as much as objects. This dolls' house conforms to a particular suburban ideal which drew on features of stereotyped rural idyll cottages. (MERL 2008/94)

Collecting 20th century rural cultures

See the Museum website and blogs for more information:

www.reading.ac.uk/merlcollecting20thcruralculture.blogspot.co.uk
blogs.reading.ac.uk/sense-of-place

The *Collecting 20th century rural cultures* temporary exhibition is available for loan to other institutions. If you are interested in borrowing the exhibition, or would like more information, you can contact the Museum using the details below.

Opening times

Museum

Tuesday–Friday 9am–5pm
Saturday & Sunday 2pm–4.30pm

MERL Library and Archives and University Special Collections

Monday 10am–5pm (Restricted service)
Tuesday–Friday 9am–5pm

The displays, library, and archives are closed on some public and University holidays. See the Museum website for further details.

Facilities

- Disabled access
- Disabled visitor parking
- Some limited parking
- Cycle racks
- Fully accessible WC
- Assistance dogs welcome
- Induction loop available
- Portable stools to take round the gallery
- Baby changing


Stay in touch

To join our mailing list to receive our *What's on* guide and/or a monthly e-bulletin with details of events and activities email merlevents@reading.ac.uk

To follow us on Twitter go to twitter.com/MERLReading

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