



John Higgs was the driving force behind setting up the Museum, and served as its first Keeper until 1957. He later became Secretary and Keeper of Records of the Duchy of Cornwall and was knighted in 1986. MERL D MERL D1/58/A884

Establishing a museum

Farming changed rapidly during the late 1940s and early 1950s, as horsepower gave way to tractors and threshing machines to combine harvesters. Old equipment was routinely discarded, seen as fit only for the scrap heap.

University lecturer John Higgs recognised the need to collect and preserve this vanishing rural heritage. In 1950, supported by colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, he submitted a proposal for the University of Reading to create a Museum of English Rural Life.

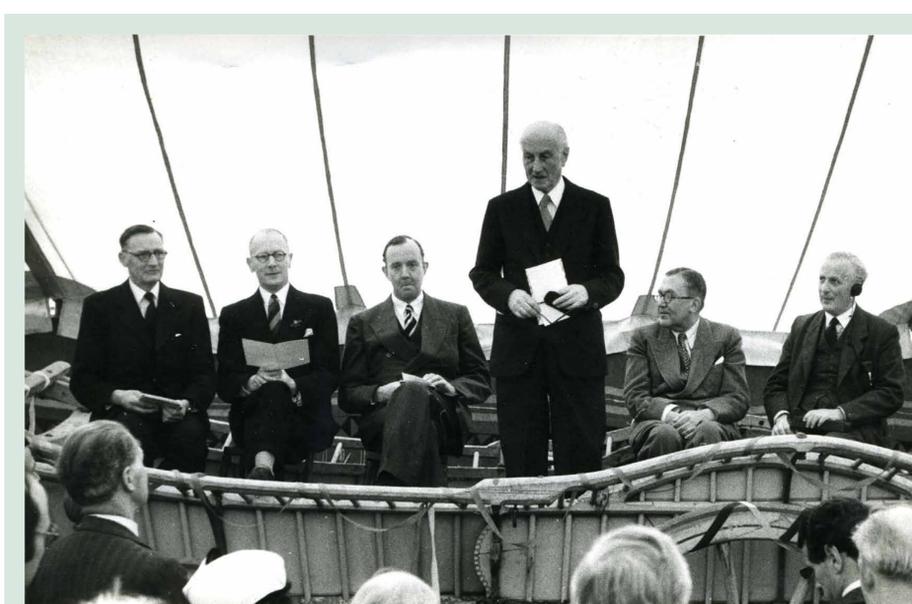
The founding artefacts of this pioneering collection were recorded on 1 January 1951. Initially there was only a barn available to store acquisitions. The Museum soon acquired premises in Whiteknights House, on the new University campus. The earliest displays opened to the public in 1955.



The Museum's Keeper John Higgs being interviewed by Godfrey Baseley, the BBC producer who founded *The Archers*, during a live television broadcast from the Museum of English Rural Life on 10 May 1954. MERL D MERL 35/2742



The Museum's first home was in Whiteknights House, on the University of Reading's Whiteknights Campus. This building is now referred to as Old Whiteknights House. MERL 60/686



When the Museum's first public displays were formally opened on 27 April 1955, various dignitaries attended the ceremony. During the speeches these important figures used one of the Museum's wagons as a podium. **Left to right:** Ernest Smith (University Registrar), John Wolfenden (University Vice-Chancellor), Keith Murray (Chairman of the University Grants Committee), Viscount Templewood (University Chancellor), Leigh Ashton (Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum), and Edgar Thomas (Professor of Agricultural Economics) who had been instrumental in founding the Museum. MERL 35/3649



Lavinia Smith gathered over 360 rural artefacts, some of which are shown here in this photograph of her home at East Hendred, Oxfordshire. The collection was bequeathed to Berkshire Education Authority and transferred to the Museum in 1951. MERL 35/268

Gathering the first collections

The earliest items to be added to the Museum's catalogue were transferred from the University's own Department of Agriculture. These artefacts had been originally gathered to help illustrate older and more traditional farming methods. The initial acquisitions were soon supplemented by important private donations.

Significant additions included farm and craft tools amassed by Henry Massingham, a writer with rural interests. Another early collection was gathered during the 1930s and 1940s by Lavinia Smith. She acquired objects from friends and neighbours near her Oxfordshire home, using the artefacts to educate local children.

