



Building Relevance for Rural Museums

Desk research and literature review

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Prepared for

The Rural Museums Network
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Contents

Desk research and literature review.....	1
Rural museums – audience development.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Contents	2
1. Context.....	3
3. The countryside.....	5
Living in the countryside.....	5
Visiting the countryside	5
4. Rural Museums.....	7
A SWOT analysis.....	7
5. Learning from other sectors.....	10
Crafts	10
Farmers markets	10
Garden centres and gardening.....	11
Gastropubs	11
Libraries	12
Horse riding.....	12
6. Promising visitor segments for Rural Museums.....	14
Grey learners	14
Rural suburban comforts.....	15
“Down the farm” entertainment.....	16
Local and proud.....	18
Eco solution seekers.....	20
Agri-anoraks	21
7. Conclusions.....	23
8. Key sources.....	24

1. Context

The Rural Museums Network commissioned the Susie Fisher group in October 2005 to undertake some primary and secondary research to help rural museums develop their future strategies. This desk research ran alongside the qualitative discussions held with members of the public in November 2005. The qualitative findings are detailed in a separate report. The desired outcome of the overall project was

“to provide a map of the terrain in which Rural Museums need to operate. Within this map it should be possible for individual museums to identify and understand where they should best locate themselves.”

We have used a broad set of data in this literature review to outline some of the main opportunities for rural museums. There is a particular focus on learning from other sectors and the mapping of potential visitor segments.

2. Museums

- Museums are among the UK's most popular attractions. Over 77 million visits are made to them each year - more than to any other category of visitor attraction (Resource, 2001). London museums are the most popular and have seen a substantial increase in visitors following the end of admission fees in 2001.
- Regional museums, and especially smaller museums, have struggled more than national museums. There is an overall trend away from smaller attractions, to larger attractions (Visit Britain, 2004b). Regional museums are now receiving special support through the government's Renaissance in the Regions initiative.
- Many museums and galleries have improved their offer to meet raised expectations and to see off competition from other types of visitor attractions. They have been fairly successful. The proportion of people mentioning that museums are boring places to visit halved from 12% to 6% over a five year period to 2004 (MLA, 2004).
- Lack of time is becoming a more significant barrier to visiting museums and is of particular concern to higher socio-economic groups (SEGs). In 1999 one in 20 cited it as a reason not to visit, now one in three say this (MLA, 2004). It is possible that this trend could have a serious impact on the distribution of museums, favouring larger destination venues, rather than smaller, "drop-in" venues.
- Some museums and heritage attractions have been criticised by the public for not promoting or advertising what they are doing in the local areas sufficiently to interest people (HLF, 2003).

3. The countryside

Living in the countryside

- England's rural population is 9.51 million, just under one fifth of England's total population. The vast majority of rural dwellers, 8.9 million, live in less sparse, central areas, with 600,000 living in peripheral, sparse areas (CA, 2005).
- Farming still covers 76% of the UK land area but it only employs a tiny percentage of the UK population (3.8% in 1939 and 0.5% in 1987) and this number is diminishing (Shorland-Ball, 2000). Many farmers are now experiencing severe difficulties following a number of crises including BSE, foot and mouth disease and intensified global competition. An ongoing problem for farmers is the overwhelming power of the supermarkets to drive down prices. Farmers now get under 8% of every pound spent in supermarkets (FARM, 2004).
- GPs in rural areas are more likely to deal with issues of anxiety, depression, suicide, farm accidents and risks connected with chemicals than their urban counterparts (CA, 2005)
- Despite the farming crisis, the British countryside is relatively affluent. The countryside is considered by many to be an ideal place to live and is associated with healthiness, tranquillity and quality of life. This trend towards affluence is set to continue as the population ages and as wealthier people outbid poorer people for scarce housing in sought after rural locations (CA, 2003). In general, people moving into the countryside have higher disposable incomes than the "indigenous" community.
- Access to services such as supermarkets, petrol stations, post offices, job centres, libraries, banks and schools is diminishing and there have been many rural closures of these services. The two exceptions to this trend are cash points and GP surgeries (CA, 2005). The problem of rural poverty and lack of access to services is increasingly recognised as a serious one.
- Health and educational outcomes are better for people in rural areas, but access to services is poor with high dependence on (multiple) car ownership (CA, 2005)
- The Countryside Agency's report the State of The Countryside 2020 predicted that 2 million new homes will have been built in the countryside by 2020 in order to fulfil England's housing shortage. Many of the new homes are likely to be subsidised for rural key workers.
- Accessible "commuter countryside" looks set to increase as people are encouraged to travel further distances to work or are able to work at home for at least part of the week. (CA, 2005)
- Traffic is growing faster on rural roads than anywhere else in the UK (CPRE, 2005).

Visiting the countryside

- British people have a strong attachment to the countryside. A MORI poll on the British landscape showed that 81% of those questioned said that visiting the countryside is important to their quality of life. Reasons to visit include "peace and quiet" (50%), "fresh air" (39%), "to get close to nature" (37%), "for a sense of freedom" (31%). The same survey showed that 8 in 10 adults worried that their children will miss out on happy experiences because they are not free to spend as much time in the countryside as previous generations (MORI, Landscapes in Britain, 3 Sept 2004)
- There is a growing domestic trend of taking multiple short breaks and additional holidays. Trips of 1 –3 nights now account for 56% of all overnight holiday trips (Visit Britain, 2005). Short city breaks in Europe are currently popular but rising air prices and taxes are likely to bring some tourists back to the UK for short breaks.
- For many people taking a break in the UK is synonymous with enjoying the countryside. A study by Visit Britain found that the key strengths of taking a break in the UK were thought

to be “unspoilt countryside”, “quality of food and drink”, “interesting villages and market towns” and “cities” to visit, “facilities for walking, rambling or hiking” and “history and heritage”. Many of these are highly relevant to rural museums (Visit Britain, 2004a).

