



THE MUSEUM
OF ENGLISH
RURAL LIFE



University of
Reading

THE MERL AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS REVIEW 2015–2016



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Timeline

September 2015

- First ever Curator of the University Art Collections appointed
- Behind the scenes tours for the Heritage Open Days
- The MERL wins Best Trade Stand – again – at the Royal Berkshire Show

October 2015

- The MERL launches the reminiscence project at the Royal Berkshire Hospital
- The MERL participates in the Big Draw with a printing activity
- Sold out MERL/Landscape Institute annual lecture by James Corner

January 2016

- Discovering the Landscape exhibition opens
- The MERL acquires six engravings by print-maker Stanley Anderson

February 2016

- Mouse found in historical trap in the MERL collections goes viral
- Student exhibition on Nancy and Waldorf Astor Archives opens at Cliveden House
- The MERL Archive display at the Spring Tractor World Show wins best in show

March 2016

- The University celebrates the 90th Anniversary of its Royal Charter

April 2016

- Ex Libris: Marks of Ownership in Rare Books exhibition opens
- Wellcome Project underway with appointment of Science Engagement Officer
- Collections Research Fair is held in the University Library

May 2016

- All incunabula leaves in the John and Griselda Lewis collection are catalogued
- Launch of the Art Collections Twitter account @UniRdg_ArtCol

June 2016

- Acquisition of rare agricultural pamphlets for MERL Library
- East Reading Festival – the MERL stand is a popular attraction
- Audit of the Art Collections uncovers a David Hockney lithograph

July 2016

- 90 Years of Memories exhibition opens
- First Food Artist in Residence Programme begins, we welcome three artists from University of Oaxaca

INTRODUCTION

The last twelve months have been some of the most eventful but also most rewarding as we have worked towards completion of a major transformation of Museum of English Rural Life, made possible thanks to the generous funding of the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Wellcome Trust, the University and other partners and supporters.

After the months and years of planning and consultation, our efforts have focused on the installation of nine new galleries and visitor facilities, with every member of staff involved in the detailed effort of producing an entirely new interpretation of our collections.

The creation of a new brand by Thomas Manss for the Museum as part of the redevelopment has already attracted positive feedback and is helping in our renewed marketing along with our increasingly active social media presence. Drawing on its black plumage, bright yellow bill and upturned tail, the 'merl', another name for the common blackbird, has provided its inspiration. With the relaunch in October, which will be marked by our Grand Opening Festival, we look forward to welcoming past and new visitors to the Museum and to offering the chance to explore our displays, interactive and immersive experiences.

Among the exciting features is an entirely new gallery space created especially to exhibit one of the extraordinary wall hangings, made by Michael O'Connell (1898-1976) for the 1951 Festival of Britain, as part of a wider series exploring the British countryside. We have also been able to make use of the garden over the past year while the Museum has been closed by installing community growing spaces for use by local community groups to explore food, nutrition and learn horticultural skills.

The launch of the University's new Heritage and Creativity research theme this year is beginning to open up new possibilities for our academic learning and engagement programmes for working with academic colleagues and students. Despite the inevitable temporary reduction in engagement with the wider community during the Museum's renewal, we have continued to see a rise in use of Special Collections and our engagement with the University's research and teaching. A further cohort of PhD students have enrolled this session for the Collections Based Research programme and we have seen significant increases in the numbers of students being taught by our staff on the Masters module in research methods and on our Museum Studies programme. More than 100 PhD students from the wider HE community have directly benefited from participation in our intensive CBR skills training, delivered on behalf of the South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership.

We have also been pleased to have participated in the many events celebrating the University of Reading's 90 Years of Excellence and to have helped to bring the University's fascinating history and significant achievements to a wider audience.

Finally, we are delighted to have been invited to join Research Libraries UK as a result of our successful application in the past year.



Kate Arnold-Forster
Head of University Museums and Special Collections
Director, Museum of English Rural Life



OUR COUNTRY LIVES



The past year has been dominated by the fit-out of the new galleries, the launch of a new brand and website, and preparations for re-opening.

