



Building Relevance for Rural Museums

Creative Forum

20th January 2006

A Summary of Ideas

DRAFT

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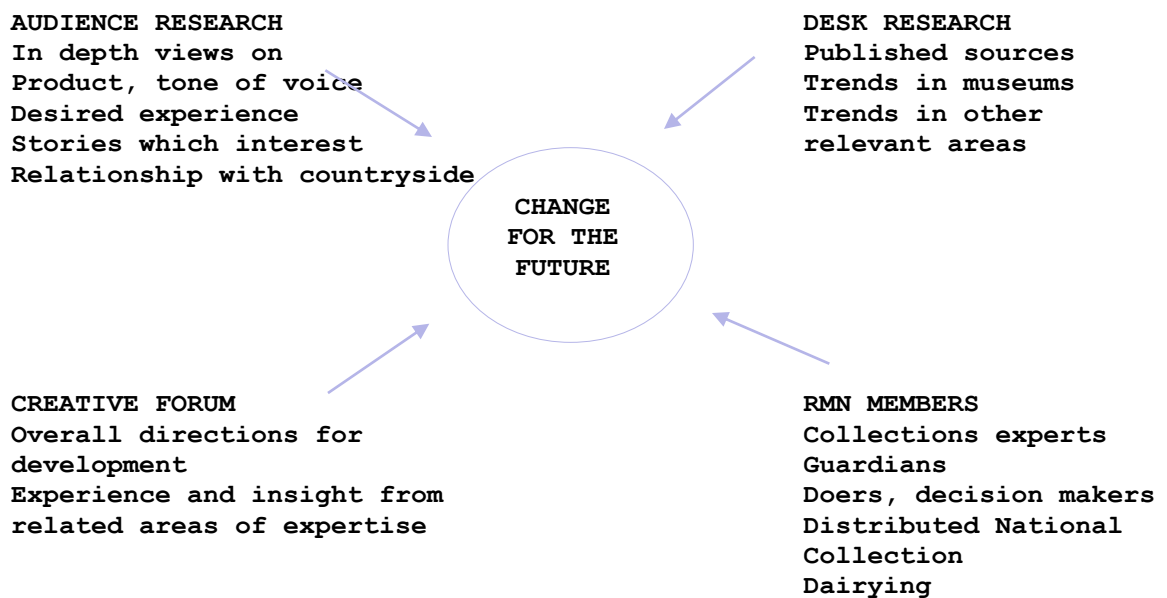
I • INTRODUCTION

1 • The Building Relevance Programme

The Rural Museum Network has been funded to carry out a one off programme to examine the relevance of rural museums to modern audiences. The key problems to be answered are

- What are rural museums for?
- Who are the audiences and what do they enjoy?
- What do the collections bring to the party?

The initiative draws in contributions from four sources.



This report details the thinking from the creative forum.

2 • The Creative Forum

The creative forum, held at the Museum of English Rural Life on 20th January 2006 was made up of nine valued professionals specialising in areas of relevance to rural museums.

Participants were

Bill Graham	Farming & Countryside Education
Stephen Greenberg	Metaphor, master planners, architects and education designers
John Hamshire	Sheffield Industrial Museum Trust
John Holden	DEMOS, the think tank for everyday democracy
Christopher Howard	Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Service
Simon Masters	Lecture on Forestry and consultant on renewable energy
Rosemary Moon	Food consultant, writer and communicator
Janet Owen	National Maritime Museum, Curator
Mary Peterkin	Independent Branding Consultant

Also in attendance

Roy Brigden	Museum of English Rural Life
Stuart Gillis	Norfolk Rural Life Museum

The day session was moderated by Susie Fisher. The Susie Group had undertaken the Audience and Desk Research. Participants were given Audience and Desk Research ahead of time and on the day they were asked to think strategically about new directions for the future of rural museums.

Their agenda ran as follows

What is the purpose of rural museums?
SWOT analysis

Strategy definition workshops

Product

Marketing

Finance

Brainstorming problems and ideas

The group pitched in with a free flowing mix of ideas, opinions, parallel experiences, insights, analysis and brainstorming.