- Although the UK is thought to have many assets for visitors, the overall loyalty/satisfaction rating amongst domestic travellers for breaks in England was lower than for other destinations (Visit Britain, 2004a). Families are less impressed with facilities for children in the UK, compared to abroad.
- Rural tourism accounts for £14billion in income and supports 380,000 jobs (Visit Britain, 2005).
- Rural tourism is growing. 2003 saw a 6% increase in rural attractions compared to a 2% increase in nation-wide attractions overall. Farm visits were up 13%, country parks up 9% and gardens up 6%. There is a growing demand for farm accommodation, especially near walking and cycling trails (Visit Britain, 2005).
- Respondents to an English Tourism Council research project on rural tourism described the concept of rural tourism as “peace and quiet”, “slower pace of life”, “fresh air”, “non-urbanised” and “lots of space” (Visit Britain, 2005)
- 62% of adults made a day visit to the countryside in 2002/3, though specific groups such as young people and ethnic minorities are using the countryside less. Countryside visitors are more likely to come from socio-economic group AB and be aged 35-44 (Visit Britain, 2005).
- “Eating and drinking out”, “walking” and “visiting friends and relatives” were mentioned as the three most popular activities on countryside tourism day visits (Visit Britain, 2005)
- Business tourism is increasingly important in the countryside, as it helps out the seasonal nature of rural tourism (Visit Britain, 2005)
- There is an increasing tendency for funding bodies to look at nature and culture together, seeing countryside, cultural traditions and built heritage as interconnected. The Heritage Lottery Fund Landscape Partnership Scheme recently awarded 9 million to safeguard five areas of UK heritage landscape.
- Increasing areas of rural land (currently about one quarter of rural land) are coming under special land designations to protect key resources and landscape features.
- The Countryside Act 2000 has improved access to the countryside for walkers, hikers and ramblers.

4. Rural Museums

A SWOT analysis

Strengths

- The British countryside remains a central part of British identity and evokes strong emotions such as nostalgia, pride and happiness among city and rural dwellers alike. The familiar image of rolling fields within a “green and pleasant land” is perhaps more iconic than any other British landmark. Rural museums can tap into this deep emotional connection, help to interpret why the countryside means so much to British people and invite people to further explore its past, present and future role.
- The preservation of material culture from all segments of society and not just the rich has particular relevance today and is strength of the exhibitions at rural museums.
- Topics of most interest at *all* museums include “how people used to live” 62%, “ancient history” 57%, “local history” 55% and “historical paintings and drawings” 49%. (MLA, 2004). Rural museums clearly have strength in a number of these topics, especially “local history” and “how people used to live”.
- Those rural museums with space for demonstrations and outdoor displays are considerably more popular than those without (Shorland-Ball, 2000). The Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans (a member of the Rural Museums Network) has become the most popular tourist attraction in Wales and has enjoyed an 115% increase in visitor numbers. Certainly part of their success is due to the introduction of free entry in 2001 but they also have an appealing range of special events and displays including Welsh language orations, a 1930s working farm, working craftspeople with produce for sale, a farmer’s market and dance festivals.
- The inclusion of live animals and rare breeds within museum sites is popular with visitors. Visitors to the Museum of Scottish Country Life rated the working Georgian Farm higher than other elements of the museum.
- Many rural museums occupy or own impressive historic buildings. Some of these buildings were threatened with demolition and recovered and re-erected on museum sites (including buildings at the Museum of East Anglian Life, Weald and Downland, and Chiltern).
- Rural museums are very object rich and have many large items such as tractors, wagons, and large scale farming machinery. Consequently, exhibitions can be on a larger and more imposing scale than other types of museum.

Weaknesses

- Rural museums have struggled to keep up with modern expectations of what museums should offer. 75% of the 66 representative registered museums sampled in the 2000 Museum and Galleries Commission (MGC) study were set up in the period 1960 to 1985. Displays are now often 15-20 years old and many museums lack the resources to change them. In addition the workforce in rural museums are typically not adequately resourced or up to date. In 1999 only 45% had an email address (Shorland-Ball, 2000)
- Whilst the countryside still occupies a special place in the British psyche, agriculture has arguably become less familiar. Some interpretations now assume a background knowledge that visitors no longer have. Examples of language used in typical displays include “ploughing”, “harrowing”, “manuring”, “drilling”, “reaping” and “threshing” - words which are not necessarily in common use today (Shorland-Ball, 2000).

- Rural museums have their roots in the folk museums developed in Sweden in the 19th century. Such folk museums have been criticised for being fervently nationalistic and sometimes overly romantic (Shorland-Ball, 2000).
- According to the Museums and Galleries Commission report of 2000 “most rural museums do not attract a socially inclusive general audience”. A recent study of a consortium of Norfolk museums showed that 42% of visitors came from the AB SEG, compared to only 18% of the Norfolk AB population overall. One reason for this is that in most locations it is easier to arrive in a private car than by public transport. This is certainly true of the Museum of Scottish Country Life where 93% of visitors in 2002 arrived by private car (Lynn Jones Research, 2002).
- Investment in rural museums is generally low. The average revenue spend per visitor head is only £1.02, indicating a low level of investment. Capital schemes tend to be focused on improved physical access, new stores or additional visitor facilities. Very few museums are addressing the issue of displays (Shorland-Ball, 2000).
- Many smaller rural museums are limited by lack of space. This can prevent them from setting up impressive displays of large objects, and from collecting new contemporary objects which tend to be extremely large.
- Collections do not always represent the full range and diversity of agricultural life, particularly in terms of more contemporary examples. The Rural Museums Network have been addressing this through a series of collection surveys which have revealed that no UK museums hold any large farming equipment from the last 30 years (Museums Association, 2005). A survey of rural museums in 2000 found that about 50% of respondees did not make any attempt to relate displays to modern farming practice (Shorland-Ball, 2000).