Working on the project has been a major focus of the past year involving final object selections, gallery text writing and editing, and image research. Staff have worked closely with our designers GuM and graphic designers Thomas Manss and Co. Meanwhile, Elmwood, our fit out contractors, have constructed new galleries, public spaces and displays. Preparing more than 16,000 objects that can now be seen within new displays and our accessible storage areas has been a huge undertaking by our Collections Care Manager, Fred van de Geer, and his colleagues.

We are delighted that we have been able to incorporate a further addition to the new display areas to celebrate the Ladybird Books collection – over 750 boxes of original artwork which form part of the Archive of British Publishing and Printing. New cases for this area were funded by Ladybird Books (Penguin Random House group) and the South East Museum Development Capital Grants Scheme.

A key aim of the project has been to introduce more opportunities for interaction in our new galleries. Digital gallery interactives have been developed with consultants and designers, Kiss the Frog, including the games Lambing Time, Seasonal Science, Feed the World and a multi-player interactives, Our Country Lives. Other interactives draw on the range and quality of the archive: Voices and Views, Then and Now, and an Evacuee-based interactive.

New animation has been developed by ShoSho, including an immersive film of the seasons for the first gallery. Non-digital low-tech interactives have also been commissioned, notably a model farm and jigsaw puzzles based on the Ladybird 'What to Look For' series. Other notable features of the new Museum will be a sensory cow (devised by Dr Kate Allen, Art Dept, and developed with members of the Reading College LLD/D department) and a model texel sheep, clad in a knitted cardigan, created by our volunteer Jan Butler.

A renewed online presence for the MERL has been developed alongside our new fresh visual identity. Working with the development team at Obergine we have aimed to produce a modern and dynamic online web presence, which will continue to develop in terms of functionality and content post-reopening.

With support of the ACE-funded project Preparing for Profit we have invested in new stock, visitor service staff training and facilities for the Museum's new refreshment offer. The Museum will open with new and extended opening hours, including longer weekend hours and regular 'lates'.

Our panels and forums have continued to have a significant input into the new galleries with the Student Panel helping to design a social learning space.

Top The new galleries allow greater interaction

Opposite top A wide range of objects will go on display

Opposite bottom Volunteer Jan Butler's 'sheep cardigan'



ACTIVITY AND AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT



Between July 2015 and June 2016 we have delivered more than 100 events, engaging and consulting with over 5,000 participants. These include film making and community growing activities where community groups have explored food, nutrition and learned horticultural skills.

Underpinning our redevelopment of the MERL has been an extensive and successful programme of activity and community engagement designed to build new audiences and to help inform plans for future programming. Displays curated by community groups in Reading and nearby are the first of our **Community Platform projects** to be showcased in the redeveloped Museum. In "Sew Engaging", funded by the Ashley Family Foundation and inspired by the Festival of Britain wall hanging, community groups and individuals helped create collaborative textile works that reflect their views of the countryside. Participatory research with the Family Forum has ensured that the Museum's interpretation, new public spaces and programme deliver unique and significant value to the wider community.

Use of the **MERL garden** has played a crucial part in developing our engagement with local communities during the Museum's closure: we built new **community growing spaces** that have been cultivated by local groups, including Reading Mencap, The Three Cooks, Berkshire Young People with Dementia, Barbados And Friends Association, Greater Reading Nepalese Community Association and Arts in Redlands. Two **experimental crop areas** have also been created: one to grow heritage crops, and a second planted with amarantha crop, grown for its seed in Mexico. This commissioned

work by Antonia Bruce was part of the First Food Residency project that was supported by a MERL Fellowship in 2016, which also included hosting three students from the University of Oaxaca (UABJO) in Mexico.

A new **shepherd's hut** for the garden, kindly donated by the Rozanda Trust and the Friends of the University, will provide a new resource and play space for our family visitors.

A focus for our programmes has been to encourage participation in hands-on activities. **Come Dine with Us** involved exploring cooking with women from the Elizabeth Fry Approved Premises for Women in Reading, inspired by historic recipes in our archives. A five-week programme of varied cooking culminated in a three-course meal and cook book. **MERL in Photographs** saw LLD/D Photography and Art students from Reading College (Activate Reading) using the museum spaces, collections and staff as inspiration for their photography. For five months they photographed the changing museum interior, its garden and its staff.

Our collaboration with the **Royal Berkshire Hospital's Elderly Care Ward** uses collections to inspire discussion and reminiscence. An annual programme has been jointly devised with the overarching theme: A Year on the Farm.

