



THE MUSEUM  
OF ENGLISH  
RURAL LIFE

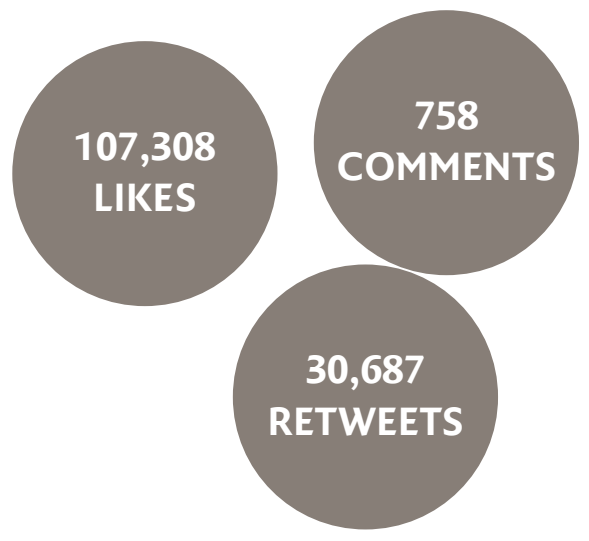


University of  
Reading

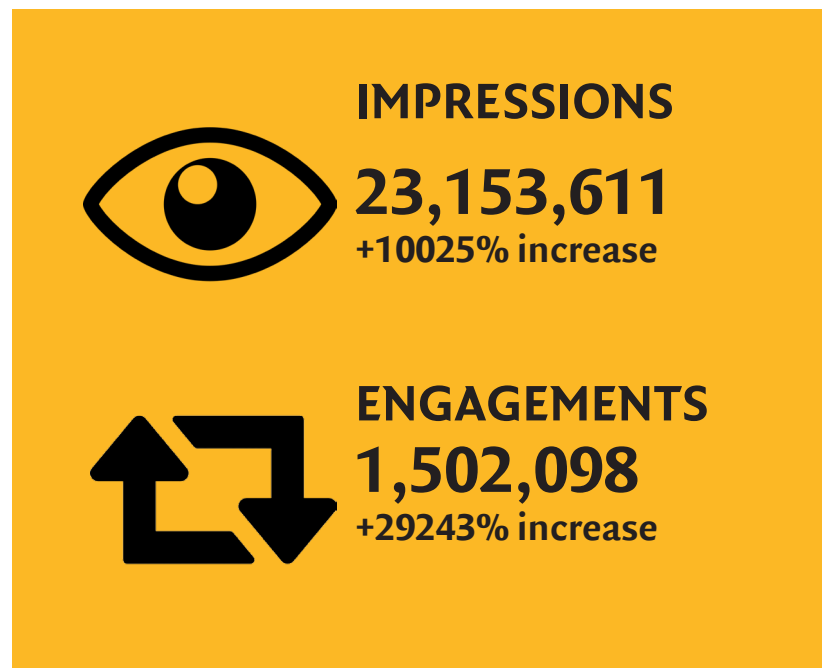
# **‘LOOK AT THIS ABSOLUTE UNIT’ REPORT**

An examination of a viral tweet and recommendations  
for The MERL Social Media Strategy

# THE TWEET



# APRIL 2018



# MEDIA FEATURES

THE  TIMES

**BBC**  
**three**

**i**

 **BuzzFeed**



# Overview

On 9 April 2018 the Museum of English Rural Life [tweeted an image](#) of an Exmoor Horn ram with the caption 'look at this absolute unit'. This tweet and the subsequent Twitter campaign went globally viral, resulting in significant exposure for the museum, a spike in engagement and followers on social media, and various other benefits.

This report explains the how, why and what of the MERL's viral success, and recommendations on how to capitalise on it.

## How we went viral

The tweet was made by Adam Koszary, Project Manager for the Arts Council England-funded project **#digiRDG: Town and Country**.