Opportunities

- People are travelling further to days out. A study into Norfolk’s rural museums showed that many people were travelling over 2 hours to reach their destination. One feasible future scenario for rural museums, which would match this trend, would be more investment in larger rural museums and fewer smaller rural museums. This model could capitalise on visitor numbers, but there is a risk that it could compromise the distinctiveness of some rural museums as the larger museums tend to have a broader remit (for example Beamish Open Air Museum includes a colliery village and mine).
- A greater connection between food and farming could be made in rural museums. There is a huge media interest in food and cooking and the subject is rapidly becoming a hot political issue. The historical development of food and cooking is also an important part of people’s personal and regional identity. In a qualitative study on perceptions of heritage, participants spontaneously mentioned food as a central aspect of their heritage and identity (HLF, 2003). There is also an obvious retail opportunity arising from a greater focus on food in rural museums.
- Farming implements have lower relevance to a population less familiar with agriculture, but the stories surrounding those implements and the individuals that used them are as appealing as ever, and possibly more so in the current context of popular interest in history and genealogy. Rural museums are object rich but according to the review by the Museums and Galleries Commission in 2000, they could do much more to collect or tell stories around those objects (Shorland-Ball, 2000). A new national database led by the Rural Museums Network will help to understand which objects are unnecessarily duplicated in other museums and which the seminal objects are (Museums Association, 2005).
- There are virtually no opportunity for adults to learn about agriculture. Readily accessible books about agricultural heritage scarcely exist in current print and Agriculture or Farming

are not categories in general use in books shops (Shorland-Ball, 2000). Rural museums are well placed to fill this gap.

Threats

- Rural museums are suffering a decline in visitor numbers (1.25 m in 1998, compared to 1.32m in 1996) (Shorland-Ball, 2000). This decline has been also been apparent in the attendance of school groups too. Taught sessions for school groups at the Museum of English Rural Life have declined steadily from a high of 4792 pupils in organised school groups in 1993 – 1994 to 2592 in 1999 – 2000 (MERL, 2002).
- Agriculture and farming are not subjects of great interest to the general public. Although visitors are interested in “how people used to live”, a MORI study found that “food and agriculture” was by far the least interesting museum topic for people with only 18% declaring an interest in it. This percentage drops to 9% amongst 15-24 year olds, a full 20 points lower than any other subject. Interest rises to 23% amongst 55+ but the number of people who remember the farming practices of yesteryear are slowly dying out (MLA, 2004)
- Knowledge of food and farming is now seen as less relevant to children’s education. Changes to the National Curriculum in 2000 removed the “Food and Farming” Supplementary Study Unit from the KS2 History Curriculum (MERL, 2002)
- Too great an investment into special events might dilute the core purpose of rural museums as perceived by regular visitors. A study by Lynn Jones Research into the visiting patterns to the Museum of Scottish Country Life notes that “an audience for events is very often just that – an event audience. They come for the events and the museum is more accidental”.
- Other countryside attractions appear to be more successful in interpreting the countryside and providing rural style enjoyment and entertainment. Farmers markets and working farms have been particularly successful at attracting visitors in recent years and it is possible they are taking market share away from rural museums.

5. Learning from other sectors

The next section looks at other leisure activities with a relationship to rural life and how rural museums can learn from them. Many leisure activities and pursuits can be interpreted as having a link to rural life and not all can be described here. The sectors below were selected from ideas and comments arising from the qualitative focus groups with visitors and potential visitors of rural museums, which were conducted in November 2005 alongside this desk research. Each sector is analysed for overall size, strength and growth and key visitor segments.

Crafts

Crafts have been taken to include textiles, ceramics, wood, metal, jewellery, glass, leather, toys, musical instruments and the graphic crafts (not fine art). It is estimated that the crafts industries turn over around £400million annually. This figure doubled during the period 1988-1998 with a rise of 20% in the number of crafts businesses over the same period. Around 2,000 craft fairs are held annually all over the country. Crafts are a very accessible market for consumers with 35% of crafts people producing some items for less than £5. Although crafts tend to be associated with rural life, most craftspeople actually work in urban areas, though their distribution networks may be rural. Many craftspeople are older having come to the profession later on in their careers. 30% of the UK population has ever taken part in a craft activity, with around 14% taking part in the last 12 months. The motivations for this were mainly enjoyment (57%) but also relaxation (31%) (DCMS, 2001). Little further information about the profile of craft consumers or craft fair visitors could be found but considering the large scale of the sector and the accessibility of many of the prices, it is probably safe to assume that crafts have a fairly mainstream audience.

Questions for rural museums

- Which crafts could help bring rural life to life (in terms of taste, touch, smell, sound)?
- Do visitors need more opportunities to purchase crafts at rural museums?

Farmers markets

Like the crafts industry, farmers' markets are thriving. The number of farmers' markets has grown from the first fledgling market in Bath in 1997 to 450 regular markets in 2002. From 2000 to 2002 the number grew from 200 to 450, a rise of 125%. Some markets take place every week while others are fortnightly, monthly or quarterly but in total it is estimated that 7,500 individual markets now take place each year. A survey of 250 market organisers found over 70% of markets describing themselves as thriving. In addition, around 60% say their business is expanding. Although farmers' markets have enjoyed great success, there are many challenges to overcome. Some market organisers feel they are not adequately supported by local planning regulations or local tourist information centres.