The YPWD (Younger People with Dementia) Berkshire Choir are being inspired by **Songs of the Countryside** – using both the MERL collections and the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) archive.

Preparing to involve more volunteers and students in the interpretation of our new galleries has involved devising new training for gallery-based activities: paid student explainers have been recruited as part of the University's Widening Participation programme and MERL volunteers have been trained to deliver regular object handling sessions.

Opposite The community growing spaces take shape

Below left Engagement with farmers has influenced our work

Right Students on the MERL in Photographs project

Bottom Berkshire Maestros playing countryside-inspired music



PUBLIC PROGRAMME AND DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

We have maintained a lively and innovative public programme of both regular and one-off events, both within and outside the Museum during its redevelopment.

Regular activities have included Toddler Time, temporarily hosted at the Learning Hub on the London Road campus – and also “on tour” as part of the Our Country Lives Activity Plan in local community spaces. Volunteers and staff have also taken part in **outreach at events** such as the Royal County of Berkshire Show, Heritage Open Day, the Big Draw and Museums at Night.

A number of our events have had a **science focus**, inspired by and supported by the Wellcome Trust funding for Our Country Lives: Nutrition, Health and Rural England. In March 2016 we ran ‘The Science of Dairying’ event and have offered science engagement activities at the University Big Lunch, Highdown Science Fair, Reading Town Meal and the East Reading Festival, offering the chance to press sunflower oil, roll oats and – to focus the mind on the future of protein sources – eat insects!

The **MERL Annual Lecture** was hosted in partnership with the Landscape Institute and was delivered by James Corner, who designed the “High Line” in New York. This sell-out event was extremely well received and reflected our very fruitful relationship with the Institute. In partnership with FOLAR (“friends of the

landscape library and archive at the University of Reading”) we delivered a study day on New Towns drawing on our collections.

Displays in the Staircase Hall and University Library have included:

- Discovering the Landscape: treasures from the collections of the Landscape Institute
- Ex libris: marks of ownership in rare books, accompanied by two well-attended talks relating to the ownership of books in our collections

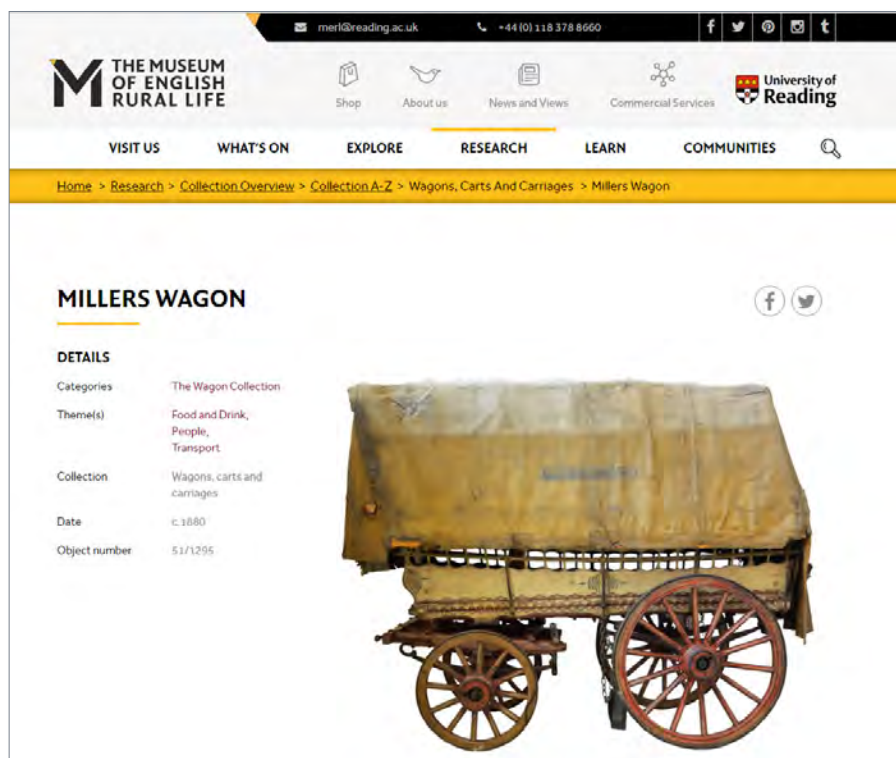
Making use of the staircase hall display area, we have presented events with pop-up exhibitions throughout the year. Our display celebrating **90 years of the University** was seen by thousands of people at other University and outreach events. We drew heavily on the University’s own rich archive and made some fascinating discoveries including an early College song, which was performed at the celebratory meeting of the University Court on 17 March 2016.