Press coverage and attendance at local agricultural shows helped to generate interest amongst the farming community and wider rural population. Despite modest beginnings the response was huge and by 1954 the Museum already held over 3,500 objects.



The Keeper John Higgs (driving) collects a steam engine from a farm near Banbury, Oxfordshire, in 1951. The farmer donated the machine after visiting the Museum's stand at the Royal Show in Cambridge. MERL D MERL D1/58/5/151



The Museum's stand at the World Ploughing Championships at Shillingford, Oxfordshire, in 1956. Temporary displays like this were mounted at agricultural shows and events throughout the 1950s. MERL 35/4360



Henry Massingham, a rural writer of the 1930s, amassed objects in an attempt to preserve the skills that went with them. He donated his collection in 1951. That same year it was showcased in one of the very first temporary exhibitions to be mounted by the Museum. This was displayed in the University of Reading Library, then on the London Road campus. This image shows Massingham alongside his own collections laid out on tables for this exhibition. MERL 35/99



Museum staff members mark the move to the present site in 2004. By 1964 the collection had outgrown the first Museum in Old Whitenights House and was moved into the accommodation that appears behind the staff in this photograph. It stayed in these 'temporary' huts for the next 40 years. Image © University of Reading

The Museum as it is now

Over the years the collection has expanded to almost 30,000 artefacts. It has also grown far beyond objects. Its holdings now include some 75,000 books, 1750 linear metres of archives, and over 1 million photographs. Together these rich resources help to tell the story of change in the English countryside.

The Museum is recognised for its unparalleled records relating to food, farming, and rural life. Its holdings are designated as being of national historical importance. They attract local and international interest, and continue to develop through active collection and continued donations.

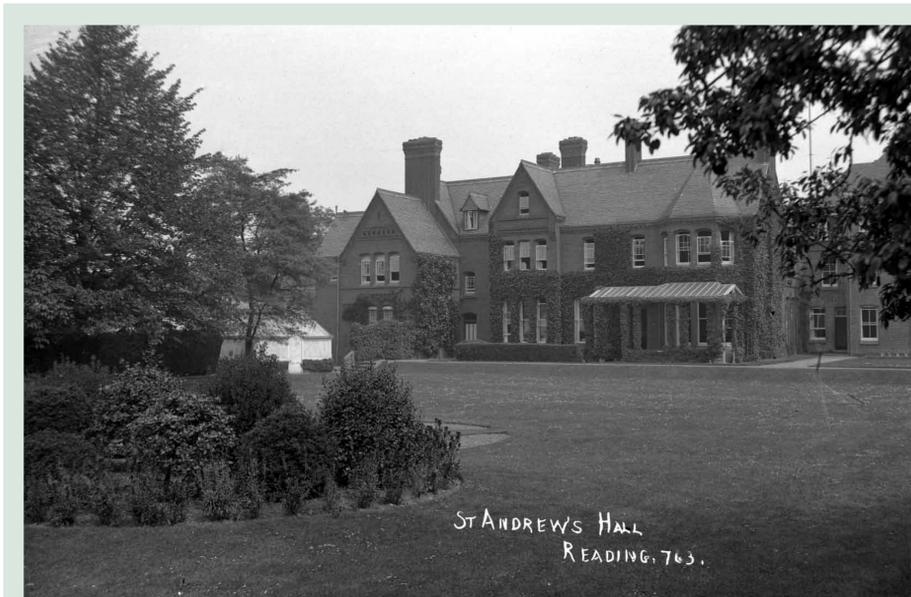
In 2005 the Museum came to its present home, following an £11million scheme to create new displays, library space, improved storage, and public facilities. This move has provided greater public access to collections, allowing better services for learners of all ages including school pupils, university students, and specialist scholars.



Patron of the Museum, HRH the Prince of Wales discusses conservation with David Empringham in 1993. MERL D MERL D1/18/F1/13



Although the Museum provides modern exhibition galleries and facilities, the architectural excellence of the old building remains. Image © Mark Mason (2010)



Originally called East Thorpe, the oldest part of this building was designed by prominent Victorian architect Alfred Waterhouse. It was the home of Alfred Palmer, whose family owned the biscuit manufacturers Huntley and Palmers. The temporary exhibition rooms were originally kitchen quarters. Palmer gave the house to the University of Reading and it served as St Andrew's hall of residence between 1911 and 2001. The Museum contains items associated with Huntley and Palmers and also the Waterhouse family. MERL P DX322 PH1/763



Lead characters Dan and Doris Archer (played by Harry Oakes and Gwen Berryman) in 1951. Dan was later played by Monte Crick, Edgar Harrison, and Frank Middlemass. Gwen Berryman played Doris for 29 years. Image © BBC

An 'everyday story of country folk'

In June 1948 a meeting was convened to explore ways of making agricultural programming interesting. Referring to the popular radio serial special agent, one Lincolnshire farmer remarked that the industry needed 'a farming Dick Barton'. This inspired BBC radio producer Godfrey Baseley to create The Archers.