Visitors to farmers' markets are predominantly older people, a survey in 2002 found that 66% of visitors were retired people. The same survey found that 62% attended farmers markets because they wanted to support British farmers, demonstrating the powerful connection many people feel towards the British countryside.

Questions for rural museums

- Could more museums hold farmers' markets on site (like the Museum of Welsh Life and Barleylands) or develop partnerships with farmers' markets?

- Are there historical parallels to modern farmers' markets? What could bring this to life?
- Should rural museums identify themselves with/promote regional foods, (especially ones with strong symbolic regional value e.g. Cheshire Cheese)? How?

Garden centres and gardening

The garden centre and nursery sector has also seen recent growth. The market is worth an estimated £5bn, up 20% year on year. The outlook for gardening and garden centres is good, particularly as gardening retains its appeal even during economic downturns (Money Week, 2005). Gardening and garden design has been subject to a high level of media coverage in recent years, which has helped to increase product sales, while the changing view of the garden now as an extension of the home has also benefited the overall market. The DIY Multiples (such as B&Q) have seen significant growth in recent years and have taken increasing share from garden centres. Within the garden centre market, there has been more emphasis placed on non- garden products and turning a visit to the garden centre into an "experience", with many centres now investing heavily in facilities such as restaurants (AMA research, 2004).

The stereotypical gardener is an older, retired person. Some of larger gardening stores have a deliberate policy to employ older members of staff to provide knowledgeable advice to shoppers who are more likely to be in their age group. However, recent interest in home improvements and home grown food has prompted more interest amongst young people and families (AMA research, 2004).

Questions for rural museums

- Could rural museums do more to connect large scale industrial farming with domestic interest gardening? Are there historical parallels (such as kitchen gardens, allotments)?
- Could rural museums run more "living experiments" such as composting or soil tests?

Gastropubs

Emphasising the relationship between farming and food has already been identified as a prime opportunity for rural museums. There is not sufficient space here for a full description of trends in food, restaurants and eating out, so we have selected gastropubs as a sector for discussion. This is because they are a relatively new phenomenon and have had a serious impact on the overall pub sector. Figures on the size of the market are hard to come by, due to the difficulty in defining exactly when a pub serving high-quality food tips over into the realm of a gastropub. According to market researcher Mintel, pub food is now a £6b-a-year industry, and much of the growth in demand and customer expectation has been fuelled by the rise of the gastropub. The phenomenon has had a ripple effect across the whole pub sector. The average pub now gets more than 25% of its turnover from meals, and the number of pub diners has overtaken the number of pub drinkers, according to Mintel's 2004 survey. The Which? Pub Guide 2004 identified 67 gastropubs in London, up by 17, with new arrivals opening in Manchester, Cardiff and Brighton. But while London remains the hub, there is now much more of a regional spread. The prospects for gastropubs look good with various commentators predicting that the gastropub sector will continue to grow and evolve, particularly in rural areas where high quality chefs moving out of London to become landlords have fuelled growth.

The market for gastropubs is not well documented though they are likely to be younger and more affluent. Mike Coughtrey, head of pubs and restaurants at business advisors KPMG says "wherever there are large numbers of commuters there will be the affluence needed to support the phenomenon" (Caterer Search, 2005).

Questions for rural museums

- Could rural museums attract a younger audience through a focus on food?
- Are there hubs of food tourism (e.g. Bray in Berkshire, location of the Fat Duck restaurant) and should rural museums be promoting themselves in these areas?

Libraries

Libraries are not specifically associated with rural life but have been included here because they have a shared role with museums in terms of promoting learning. They have also undergone significant change in rural areas. Use of libraries, especially the smallest facilities in rural areas is declining. Representatives of Local Authorities have suggested that residents in rural areas are more prepared to travel further to the main towns to use better services (though some less affluent rural residents are dependent on local provision). Rural library closures have been a problem in recent decades, but this trend seems to have been stemmed with very few authorities currently planning the closure of libraries - although some authorities are reporting significant budget cuts. Co-location of library facilities with other services (which involves sharing the costs of overheads) is becoming the preferred approach to the replacement of small rural libraries. With the long-term decline in book-borrowing the library service is placing emphasis on the development of ICT-based services. There is also a strong policy commitment to providing services for 'socially excluded groups' such as poorer people, disabled people and ethnic minorities (Defra, 2002).

Questions for rural museums

- Can rural museums provide more online to enhance visitors' pre and post experience of their visit? Is attempting to provide "virtual" visits online worthwhile?
- Could smaller rural museums co-locate with other services? Could other services use objects and images effectively?

Horse riding.

The Henley Centre suggest that the horse industry is growing, particularly leisure riders. However, their research also points to a decline in numbers of some riding stables so it is hard to pinpoint which direction the industry is going. Certainly interest in riding is relatively widespread with 23% of the population saying they have an interest in horse riding (from taking part to watching horse racing on TV) compared to 39% of people interested in football, 19% in cycling and 28% in walking and cycling. Regular riders are more likely to be female and from an AB social grade. Interest in riding is spread fairly equally across age groups. Anecdotal evidence suggests that adult women are spending more than ever on their passion, buying better horses and hiring personal trainers. However, leisure riders are reporting increasingly levels of animosity from car drivers.