Transforming levels of **digital engagement** with the wider community has been central to our communications and public engagement during the MERL’s closure. This has involved attracting

25,000 unique visits to the MERL blog, reaching more than 7,000 Twitter followers, as well as Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest. A recent Facebook post led to 373,753 impressions and 15,429 engagements. A Digital Marketing Academy Fellowship from the Arts Marketing Association awarded to Alison Hilton has led to digital marketing experiments aimed at increasing engagement with specific audiences.

Left The MERL’s new website is clearly laid out and accessible

Opposite bottom right The University’s 90th anniversary was the subject of events and displays





 University of
Reading | 1926
2016
NINETY YEARS OF EXCELLENCE



COLLECTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE



The past year has seen significant investment in collections care and access, as well as some notable acquisitions.

The creation of new storage and display environments for the MERL object collections represents a major step forward and has required huge efforts in terms of conservation, protection and movement of objects. A particular challenge was the conservation of two large textile wall hangings from the Festival of Britain. Hundreds of other objects have been cleaned, repaired and mounted in preparation for display.

The University has invested significantly in a new programme relating to its significant and widely varied art collections. As well as undertaking a major audit across all the University's campuses, this new team has also concentrated on cataloguing and loan management of the Ladybird Books artwork and has supported the acquisition, thanks to an Art Fund grant, of rural life prints by Stanley Anderson.

One of the most significant additions to the MERL library this year was a collection of 22 rare agricultural pamphlets from the mid-19th century. They provide a unique insight into the economic and technological developments in British agriculture. This purchase was generously funded by the Arts Council England/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of the National Libraries.

2015/2016 has seen a further series of loans from the Ladybird Books archive, to Nymans, Nature in Art and Dickens Museum. The popularity of the collection has led to the creation, within the MERL galleries of a dedicated gallery for Ladybird. Other significant loans have included:

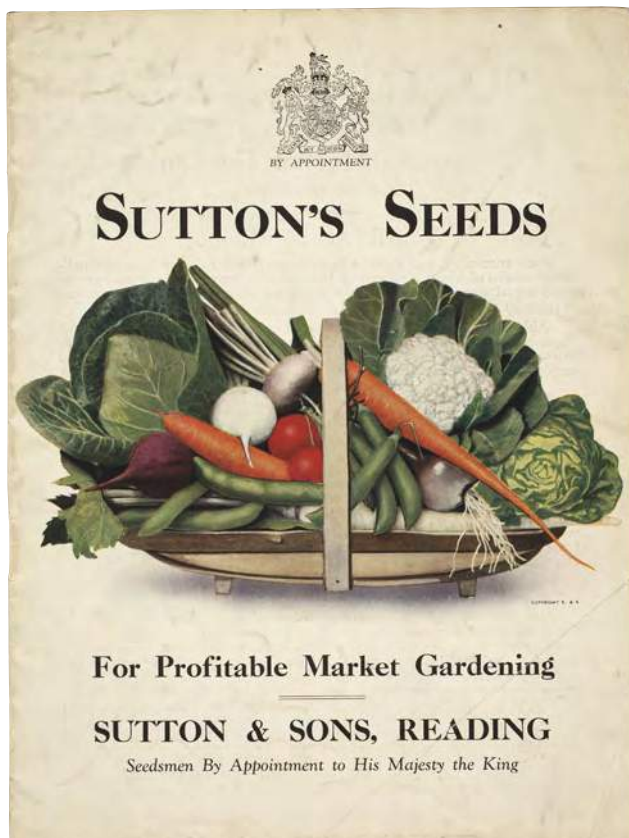
- Three books to the ArtAngel installation at Reading Gaol;
- Michael Harvey material to Snape Maltings (in collaboration with Typography and Graphic Communications).

