

## Museums and Agriculture: The Challenge of Relevance

What I propose to do in this short paper is to examine some of the issues surrounding the interpretation of farming at the Museum of Welsh Life (MWL) and to put them in the context of the current debate surrounding agricultural and rural life museums in the UK generally.

By common consent agricultural museums in the UK have been in a state of crisis for some time. Visitor numbers have been falling and a few museums, including some notably good ones, have been forced to close. This is in marked contrast to the position in the late 1960s and early 1970s when an upsurge of interest and enthusiasm led to the creation of a significant number of agricultural and rural life museums, indeed almost 75% of the UK's rural life museums have their origins in that decade and a half from 1965 onwards. Critics might argue that this expansion was unsustainable and contained within it the seeds of its own destruction inspired as it was by nostalgia for a simpler period on the land when the horse was king rather than any rigorous analysis of agrarian history or even public demand. Since that time there has been, with a few honourable exceptions, very little development of note within the sector and agricultural museums have seemingly been content to slumber gently in a nostalgic museological backwater.

In some ways this lack of momentum is hardly surprising given the highly urbanised nature of British society and the virtual invisibility of farming in the British consciousness. According to the latest statistics agriculture accounts for a mere 0.9% of UK GDP, although it is marginally higher in Wales at 1.2% of GDP. However, if direct subsidies and indirect support to the industry is excluded farming actually contributes 0% to Welsh GDP. Consequently the industry in the UK has nothing like the significance or profile that it has in some European countries. To put it into perspective a few years ago *The Sunday Times* newspaper noted rather dismissively that '*sandwich sales were worth more to the British economy than farming!*' This lack of interest is exacerbated by the fact that it is many generations since the majority of the population of the UK had any personal links to the land. This is particularly true in the case of Wales which as long ago as 1841 became the world's first industrial nation with over half of its population employed in industry rather than agriculture.

It is ironic in a way that the 'crisis' in rural museums has only become widely recognised over the past couple of years, a time when more public and media attention has been focussed on farming than has been the case for decades. Sadly most of that attention has been negative with the farmer

largely cast in the role of villain. Issues such as BSE, Foot & Mouth Disease, animal welfare, the use of growth promoting hormones, food safety, Salmonella and more recently GM crops, not to mention the destruction of the landscape and the pollution of our rivers - have made farming front page news, for all the wrong reasons, and emphasised the huge gap in understanding that has opened up between farming and the rest of British society. Beyond farming it is now also become increasingly evident that the countryside itself is in a state of crisis and are becoming seriously disadvantaged. The disappearance of many rural services, the decline of rural incomes (by as much as 65% over the past five years), and the emergence of problems such as drug-abuse more usually associated with urban areas have generated a sense of despair in many areas. Sections of the rural population have felt themselves marginalised and besieged by what they perceive as an ignorant and unsympathetic urban majority. This alienation has even found a political voice of sorts in the Countryside Alliance, a rag-tag agglomeration of vested interests organised, some would claim hi-jacked, by the pro-fox hunting lobby. This group succeeded in mobilising marches of up to a million people in London over recent years testifying to the strength of rural disenfranchisement. If ever there was a need for mutual understanding between town and country, between farmers and the mass of the British population this is it, but sadly at this very time when rural life museums that have the potential to bridge that gap in understanding have been found singularly wanting.

The perceived crisis in rural life museums prompted the Museums & Galleries Commission, the government's former advisory body for museums, to establish a Working Group whose Report entitled, *Farming Countryside and Museums: Museums of farming and rural life at the beginning of the Twenty-first century* was published in 2000. This in turn begat a number of regional reports commissioned by Area Museums Councils including one of particular interest to me *Agricultural and Rural Life Collections, Displays and Museums in Wales*, which appeared in 2001. Whilst these Reports were critical of 'traditional' rural life museums on a number of grounds, their most trenchant criticism was reserved for the fact that they had allowed themselves to become increasingly irrelevant to the needs and concerns of their audience in that they have nothing meaningful to say about either modern day farming nor those issues such as BSE or GM crops which are constantly in the public mind. Such museums, it is claimed, have totally failed to use their collections to interpret issues of current concern and fail to make connections for people who are interested in, but increasingly out of touch with farming and the challenges of living in rural areas today. In essence the Report complains that whilst rural life museums have the skills

and the resources to provide objective information on current issues, most remain steadfastly locked in the nostalgia of the horse drawn era on the land.

