



THE MUSEUM
OF ENGLISH
RURAL LIFE



University of
Reading

FARMING

The first 12,000 years

Explore the Museum of English Rural Life and the Pitt Rivers Museum to find objects that reveal different aspects of our farming lives, past and present.

Visit in person or join us online to find out more
merl.reading.ac.uk/farming12K



For the majority of the last 200,000 years, modern humans obtained food by foraging for plants and hunting wild animals. Since farming emerged nearly 12,000 years ago, it has become the world's main source of food. It has contributed to the emergence of political movements, social inequalities, land disputes, and even urbanisation.

In recent centuries, mechanisation, mono-cropping, intensive production, and chemical farming have all shaped the way food is grown. These new systems have brought benefits but have also damaged soils and ecosystems, and contributed to loss of traditional knowledge.

This trail introduces objects drawn from prehistory to the recent past. Some technologies remain similar today whilst others are in decline or have disappeared altogether. As fewer people now participate in farming, its processes have become increasingly unfamiliar.

Exploring farm objects can help us better understand our past and frame important questions about the future. While we must be careful not to romanticise our farm histories and prehistories, they may help us to meet the food security and environmental challenges we currently face.

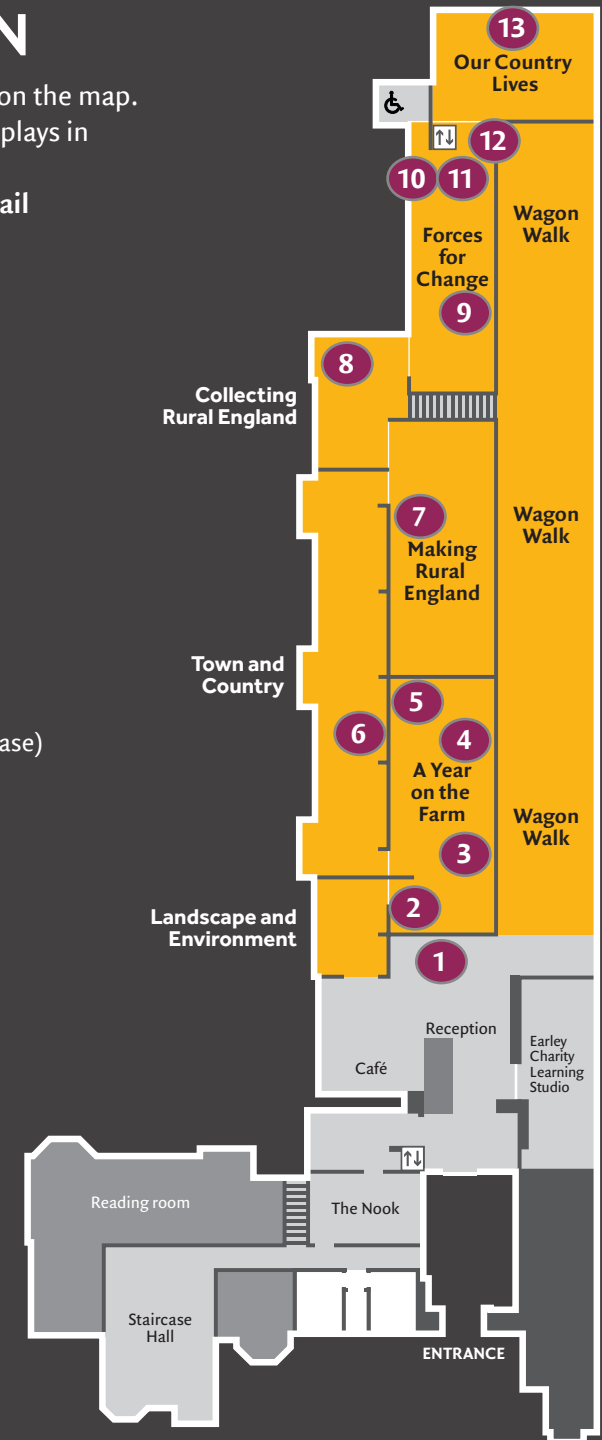


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FLOORPLAN

Find each numbered item on the map.
See below for names of displays in which the objects appear.
Enjoy the #Farming12K trail

- 1 Welcome area (see case)
- 2 Spring
- 3 Summer
- 4 Summer (see case)
- 5 Autumn
- 6 Dairy to Doorstep
- 7 Makers at Work
- 8 Museum on Show
- 9 Threshing (see case)
- 10 Selective Breeding
- 11 Selective Breeding (see case)
- 12 Artificial and Organic
- 13 Festival of Britain



1 Farming game

Have you ever listened to The Archers? Traditionally, farming practices and knowledge are passed between generations. In the 1950s, English broadcasters created The Archers radio serial, charting life in a fictional farming community. It encouraged post-war farmers to modernise and became popular enough to merit spin-off merchandise. Organisations such as Farm Radio International and The Archers-inspired Rwandan series Urunana have helped cement the valuable role of radio communication within rural African communities. MERL 2009/67



2 Seed fiddle

Have you ever grown anything from seed? The first farmers broadcast seed by hand. The earliest seed drills funnelled seed directly into the soil and were developed in Babylonia (present-day Iraq) around 4000 years ago. Similar technologies developed independently in several places. More complex mechanisms were introduced in eighteenth-century England but handsowing remained common on smaller farms. In around 1850, hand-operated distributors were designed in the USA and soon copied elsewhere, as with this Scottish-made seed fiddle. MERL 98/12