Opposite A John Tarlton photograph which will be shown on screen in the new galleries

Below The Sutton's Archive remains an important resource

Top right The Art Collections audit is underway

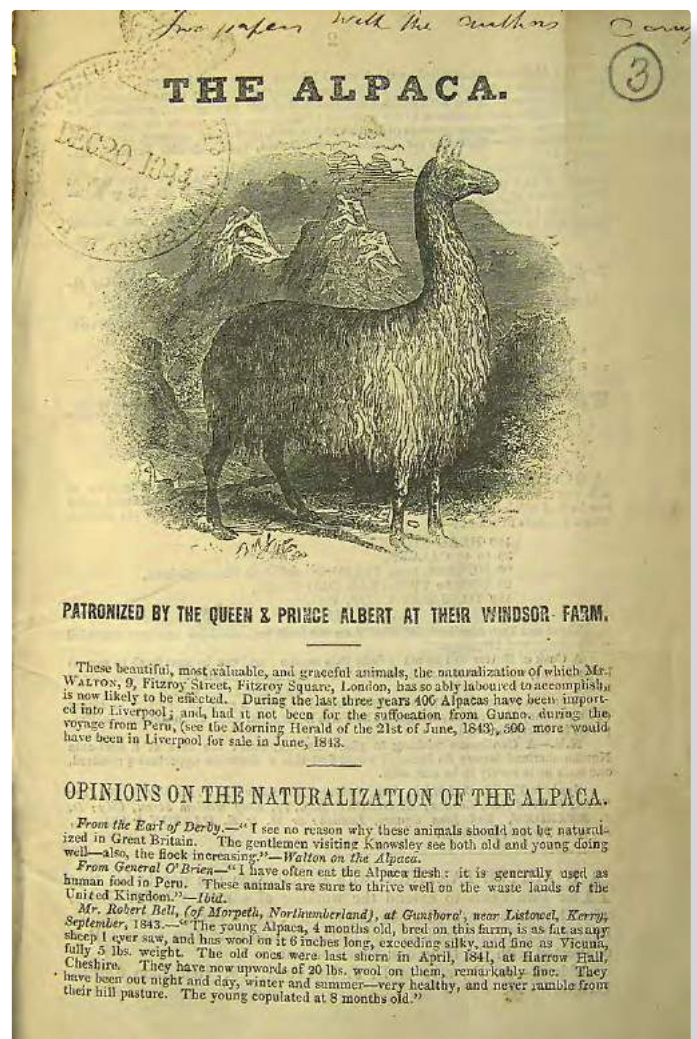
Bottom right One of the more unusual pamphlets acquired this year



Significant progress has been made in cataloguing, especially of the Landscape Institute (LI) library and archive and the University of Reading's own records – notably the papers of Professor Cole. The MERL has secured a fourth year of funding from the LI.

We have also made significant progress with the John and Griselda Lewis collection. This fascinating collection of ephemera contains a large number of loose leaves from medieval manuscripts and early printed books from the fifteenth century. The library team have identified and catalogued all of the printed leaves, and Siobhan O'Mahoney, a student from the MA in Medieval History course, is working on dating and describing the manuscript fragments.

The archive of Suttons Seeds, which had been held here on loan for over 30 years, was generously donated to us by the company.



RESEARCH

Our research services, including the reading room, have continued to see high levels of activity, and the work of the Centre for Collections-Based Research has both widened and deepened our engagement with researchers from across the University and from the wider academic community.

We hosted the first Heritage and Creativity research theme 'Action Lab', exploring the potential to enhance collaborative and interdisciplinary research around the theme of 'animals' utilising the University's collections. UMASCS staff also supported research projects relating to the stage works of Harold Pinter (using expertise gained during the Staging Beckett Project), women's suffrage (in collaboration with the Parliamentary Archives) and the experimental film-maker Stephen Dwoskin.

The AHRC has generously supported two Kings College London (KCL) PhD students, Felicity McWilliams and Alex Bowmer, to develop a more critical historical narrative of agricultural technical change between 1920 and 1970. These Collaborative Doctoral Award

students are based partly at the MERL and are jointly supervised by Professor Abigail Woods (KCL) and Dr Ollie Douglas (The MERL). Their research aims to challenge the idea of a linear path in which new technologies are adopted and old ones abandoned, with each student focussing on a different aspect of farm practice.

