



THE MUSEUM
OF ENGLISH
RURAL LIFE



University of
Reading

THE MERL AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS REVIEW 2017–2018

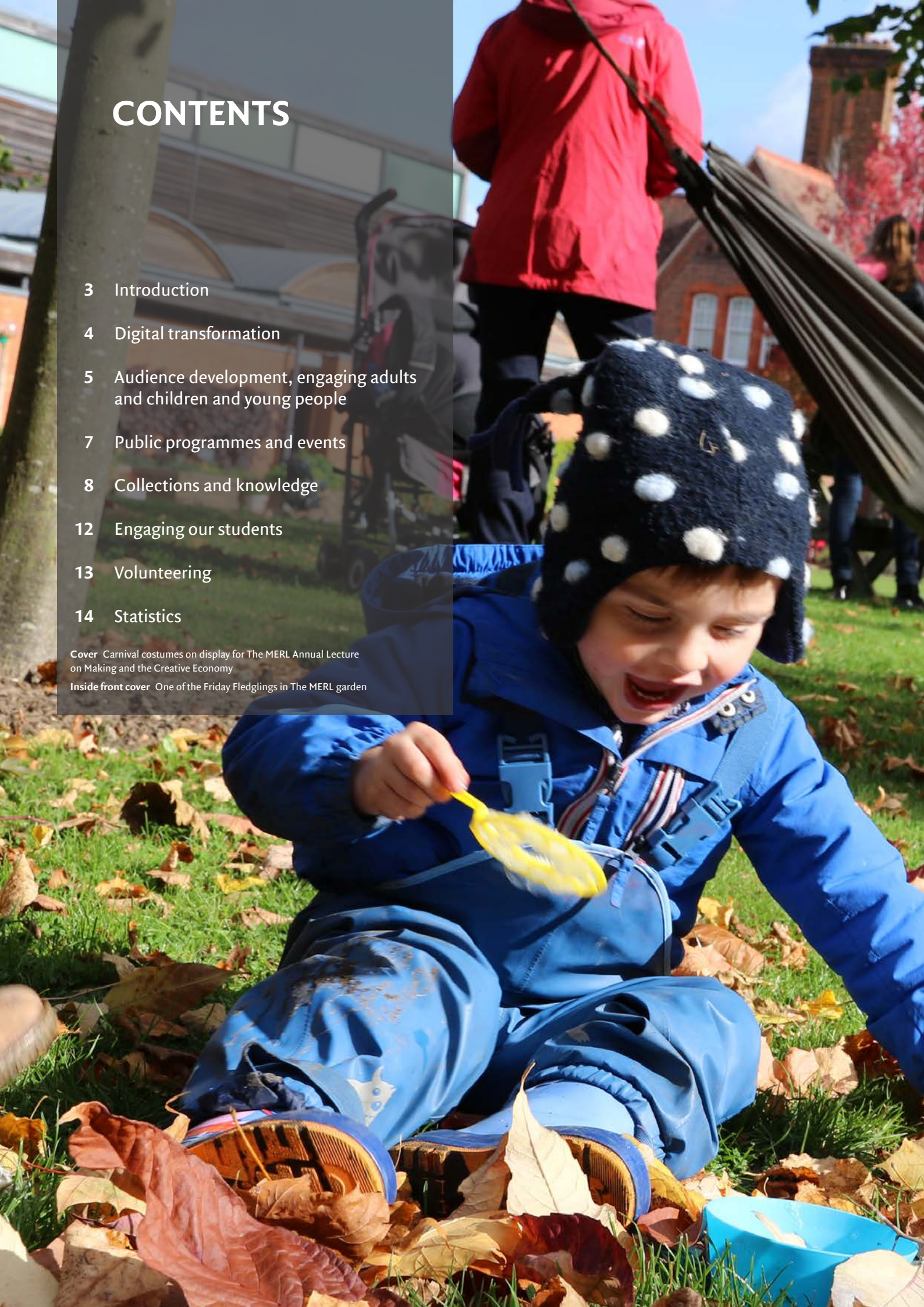


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Cover Carnival costumes on display for The MERL Annual Lecture on Making and the Creative Economy

Inside front cover One of the Friday Fledglings in The MERL garden



INTRODUCTION



The last year has been one of important transformation and change for The MERL and Special Collections; the impact of its major redevelopment, Our Country Lives, has been translated into new and increasingly diverse audiences, both local and global. Audience research and development that underpinned the OCL has also fed into the launch of exciting new activity, volunteering and engagement opportunities. These have helped ensure that we are reaching visitor targets and engaging new communities in programmes designed to deliver outcomes that connect people with their personal histories and identities, improve well-being and foster a sense of place.