The purpose was to provide a platform for Network members from which they could pose the question 'How can these ideas benefit rural museums?'

II • CONCLUSIONS

- Rural Museums are being asked to think big and to work efficiently as a sector in order to command attention and tell relevant stories.
- They have a recognised authority as the 'Gateway to the Locality' and Steward of the Countryside'. Everyone feels a spiritual belonging to the land. The land involves nature, landscape, local heritage as well as farming.
- In addition to preserving collections, rural museums will need to become skilled at identifying and telling stories. Think of the objects as props in a narrative which creates meaning.
- Rural museums need to recognise the leisure and entertainment needs of their audiences and provide a richer quality of experience. Hands-on, live and real will be essential elements. Fun too.
- Fresh opportunities lie in exploring the subject of food, in the modern idiom, involving supermarkets, branding, tasting, cooking as the natural complement to methods of production.
- Dangers lie in the level of alienation which an urban audience can feel for the country. This means a rural museum must make a special effort to create a welcome for them. The City is the complement to the Country. The rural museum must address the contrasts and talk about the issues which unite and divide people.
- Rural museums will generally be recognised as more relevant when they show an awareness of more universal (global, national) issues and draw in the

links. This will need to be a central concern, not an afterthought.

- The expectation is that rural museums will need to prove themselves to be adept in the modern world. A confident approach to technology will be needed and a willingness to engage with commerce. Partnerships of all kinds are seen as a liberating and fruitful way forward.

III • THE THINKING ON THE DAY

1 • What are Rural Museums for?

The strong consensus of this group was that Rural Museums should broaden their purpose. Think big.

'To show the countryside in our lives past present and future'

The danger they perceived, was that rural museums would confine themselves to presenting historic farm life largely through agricultural machinery. This was a message, which would be lost in a world where farms were not top of mind and where peoples' interest and knowledge were relatively low.

These were the purposes which emerged for rural museums.

- Setting up challenge and personal meaning.
- Preserving authentic collections.
- Being the guardian of human relationships with the land.
- Acting as gateway to the locality.

- Mounting a countryside leisure experience, attractive to visitors.

a • Setting up Challenge and Personal Meaning

The group puzzled over the idea of 'education'. Of course it was worthy but they wanted to achieve a more personal meaningful result for people.

They rejected the idea of a syllabus of knowledge which visitors were meant to absorb.

The key words instead were

Questions	Spark
Debate	Meaning
Challenge	

The idea of debate is linked to contemporary issues. It would be for the museum to raise the issues and provide the comparisons from objects, from the past, from other parts of the world, so that the visitor could begin to see, understand and form a view.

b • Preserving Authentic Collections

It is the duty of museums to collect and preserve. They are different from a range of other organisations in that they identify, value and preserve the authenticity of their objects. You can be sure you are looking at the real thing.

c • Guardian of Human Relationships with the Land

Peoples' current relationship with the land is unlike that of any other time in history, due to a mix of

Urban living
The pre-eminence of technology
The disassociation between food and the
means of growing it

Nevertheless, everyone feels they have a spiritual relationship with nature and land, even if they are alienated from UK farming. It can be the role of rural museums to broker and illuminate this broader relationship.

The museum is uniquely equipped to examine how this relationship, dependency even, has changed over time. This approach can incorporate modern ideas of respect and sustainability.

d • Gateway to the Locality

Most regions in the UK have sprung from farming roots. Probing the history, heritage and identity of an area will inevitably delve into a complex society based on farming. The job of the museum is to bring to life the complexity of this society. It uses objects to establish meaningful (live) links with a past world. To quote a phrase, it passes on 'the inter-generational equity'.

e • A Countryside Leisure Experience

The forum were quick to point out that museums had a multiplicity of agendas, including the agendas of their funders and the agendas of the marketplace. These last two could not be ignored or the site would not prove practically viable.

In the profit making sector, visitor attractions catered to the needs of their visitors and recognised that people visited during their leisure

time. Museums should therefore provide a mix of experience suited to leisure time.

