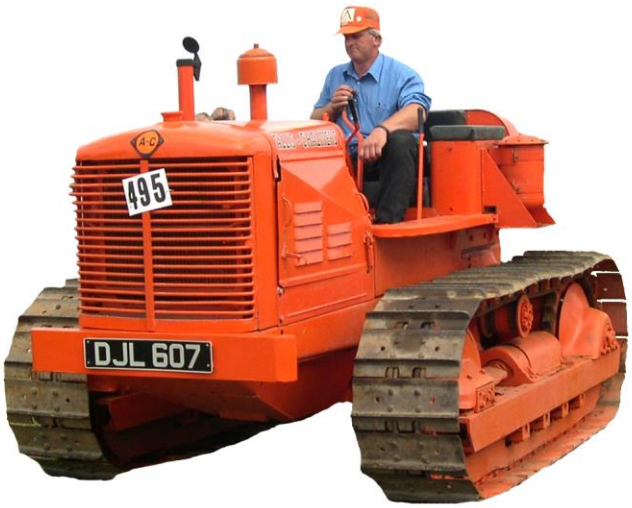
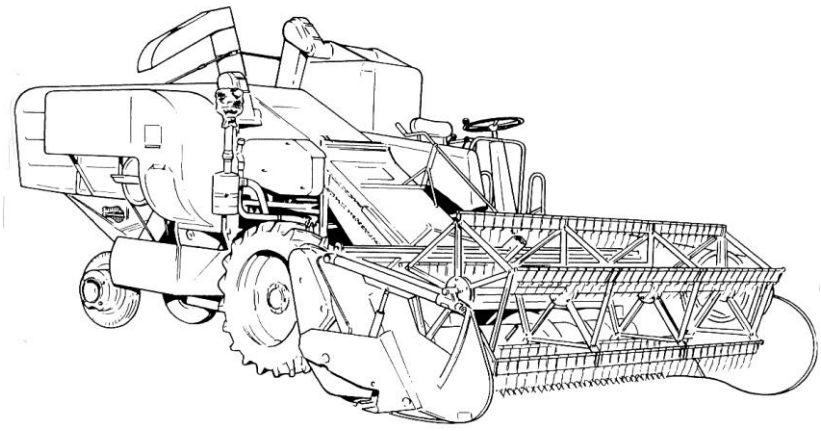
Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff

Developing the
Distributed National Collection
of agricultural heritage collections

Tractors and combines –
icons of 20th century farming





An Additional Report
for the Rural Museums Network
by Catherine Wilson
February, 2005

This Additional Report includes the results of the seminars held during 2004 to consider the Distributed National Collection of tractors and combine harvesters; and an assessment of the robustness of the process.

It supports and takes forward the earlier reports:

Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff
The Distributed National Collection: a scoping & development study of agricultural heritage collections
by David Viner and Catherine Wilson,
in association with Rob Shorland-Ball,
published in January 2004; and

Developing the Distributed National Collection of agricultural heritage items – a supplementary report
by David Viner and Catherine Wilson, published July 2004

Both for the Museum of English Rural Life of the University of Reading
Copies available from the Museum on request.

For further information on this Report please contact:
Catherine Wilson, Tel. 01522 753648
catherine@penates.demon.co.uk

Cover illustration:

Allis-Chalmers HD5, 1945, owned and restored by Brian Baxter, volunteer at the Museum of Lincolnshire Life.
Photograph: Catherine Wilson
and
A Massey Ferguson 788 combine. Reproduced with the kind permission of the author from *An Illustrated History of Combine Harvesters* by Jim Wilkie (Ian Allan 2001)

Acknowledgement
Grateful thanks are due to those individuals who freely gave of their time to participate in the two seminars, and particularly to the two museums hosting the event.

Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff
Developing the concept of the Distributed National Collection of agricultural heritage collections

TRACTORS AND COMBINES - ICONS OF 20TH CENTURY FARMING

1 Introduction

1.1 The development of the Distributed National Collection (DNC) concept for agricultural heritage items is seen as an integral part of the agenda which the Rural Museums Network is seeking to pursue as it establishes itself as a permanent and representative body.

1.2 The *Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff (SWfC)* Report (Viner & Wilson, 2004) was a scoping study which started the process, and suggested a methodology, for identifying the DNC. This Report was endorsed by the Rural Museums Network at the *Breaking New Ground Conference* held at the University of Reading in March 2004. Since that conference, an object-level survey of combine harvesters has been undertaken to add to the initial case study on tractors and Collection Working Group seminars, as recommended in the *SWfC* report, have now been held for both of these topics. This report presents the results of that work.