The past year has also seen continuing growing demand for UMASCs' services and programmes in responding to growing interest in collections-based teaching and learning and research. The MERL and Special Collections Reading Room supervised 507 University of Reading individual student researcher visits and supported 27 modules with 70 hands-on collections workshops. Joint development of new Research Frameworks for key collections areas, covering themes including 'Landscape, place and people' and 'Book trade, publishing and business history' is also shaping innovative new research projects with a range of colleagues from different disciplinary fields.

The unlikely marketing success of a single tweet – an archival photograph of an Exmoor Horn aged ram, captioned 'look at this absolute unit' – has helped ensure that The Museum is reaching a global audience, with The MERL social media accounts attracting over 34,000 new followers by the end of July. Our content has reached 40 million people around the world.

This year also marked the beginning of Museums Partnership Reading (MPR), a consortium of Reading's two leading museums, The Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) and Reading Museum (RM). Funded by Arts Council England as a new National Portfolio Organisation, MPR has secured £1M investment from 2018–22 to deliver a dynamic programme for local audiences with a strong focus on working with young people, vulnerable adults and diverse local communities with low participation in culture.

The Twitter sensation that is 'Look at this Absolute Unit'





DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Building on the highly successful #digiRDG of 2016/7, a project that built digital skills and resilience in the workforce and in the use of digital platforms to extend engagement, The Museums' digital transformation has been extended through adopting a new Digital Strategy, supported by MPR investment.

This encompasses online and social content, a digital literacy programme, a community programme, improvements to the website, a new online exhibition tool and integrating digital technologies into public events and our work. Notable successes include establishing strong links with the local tech community and The MERL's viral Twitter account.

The MERL's main objective was to use twitter to find a new digital audience that would extend the museum's profile beyond Reading – those of us work here knew the museum deserved wider recognition but had not anticipated that this would result in this level of social media prominence. A remarkable aspect of this new digital audience is that approaching 40% are based in the US.

There is a strategy behind this success: On the one hand 'the absolute unit' was an unanticipated surprise, but on the other, part of a carefully planned and conceived campaign. This was based on the proposition that through social media The Museum's voice could share a different, engaging and entertaining insight into the world of The Museum's collections, have fun and be part of an online conversation that has brought us a sustained and still-growing audience.

"From the thoughtful placement of a small children's library next to a ridiculously enjoyable gamified exhibit exploring contemporary countryside challenges, to the lady who let my children stand inside the open door of their collections store and gaze up at walls hung with scythes and picks (and I'm sure at least one fox trap) explaining how the glass walls allowed them to be open to all, even when they were shut. I could go on and on and on.

It's not just that they're funny on twitter – and they are – it's that they are also engaging, and warm, and open with it. In the museum, those attributes were reflected in every nook and cranny."

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT, ENGAGING ADULTS AND CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Community engagement with local groups and education providers has continued to grow with many groups using our community spaces and the garden on a regular basis, with others engaging in a range of collections projects.

An oral history outreach project, for example, gathered views on the current state of farming and the countryside culminating in a community display in The Museum, 'Brexit – a Rural Perspective'. Working with Dr Kate Allen's AHRC-funded Sensory Objects, adults with learning difficulties from Reading College, as part of the PurpleSTARS initiative, have been contributing as co-researchers in the development of new gallery-based interactives at The Museum.

Those taking part in the UMASCS' programmes have included:

- Elizabeth Fry Approved Premises for Women
- Royal Berkshire Hospital
- Whitley Wood Community Association
- Reading Children's Book Group
- Alzheimer's Dementia Support
- Italian Mums of Reading
- Dee Park Lost Museum
- Macular Support Group for Bracknell
- South Sudanese Community Association
- Dementia Action Alliance.