The image was found while searching for something relevant to **#NationalUnicornDay** on the MERL's Digital Asset Management System, using the keyword 'horn'. The image used in the tweet was digitised in 2008 as part of a JISC-funded project digitising the Farmer and Stockbreeder photographic collection in the MERL archive.

The caption used is a reference to an online meme pictured to the right. A meme is an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations.

## Why the tweet went viral

The tweet went viral due to these factors:

- A relevant use of a meme, and the novelty factor of an account such as ours using a meme in this way
- A high-quality and attractive image
- The subsequent campaign engaging with followers and producing high-quality content exploring factors around the image
- Being featured as a Twitter 'Moment' of collected tweets as a result of our campaign, which was shared globally by Twitter

The conditions for the tweet going viral were:

- The network of followers the MERL Twitter account had already cultivated
- The digitisation of the image and it being marked as social media approved by the MERL archive team
- The skills, reactivity and out-of-hours time dedicated by Adam Koszary and other colleagues

## How we capitalised on our success

The original tweet was a foundation for a social media campaign which centred around:

- **Capitalising on the tone and style established by the original tweet:**
  - Creating new memes based on our animal portraiture collection
  - Responding to people on Twitter in a very informal, sassy and ironic way
  - Using a Twitter poll to ask followers whether we should only make content around fat animals

### About

**Absolute Unit** refers to jokes made on **Twitter** in which **people caption images** of large objects or people with a variation on the **phrase**, "In awe at the size of this lad. Absolute unit."

### Origin

On December 13th, 2017, Twitter user @mrreptoid<sup>[1]</sup> uploaded a picture of British hotelier David Morgan-Hewitt posing with the **Queen of England**. He captioned the photo "In awe at the size of this lad. Absolute unit," referring to Morgan-Hewitt. "Absolute" is a British slang term used in so-called "lad culture" to mean "total" (e.g. **Absolute Madman**). The tweet gained over 3,500 retweets and 13,000 likes (shown below).

### Meme

Status

Confirmed

Type:

Slang

Year

2017

Origin

Twitter

Tags

english, slang, obese, fat, large, portly, queen of england, morgan-hewitt, david roth, david morgan-hewitt, in awe of the size of this lad

Additional References

Twitter



- Exploring the context, history and collections around the ram pictured in the original tweet
  - Publishing a blog written by Dr Ollie Douglas exploring the history and context of animal breeding, genetics and animal portraiture
  - Creating a Twitter campaign giving followers facts on animal portraiture
  - Finding the original photographic record, glass negative, photographic print and Farmer and Stockbreeder article from the MERL Archives and Library
- Welcoming new followers to the MERL and explaining who we are
  - Creating a Twitter thread tour taking new followers around our galleries and showing what is in them
  - Creating a Twitter thread exploring a day in the English countryside and inviting contributions from our followers
  - Live-tweeting the Museum of the Intangible event and the FOLAR seminar

## Outcomes and outputs of the campaign

The importance of this tweet and the subsequent campaign for the MERL's online exposure and digital marketing cannot be overstated. It is rare for a viral tweet to result in new followers, but our campaign centring on our collections brought in more than 22k more followers interested in the core mission of the MERL.

### Media

The tweet and campaign were featured in:

- the print and online version of The Times
- PR Magazine
- BuzzFeed
- Mashable
- the i
- BBC Three
- The Verge
- and multiple other outlets.

### Online

An overview of the broad statistics can be found above on page 2 of this report. Suffice to say, our digital engagement numbers for April 2018 are far above our average.

We received 40k visits to the MERL website in April, with 12k of those being visits to our blog focusing on the ram featured in the tweet.

### Sector recognition

Our Twitter account is now par with or exceeds the followers of museums such as Leeds Museums, Pitt Rivers, London Transport Museum and Bristol Museum.

We are due to be featured in the Trendswatch section of the **Museums Journal**, have already featured in academic presentations such as the **Natural Sciences Collections Association Conference** and the campaign will be featured as a case study in the **National Archives' Action Plan** for the Archives sector.