The Henley Centre identify horse-related tourism as a potential growth sector. France and the USA both have very strong horse-related tourism, boosted by government support. The Henley Centre suggests that providing unbroken riding routes (such as the 106 miles of the South Downs), accommodation and spectator events could enhance tourism in many areas (The Henley Centre, 2004).

Questions for rural museums

- Could a greater emphasis on horses and their riders/trainers help bring some agricultural objects to life and provide the basis for much needed stories?
- To what extent are leisure riders likely to be interested in exhibitions relating to working horses on farms?

6. Promising visitor segments for Rural Museums

The initial desk research indicates five potential segments for the rural museums marketplace

- Grey learners
- Rural suburban comforts
- “Down the farm” entertainment
- Local and proud
- Eco solution seekers
- Agri-anoraks

Grey learners

Key words

Family/local history	Gardening
Crafts/skills	Health
Internet	Diet
Walking	Learning

Grey Learners are older people who are approaching retirement and have an interest in education and hobbies. They come from the “babyboomer” generation i.e. the peak of children born in the decades following the second world war. Of particular interest to the museums sector are those babyboomers with an appetite for culture and education. This is common within the babyboomer cohort with 69% of babyboomers interested in undertaking learning activities in the future, more than double the figure for the older generation (Demos, 2003).

Retirement for Grey Learners will contrast starkly to the retirement experiences of their parents. They are likely to enjoy better health, wealth and be keen to take on the challenge of new hobbies. They are not afraid of new technologies such as the internet and are interested in undertaking positive health measures such as exercise and diet regimes to help prolong their retirements.

There are many strong arguments for focusing on Grey Learners as a visitor segment for rural museums. Older people already form a loyal base for both the countryside (living and visiting) and visiting museums of all types. Older agricultural methods are also a more recent cultural memory for babyboomers and nostalgia is clearly an important part of the appeal of rural museums. An analysis of visitors to the Museum of English Rural Life at Reading found that approval rates of the displays increased with visitor age (MERL, 2002). Grey Learners are also more likely to have the time to indulge in leisure pursuits that matter to them. A survey of farmers’ market organisers found that they estimated around 66% of visitors to the markets were retired people (NFU, 2002).

Rural museums could do more to engage Grey Learners even further in rural museums. Grey Learners are interested in activities that combine health with education or leisure, such as gardening or walking tours. A recent study found that three in 10 older people would go on a walking tour of a historic feature of their neighbourhood, something which local rural museums might be able to facilitate (HLF, 2003). Organised walking tours and trails could engage people with landscape histories, field patterns and names, whilst also raising the visibility of the museum in the local community. Exhibitions could take advantage of their interest in health and draw

parallels between the health of the agricultural workers of the past and the health debates of today (in terms of diet, exercise, health and safety, heart disease etc). Rural museums could also provide more facilities for Grey Learners to learn about and pursue their hobbies, such as craftwork or family history research.

Possible partnerships/sectors to learn from

- Popular family/local history internet sites e.g. 1901 census
- Libraries and archives
- Craft groups and associations
- Self help health groups e.g. health walks, ramblers
- National Association of Farmers' Markets

Rural suburban comforts

Key words

Scenery	Hedgerows/meadows
Green belt	Preservation/conservation
Peace/tranquillity	Food
Space	Wildlife/animals

Suburban comforts are a demographic group described within the MOSAIC classification used by the consultants Experian. They are identified as having comfortable homes in mature suburbs. They tend to be white collar workers, hard working, married, with older children and planning for retirement.

We have used the term rural suburban comforts to describe a more specific group. Rural suburban comforts

- Actively choose to live in the countryside for the quality of life
- Live in accessible countryside, often in newer rural suburbs
- Are unlikely to have been born and bred in the area they now live
- Are comfortable but not wealthy and may have made some career compromises in order to live in the countryside

According to the Countryside Agency this group (described as “pragmatists” in a 2003 report) are set to increase as parts of the countryside become more accessible.

Rural suburban comforts are already a well represented group in terms of rural museum visitor numbers. A recent study found that suburban comforts made up 24% of visitors to a consortium of Norfolk museums (15% in population overall). Rural suburban comforts are likely to be looking for local leisure activities and things to do with visiting friends and relatives. Rural museums may also fulfil an important role in reinforcing their positive choice to live in the countryside by presenting an appealing picture of rural life. However, although rural museums are potentially important to rural suburban comforts, they are not necessarily fully engaged in farming issues and may be put off by in depth agricultural information.

Rural museums could target rural suburban comforts by exploring the new identity of the countryside. The practice of living in the countryside is increasingly one of choice, so what does this choice mean in terms of individual and group identity? This question is of increasing

importance to new arrivals in the countryside keen to take on the mantle and identity of their new home and community.

One obvious way to explore the identity of the countryside and its dwellers is to draw a contrast with urban life. Many rural suburban comforts will have fled the hustle and bustle of the town for the peace of the countryside. New innovations such as the tranquillity area maps developed by the Countryside Agency could form part of exhibitions about rural life and how it has changed (and remained the same) over the ages. A strong visual and aesthetic component to displays is likely to be enjoyed by rural suburban comforts who place a high value on beautiful scenery and views. Opportunities to buy work by local artists and photographers would enhance their enjoyment.

Rural suburban comforts are unlikely to be seeking overt political content as part of their visit to a rural museum. However, there may be some appeal in exploring farmers' modern role, particularly in terms of protecting the natural beauty of the countryside and preserving the green belt. A recent report by Opinion Leader Research for the National Farmers Union found that farmers' environmental role was widely unknown amongst the general public but it was valued when they found out about it.