Organisations involved in the 'Community Hire Scheme' include:

- Headway
- Reading Mencap
- My Cancer, My Choices
- Take Control Cancer Rehab workshop.

A new youth strategy for Museums Partnership Reading

A major programme of consultation and development for MPR has been underway to create a shared Youth Strategy for The MERL and Reading Museum as part of the MPR delivery plan. This will focus on a range of new initiatives as well as promoting current services that both museums provide. Strands of activity will include: working with children and young people in the community; mainstream and SEN schools; teachers panels; a new partnership with the proposed British Museum store in Wokingham; Widening Participation activity aimed at young people living and studying in post codes with low participation rates in Higher Education, and work experience and young volunteering.

Museum learning for schools and colleges

The MERL continued to support panels and forums to gather views and encourage participation from University students, local children and young people and families, with 7213 engaged in different aspects of the learning programmes in the past year.

Among new developments, nine new learning resources were made available for teachers planning visits to The Museum and classroom activity on themes relating to food, farming and the countryside.

Three supported work placements with Reading College were hosted by The MERL.

A successful programme of sessions was offered to schools selected from low participation postcodes, with a further two holiday activities offered to families from Whitley.

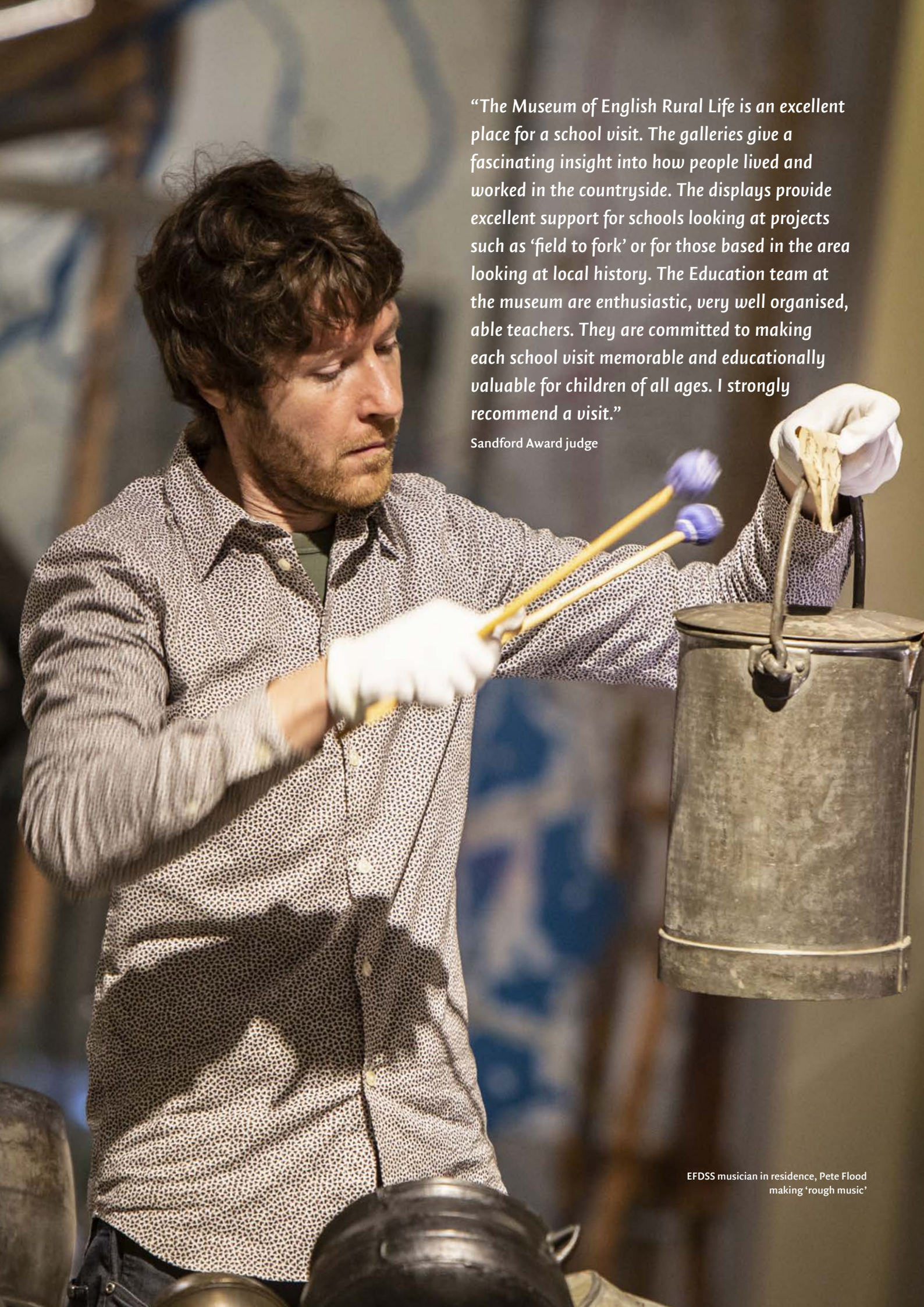
The MERL continued to provide opportunities for young people to participate in activity accredited by the Arts Council England's Arts Award. Delivered in partnership with local arts organisation Jelly, altogether 165 Discover Arts Awards were achieved by local children.