We have been approached to take over the popular **Farmers of the UK** Twitter account, to host an 'Ask Me Anything' session on **reddit.com**, and to contribute to the **Museums Association conference** and **The Archers conference**.

### Physical visitors

What is unclear is how much impact this tweet will have on visitors to the Museum. Many have tweeted that they would like to visit, but we will only be able to make a judgement after several months of visitor figures.

### Other Platforms

The image and caption were cross-posted to Facebook and Instagram but without the same success as on Twitter. They were, however, more popular than our usual posts to these platforms. On Instagram, in particular, we have seen a large rise in new followers and engagement with our posts.

With the time and resources available, it was a conscious decision to focus on Twitter for this campaign.

## WHERE WE ARE NOW

The main outcomes of this campaign are:

- The MERL is now on par with large regional museums on Twitter, and have positive sector recognition for our use of social media
- We have a lot of new followers who know us for a particular tone and style
- We can now use Twitter as a useful tool in our projects, as we now consistently attract engagement on topics ranging from our collections to contemporary issues such as Brexit

This campaign marks a step-change in how the MERL behaves on Twitter, but the new style is very particular and we have to be careful about the tone of the content we now post. Without a role dedicated solely to social media, the MERL must continue to source content from roles across the museum, library and archive.

## WHAT WE PLAN TO DO

### **Revise our Social Media Strategy**

- A new Social Media Strategy was planned for the early stages of our Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) project, but has been accelerated
- The Strategy has been consulted on through the UMASCS Social Media group, and will go out to all staff for comments in May
- The Strategy will address our principles, resources, aims, audiences, how we use each individual platform and for what, and how we plan and create content for our campaigns
- The Strategy will be made publicly available

### **Change how we use Twitter**

- The majority of our content on Twitter will now be scheduled by Adam Koszary, due to the new tone and style established through this campaign
- Content will mostly be sourced from other staff and scheduled in advance by Adam Koszary, to ensure he has the capacity to fulfil the duties in his job as Project Manager and Digital Lead on the NPO

# APPENDIX: ONLINE RESPONSES AND T-SHIRT

**Darren Henley** @HENLEYDARREN · 2m

If you don't already follow #ACESupported @TheMERL - The Museum of English Rural Life at @UniofReading - then your daily smile quota will definitely increase if you do. They've got to be among my favourite tweeters of all time. #AbsoluteTwitterUnit

**Sarah J. Furger** @Librarian\_witch · 2m

If @TheMERL ever needs an archivist or librarian I hope I see the posting and apply. I love this twitter account and the marvelous museum behind it.

**National Trust** @nationaltrust · 11m

Look at this absolute unit with six legs @TheMERL.



**Elisa Frye** @phillyrabbit · 1h

Replying to @TheMERL

This Twitter feed is the best thing on the Internet.

**Kate Newey** @Dr\_Kate\_Newey · 12m

Best thread on Twitter today

**The Museum of English Rural Life** @TheMERL



It's a beautiful day so we're giving our #TopTips on what to do in the English countryside today...

Show this thread

**Lenette Breytenbach** @LenetteB\_NZ · 58m

Replying to @LenetteB\_NZ

Twitter and Instagram absolutely contribute to public engagement with museums and heritage sites. Lord knows if I ever get the chance I'm gonna view the Absolute Unit at @TheMERL. Would never have known about him or the museum without Twitter

**Whyte House Lamb** @WhyteHouseLamb · 5m

My girlfriend made an absolute unit birthday card for me. It's getting out of hand! @TheMERL @SheenaDDesai



**Mary Gater** @M4ryGater · 11m

I bloody love this account 😂 it is the best example of modern and humorous PR for a museum I have ever seen and I used to work in PR

**Janet Dickinson** @Tudornobility · 1h

This just gets better and better. Transforming rural history one thread at a time! At the end of it all we're all going to be fascinated by sheep.

**The Museum of English Rural Units** @TheMERL



🐑 Hello new followers 🐑

You may be wondering who we are...

Show this thread

**Meg Spilker** @TheGoggette · 1m

The new @TheMERL content style is the future way of talking about the past.