The first explores complex choices linked to draught animal power and mechanised power. The second investigates the use of pharmaceuticals and other approaches by livestock farmers. This collaboration supported MERL's Wellcome Trust award of £385K for 'Our Country Lives: Nutrition, Health and Rural England', which has created new displays and interactions for the gallery in addition to a series of public engagement initiatives including artists in residence.



With the generous support of the Arts Council England (ACE) Designation Development Fund (£87,663), the 'Making, Using and Enjoying' project is set to get underway in late 2016. It will explore ideas of intangible heritage, using creative and digital practice to improve our understanding of the collections we hold. Makers, creative practitioners, users, academic experts and young people will examine selected craft and farming related resources from the broad collections of the MERL. These static resources will be reanimated through digital pathways and creative interventions. Rather than simply gathering more things, this project will use living experience to reveal hidden systems of knowledge. It will bring people together around collections, using these encounters to spark new ways of thinking and stimulate fresh engagement opportunities.

The 2016 MERL Fellowship was awarded to Antonia Bruce, Lead Artist at the First Food Residency (FFR). The aim of this Fellowship was to support MERL's participation in the First Food Residency in order to help develop the Museum's knowledge, networks and experience in relation to working with artists, with particular reference to the Museum's ambitions to develop a sustainable approach to its public engagement activity linked to food, nutrition and environmental issues.

Opposite Animal health research will feature in the new MERL galleries

Below Farm records acquired and catalogued during the past year

Top right Preservation work on the Woolworth's Archive

Bottom right Farm technology is the subject of a collaborative doctoral project at the MERL



ENGAGING OUR STUDENTS

We continue to support teaching across undergraduate, postgraduate taught and doctoral level using a wide range of our collections.

In August 2016 Dr Rhi Smith was made UMASCS Director of Academic Learning and Engagement with the aim of strategically developing the next stage of our T&L programme. Dr Nicola Pickering joined us from the London Transport Museum to take on the post of Museum Studies Teaching Fellow.

For the academic year 2015-16 we taught five undergraduate modules and planned our new final year exhibition module which will launch Spring 2017. Our students undertook placements at a range of local museums and many found paid positions in heritage organisations such as the Historic Royal Palaces. We also continued to welcome classes from a range of different departments including the Institute of Education, History, Typography and Graphic Communications and English Literature and Languages.

The undergraduate Museum Studies programme had 1940 attendees last year across six modules and two joint degrees (a rise of more than 60% on the previous year), which means that student numbers enrolled on these courses have doubled in the past three years.

We continued to support academic placements including the Discovering Archives and Collections module (History) and a wide range of placements for students in the School of Languages and

Literature. The former culminated in a pop-up exhibition over 2 days at Cliveden, building on and presenting to the public the students' work on the Astor Collection.

At postgraduate level the Centre for Collections-Based Research's doctoral training programme entered its third year, welcoming students from several disciplines. The South-West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership recognised the Centre for Collections-Based Research as its provider of training on this subject. As a result staff were involved in the organisation and delivery of several training sessions for doctoral students across the region. We welcomed a record number of 27 students on the MRes History module and plan to run the module again next year with Professor Kate Williams (Professor of Public History).

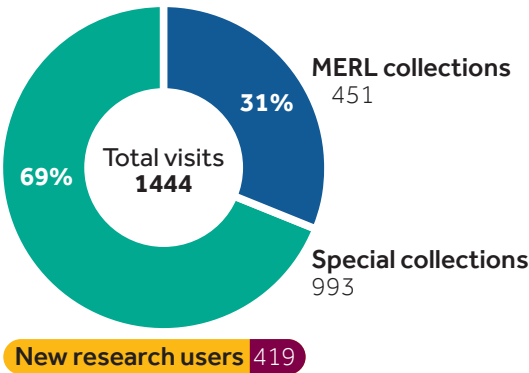
Students continue to play an important role in our volunteer workforce and have been an invaluable asset in the planning of the new galleries. Our student panel co-designed and helped to install a new social learning space called 'The Nook' in the newly opened Museum of English Rural Life. Students have also been trained to run object handling stations and Widening Participation funds have been used to employ trained student explainers to work in the new galleries.