During 2017/18 two musician residencies in partnership with the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EDFSS) have been hosted by The Museum: Jackie Oates and Pete Flood have devised musical workshops aimed at young people or their carers.

In November 2017 The MERL received the Sandford Award that recognises excellence in museum learning.

Object handling at The MERL



A man with dark, curly hair and a beard, wearing a patterned button-down shirt and white gloves, is playing a large, cylindrical metal drum. He is using two mallets with blue heads. The drum is made of metal and has a handle on top. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a museum or gallery setting with various objects on display.

“The Museum of English Rural Life is an excellent place for a school visit. The galleries give a fascinating insight into how people lived and worked in the countryside. The displays provide excellent support for schools looking at projects such as ‘field to fork’ or for those based in the area looking at local history. The Education team at the museum are enthusiastic, very well organised, able teachers. They are committed to making each school visit memorable and educationally valuable for children of all ages. I strongly recommend a visit.”

Sandford Award judge

EFDSS musician in residence, Pete Flood
making ‘rough music’

PUBLIC PROGRAMMES AND EVENTS



During 2017/18 The MERL continued to provide established annual events alongside new initiatives aimed at attracting a broader audience to the museum. The Friday Fledglings under 5s activities were held in the garden over 30 times and with support from volunteer guides, 64 groups made booked visits to the galleries. A new MERL 'Lates' programme has proved very popular, attracting a lively mix of students and local people.

The MERL, alongside Reading Museum, participated in Culture24's Let's Get Real, delivering a project with museums for local Looked-After children.

In May 2018 a popular Spring Chickens event was generously funded by the Poultry Club of Great Britain and attracted over 500 visitors.

Outreach activity included participation in a number of events including Open Farm Sunday, Reading Town Meal, Whitley Wood Community Association events and Katesgrove Community Association's Older People's Day. Major events included:

- 2017 MERL Annual Lecture *Making and the Creative Economy*
- MERL Seminar Series Autumn 2017
Showing, Doing, Telling: Craft and Making

- MERL Seminar Series Spring 2018 *Rural Riders and Radicals*
- Late events hosted at The MERL for 2017–2018:
 - Make It!
 - Wool
 - Dig it
 - Digital Takeover II.

In May 2018, MERL staff led workshops at the Museums and Heritage Show for the Collections strand: 'Open Wide – developing access to your stores' and for the Understanding Your Visitors strand 'Whose story is it anyway?'



