

Rural Crafts Today

For more than 50 years, The MERL has been recording and collecting rural crafts. Between 2006-2007, the Museum made films of ten craftspeople to relate its collections to the contemporary countryside.

The project was about connecting the Museum's craft collections with the people, skills and places associated with countryside crafts today. The project was grant aided by the Designation Challenge Fund, part of the government's 'Renaissance – museums for changing lives' initiative.

During 2006-7, Roy Brigden, then Keeper of The MERL talked to ten very different crafts people, from different parts of the country, to discover more about the present and future prospects for rural craftsmanship in the twenty-first century. The films show craftspeople, such as the blacksmith, horse collar maker and potter, carrying out their work, bringing to life many of the objects on display in the Museum.

Roy Brigden said, "Rural crafts are a central focus of The MERL collections. Over the last century, the demise of rural crafts has been frequently forecast. And yet they remain, some in better shape than others, to provide a counterpoint to the conventions of modern living.

"The most satisfying aspect of the project has been making connections between historic tools and products in our collections and the craftspeople of today's countryside. Some things have changed, some haven't. But what always shines through are the people themselves and the way their skills and lifestyle relate to the environment around them".

One of the craftspeople featured is weaver, Mary Kinipple, from Streatley in the heart of rural Berkshire, yet surprisingly close to Reading, Mary practises one of the most ancient of crafts, using wool from her own sheep and dyes that she produces from plants in her garden.

Mary says, "I agreed to take part in the series as I felt it an honour to be asked and more importantly I believe that the wider public need to be made aware of processes in the production of handmade articles. Once upon a time all our textiles were made this way!"

The project was a contribution to a long standing interest in rural crafts that encompasses archive material from the Rural Industries Bureau dating back to the 1920s, records of earlier museum fieldwork

programmes from the 1950s, and former director Professor Ted Collins' 2004 report for the Countryside Agency Crafts in the English Countryside Towards a Future.

RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

Download a [copy of the booklet](#) which accompanies the project. The booklet includes an introduction to the project by Roy Brigden, the film diary and details of research into rural crafts and trades collections by David Viner.

The films pieces created by the craftspeople featured have now become part of the permanent collections and visitors are able to see some of them in the main galleries.

Full versions of the films are available to view on DVD in the [reading room](#), where visitors can also consult materials relating to rural crafts in The MERL archives and library.