This will include

Entertainment

Retail opportunities

Nice food

Play areas

as well as learning. Ideally learning should permeate all of these.

2 • The SWOT Analysis

a Strengths

- **A spiritual resonance with the visitor.**
- **Rooted and unique within the locality.**
- **Recreational, outdoor.**
- **Accessible and inviting participation.**
- **Live**

By nature of their link with the land, rural museums could claim a spiritual resonance with the visitor. There would be an emotional tug An authentic look at the old ways, in which 21st century audiences, would ask themselves if the artefacts of this way of life held the answers for the post industrial society of the future. A reality check for soft city folk.

As museums, the sector was the proper guardian of this deep knowledge. And because of its own rooted identity within the locality, it was uniquely placed to interpret the history and identity of its own community.

Unlike traditional museums, the rural museum was often outdoor, which immediately constituted a more recreational experience for the visitor. The outdoor experience was not only true to its subject matter, it was also more in line with peoples' mental image of visiting the countryside.

Using their outdoor sites, rural museums were able to mount events and demonstrations which could be more spectacular, relaxed, carefree than they could have been indoors.

Collections, concepts and history all suggest a high level of visitor participation. The objects are by and large robust, inviting, hands-on, not needing to be encased. The buildings themselves are integral parts of the story and people can go inside and climb up and down. Because they were built for purpose, the objects are intellectually accessible and easy to link to activities which tell the stories the museum needs to tell.

Mixed farming is built on a foundation of life and growing. Rural museums have an inbuilt capacity for celebrating living things; livestock, plants, nature. These can create a live ethos; with live exhibits and demonstrations, the scene is animated, emotional and visceral.

b Opportunities

- **Building a varied visitor package**
- **Designing constructive play areas**
- **Bringing the food chain to town**
- **Tasting and experiencing food**
- **Responding to existing funding budgets**
- **Using the Web more widely**

Opportunities lay in designing a visitor package, designed to appeal to visitors on a number of levels, recreational as well as educational.

Rural museums could benefit from clustering together with other organisations which rounded out the experience

e.g.	a home farm	a
retail outlet		
a forest	RSPB	

new (and old) varieties of apples, strawberries, tomatoes and commodity foods which are taken for granted. It was intrinsically satisfying to have tasted the best and to be able to compare them.

Once re-awakened to the range and possibilities of food, people were going to be more interested in the food chain. How food gets from farm to supermarket to us and what kind of food at that. Farmers' markets were a natural magnet and a good route for beginning to personalise the food chain and relate it back to farming. There was much excitement about the idea of bringing rural museums physically into the towns. Could they make an appearance at Borough Market? Spitalfields? Waitrose Car Park? This was an opportunity for partnership with the supermarkets.

Food is a global industry, which means that farming is a global pursuit. There is scope for international comparisons. Twining with a French farm/supermarket/region appealed to people who had holidayed in France, but knew next to nothing about farming methods on either side of the Channel.

Triggered by a universal desire to follow a socially inclusive agenda, was the idea of links with African farmers, who were expected to be producing crops and animals using methods much closer to those of 19th Century Britain. The additional advantage here was the substantial regeneration and inclusion funding which was available to collections, able to contribute to these agendas. This wider remit was considered to be an intellectual step forward for rural museums which had hitherto had a much narrower focus.

The final opportunity lay with the Web. Forum participants were not aware of a Web presence for rural museums. They felt it should be fully exploited.

Education and schools audiences
Visitor promotion

c • Weaknesses

- Fear
- Ignorance
- No easy way in
- Male
- Outside the National Curriculum
- Local Authority strait jacket
- Low audience profile
- Staff training levels

The weaknesses of the rural museums' position lay in peoples' psychological attitude to the countryside. Surprising perhaps in a group of confident, well educated professionals.

People were afraid of the countryside. Why? They felt wrong footed. They didn't know the rules and they didn't feel welcome. In the words of one participant.

"I don't do country."