3 Reaper

What links English farmland to colonialism? From the sixteenth century onwards, European farming cultures expanded overseas. In subsequent centuries local people were forced to make way for settler farmers. In the North American midwest of the nineteenth century, enterprising McCormick family members trialled a new way to harvest cereal crops. Their reaper enabled producers to increase the size of both fields and yields. Exported back to Europe, machines such as this 1890s example changed the farm landscapes of England and elsewhere. MERL 65/5



4 Harvest jug

'If you the Barley Mow neglect good ale you cannot then expect'. The threat of poor crop growth, loss, or damage can make cultivation stressful. Traditions have emerged globally to mark different stages in farming, from timely planting to safe harvest. Drinking is one popular way of celebrating, as shown by this 1838 'barley mow' jug from Devon, England. Many cultures have distinct calendar customs linked to farming, such as Holi, the Indian festival of spring, or Thanksgiving festivals, designed to mark harvest in North America. MERL 60/146



5 Dipping trough

Sheep have long been dipped to clean fleeces or protect against flies and parasites. In most places, natural washing spots or purpose-built troughs are favoured. In some cases, portable troughs were provided by dip companies to promote sales. This example was made in early-nineteenth century Dorset, England. The earliest chemical dips were introduced at around the same time. Many dips subjected workers to substances highly hazardous to health. In some parts of the world resistance to enforced dipping became a form of anti-colonial activism. MERL 60/134

6 Back can

How far has milk travelled by the time you use it? Dairying technologies have changed considerably in recent centuries. Trains enabled perishables to move quickly from farm to town, meaning urban dairying declined. In many places globally, hot weather or traditional methods necessitate focussing on local consumers. On some early-twentieth-century Yorkshire farms portable equipment was carried to hilly areas and cans used to transport milk back. In intensive systems animals are brought in at set times or automation enables cows to set their own routines. MERL 60/512





7 Thatch sample

It may be romantic and nostalgic but how does thatch link farming to craft? It certainly reminds us that farm by-products serve an important role in our lives. This modern thatch sample was installed by master thatcher Kate Glover. The layered structure helps explain how thatch sometimes holds clues to our farming past. The low, usually smoke-blackened layers of early roofs can help reveal the biodiversity of medieval cereal crops. These heritage varieties contrast with modern mono-crops and dwarf wheats.

MERL Unnumbered

8 Horse plough

What exactly does a plough do? An earlier type of tool called an ard was designed to scratch into the soil surface. A plough not only scratches the soil but also turns the earth over into furrows. Over time, different styles of plough have emerged to meet the demands of particular soils or animal power traditions. This nineteenth-century turn-wrest plough was typical to Kent, England. It was designed so that the soil always turned over the same direction, creating uniform furrows. Where tractor ploughing took over from horse ploughing, the operator's perspective shifted from forward- to rearward-facing.

MERL 55/786



9 Combine harvester

For thousands of years, cereals were harvested and processed largely by hand. From the nineteenth century onwards, sickles, scythes, and hand-threshing tools were in many cases replaced by mechanical reapers and threshing machines. In the twentieth century these were exchanged for a machine combining threshing, winnowing, and sieving in one, hence its name – combine harvester. The stop-start chain of manual tasks gave way to a single process, saving time and effort.

MERL 2010/14



10 Animal portrait

Why are the animals in these paintings often gigantic? Most of our farm animals were selectively bred over the last few centuries for size. Livestock portraits were commissioned to celebrate success. A few early prize animals acquired almost celebrity status. This prize-winning Berkshire pig was painted by Richard Whitford in 1872. Berkshires were named after the county where they were first bred. In recent decades they have become popular in China. In modern livestock husbandry, questions of disease resilience, genetic modification, and welfare play a role.

MERL 65/354

11 Seed cabinet

What can seeds tell us about our modern landscapes? Over the last 250 years, seed researchers have continued a tradition spanning 12 millenia. Founded in Reading, England, in the nineteenth century, Suttons Seeds became known for flowers, bulbs, and farm seed. This cabinet hints at the colonial establishment of grasslands. In nineteenth-century New Zealand farmers realised that sheep preferred English to native grasses. By 1925 almost a quarter of the country had been turned over to pastures that echoed European landscapes.

MERL 2004/27



12 Agrochemical signs

Are there alternatives to chemical farming? During the twentieth century, artificial fertilisers and pesticides dominated global agriculture. Traditional ways of boosting soil and crop health were side-lined until the organic movement offered alternatives. Early organic farming was essentially a mix of traditional techniques with sustainable methods appropriated from colonial contexts. This toolkit now forms part of a range of climate-smart approaches that are of growing importance worldwide.

MERL 2009/59 and 2009/51





13 Wall-hanging

What can this massive artwork tell us about food production and modernity? Farming has become increasingly homogenous but specific places are still known for particular produce. This textile depicting Kent, England, was designed by Michael O'Connell for the 1951 Festival of Britain. The imagery is suggestive of tensions of tradition and modernity that define much of twentieth-century farming. The nostalgic idea of regional farming was intended to boost global trade links post-war. However, rather than local factors, farming at this time was shaped largely by conflict, colonialism, mechanisation, and industrialisation.

MERL 63/18/9