A successful week-long trial was broadcast on the Midland Home Service in 1950. The first national episode aired on the Light Programme on 1 January 1951. Early emphasis lay firmly on promoting modern farming methods and best practice. Sixty years later this pioneering series continues to flourish.

In the 1970s the format changed to become more entertainment-based. Despite this, The Archers still retains an agricultural advisor and seeks to provide an accurate portrayal of rural Britain. Echoing the actual experience of farmers, characters on the show have battled real life problems including foot and mouth and BSE.



The production team in 1954. **Left to right:** Tony Shryane (Producer), Godfrey Baseley (Editor), and Edward J Mason and Geoffrey Webb (original scriptwriters). Image © BBC



Tony Shryane gives notes during rehearsals at the BBC Broad Street studios, Birmingham, November 1955. **Front, left to right:** Joy Davies (playing Helen Fairbrother), Anne Cullen (Carol Grey), Lesley Saweard (Christine Archer), Gwen Berryman (Doris Archer), and Leslie Dunn (Paul Johnson). **Back, left to right:** Leslie Bowmar (George Fairbrother), Norman Painting (Phil Archer), Harry Oakes (Dan Archer), and Denis Folwell (Jack Archer). Image © BBC



Accurate portrayal of countryside issues lies at the heart of The Archers and its aims. The first Editor and series founder Godfrey Baseley provided rural storylines for the first 20 years. Anthony Parkin was Agricultural Story Editor from 1972. In 1997 he was succeeded by Graham Harvey, who had been a scriptwriter since the mid-1980s. Steve Peacock became the Agricultural Advisor in 2011. This photograph, taken in 1993, shows some of these later figures with other key individuals. **Left to right:** Norman Painting (who played Phil Archer and was a scriptwriter), Graham Harvey, Anthony Parkin, Bob Arnold (who played Tom Forrest), Phil Drabble (country writer and broadcaster) and Vanessa Whitburn (Editor since 1992). Image © BBC



Brookfield Farm as it is portrayed today, with Friesian dairy cattle shown in the foreground. Image © BBC

Brookfield Farm

The Archer family's own farm, Brookfield, represents the experience of medium-scale mixed British farming. Storylines relating changes to land tenure and ownership chart a familiar rural story.

In the early 1950s, this 100-acre tenant farm on the Lawson-Hope Estate was home to Dan Archer and his wife Doris. When the estate was broken up in 1954 Dan bought the freehold. His son Philip took over Brookfield in 1970. It is currently farmed by David Archer and his wife Ruth.

Today Brookfield covers 469 acres. A paddock grazing system provides for a herd of 180 Friesian milking cows. The 339 acres of grassland also house a herd of Hereford beef cattle and some 350 ewes. Lambs are marketed co-operatively under the Hasset Hills brand. Arable land includes 88 acres of cereals, 10 of oilseed rape, 10 of potatoes, 12 of beans, and 10 of forage maize.



Dan Archer (played by Harry Oakes) manhandling milk churns at Brookfield in 1954. Image © BBC



David and Ruth Archer (played by Timothy Bentinck and Felicity Finch) have been running Brookfield since 2001. The Ford 6600 tractor shown behind them was manufactured between 1975 and 1981. Image © BBC



In response to post-war mechanisation, Dan Archer reluctantly retired his two shire horses and bought his first tractor in 1951. Here Brookfield farmhand Simon Cooper (played by Eddie Robinson) and casual worker Bill Slater (John Franklyn) inspect the new tractor and two-furrow plough. The tractor itself is a Ferguson model TE20, or 'little grey fergie' as these tractors became known. These iconic machines featured Harry Ferguson's patented three-point linkage at the rear, which had a very significant impact on modern agriculture. Image © BBC



The house at Home Farm, as it is portrayed today. This property was originally called Ambridge Court. Image © BBC

Home Farm

With 1,585 acres, this is the biggest Ambridge farm and represents larger scale agriculture. It was formed in 1975 when Brian Aldridge bought 1,500 acres and Ambridge Court farmhouse from Ralph Bellamy. Brian is married to Jack Archer's daughter, Jennifer.