It turned out that if you a family/childhood connection with the countryside, there were fewer barriers. People felt ready to be re-introduced to the places and the issues. That said, they worried that certain groups, notably ethnic minorities, were rarely seen in the country and were unlikely to feel welcome there. The countryside was not a place which addressed issues related to cultural diversity.

There was not even an agreed conception of what the countryside was. Because the boundaries were unclear, this had repercussions for establishing access.

In physical terms, were you allowed into country estates, were you free to wander in woodlands or through the farmers' fields? Feeling uncertain, City people might look to the National Trust or English Heritage to mediate and give permission.

In intellectual terms, farming language could be technical and excluding, 'dibber', farrowing pen and so on. Lurking also is the suspicion that this is a male world; mechanical, tough and dare they say it? Boring.

Ignorance combined with a lack of welcome is not the most motivating contribution for attracting visitors to a museum on rural life. Currently, young people have little chance to conquer their lack of knowledge as rural/agricultural history has fallen out of the National Curriculum.

Those participants with a museum background recognised that rural museums found themselves in a Local Authority straitjacket. Working with limited funding and often to a political agenda. This had limited their capacity for change. Allied to this, staffing levels and levels of staff training had largely kept rural museums in the same groove as they had always been. Museums would need empowered staff, skilled in telling stories, through objects, in order to make visitor centred changes.

Finally, the forum identified the problem of low visitor awareness. The countryside is often not top

of mind for potential audiences in itself and against this background rural museums can be even less salient.

d • Threats

The threats lie largely with audiences. The issue of whether to visit a rural museum may simply never arise. Even if people do, their own feeling of alienation from the countryside, combined with the suspicion that it's all a bit boring might not tempt them.

The danger is that visitors looking for a day out, will choose other visitor attractions which are physically more tempting and overall more entertaining. Desk research suggests that

Gastropubs	Horse riding holidays
Garden Centres	Farmers Markets

are all growing. These are the kinds of activities which may steal audiences from rural museums.

3 • Strategic Directions for Rural Museums

The creative forum considered the way ahead from the points of view of

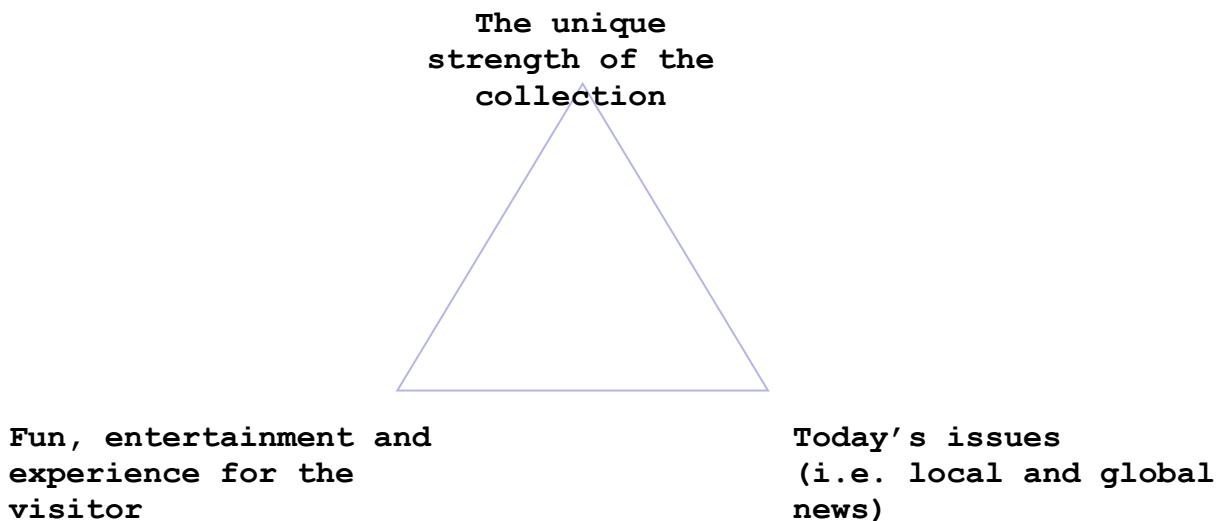
Product Development

Marketing

Finance

The consensus was that rural museums should broaden, step out of their familiar narrow groove and be seen to act with modern world confidence. Embracing today's issues was the obvious path towards relevance.

