



THE MUSEUM
OF ENGLISH
RURAL LIFE



University of
Reading



What was it like to be a child in the countryside? Country life then and now

Your class will have the opportunity to explore what it would have been like as a child in the countryside from the early 1900s onwards and how it differs from their own lives today. Changes in technology, food, clothes and toys all tell us a story about the world that children once lived in.

PRIMARY | LOWER SECONDARY

Learning outcomes

By the end of the activities students will:

- have a greater insight into what country life was like for children in the past and how it compares to their own lives
- have developed their enquiry skills; asking questions about what childhood was like in the countryside and why
- have compared everyday objects such as clothing, food and technology in the past and now.

Before your visit

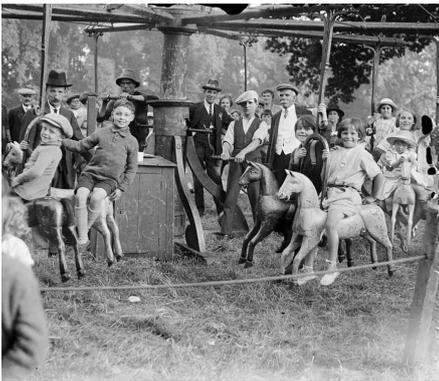
There are six images at the end of this document (and as separate files on the webpage) that depict children undertaking different activities in the past. Some children are working, others are playing.

THEMES AND TOPICS

- Local history study and a period after 1066
- Local history study

LINKS WITH OTHER ACTIVITIES

This activity could also be used in conjunction with the 'Country Showdown' resource.



Ask the students to look at the pictures and think about what they tell us about rural life in the past. Encourage them to look for clues in the images. Below are some of the questions that you could consider.

- Would this happen today?
- What differences are there in this image compared to similar images from today? You could look at objects in the photos, how people dressed, changes in materials and furniture.
- How would you feel if you were the child in the picture? Would you enjoy this activity? Would you be able to do this activity? Would you be allowed to? If not, why not?
- What would you learn if you went back in time to take part in this picture?
- What about the photos themselves? How would these have been taken? What did early cameras look like? How did they work?

Consider everyday objects and list common clothing, foods and technology, including transport, that children all have in common today. Use this as a prompt for visiting the Museum of English Rural Life and comparing with what these items used to be like or whether they are a recent invention.

Gleaning straw after harvesting, early 1900s



Visiting the Museum of English Rural Life

After your students have had a little time to explore one or two galleries, ask them to choose a child-related object that they had not seen before their visit. It might be related to play, school, home life or food. The museum also has mystery objects that can be identified by lifting the flaps which reveal the information panels. Then complete the activity below.

Describing mystery museum objects to each other

After your students have had a little more time to explore one or two galleries, ask them to choose an object, one they haven't seen before they visited.

1. Students work in pairs.
2. One partner selects an object.
3. The other is then taken to the vicinity of the object without being allowed to see it.
4. The partners sit or stand back to back.
5. The student who made the selection faces the object and describes its appearance.
6. His or her partner produces a drawing of the object based entirely on the description. They might ask further questions.
7. They then swap roles.

Questions to consider when looking at objects and photos

- Who might have used the object?
- What happened to it?
- What did it do?
- What is it made of?
- What shape is it?
- When was this object used?
- Where was this object used?
- Why was the object needed or developed?
- How was the object used?

Comparing between then and now

The following table provides the opportunity to make notes and drawings of objects and artefacts that help your students compare our lives today with rural lives in the past.

Comparing between then and now

Theme	Look for objects and artefacts that reveal what people did or had in the countryside related to these themes. What items or information in the museum tells you this?	What do you have and use today related to these themes?
<p>Clothes</p> <p>What clothes did people wear?</p> <p>What do you wear today?</p> <p>What materials were used?</p>		
<p>Food</p> <p>What did people eat and drink?</p> <p>What do you enjoy eating?</p> <p>How does food packaging compare?</p>		
<p>Transport</p> <p>How did people get around?</p> <p>What transport did they use?</p> <p>How do you get to school or after school clubs?</p> <p>How was transport powered?</p> <p>How safe are roads in the past and now?</p>		

Comparing between then and now

Theme	Look for objects and artefacts that reveal what people did or had in the countryside related to these themes. What items or information in the museum tells you this?	What do you have and use today related to these themes?
<p>Home</p> <p>How did the home differ?</p> <p>What did people have in their homes?</p> <p>Were there differences even in the countryside?</p> <p>What does your home have that's different?</p>		
<p>Play</p> <p>How did children play?</p> <p>What toys did they have?</p> <p>What do you play with?</p> <p>What games do you enjoy?</p>		
<p>What things are made of</p> <p>What materials are used?</p> <p>How do they look?</p> <p>What are their properties?</p>		

Areas of the Museum of English Rural Life that specifically refer to children

Town and Country gallery

- Into the Country display showing evacuation and objects related to hop picking holidays.
- Rural Healthcare (including a child's coffin).
- Showing Progress revealing more about women and children working at home making lace or plaiting straw.

Making Rural England

- Children and Play showing toys and books.
- The Open Road Romani Carriage and Children's Hour Radio Out with Romany.

A Year on the Farm

- Summer (harvest).



Blackberrying

What next?

- Reflect on the different objects children have seen and described. Are there objects they would love to have or use today? Are there some that really surprised them? Would it have been easy being a child back then?
- Write a letter to a child from the early to mid-1900s telling them about how life is different in the countryside today. Think about what you would tell them about and the sorts of things you can do that you couldn't then. Think about the types of technology, clothes and foods you have today in your own life.
- Put together a box of objects that reflect your lives today and how you would describe them to a child 70 years ago who has never seen them before. To them the objects might seem magical, unbelievable and possibly unaffordable.

Writing a museum object label

- Use mind-mapping, explore what makes a label. Create your own fantasy labels based on some of the objects you have seen, then write labels about modern-day objects. How would you describe those objects to a child who lives in the countryside 70 years ago?

museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/text-and-labels

Summer is the season of harvest.
From early June grass is made into hay or silage ready to feed livestock over the coming winter.
In July and August cereal crops are harvested. Farmers also shear their sheep and show off their prize animals at agricultural fairs.

Without machines, people worked long days during the good summer weather.
Long school holidays have their origin in the need for children to help bring in the cereal crop by hand.

Top tips for writing a museum object label:

1. Think about your object and the story you would like to tell. Write at least five words or more that come to mind as you look at the object. Think about descriptive, interesting, funny, ridiculous, memorable words.
2. Write down five questions that occur to you, or that you would like answered about your object.
3. Keep your questions and words in mind when you are writing, and stick to the message or story you wish to tell.

4. Write for your audience and avoid difficult words. Avoid jargon and scientific terms. Write your text in a way that will be understood by 12 year old children.
5. Think about the tone of your writing and the voice you are using. Write in an active, conversational way.
6. Use words that reflect the way that people really talk.
7. What is the first thing you notice? Is there something odd or interesting that you wish to write about it?
8. Personalise it in a way that relates it to your own everyday lives.
9. Stick to a word count. Visitors do not want (and don't have time to read) long paragraphs. Keep each label to 60–70 words and avoid big chunks of text.





Fairground roundabout, 1930s



Chair making, Buckinghamshire, 1940s



A boy making a rake, 1930s



Two boys playing croquet, 1890s



Learning at Moulton Farm Institute,
Northamptonshire (now Moulton College)



Boys fishing

MERL galleries