The farm is now jointly managed by Brian's step-children, Adam Macy and Debbie Aldridge. Brian has interests in a consortium, which owns farmland in Hungary. Debbie also manages this venture. Home Farm carries out contract work for Brookfield Farm and the former Berrow Estate, now owned by Borchester Land.

Mainly arable, this farm has 1,118 acres of cereal crops, 158 of oilseed rape, 36 of linseed, 6 of maize, 80 of woodland, 10 of willow, and 4 acres of polytunnels for strawberries. Deer and some 280 sheep occupy the 148 acres of grassland. This diverse property incorporates a fishing lake and horse riding course. Adam is currently developing a cherry enterprise.



Brian and Jennifer Aldridge (played by Charles Collingwood and Angela Piper). Image © BBC



William Grundy (played by Philip Molloy) is gamekeeper for both Home Farm and the Estate. Image © BBC



Brian Aldridge and Adam Macy (played by Charles Collingwood and Andrew Wincott) inspecting the strawberry crop at Home Farm. Poly tunnels are now a common sight in strawberry producing regions, where they allow for longer growing seasons. Soft fruit farmers employ pickers and packers for longer periods. Adam's enterprise represents the kind of diversification that is helping UK farmers to reduce foreign imports of seasonal produce. Image © BBC



Bridge Farm, used today to portray the thriving and modern face of organic farming. Image © BBC

Bridge Farm

Tony Archer and his wife Pat became tenants of Bridge Farm in 1978. They later became owner-occupiers. Their son Tom Archer now runs his pig business from the site. Their property helps tell the story of diversification in farming and of growing interest in organic produce.

The farm converted to organic production in 1984, gaining Soil Association certification the following year. In 2008, the landlord Borchester Land tried to convert a barn into a dwelling. In response the family bought the freehold to all 140 acres. They rent a further 32 acres.

The 115 acres of grassland cater for 45 pigs and a milking herd of 92 Friesian cows. The dairy produces yoghurt, ice-cream, and cheese to sell in the family's Borchester shop, Ambridge Organics. They also grow 35 acres of cereal crops, 5 of potatoes and 5 of salad crops, 4 of carrots, 2 of leeks, 3 of swedes, and 3 of cabbages.



Tony and Pat Archer (played by Colin Skipp and Patricia Gallimore) in the milking parlour. Image © BBC



Tony and Pat's son, Tom Archer (played by Tom Graham), brought his free-range Gloucester Old Spot pigs back to Bridge Farm in 2009. Image © BBC



Pat and Tony Archer (played by Patricia Gallimore and Colin Skipp) in the farm shop, as it was portrayed back in 1996. Their Borchester Shop, Ambridge Organics, opened in 2000. This storyline is just one of a whole series of farm diversifications and marketing enterprises that have been showcased in the programme over the years. With the rising popularity of organic produce and locally sourced food, farm shops carrying such produce have become a major area of growth. Image © BBC



Grange Farm, as it appears today, with Guernsey dairy cattle in the foreground. Image © BBC

Grange Farm

This small farm has had a chequered history, particularly during the tenancy of Joe Grundy and his son Eddie. Although his family had been tenants of Grange Farm for generations, Joe Grundy first featured on the programme in 1970.

When it initially appeared Grange Farm was 118-acres in size, barely large enough to support the family. Income was supplemented by various ventures. These included Christmas turkeys, cider-making, and in 1975 a successful pop concert held on the farm.

In 1999 an outbreak of bovine viral diarrhoea in the herd of 40 Jersey cows led to bankruptcy and eviction the following year. The farmhouse and 50 acres were sold to Oliver Sterling. He established a herd to support Mike Tucker's milk round, later giving Eddie's son Ed a farm business tenancy. By renting 50 additional acres of grassland Ed has expanded to run a milking herd of 45 Guernsey cows.