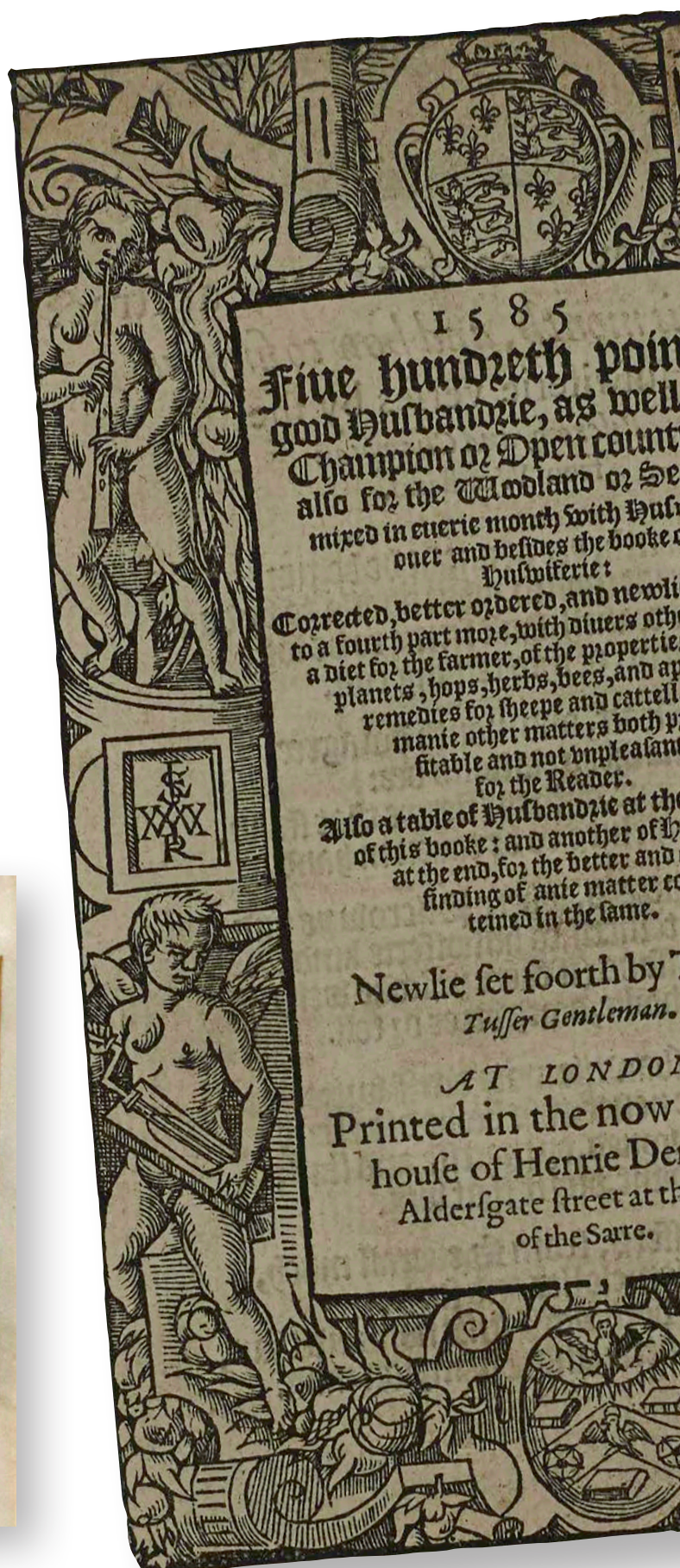
Visitors enjoying a 'Late' event

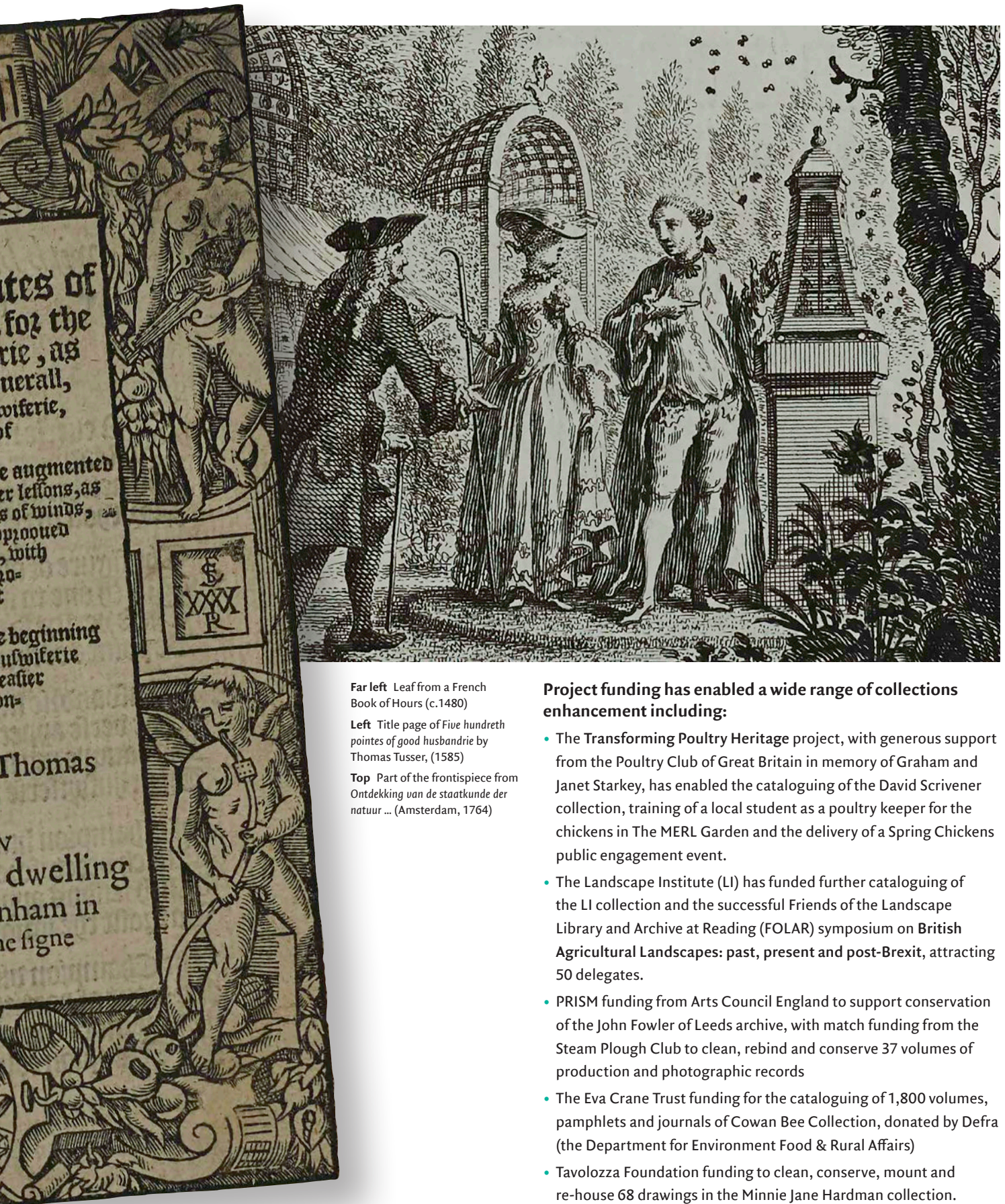
COLLECTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE

The past year has seen The MERL, Special Collections and the University's Art Collection continue to provide support and source material for a variety of new research, engagement and collections enhancement projects.

Bursaries and fellowships have once again brought new research interest to collections including:

- Associate Professor Alex Arnall awarded The Land Settlement Archive Bursary
- Suzanne Joinson, this year's Gwyn E Jones MERL Fellowship to research and write a nature and landscape memoir, *Sheepcombe: A Reckoning*
- Eimear McBride as the 2017–18 Beckett Research Centre's Creative Fellow, working on a new creative work
- James Bowen as the Poultry Club of Great Britain MERL Fellow
- Christine Mackey, a Wellcome Trust- funded artist residency, *Home Grown Housing*, creating a bespoke hen house for The Museum's garden
- Deirdre O'Mahoney, a Wellcome Trust- funded artist residency, *Speculative Optimism*, creating an archive-based film.