STATISTICS

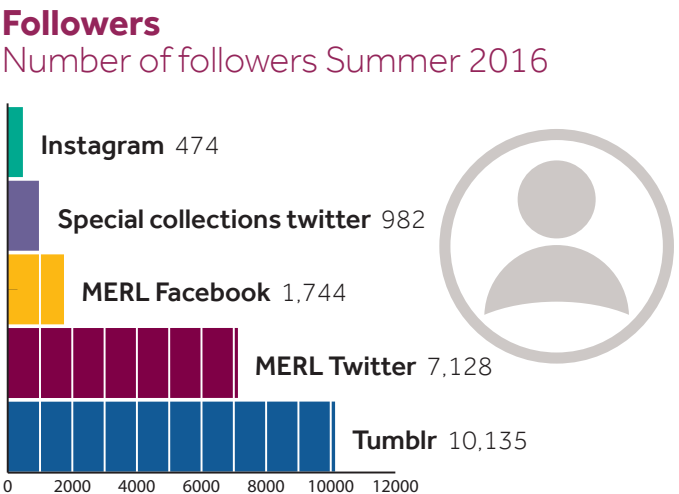
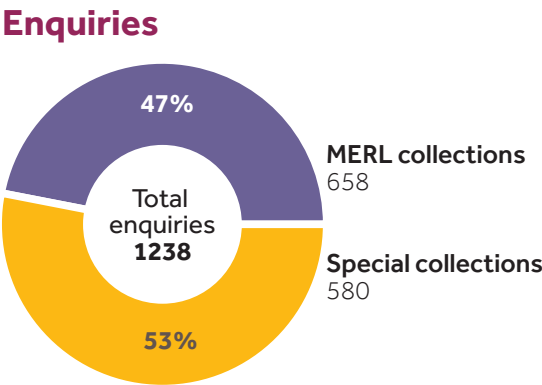
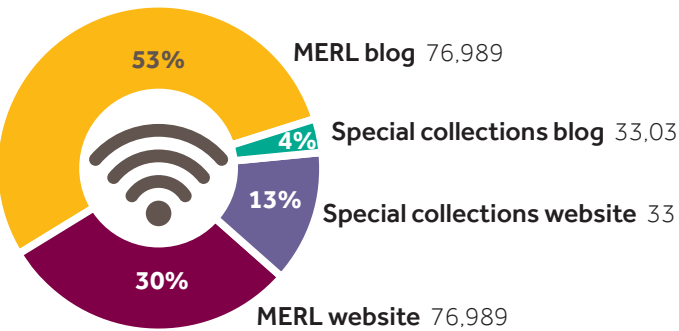
Research use of the collections

Number of visits, Aug 2015–July 2016



Website and social media

Number of visits



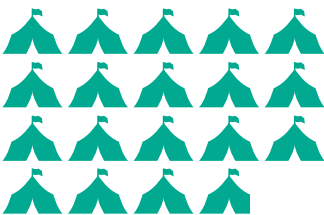
Student use of our collections

Student visits	760
Number of HEI courses drawing on our collections	20

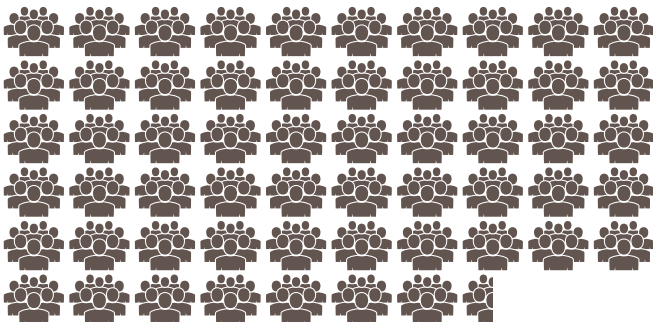
Outreach

Our Country Lives Activity Plan, Jan–Sept 2016

Number of events 189



Number of people directly engaged 5747





Michael Cardew's 6.5 gallon teapot was acquired from the British Council in 1960

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For more information, please contact:

Museum of English Rural Life

University of Reading
Redlands Road
Reading RG1 5EX

merlevents@reading.ac.uk
Tel (0118) 378 8660

@UniRdg_SpecColl @theMERL @UniRdg_ArtCol

www.reading.ac.uk/TheMERL
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