Most rural life museums depict the period of ‘the first generation’ of farm mechanisation – the era of steam engines, the first tractors and even early combine harvesters. What they have seemingly failed to realise, and most certainly have failed to reflect, is the fact that since that time there has been, in the view of many agricultural historians, a Second Agrarian Revolution in the UK with the intensification of farming, the advent of factory farming, bio-technology and scientific agriculture which has left most people, including I suspect, most curators, totally bemused. Museums totally exclude from their interpretation the intensive farming methods and the large machines which dominate the British countryside today. In effect the UK’s agricultural museums have become stuck in a 1950s time warp.

At the Museum of Welsh Life we have been reviewing our interpretation for some time and had already become conscious of the shortcomings in our own approach to agriculture. The Reports were very timely as far as we were concerned, therefore in that they articulated many of our own concerns and provided us with a yardstick with which to compare ourselves. It did not make entirely happy reading; in fact much of the Report could almost have been written with us in mind. Guilty on all counts would be my verdict. As far as our interpretation of farming is concerned we are an archetypal late 1960s museum. At that time we were probably ahead of the game, but like so many museums we have simply failed to move on over the intervening thirty years. Again like many other museums we could quite legitimately claim that we have simply not had the resources to enable us to do so, but that is little comfort to our audience who are seeking answers to questions that we have simply failed to ask. What I propose to do for the remainder of this paper is to provide you with some indication of the direction in which we are moving with our interpretation of farming.

But first it is necessary to provide some form of background to the Museum as we might not be entirely a typical example in terms of other European open air museum. The Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans was opened in 1948 and is one of the largest open-air Museums in the UK. It is important, particularly in this company, to note that MWL is more than an open-air museum in that it performs the tasks which are often performed by a number of different institutions in many countries. MWL is also an ethnographic museum and the national folk archive, and in this context we are by default Wales’ national agricultural museum. It is also helpful to place MWL in its

institutional and political context. MWL is a constituent part of the National Museums & Galleries of Wales, a multi-disciplinary and multi-site institution which provides us with a perspective that might be slightly different to that of many of you here. It is also a national museum funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, which has its own quite distinct agenda which we are committed to deliver. In these terms you might be interested to learn that the Welsh Assembly Government is the only government in Europe that has a constitutional duty to promote sustainability. It has a robust rural policy and in 2001 published quite a radical strategy document *Farming for the Future: A new direction for farming in Wales*.

For the first forty years of its existence the Welsh Folk Museum, as it was then, was exclusively a rural life museum and quite naturally agriculture was given due prominence. There are several strands to MWL's interpretation of Welsh farming. A significant number of our trans-located buildings are agricultural in nature, and appropriately enough, the very first building to be re-erected at St Fagans was the sixteenth century barn from north-east Wales. The Museum is not restricted to a specific time period in its collection and interpretation and we currently have eight farmhouses ranging in date from the early sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century and seven farm buildings including barns, pig sties and a gorse mill. However, we have only one complete farmstead - Llwyn yr eos a nineteenth century farm which was on the site before the Museum came into being. This is a major weakness and our interpretation of farming from the buildings perspective is far from complete. Remarkably in the 55 years of our existence we have only been offered one farm building which complements one of our existing farmhouses, and that was only last year. This is a small eighteenth century byre from Snowdonia in north-west Wales. It is typical of the farm buildings of that area and virtually identical to one that once stood alongside Llainfadyr Cottage, a building which was brought to St Fagans in the early 1960s. We are aware of our shortcomings in this respect and have become far more proactive in seeking out buildings that we require rather than waiting for them to be offered to us as has been the case in the past. We are also now working towards making far stronger connections between our agricultural buildings and their surrounding landscapes. We already replicate appropriate field boundaries in the vicinity of each building, but we need to go beyond that to plant appropriate trees, crops and so on.

An acute shortage of agricultural land and the time span of our historical buildings make it conceptually impossible for us to attempt to convey a coherent picture of farming at any given period and we have never tried to do so. However, our activity programmes contain a high

proportion of agricultural based events such as ploughing and threshing and we keep historical breeds of Welsh livestock to populate the fields. In our experience the keeping of live animals for interpretative purposes is becoming increasingly difficult and very often relies heavily on the enthusiasm and dedication of individual members of staff. Keeping livestock in the traditional manner requires a hefty capital requirement, scarce skills, individual dedication and an increasing amount of grief from the public and from regulators.