Far left Leaf from a French Book of Hours (c. 1480)

Left Title page of *Five hundreth pointes of good husbandrie* by Thomas Tusser, (1585)

Top Part of the frontispiece from *Ontdekking van de staatkunde der natuur ...* (Amsterdam, 1764)

Project funding has enabled a wide range of collections enhancement including:

- The Transforming Poultry Heritage project, with generous support from the Poultry Club of Great Britain in memory of Graham and Janet Starkey, has enabled the cataloguing of the David Scrivener collection, training of a local student as a poultry keeper for the chickens in The MERL Garden and the delivery of a Spring Chickens public engagement event.
- The Landscape Institute (LI) has funded further cataloguing of the LI collection and the successful Friends of the Landscape Library and Archive at Reading (FOLAR) symposium on **British Agricultural Landscapes: past, present and post-Brexit**, attracting 50 delegates.
- PRISM funding from Arts Council England to support conservation of the John Fowler of Leeds archive, with match funding from the Steam Plough Club to clean, rebind and conserve 37 volumes of production and photographic records
- The Eva Crane Trust funding for the cataloguing of 1,800 volumes, pamphlets and journals of Cowan Bee Collection, donated by Defra (the Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs)
- Tavolozza Foundation funding to clean, conserve, mount and re-house 68 drawings in the Minnie Jane Hardman collection.



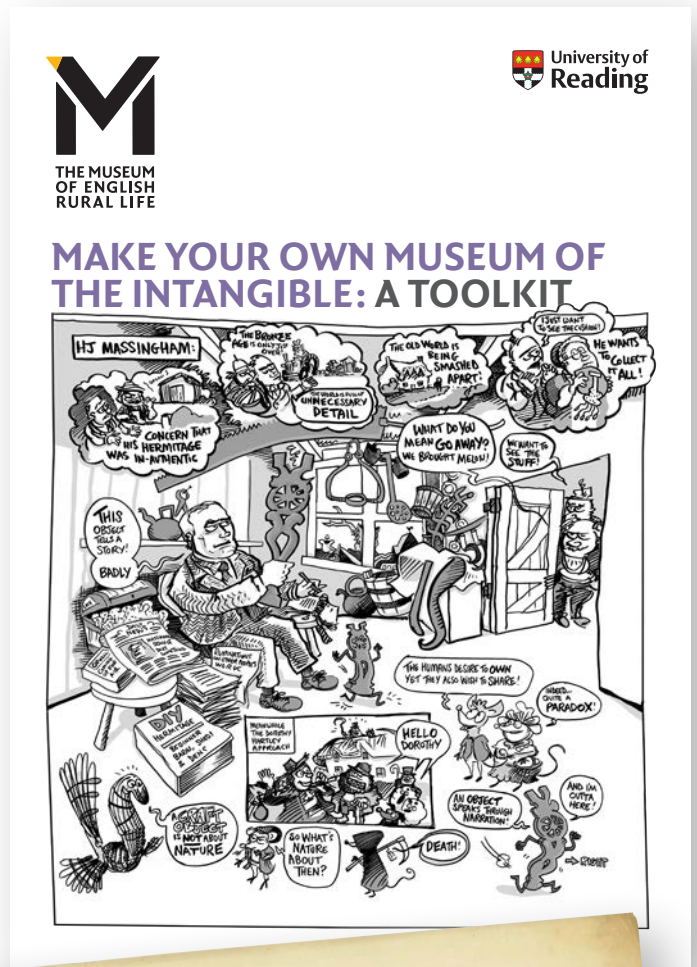
Research collaboration, engagement and related impact activity including:

- an exhibition from the Spellman Collection, 'Hi-tiddley-hi-ti': echoes of the Victorian music hall exhibition illustrated art, printing, politics and social history
- The MERL garden 'Test Bed' continued this year with Environmental Science PhD students, Harriet Robson and Marijke Struijk managing new planting and monitoring
- The Museum of the Intangible, funded by Arts Council England's Designation Development Fund, supported new creative commissions including poetry, knitting and soundscapes, story-telling and short story writing, culminating in the commissioning of hand-made clogs for a new dance piece choreographed by Hannah James.
- Thinking forward through the past: Linking science, social science and the humanities to inform the sustainable reduction of endemic disease in British livestock farming – MERL's partnership with Kings College London and Leeds Trinity in a £1.5m four-year collaborative project funded by the Wellcome Trust that will include digitization of MERL records and images (check??)
- a major international loan from the Beckett Archive to the Literaturmuseum der Moderne (Museum of Modern Literature), Marbach am Neckar, Germany, for the exhibition German Fever. Beckett in Germany
- the start of a new interdisciplinary AHRC project, led by Dr Rachel Garfield in collaboration with UMASCS, to preserve and promote the material in the archive of the acclaimed experimental filmmaker, director and cinematographer Stephen Dwoskin
- Health Humanities Research Cluster workshops in collaboration with the University Art collections including an Art Collections Showcase and a collaborative seminar on the theme of Anatomy for Artists.