The key was to unite three strands.



The territory which rural museums should seek to occupy can be summed up under the following headings.

- More engaged with the world at large.
- More welcoming and inclusive for urban visitors.
- A wider role; centre for countryside, nature, landscape, food, local heritage.

POSITIONING ISSUES

- A richer visitor experience using physical involvement.
- A willingness to get involved in peoples' stories.
- Technology confident.
- A more widely skilled staff base.

PRODUCT DESIGN

- Working in partnership with each other and the commercial world.

BUSINESS MODEL

The richness of the forum's thinking is best communicated through the range of issues in which they wanted to see change. From this to that. It will be in considering the journey from 'this to that' that the sector will begin to engage with its new strategic direction.

a More engaged with the world at large

FROM	TO
Narrow Focus	Broad Focus
Rural	City and country
Self contained	Connected to the world
Excluding	Including
UK only	Third World
Accepting	Challenging
Apolitical	Political
History, preservation	Life's big issues
Picture of the past	Contrast with the present

This entailed a broadening of focus. Instead of thinking of themselves as self contained, rural museums were urged to connect to the world, exploring connections, not only in the UK but into the Third World too.

Rural museums should become the territory for exploring urban/rural contrasts, rather than agriculture in isolation. This throws a country perspective on life's big issues rather than tethering the museums to a traditional base of History and Preservation. The picture of the past is used to contrast meaningfully with the present.

The emphasis moves from excluding to including, from apolitical to political, from accepting to challenging. The price of engaging is to court danger, the issues which matter to people are controversial.

e.g. City folk buying up the countryside

Super mechanised agriculture

To offer them for analysis and debate is to raise ones' head above the parapet.

b More Welcoming and Inclusive for Urban Visitors

FROM	TO
Excluding	Welcoming
Country audience	City audience
White	Multi-ethnic

Many people feel excluded by the countryside. In order to counteract this, rural museums need to be actively welcoming. The sector needs urban audiences. They have to be recognised, understood, addressed and welcomed. Ethnic minority audiences are a special case because they are even less visible in the countryside. Extending access to minority groups in the UK is high priority and often well funded. There is every reason for rural museums to identify the subject links with ethnic communities and their countries of origin.

c A Wider Role

FROM	TO
Rural	Countryside
Machinery	Nature, landscape, soil,
Farming only	people
Agriculture	Guardian of local identity,
	heritage
	Food, food chains, trendy
	foods

Rural museums have centred on 'farming', but for people at large 'the countryside itself' is more likely to be the key concept. They will contrast city and countryside. They may barely be aware of farms.

If the sector thinks of itself as the preserver and interpreter of the heritage of the countryside, then it will be stepping into a big role, with a lot of good will behind it. The term 'rural' may need to be dropped in favour of 'countryside'.

The museum becomes guardian of the identity and heritage of the local area. These artefacts and this way of life, tell the tale of the place in which you stand. Its stories and its people are woven in and it will be unique.

In addition, many people equate the countryside with nature and landscape. They will look to the countryside museum for illustration, guidance and authority; animal and plant species, the lie of the land, the soil, the rivers.

Agriculture does not disappear but it is related more closely to food; food chains, food varieties, trendy foods, supermarkets.

d A Richer Visitor Experience, using Physical Involvement

FROM	TO
Hands off	Hands on
Intellectual	Intellectual, physical,
Food in the	emotional
abstract	Real food, eating
Boring	Entertaining
Visual only	Animated hands on,
Object focused	participant
Single experience	Visitor focused
Dead	Textured experience
	Alive and growing

People typically learn and enjoy more by physically experiencing something. Much is available to them to experience in modern museums, including retail and entertainment.