Finally we have a conventional thematic gallery devoted to agriculture and it is on this latter element that I will focus for the remainder of the paper. The Gallery, which was opened in 1974, was in many ways a ground breaking development which has been emulated by many other museums. It was object-rich, well designed, and it took an original approach to interpretation in that a conscious decision was taken not to use explanatory labels, but rather to let the objects and the photographs speak for themselves. It is laid out in accordance to the farming calendar starting with the springtime tasks and working through the annual round of ploughing, sowing, harvesting etc. It has remained virtually unchanged for almost 30 years and only in the last year or so has wear and tear begun to take a serious toll. Physically, therefore, the Gallery has aged well and stood the test of time.

Intellectually, however, this is far from being the case and the Gallery shares many of the perceived shortcomings of agricultural galleries and museums throughout the UK in that arguably it is now largely irrelevant to the majority of visitors and bears little relation to their own lives and concerns. Having been installed in the early 1970s it naturally reflects that period of farming which came to an end in the 1950s and 60s. And indeed this was a pivotal period in Welsh farming marking as it did a significant break with the past. At that time the Gallery stimulated much public interest and it was commonplace to encounter whole families with parents and grandparents reminiscing about the days of their youth and 'interpreting' the displays to children and grand children. Sadly those living links to the past are no longer with us.

The pre-eminent interpretive challenge that has to be faced therefore is how to make the Agricultural Gallery as relevant to today's visitors as it was to those visitors when it opened thirty years ago. Contemporary relevance is more than an academic concern for the National Museums & Galleries of Wales; it is something that we have committed ourselves to deliver. Our current Corporate Plan states that we will ensure that we 'are widely recognised as relevant to the needs of an inclusive society'. That means using our collections and our knowledge of the past to inspire

informed discussion of the present and the future, and equally importantly enabling people from very different backgrounds to play a meaningful part in those discussions.

An essential pre-requisite for a relevant display, however, is a relevant collection. Sadly, our existing collection is totally inadequate to enable us to address many contemporary issues of relevance. Effectively our agricultural collection stops at the 1950s, and even within that limitation is quite narrowly focussed in its scope. Consequently it is incapable of supporting a more contemporary view of farming. The reasons for this are familiar. The 1960s was a period of extensive redundancy in terms of agricultural equipment as modern farming methods were introduced. This coincided with a period of relatively plentiful resources for many museums, the almost inevitable consequence being a period of rather indiscriminate over-collecting which filled stores to capacity and in the longer term prevented many museums from being able to continue with any systematic and meaningful collecting. Many agricultural collections, our own included, therefore find themselves in a state of suspended animation unable to bring the story up to date.

Over and above such internal problems besetting museums there have also been huge changes within farming itself which have acted as deterrents to further systematic collecting. The sheer scale of modern agricultural machinery is so daunting as to make even the most acquisitive of curators hesitate before accepting them into the collection. Many modern machines are also hugely complex both to maintain and interpret, which again deters acquisition. Finally the pace of change is itself relentless with entire technologies seemingly having a lifespan of a decade or less which again makes it difficult to determine what is of sufficient significance to be collected. I also suspect that the technical complexity of both the machinery and of the industry itself has left the knowledge and skills of many curators behind.

A systematic programme of collecting is therefore necessary before tackling the interpretive challenge can even be contemplated. Fortunately we already have a time frame within which this programme can begin as the Museum has just embarked upon a scheme to upgrade and extend its storage facilities. This will allow us to restart active collecting thereby enabling us to meet new challenges.

Amongst the many valuable recommendations in the MGC Report is the creation of a UK-wide data base of agricultural collections. This is seen as the necessary first step in the creation of a dispersed national agricultural collection with different museums being responsible for the

collection of objects relating to different aspects of the industry. This is a concept that is already in being and operating successfully in the case of historic ships and represents what is possibly the only realistic way ahead in dealing the preservation of large and expensive objects. The duplication of collections is something that can no longer be afforded. Hopefully this could also be the beginning of much needed pragmatic and informed approach to the rationalisation of any over-abundant and ill-provenanced agricultural collections.