Possible partnerships/sectors to learn from

- RSPB
- National Trust (38% of visitors to the Museum of Scottish Country Life are members of the National Trust for Scotland – Lynn Jones Research, 2002)
- The Council for the Protection of Rural England
- Animal welfare organisations or pet clubs

“Down the farm” entertainment

Key words

Animals	Feel/touch/smell/taste
Entertainment	New
Events	Different world
Recreate	Good day out

“Down the farm” entertainment is a term to describe a diverse group of individuals from a wide range of ages, social grades and locations. The main thing that holds them together is that they are families looking for an appealing day out.

Many other visitor attractions are targeting the “down the farm” entertainment group, often with greater success than rural museums. Tourism at working farms is becoming more popular and extensive as farmers look for ways to diversify their activities. Many farms are offering attractions such as petting zoos, cider farms, vineyards, brewing facilities, activity and play centres, farm interpretations, museum, arts and crafts, shops and cafes, fishing, go-karts, pick your own, horse riding, history and theme parks (Visit Britain, 2005). Whilst the continued popularity of the countryside is good news for rural museums there is also a danger that farm tourism will supplant rural museums and lure away their target audience. Rural museums can prevent this by providing more animals, activities and events, or by developing partnerships with farms.

Rural museums which become more experiential and farm-like are likely to appeal to children and families. Visitor attractions which can provide a nostalgic, historical element as well as child-led activities are likely to appeal to the “vertical” families of today which are likely to include fewer children but more grand-parents and great grandparents. Grandparents looking for things to do with grandchildren are an increasingly important segment. Rural museums focused on families will also need to provide some attractions for teenagers, historically a very difficult group to target (see separate section below).

Rural museums with a focus on family entertainment will need to have a highly seasonal offer. Special events which follow the farming (and school) year could take advantage of the family visitor peak around Easter, August and October (Visit Britain, 2005). Schools would also be an important audience. Currently nearly half of farm attraction visitors are children and many of these are part of school groups (Visit Britain, 2005). If rural museums begin to focus on a more varied and seasonal offer, significant marketing budgets will be needed to make sure the public know about events as they happen.

Entertaining farm-like museums with a focus on animals could help extend rural museums’ narrow appeal in terms of SEG. Zoos or wildlife parks appeal equally across social classes (unlike museums and galleries) (MLA, 2004). In addition, those in the DE social group are significantly more likely to visit with children and grandchildren, emphasising the role of children in encouraging non museum visitors to try visiting (MLA, 2004).

“Experiential” museum experiences likely to appeal to the “down the farm” group have been important in the museums sector for some time. Living history farms are popular in the USA and sites include the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill and Pioneer Arizona. The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM) in the US has drawn up some of the advantages and disadvantages of using this approach to communicate about agriculture.

Advantages:

- Uses of social history to present different views of people, land, work and the past
- Opportunities afforded by the techniques to breathe life into written historical accounts
- Demonstrations show artefacts in context
- Historic processes can be explored and presented
- Experimental history and archaeology can be used to discover things that documentary history does not
- The techniques engage visitors
- A grassroots view of history can be presented
- Visitors are jogged out of a passive “museum stroll”; through history
- Visitors can explore and discover the past with the interpreters

Disadvantages:

- High cost
- The constant need for on-going training
- Limited perceptions of history
- A tendency to romanticise the past
- The threat first-person interpretation poses to some audiences
- The risk to artefacts exhibited in living history settings
- The need for good orientation to prepare visitors
- Inadequate research or inadequate documentation

- Modern perceptions of cleanliness which influence museum and landscape interpretations, often resulting in pristine, park-like environments
- A lack of presentation of urban and industrial history
- Challenges to overcome “Little-House-on-the-Prairie” understandings of history
- Strong interest in “Mickey-Mouse” history with a heavier emphasis on entertainment than education (Boardman, 1997).

Some rural museums could find it a challenge to target the “down the farm” entertainment group because their current visitor profile is currently heavily weighted towards older people and higher SEGs. Limited space, money and trained staff could limit their ability to attract more families looking for an entertaining day out. However, some rural museums, especially the larger ones, are already targeting this audience to great success (Beamish Open Air Museum and the Museum of Welsh Life, amongst others).

Possible partnerships/sectors to learn from

- Farm tourism
- Theme parks
- Zoos, wildlife parks, animal sanctuaries
- Center parcs

“Down the farm” entertainment for teenagers

Teenagers are a challenging audience for all museums. Older children and young people (14+) are underrepresented in museum visitors and are likely to describe all museums as “quiet”, “snobby” and “boring” (HLF, 2003). From the information available it seems that teenagers are no more positive about rural museums than they are about general museums. A visitor survey by the Museum of English Rural Life found that the 13 – 17 age range were less likely to give a high approval rating to the displays. Younger people (15-24) are also less likely to visit the countryside and stay overnight, though they are higher users of parks (HLF, 2003).

Teenagers are a difficult segment to capture but it is important to consider ways to appeal to them because their lack of interest may prevent families from visiting rural museums. Rural museums need to provide interest for teenagers in order to fully capture the extended family visitor segment.