2 Collections Working Groups

2.1 The *Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff* report discussed in some detail the concept of a Collections Working Group (p.35/6)

It is useful to repeat here how this process was envisaged:

"A way [forward] would be to organise a series of seminars or workshops on specific quite narrow activity based topics, following the categories in the Questionnaire as a starting point. Invited to those seminars would be not just museum people with specific knowledge of that topic and collections related to it, but other relevant specialists in the area – practising farmers, knowledgeable collectors or preservationists, agricultural historians or other specialists, including - importantly - volunteers and those in the private sector. This would involve a different group of people for each topic so would not place too high a burden on any individual.

"The task of each seminar would be to identify landmark developments and significant storylines in the subject area over the last 200 years; to suggest objects or groups of objects which might illustrate those developments and storylines; and then to identify where those objects are held. Priority would be given to items already in the leading regional museums, but objects in private hands could be identified if none existed in the public sector. A first and straightforward task for this group would be to peer review the identified tractor collections to bring this piece of work to a conclusion.

"Similar regionally based seminars could be held to consider topics particularly important to, or distinctive of, an individual region. A pilot for this approach could perhaps be started in East Anglia, where an informal group of curators from the leading museums has already met on a number of occasions, to share information and familiarise themselves with each other's collections.

"Over a period, this formula would enable a picture to be built up, not only of significant collections, but of why they were significant and how they could be used to illustrate that particular aspect of the story of British agriculture.

2.2 Although no central funding, as envisaged in the *SWfC* report, has yet been forthcoming, through the good offices of two host museums, it has been possible to test this methodology through two pilot seminars; one on the subject of combines, held at the Museum of Scottish Country Life in July 2004; and one on tractors held at the Science Museum, London in November 2004. Thanks are due to the respective curators, Duncan Dornan and Jane Insley, for being prepared to support this initiative, and to the Scottish Country Life Museums Trust and the Rural Life Museums Action Group (Rulmag) which organisations agreed to reimburse participants' train fares. Catherine Wilson acted as 'secretary' for both seminars.

2.3 The seminars involved only 7 or 8 people: a three or four key curators and a similar number of private individuals with a deep and detailed knowledge of the subject – not just the nuts and bolts, but the wider social story as well.

2.4 The proceedings were recorded, so that, as well as notes, there will be a full transcript of what was said. Jane Insley is kindly arranging for the transcripts to be made from the recorded discs. Although not envisaged initially, it is felt that this is a very useful exercise as it will enable the full proceedings to be available to any member of the Network who may be interested; and it will enhance the general knowledge base

about these collections. The cost of this process should be factored in to any future funding for CWGs.

2.5 A summary of the two seminars follows in sections 3 and 4, but it is appropriate to outline here the lessons learned.

Practical issues:

1. An agenda for the seminar should be circulated to participants in advance. This should state clearly the purpose of the day, and list key questions to be answered.
2. Participants should be encouraged to do 'homework' in advance around these questions
3. Reference books, particularly those giving key dates or facts should be available in the seminar room, to reduce time spent discussing these issues when they can easily be resolved
4. A good chairman for the meeting is essential, to keep the discussion focussed and on track
5. As well as the chairman there needs to be a note-taker/secretary
6. It is important to select a *small* number of the right individuals. It is felt that 10 people attending is a maximum if the discussion is to remain focussed and manageable

Intellectual issues:

1. The 'peer review' element has proved vital to the process. In both seminars, a very different list of 'DNC' objects has emerged, than just taking the results of the curators' assessments in the questionnaires.
2. Private individuals, at least those approached so far, are very happy to share their knowledge; they welcome contact with museum people and express the wish for closer links
3. On the wider issues of contemporary collecting, and sharing collections, the feeling is that members of the preservation movement would be willing participants
4. The process will enable collections to be better understood, and will make decisions on the future of the objects concerned easier, as they can be made from a basis of better knowledge
5. Over a period of time, a database of key knowledgeable individuals will be built up, both those in museums and the private sector, whom curators could contact for further information (of course with their permission, and in a controlled way.)

3 Combines

3.1 In the initial *SWfC* survey, nine of the selected museums indicated that they had combine harvesters in their collection. These nine museums were all sent a copy of a questionnaire aimed at gathering detailed information about those combines. As with the tractor questionnaire curators were asked to complete a series of Range Statements relating to them as well as details about the machines. These produced a total score for each machine which should give an indication of its importance. In addition, a general request was circulated to all members of the Rural Museums Network for information on combine harvesters in museums. This elicited a further three responses. Subsequently, a further combine has been identified in a museum which is not part of the RMN, but is a Registered museum.