Top Cover from *Make your own Museum of the Intangible: a Toolkit*

Right 'There's more to follow: the great topical song' Cee Tee (artist): Victorian sheet music cover from the Spellman Collection

Far right Staircase hall exhibition space





ENGAGING OUR STUDENTS

UMASCS staff have designed, support and now deliver seven enquiry-based learning BA/MA museum modules available to students across the University.

7

Items from the collections used in student engagement:
The MERL and Special Collections

757

Number of courses and modules offered:
The MERL and Special Collections

27

Number of placements offered to both internal and external students:
The MERL and Special Collections

16

Programmes have also been developed with the Institute of Education at Reading which includes placements for teacher trainers.

As a new development in teaching and learning, the Curator of the University Art Collection has designed and delivered a series of collections-based seminars with Museum Studies students, as part of the HCIC PhD collections workshops, and has co-taught on a BA1 Art History module 'Modernisms & Mythologies'.

VOLUNTEERING



Volunteers contributed 4,528.03 hours of their time to work with The MERL and Special Collections. In total 125 individuals volunteered on particular projects and in a typical month up to 70 volunteers attended at The Museum.

Volunteering strategy focused on:

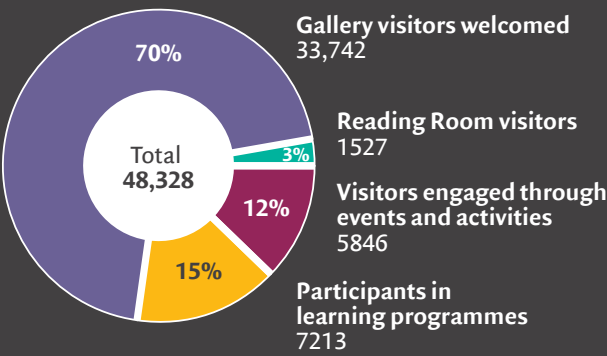
- consolidating communications with existing volunteers
- developing the numbers of skilled volunteers participating in object handling sessions
- taking steps to align volunteering processes with Reading Museum as part of the MPR.

The 'Mewes Knitters' were awarded Highly Commended certificates as part of the British Museum/Marsh Trust Award for Volunteers in Museum Learning. The judges were particularly impressed by the exceptional contribution the knitters had made.

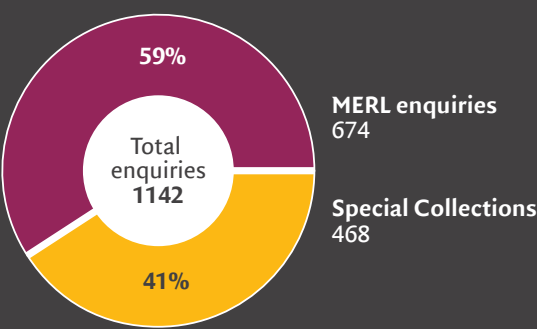


STATISTICS

Engagement



Enquiries



Student use of collections

Students involved in teaching sessions with collections



Teaching modules drawing on collections



Research use of collections

New research users 742



Archives produced for users in the Reading Room during the year 12,091



Reached through digital activity

Impressions 40,604,499



Engagement 2,130,057



New followers 34,509



OPPOSITE PAGE
Top left Carnival costumes on display at The MERL Annual Lecture
Top right A small group seminar about rare books in the archives
Middle right Clogs that inspired new choreography by Hannah James
Bottom The Beet Box raised bed in The MERL garden





Some of the Mewes Knitters' handiwork in The MERL garden

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i For more information, please contact:

The Museum of English Rural Life

University of Reading
Redlands Road
Reading RG1 5EX

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

t @UniRdg_SpecColl @theMERL @UniRdg_ArtCol

merl.reading.ac.uk

<http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/merl/>



Supported using public funding by
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