Making the re-displayed Agricultural Gallery more relevant will entail making a number of crucial changes to the approach adopted in the past. Firstly, and most crucial of all, the displays and the interpretation must be intellectually accessible, i.e. visitors must be enabled to understand what the displays are about. The interpretation of agriculture at MWL and elsewhere assumes a level of prior knowledge on the part of visitors that they simply do not now have. Whereas this might have been excusable in the 1970s when a greater proportion of visitors might have had some knowledge of the farming and the technology displayed it is most certainly not the case now. Sadly it has become apparent over the years that one can never underestimate the ignorance of the average visitor when it comes to things agricultural and museums must pay heed to this fact. One way of ensuring intellectual accessibility is to create contact points with visitors' own experiences and concerns, i.e. address those issues which it is known interests the public at large. This involves answering questions such as, 'Where does our food come from?' and 'Why and how was the landscape created?'

Secondly, the gallery must go beyond technology. At the time that the Gallery was being planned it seemed almost to be an unwritten rule that every agricultural gallery should *de facto* become a gallery of agricultural technology. That is no longer a viable approach and every effort will be made to place farming in Wales in its historical, geographical and socio-economic context. It is the relationship to the land, the impact of geography on what can be grown and where, the vital function of agriculture as a provider of food, the inter-relationship between habitat, economy and society which together tells the compelling story that needs to be told. The interpretation must also more accurately reflect the balance between arable and livestock farming. Because of its geography Wales has predominantly been a land of livestock rearing with crops being grown primarily for home consumption and the feeding of livestock. Yet within the existing Gallery such is the imperative to display the machines in the collection that the livestock is virtually invisible. Equally there is nothing about the ownership of land, arguably the most contentious political issue in late nineteenth century Wales and something that is reflected in the political map

of the country almost to this day. Even within the narrow parameters of agricultural technology it could be argued that the interpretation in most agricultural galleries is flawed in that they appear to be almost ahistorical in approach with change being viewed as an inevitable march towards progress. Drivers of change such as political policy, market forces, technology etc are often completely ignored.

Thirdly the 'new' gallery must include people and emphasise the lives of those who lived and worked in the countryside. Farming in the past was hugely labour intensive and the vast majority of the people in rural areas were employed on the land, yet people and their lives are noticeably absent from most displays. This is an area where our colleagues in industrial museums have stolen a march upon us. They have long since realised that the day of the rivet counter was numbered and every industrial museum is busily engaged in reinventing itself as a museum of social history. It is a truism that people are interested in people and if you want to succeed as a museum you have to ensure that people are central to your story. The design brief for the new industrial museum that the National Museums & Galleries of Wales is developing in Swansea reflects this and approaches 'the wider themes of technological and social change over time and into the future' through 'a focus on the day to day experiences of people and communities'. That is the path that agricultural museums would do well to follow. At MWL we are fortunate in that we have a wonderful resource to enable us to do that in our extensive audio visual archives. We have hundreds of hours of tape recorded reminiscences of farming life over the past century. We literally have the voices of the people who used much of what have on display and to whom it was an integral part of their daily lives. Modern interactive technology will enable the visitor to see and hear the people who used the tools and implements on display and to hear about the social life that revolved around their use.

Finally, the interpretation needs to include the end product. Such is the emphasis on process in most conventional agricultural galleries that product is virtually ignored. Farming is essentially about the production of food yet rarely is this made explicit and nowhere is the end product given the prominence that it deserves. The principal products of Welsh agriculture were milk, butter and cheese, meat, wool and hides. None of this is reflected in the current display and will have to be introduced. Bizarrely the only end product that is currently on display is peat, an important domestic fuel in many parts of Wales. I often wonder whether our visitors actually think that we eat the stuff! It is here that an attempt must also be made to link farming with the food processing, a Cinderella industry ignored by agricultural museums and industrial museums in equal measure.



In Welsh terms food processing far eclipses agriculture itself in terms making a positive contribution to the economy, employing many thousands of people in factories producing and packing a vast range of foodstuffs from butter and poultry to far more exotic and un-Welsh fare such as of Mozzarella cheese and Indian curries!

In conclusion therefore it is crucial that our agricultural displays aim for relevance. To be relevant we need to ensure that our visitors are provided with an appropriate level of intellectual access to our displays. Farming must be placed in its wider context and our interpretation must go beyond narrow technology to encompass both products and people. We have to build the much needed bridge of understanding between the farmer and the urban dwellers that make up the vast majority of the population. To end on an optimistic note. Museums have the potential to do that – we have the collections, the knowledge and the skills. I also feel that the current debates surrounding rural issues provides us with a golden opportunity to show how relevant we can be to today's society. It is now up to us to seize that opportunity.

**Copyright: John Williams-Davies 2003**