Whereas rural museums might have been set up to yield a hands off, intellectual, reward , nowadays visitors want a more textured ride. They want the full emotional and physical impact in order to enhance the intellectual. In practice, this means hands on, not hands off, eating the food as well as being told about it, planting the seed rather than just looking at pictures.

Objects are more boring if they seem dead and you are not allowed to touch. Rural museums have the scope for live exhibits and a plethora of robust objects which could be touched and put to work. The emphasis moves from object focused, i.e. letting the object determine the display, through to visitor focused, letting the visitor's needs determine how the object is displayed.

e A Willingness to get Involved in Peoples' Stories

FROM	TO
Objects	Stories
Impersonal	Personal
Displaying objects	Raising questions
General themes	Individual rooted stories
Haphazard	Managed storytelling
storytelling	Lifestyle and livelihood
Kit	Full of personal meaning
Static Objects	Collections are for people
Collections	are
enough	

The fundamental assumption here is that collections are not enough in themselves. Collections are rather for people and about people. Individual objects tell the stories of the people who designed and used them.

Under this regime, objects move from being impersonal to personal, from being static to being charged with personal meaning. No longer 'just kit', they are the means of explaining how people lived and how they gained their livelihoods. General themes are explored real rooted histories. The people shine through.

Currently, the storytelling on display is partial and haphazard. The new approach signals a need for **managed** storytelling. Deciding in conjunction with the collections, which of the stories you will tell and using the objects to bring out their integrity. Objects will no longer simply be displayed but will illustrate the stories to be told and raise questions and challenges for the present day.

f Technology Confident

FROM	TO
Low tech	Hi-tech, virtual, web
Old technology	New technology
Analogue	Digital
No TV	Channel 4 series

Confidence with modern technology wins credibility and status in today's world. People want to see that rural museums are at home with new technology. Otherwise they are confirmed as old fashioned, yesterday's man. Technology has a ubiquitous role, it can be seen in displays, marketing, education, communication, commerce. Rural museums are urged to move from low tech to hi-tech, making use of Web, virtual experience, PDA's, television.

g A more Widely Skilled Staff Base

FROM	TO
Low tech	High tech, virtual web
Old Technology	New technology

The forum was concerned for the welfare of staff. The demands of the new approach were felt to be currently outside their skills and training. But it would need a positive, confident, empowered staff to make the whole thing work.

They wanted staff to move from the backwaters to being empowered and upfront. Rather than placing the emphasis only on curatorial skills, museums would need a range of skills, not the least of which

would involve storytelling. More training for existing staff and more staff with different skills.

h Working in Partnership with each other and the commercial world

FROM	TO
Single museums	Partnerships
Isolated	Leadership
initiatives	Multiple financing
Local authority only	Business partners/sponsors
Academically aloof	Smart
Naive	Big time
Small time	Partners with supermarkets
Hostile	High profile
supermarkets	to Clustered with others
Low profile	High quality
Out on their own	
Quality neutral	

The big change here was the move away from isolation and the synergy to be gained from working in partnership.

Single museums were encouraged to work in partnership with other museums, with businesses, with other organisations.

Sometimes physical clustering together with, say, related shops, farm, restaurant, playground carried a beneficial momentum.

The Rural Museums Network itself was felt to have real leadership potential, rescuing the sector from repeated small initiatives and leading the body of

museums instead onto greater goals (and funding) which could benefit all.

Rural museums would have to change from being academically aloof to being prepared to tangle with business partners and financial sponsors. Supermarkets were a key issue. Rather than reflecting hostile attitudes to supermarkets, (in all probability, shared with today's farmers), the museums would do well to work with them. They could explore interests in common and complementary skills.

People assumed that the sector would be hobbled by its dependence on local authority financing. The ideal would be to have multiple financing strands.

One result of greater engagement with the commercial world was a certain smartening up. Museums would be seen to move from naive to smart, from small time to big time, from low profile to high profile. The expectation was that quality would receive a boost as a result.

4 • Some Ideas to Play With

Ideas and brainwaves give a more down to earth feel for what the strategy directions might mean in practice.