A recent study by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence put forward a number of ideas for how to engage teenagers in heritage and museums. They identified teenagers high interest and activism in environmental activities as a possible “hook”, though they could not provide any information about how this might link to museums/heritage (HLF, 2003). They also identified identity formation and identity politics as a potentially engaging subject for teenagers and young people. Two ideas present themselves in reference to rural museums, teenagers and identity;

- Links to exciting new projects tracking DNA and migration patterns
- New displays to reflect the growing academic and social interest in what it “means” to be from a white heritage

Local and proud

Key words

Authentic	Community
Economy	Technology
Farming	Distinctive
Proud	Tradition

The local and proud visitor segment have been born and bred in the countryside and are likely to work in or have a connection with the agricultural sector. They are already a key visitor segment for rural museums. A visitor survey at the Museum of English Rural Life found that 18% worked in an occupation connected with rural history, farming or the countryside (MERL). The local and proud visitor segment are attracted to rural museums because they feel an affiliation with farming issues, objects and heritage and have a strong sense of local identity. A survey showed that local industry/industrial heritage were mentioned by 20% as important in making an area special, higher than its history and diversity of its people. (HLF, 2003).

The local and proud visitor type might share some characteristics with the MOSAIC segment “ties of community” identified in a Norfolk study of rural museums (12% of visitors) (Experian, 2005). “Ties of community” come from a lower educational background than many museum visitors and are often found in close knit towns where social networks are strong.

Local and proud people may place a high value on a rural museum, even if they never visit it. A local museum can be a source of local pride and community feeling. The majority of the public think it is important for their local town or city to have its own museum/gallery and this rate of agreement is still high amongst non visitors of museums (76%) (MLA, 2004). Emphasising the “heroic” contribution of farm workers to British life is likely to appeal to this segment. Some academics argue that the industrial revolution could not have emerged without the increased productivity brought about by innovations such as crop rotation, enclosure and new technologies such as the seed drill. The impact of such improvements was dramatic. In 1760 the output of each agricultural worker could feed around 1 other person, by 1841 it could feed another 2.7 (Williamson, 2002). More recently an army of “land girls” saved war-time Britain from starvation.

Rural museums focused on local and proud visitors would ideally provide a forum for topical and controversial issues and not just “history”. Some, but very few, museums address contemporary issues. Melton Carnegie Museum has received an HLF grant to create a new exhibition about fox hunting, but providing a forum for this kind of contemporary debate is rare. Coverage of contemporary rural issues should not necessarily mean a gloomy look at the obvious crises of the last few years such as food and mouth disease. Lord Haskins recently pointed out in a speech at Reading University that farming continues to play a positive and strategic role in British life.

“The ‘Good Old Days’ of English agriculture is a myth that should no longer be perpetuated and the view that farming does not matter is incorrect. Farmers’ feel threatened by Europe, villainous supermarkets and the disappearance of family farms but farming is actually more important strategically than it has been in the past two hundred years.” Lord Haskins

Rural museums would need to keep in touch with local farming issues that matter to the local community and regularly change their displays to reflect these concerns. A survey by the Museum of English Rural Life found that the majority of rural museums (71%) were already using the internet to keep up to date with rural issues. However only 35% of members are actually documenting these issues or communicating them to visitors (MERL, 2002).

Local and proud visitors are likely to support the conservation of museum buildings (where they are of historical importance) and would like the museum to promote solutions for other local buildings at risk. There is strong public support for restoring old buildings as a way of reviving neighbourhoods and regeneration (HLF, 2003). Rural museums could also be a nucleus for learning, support and services by extending their remit to combine with libraries, shops, schools or other services. The small museum at Halesworth, a market town in Suffolk, provides shared premises for the Tourist Information Point, the local branch of MENCAP and Halesworth Community Transport. Another rural museum, the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, saved the local post office when it was threatened with closure by moving it to their site. Rural museums focusing on local and proud people could also take advantage of the many funding streams available to organisations providing a service to people at risk of rural exclusion¹.

There are challenges inherent in focusing on the local and proud visitor segment. Following this route will be difficult in the face of declining visitor numbers and declining employment in agriculture. Rural museums could address this problem by encouraging repeat visiting. There is already some evidence to suggest that less privileged groups are likely to return more often to a museum they like than higher SEGs. A MORI study found that DEs are the most likely group to find a museum they like (often local) and return often while ABs are more likely to “spread themselves around” (MLA, 2004).

The benefits of focusing on the local and proud segment would be mainly in community pride and the personal development of local people. A research project for MLA found that the acquisition of new skills and trying new experiences helped build confidence amongst museum visitors. The study described community empowerment, cohesion and capacity building as outcomes of museums (MLA, 2002). Local friends groups, volunteers and local researchers all bring value to museums, if not high visitor numbers. This segment might be particularly important if the Rural Museums Network want a presence in isolated countryside areas, which are quite different in character to accessible countryside areas.

Possible partnerships/sectors to learn from

- National Farmers Union
- Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
- Farming and Countryside Education (FACE)

Eco solution seekers

Key words

Ethical	Green
Sustainable	Innovation
Global	Organic
Food miles	Environment

Eco solution seekers are younger and more affluent people who are concerned about global sustainability issues. This segment are likely to have much in common with one of Visit Britain’s core target audiences “cosmopolitans”. They are independent minded individuals who seek new experiences and challenges, both physical and intellectual. They are 15% of the population, with a high ethnic representation. They are relatively young, have an average income of £26k and

¹ A full discussion of funding streams available detailed in the publication, Yates, B. April 2002, Rural Renewal: New opportunities for museums in rural England, AIM

over a third of them are post family. They take on average 4 short breaks a year. They enjoy a wide variety of types of holiday, especially activity and themed holidays.

Focusing on “eco-solution seekers” would be quite a radical shift for rural museums, but potentially a prescient one. Rural museums would have to make serious changes to their collections, displays and interpretative approach by shifting their focus away from agriculture and towards sustainability. This process is currently happening within UK agriculture as farmers diversify into environmental management and more land is designated with special status. In this context there is likely to be more of an appetite for learning about issues such as renewable energy, organic produce and sustainable technologies.