3.2 As a result ten museums were identified as holding combines, totalling thirty-two machines between them. Of these thirty-two, thirteen are at the Museum of Scottish Country Life at Kittochside, where they have been carefully and systematically collected to represent the developing story of combines.

3.3 At the Combine Seminar, the starting point was to identify landmark developments in the combine story in the UK, and to explore the ways in which the gradual spread of the combine had had an impact on the farmers and the rural community. The Seminar then considered how well the combines already in museums could illustrate these stories, and which of them were of sufficient importance to be identified as part of the DNC.

3.4 On the whole, the match was quite good, with no major gaps identified. Of the thirty-two combines, twenty-four were considered to be worthy of forming the Distributed National Collection. These were given a 'star rating', which resulted in one having four stars, three having three stars, six having two stars, and the rest with one star. The list of these combines is shown at Appendix 1. From the information provided at the seminar it is clear that the assessment of significance of individual machines varied considerably from the 'scores' allocated by the curators in the questionnaire responses. In particular, one machine in poor condition and stored outside was identified as being of considerable historic importance as the earliest surviving combine to have entered the UK. This can be compared to an art expert identifying a previously unknown Raphael in the stores of an art gallery! So the seminar process demonstrated conclusively the real benefit of having the input of those with detailed knowledge and expertise into the DNC process.

4 Tractors

4.1 The invention, development and spread of tractors during the 20th century had a profound and lasting effect on life in the UK. The technology of the internal combustion engine brought major changes to the way farms were operated and to the lifestyle and work pattern of farmers and farm workers. Increasing efficiency and production led to the concept of cheap food which is such a feature of contemporary life. The two world wars of the 20th century stimulated the widespread replacement of working horses with tractors. The tractor is an icon for farming in the 20th century, and as influential in its way as the introduction of the railways in the 19th century. It is also an artefact type that is widely collected in the private sector, where there is great expertise.

4.2 As part of the original questionnaire distributed in July 2003 to thirty-three museums, detailed object level information was requested for tractor holdings. The results of that Survey, together with a list of tractors, was published in the *'Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff'* Report in January 2004. Since that time, tractors held by the Hampshire County Museum Service (9) and the Science Museum (67) have been added to the database, giving a grand total of 186 tractors in twenty-three museums. Apart from the Science Museum, other large collections are held by the Yorkshire Museum of Farming (29) and the Museum of Scottish Country Life (16). Most other museums held fewer than 6 tractors.

4.3 The Questionnaire provided basic information on make, type, date, provenance and storage, current condition and the curator's assessment of significance. However, as with the combines it was recognised that this on its own was not enough to determine whether any individual tractor was worthy of inclusion in a Distributed National Collection.

4.4 Following on from the pilot seminar on combines a further seminar was held at the Science Museum, London, through the good offices of Jane Insley, on 15th November 2004. The purpose was:

1. To consider the social and technological impact of the introduction of tractors on agricultural life in the UK during the 20th century
2. To identify individual makes and models of machine that could best illustrate that impact
3. To consider existing holdings of tractors in museums; identify those which are representative of the makes and models in (2) above; and identify those worthy of forming part of the Distributed National Collection.

4.5 The discussion reflected the more complicated nature of the tractor scene as compared to combines. There were many more makes and types to consider. However, a good consensus was reached on landmarks up to and including the Second World War. After that the position was less clear cut, with many different manufacturers setting up in the UK. Here, local association may well be a factor for a local museum, but would not necessarily give the item a national importance. There was a feeling that because of their widespread social impact there should be 'class designations' for the very common tractors, particularly the widespread and enduring, even endearing, 'grey Fergie'; and the Fordson. Both these makes are reasonably well represented in museums, and all are considered important. They have a real story to tell in our museums, and they are an easy point of contact with visitors, particularly children who seem to relate to them even if they do not come from a rural background. To most visitors a common tractor will be at least as appealing as a rarer machine whose significance may need more explaining. The point was also made that model tractors and implements have a lot of public appeal; and they are cheaper to obtain and easier to store than the 'real thing'.

4.6 However, it was felt that some further analysis of museum holdings was necessary, and this happened after the meeting with two of the participants going through the information and the lists again. So not all Fergusons and Fordsons are included in the DNC, but those museums that own them are urged to care for them and use them in positive ways in their displays.