The ideas and half formed thoughts from the forum are listed here without comment. They give the flavour of what is possible.

a More Engaged with the World at Large

- Demonstrating practical aspects of sustainable living and local energy (solar cells), local food (farmers market).
- How will we feed ourselves after the Apocalypse? Looking to the essence of the tools of the past to get us through the future. The secrets of the future.
- Exploding the myth of the City/Country divide. Aren't we all just suburbanites really? Supermarkets, petrol stations, garden centres, industrial units and housing estates are everywhere.
- Take the objects out of the museum and go travelling to the towns. Waitrose car park, the foyers of hotels, Borough Market. The objects both contrast and are relevant to their new contexts.
- Pick up on the issues in the papers.

Genetic engineering
 Alcohol and drug abuse
 Housing, building on greenfield sites
 Climate change and its effects
 Fox hunting
 Pesticides
 BSE, hygiene, Bird Flu, Disease

b More Welcoming and Inclusive for Urban Visitors

- Museum brand ice-cream..
- Direct comparison with a specific rural community in Africa or Romania or India. Connect the communities.

- Market together in clusters e.g. museum stories about dairying, multi stall farmers' cheese market. Ploughman's lunch extravaganza. Milling experience. Modern Probiotics.
- Think of audiences as different identifiable groups e.g.
 - grey learners
 - eco warriors
 so you can really get to know them.
- Use familiar language
 - 'From teat to tippie'

c A Wider Role - Centre for Countryside, Nature, Landscape, Food, Heritage

- Increase dwell time by having identifiable zones of markedly different character.
- Think of yourself as 'gateway to the locality'.
- Enjoy explaining current food and trends. What are probiotics?
- Give a dramatic sense of place, though the senses.
- Show visitors who would have been in their family (or as good as) i.e. who they are themselves.
- The present is continuous with the past, but how?
- Each collection has to puzzle out its **specific** relevant message.
- Have 'a self reliant in food' patch. Could **you** do it?

d A Richer Visitor Experience Using Physical Involvement

- Waitrose food fairs. Fun, tasting, colour, music. A celebration outdoors.
- Taste 20 rare varieties of apple. Are they different? What's best?
- Horse dentistry in France. Irresistible. How does he hold the horse and get at the teeth?
- Children's play area designed as a rolling mill. Makes a virtue of necessity. They grasp the process as they play.
- Have farmyard toys to play with and sell. Will they show mixed farming? Why?
- Give the visitor an animal to look after. Grooming, feeding, mucking out.
- Make a dramatic difference between indoors and outdoors. Use the weather.
- Set up a car boot sale. Themed?
- Provide access to extreme sports e.g., rock climbing, pony trekking, mountain biking.

e Willingness to get Involved in Peoples' Stories

- Personalise the interpretation with a real storyteller like Ray Mears. You **want** to know how he sees it.
- Get a BBC Costume Drama commissioned on site and with the best stories.

- Use celebs and use their power to influence.
- Think of the museum as having the props to tell the story.
- Ask what's at the heart of an object. Why does it move you?
- Take a theme and make it specific. e.g. hands and tool relationship. Whose hand? Which tool? What was at stake?
- Symbiotic relationships, humans with animals, city with country, young with old.

f Technology Confident

- Production values are as important for getting people in as are the objects.
- Get Channel 4 onto it.
- What could you do with PDA's?

g Wider Staff Skills Training

- The Network should work out the core message for the sector as a whole. Each museum works out the local link. Everyone benefits from wider publicity and the message is reinforced at each visit to each rural museum.
- Measure the core Metrics and benchmark.
- Get your till roll to collect the demographics.

h Working in Partnership with each other and the Commercial World

- Actively look for sponsorship. NDC, Waitrose, RSPB.
- Try and benefit from the corporate social responsibility budgets of big corporates.
- Benefit from local regeneration budgets for rural areas.
- Look for multiple income streams, catering, car park, entry fees.
- Ask if a Trust structure would be more liberating?
- Work with the National Curriculum on content and relevance.
- Ask the question loudly.
 'What business are we in'?