The Grundy family had a stressful time when the farm was repossessed by Borchester Land. **Left to right: Joe, Eddie, and Clarrie Grundy** (played by Edward Kelsey, Trevor Harrison, and Rosalind Adams). Image © BBC



In the programme, the Grundys exemplified farmers who struggled to make a living. In the early 1950s, this was the lot of Walter Gabriel (played by Robert Mawdesley). He is shown here in 1951 with the cart horse Boxer, which he bought from Dan Archer. In the early years, Gabriel's attempts to farm were contrasted directly with those of the Archers and provided some light relief. The Grundy's efforts came to fill the same gap, as with Eddie's attempts to capitalise on a crop circle he found in a field at Grange Farm in 1991. Image © BBC



Mike and Vicky Tucker (played by Terry Molloy and Rachel Atkins) feeding hay to the Guernsey cows at Grange Farm. Image © BBC



Ned Larkin (played by Bill Payne) and Tom Forrest (Bob Arnold) at The Bull being served by Jack (Denis Folwell) and Peggy Archer (Thelma Rogers). Image © BBC

Ambridge in 1951

From 1951 onwards, Ambridge came to represent a typical English parish of its day. Farming played a more significant role in village life than it now does. The Ambridge of the 1950s was a relatively self-contained community. Unlike today, residents' needs were catered for by a diverse range of local amenities.

The squire, Clive Lawson Hope, lived at the Manor. There were also two other major landowners, Admiral Bellamy and Clive Fairbrother. The farming families were predominantly tenants. Ambridge had good farmers, characterised by Dan Archer, poor ones such as Walter Gabriel, and smallholders like Dan's brother Jack.

Village facilities included a shop, bakery, school, garage, and two pubs – The Bull and the Cat and Fiddle. The neighbourhood policeman and vicar both lived in the village. Community events centred on the village green, with an annual summer fête and a flower and produce show in the autumn.



The Church of St Mary the Virgin, Hanbury, Worcestershire, has been used to represent St Stephens Church in Ambridge. It has featured in publicity photographs for several weddings from The Archers and the sound of its bells has often featured in the programme. Image © BBC



Grace Fairbrother (played by Ysanne Churchman) with her fiancé Philip Archer (Norman Painting) in 1954. They married in April 1955 and Grace was tragically killed in a fire at the stables the following September. Image © BBC



The Old Bull Inn at Inkberrow, Worcestershire, was well known to programme creator Godfrey Baseley. It has long been used to represent The Bull at Ambridge, as in this publicity shot from 1975. This iconic half-timbered building dates to at least the seventeenth century and possibly earlier, and was Grade II listed in 1959. It represents an architectural style that has become synonymous with rural England. Storylines in The Archers have sought to reflect the struggle to survive that many real-life rural inns have had to face. Image © BBC



The River Am and the bridge that gives the village its name. Image © BBC

Ambridge in 2011

The Ambridge of today represents a typical Midlands village of the twenty-first century. It lies at the heart of a thriving country community, no longer dominated by farmers. The familiar features of modern rural life abound, such as the renowned country house hotel and restaurant Grey Gables.

Small-scale housing developments have swelled the population to around 600. Many residents commute to Borchester or Birmingham. Much of the agricultural land is owned by farming families, including the Archers and Aldridges, or by the property company Borchester Land.

The Bull pub and St Stephen's Church form the centre of village life. The vicar lives in Ambridge but is also responsible for three other parishes. The local school has been converted into a village hall, and now hosts events such as the Christmas pantomime. The village store has become a volunteer-run community shop.



Licensee of The Bull, Jolene Perks (played by Buffy Davis), shown with her daughter Fallon Rogers (Joanna van Kampen). Jolene has struggled to run the pub since the death of her husband Sid in 2010. Image © BBC



Owned by Caroline and Oliver Sterling, Grey Gables represents the kind of country house hotel and restaurant that have become familiar features in the English Countryside. Image © BBC



Caroline Sterling (played by Sara Coward) and the Duchess of Cornwall. In February 2011, the Duchess visited Grey Gables in her capacity as President of the National Osteoporosis Society. Image © BBC



For many years the village shop was owned by local businessman Jack Wooley. Following Jack's failing health, the shop was to be sold, but in 2010 his wife Peggy agreed to lease it at a peppercorn rent so that it could be run by volunteers as a community shop. This storyline drew inspiration from a real-life community shop venture in Almondsbury, Gloucestershire. The closure of village shops and Post Offices has had a dramatic impact on many rural communities. Image © BBC