4.7 At both seminars there was healthy debate about the importance of rarity versus representation. The general conclusion was that a machine should not be included in the DNC *just because* it was the last survivor of its type/make. The importance should rest on how representative it is of a particular technological advance, or of social impact. For example the Ivel tractor was the first successful lightweight tractor in the UK and possibly the world. The fact that only two are known to survive in the UK, one of which is in the Science Museum, gives it added value, but does not on its own make it worthy of the DNC. To a private collector rarity is a great attraction; to museums it should be less so.

4.8 Particularly for the early part of the story, it was recognised that not all important technological advances were represented amongst museums' holdings. So a separate list has been compiled of those which are considered important and are known to exist in private hands. This raises the question of whether the DNC concept should be moved on a stage to include items in private ownership, as is the case with the Register of Historic Ships – this is an area for further debate. This list

(Appendix 3) also includes suggestions for some more contemporary machines that illustrate significant developments.

4.9 A concern was expressed that, because we do not know much detail about the originality or condition of most of the machines in museums, it is hard to say that they are of national importance, at least those of more common makes, when there may well be much better examples in private hands. There is certainly much more work that could/should be done in this area. However, this list is offered as a starting point for further debate.

4.10 The net result of the deliberations is that eighty-five machines have been identified as forming the potential DNC. In some cases there are two or three of one make. To narrow the list down to just one of each make/type, more information would be needed on condition/originality/etc. in order to make a choice.

4.11 It did not prove possible to give the tractors a 'star rating' in quite the same way as the combines. However, they were assessed for their technological and/or social impact, and this assessment appears on the list. (Appendix 2)

4.12 The number of tractors on this list is minute when compared with the tens of thousands produced during the 20th century, and with the thousands which still exist in private preservation. Moreover, with one or two notable exceptions, they have not been collected systematically with the intention of representing either the technological development of tractors, nor of charting their social impact. The seminar however showed that there is nevertheless a reasonable spread of representative tractors within our museums.

4.13 Of the eighty-five machines identified, forty-two are in the Science Museum's collection; eight are in the Museum of Scottish Country Life; two in the Irish Agricultural Museum; one in the Museum of Welsh Life; the remaining thirty-two are spread between fourteen regional museums. Of these, one is in Scotland, one in Wales, and the remainder in England, spread from Devon to Yorkshire. This is therefore a good illustration of a national collection that is indeed well 'distributed'. The full list is given at Appendix 2.

4.14 What is noticeable from both the tractor and combine work is the paucity of any representation of the products of the 1970s and 1980s and the total absence of any collecting over the last 25-30 years. Given the huge advances in that time, from air-conditioned cabs to satellite mapping, this is an issue that needs to be addressed. The point has been made that mechanically operated machines can be repaired by suitably

knowledgeable people; computer controlled ones will be much more difficult. If they are to be collected therefore, it is essential that they are acquired in 'as new' condition. It is also sensible that approaches to contemporary collecting should be addressed on a national basis.

4.15 For the future, there is a strong recommendation that museums investigate working with private collectors to supplement their exhibits, at least for special displays and working days, rather than seek to acquire more items that will be largely static exhibits. Some museums already do this successfully, but more could be done.

5 Summary and conclusions

5.1 Twenty-four combine harvesters spread through seven different institutions can claim to form the Distributed National Collection in that subject area. Two of the seven institutions are national museums but five are regional museums without Designated collections, and three of these are independent museums.

5.2 Eighty-five machines are identified as a starting point for the Distributed National Collection of tractors. These are spread between nineteen museums. Forty-two of the tractors are in the Science Museum's collection, giving that museum a clear leading role in this subject area. The relevant national museums for Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland also feature in the list. But thirty-two machines deemed to be of national significance are cared for by local authority and independent charity museums are involved, and by the Designated collection at the Museum of English Rural Life.

5.3 Only one combine dating from 1976, and two tractors, from 1978 and 1983, represent the last 35 years of development across the UK. There may be a number of reasons for this: the sheer size of the objects; the pressure on space in all museums; the increasing complexity of the machines; the fact that they are no longer built in the UK. But does any museum have a policy of collecting video footage, photographs or brochures instead? Continuing collecting of at least some material is as important in this area as it is in any other museum discipline.

5.4 These two seminars are a very small step towards the ultimate goal of identifying a DNC of agricultural heritage items, but the process has proved that the methodology can work; that non-museum people are very willing to be involved in the process; that most museums will respond to simple limited scope questionnaires; and not least that there is much goodwill in the sector and a wish to see this process continue.