Recent studies have shown that the UK public do not fully understand the link between agriculture and environment or the environmental functions farmers perform. Rural museums could play a crucial role in educating eco solution seekers and others about these issues.

- Displays could draw parallels with international agriculture and political issues such as the patenting of seeds and the need for developing countries to progress by “leapfrogging” unsustainable farming practices. Historical parallels in the UK could be made with all these issues. An international focus might appeal to BME visitors.
- Objects and buildings would be interpreted in the context of sustainability. There could be a special focus on the re-emergence and relevance of bygone technologies and practices such as windmills and natural pest control
- A more explicit link between food and farming could be made in the exhibitions and merchandise

One problem with targeting eco-solution seekers is that this strategy would require quite substantial changes for many rural museums. Sustainability is a relatively new concept in the public mindset and there is not much evidence about how much of a market for sustainable tourism there is, though the longevity of the Centre for Alternative Technology and the popularity of the Eden project are encouraging.

Possible partnerships/sectors to learn from

- Centre for Alternative Technology
- The Eden project
- Mind, body and spirit retreat holidays e.g. at Findhorn
- Organics

Agri-anoraks

Key words

Technology	Tractors
Restoration	Workers/farmers/labourers
Former glory	Skills
Clubs	Materials

Agri-anoraks are enthusiasts in the area of bygone farming practices and are often engaged in restoring objects or recreating activities relating to their passion. There is some evidence that there is a growing and untapped audience for rural museums amongst this segment. There has been an increase in the numbers of people attending steam rallies, ploughing matches and

“vintage” events (Shorland-Ball, 2000). Restoring old tractors and caring for rare breeds are growing pastimes and there is a burgeoning specialist magazine market to provide specialist advice (Shorland-Ball, 2000).

Rural heritage has much in common with transport heritage. Both are firmly grounded in the working class experience and both hold impressive collections of large mechanical objects. Both sectors are supported by enthusiasts who independently own and restore important elements of the national collection. Nostalgia for a bygone age is an important element of the appeal, alongside an intellectual fascination with the technological revolution of the past.

The transport heritage sector is better known and supported than the rural heritage sector. It is estimated that audiences and participants in heritage transport activities exceeds 15 million people a year (HLF, 2001). Out of the ten most popular visitor attractions in the UK, only the National Railway Museum is outside London. Enthusiasts in this sector are typically male and visiting transport heritage sites is often a dad/granddad-led activity. Rural museums could potentially benefit from this thriving community of interest.

Rural museums targeted at agri-anoraks would prioritise the acquisition, display, and opportunity for hands on use of large-scale mechanical items like combine harvesters, tractors and wagons. Visitors to the Museum of Scottish Country Life are already enjoying hands on experience with large items with 14% rating the tractor ride as the most enjoyable aspect of their visit (Lynn Jones Research, 2002). Pursuing this strategy throughout the network might involve extending some museums to accommodate new displays at the expense of smaller museums. Rural museums targeting agri-anoraks would facilitate an even greater focus on essential rural skills such as wheel making, black smithing and leather making. Displays and interpretations would also need to take care to personify characters from the past and help agri-anoraks imagine being in their shoes. A key role of rural museums should be to provide signposting, merchandising and literature, in the museum shop or elsewhere, so that visitors can extend their interest at home.

This type of approach would require close collaboration between museums and volunteer groups with specialist expertise. To some extent these relationships already exist. 44% of museums already have informal or formal links with local preservation clubs and Beamish Open Air Museum are developing a project of shared storage with a local group. However, collaborating with local groups can be resource intense and catering too specifically to their interests could risk alienating other groups.

Possible partnerships/sectors to learn from

- Railway museums
- Preservation societies and magazines e.g. Rare Breeds Trust
- Motor and air shows and rallies
- Miniatures, models, toys and collectables

7. Conclusions

The world of rural museums is one of contradictions. Some of the larger open air museums are thriving, but declining visitor numbers are causing others to struggle. Interest in farming and agriculture is very low, but the British countryside continues to be held in the highest regard by much of the population. The rural museum offer is largely based around the idea of the “agricultural revolution” which fuelled Britain’s role as a world super power, but academics cannot agree if and when this really happened, and awareness of this concept amongst the general public is virtually non-existent. In the face of such contradictions, what is the future for rural museums and their visitors?

The Rural Museums network includes museums as diverse as Barleylands Craft Village and Farm Centre in East Anglia and the Domestic Fowl Trust in the West Midlands. Visitor profiles are likely to vary hugely by the specific attractions on offer and by the regional location. There is unlikely to be one solution to audience development for all rural museums. Individual rural museums need to gather data to understand their core audience and how this profile might be shaped in the future. The Heritage Lottery Fund publication *Developing New Audiences for the Heritage* notes that “it is important to balance the need to bring in new audiences without departing from their ‘core’ product or activities, or alienating the core audience”. Individual rural museums need to understand what these ‘core’ activities are and then test out some of new ideas and options. Promising areas for further research arising from this initial research appear to be:

- Food
- Animals
- Partnerships or combined events with working farms and other organisations
- Coverage of contemporary and potentially controversial rural issues
- Retail in museum shops, especially local arts, crafts and produce

There are of course many other routes which rural museums can follow which we have outlined in this report. One common theme is the fragmentation and diversification of the overall identity and meaning of the countryside for country and urban dwellers alike. Rural museums can no longer interpret the countryside in terms of farming alone. To remain relevant to visitors rural museums must reflect these large scale changes taking place in the modern countryside, whilst also accurately representing the historical, and largely agricultural, context. For the rural museum of the future therefore, the difficulty may be not too few opportunities, but too many.

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