



FARMING

The first 12,000 years

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

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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.



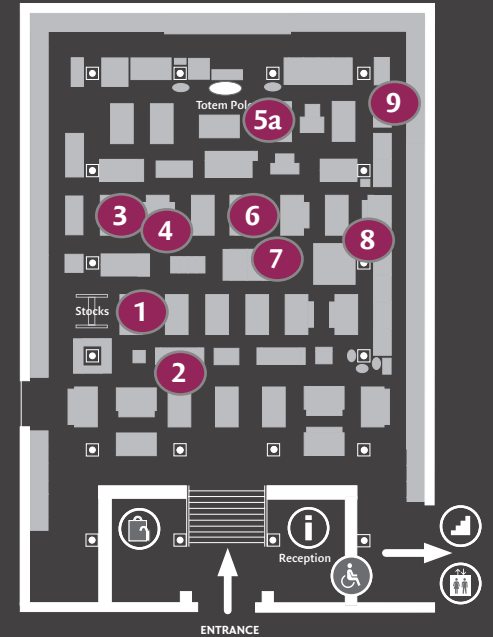
Illustrations by Miranda Creswell
 Photos by Liz Yardley (PRM harvest trophy) and Ian Cartwright (PRM other objects)
 Text by Jade Whitlam, Jozie Kettle, and Ollie Douglas

FLOORPLANS

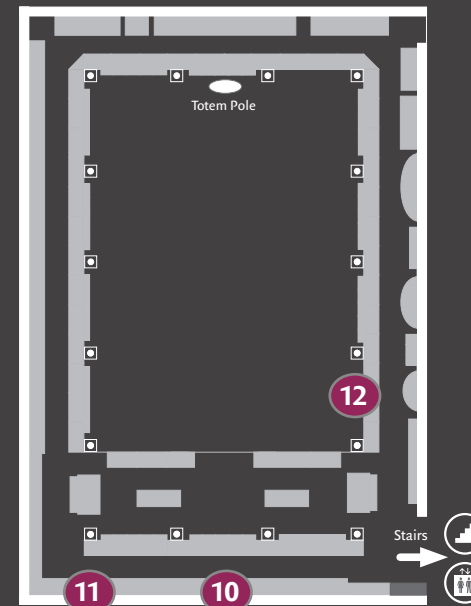
Find each numbered item on the map. The case numbers and hints below may help. Enjoy the #Farming12K trail

- 1 Case 116
- 2 Case 133
- 3 Case 77
- 4 Underneath Case 79
- 5a Underneath Case 56
- 6 Case 85
- 7 Case 110
- 8 Case 98
- 9 Case 61
- 10 Case 62
- 11 Case 60
- 12 Case 86
- 13a Case 61
- 13b Case 65
- 5b Case 26

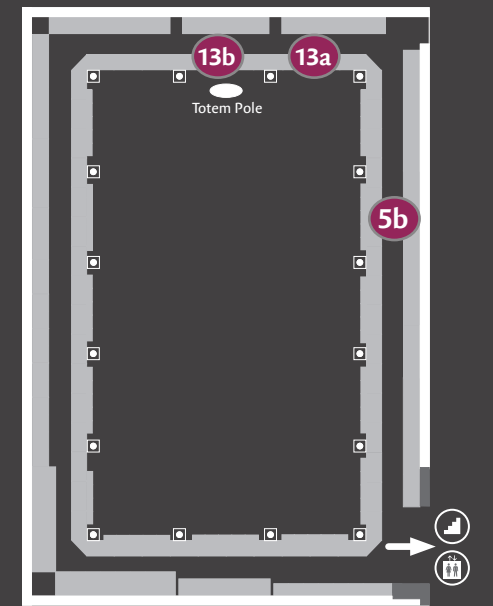
Ground Floor Court



Lower Gallery



Upper Gallery



1 Milk container

How many containers has your milk been in before it reaches you? This twentieth-century goat's milk container comes from Spiti in Western Tibet, where nomadic pastoralism – the movement of livestock across the landscape following fresh pasture – has been practiced for thousands of years and is still practiced today. With a capacity of less than 250 millilitres, this container also represents dairying on a much smaller scale than the industry of Europe and North America. There, many milking parlours for cattle are now routinely robotic and automated.

PRM 1954.6.157



2 Bark fuse

What connects fire to farming? 'Slash-and-burn' involves cutting and burning natural vegetation to clear land for cultivation. After several years land becomes exhausted and new space must be cleared. Although it has a long history, this technique can damage the environment with loss of soil cover, nutrients, and biodiversity. This roll

of bark was collected in 1932 and was made by Rengma Naga people to transport fire to fields in Sendenyu in Nagaland, India. Known as jhum, this practice of shifting agro-forestry remains common in this densely forested region today.

PRM 1928.69.1596



3 Bird scarer

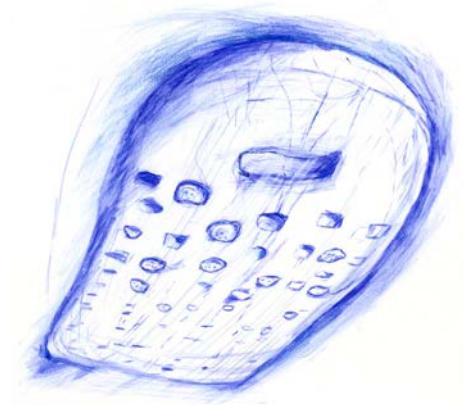
People aren't the only creatures that need to eat. Bird scarers are used to discourage birds from eating recently planted crop seeds. Some are visual, as with a scarecrow, and others employ sound. This jingle is from late-nineteenth-century Sabah in northern Borneo and would have been shaken to make an off-putting noise. It is made from a mix of recycled metal plates and animal bone. Clappers and other similar technologies were used in the UK in the nineteenth century.

PRM 1899.72.27

4 Threshing sled

After harvest, how do you separate grains from straw and chaff? This job, known as threshing, was traditionally done by trampling crops under foot, or using a flail or threshing sled. Threshing sleds are wooden boards with teeth of stone or metal that are drawn over the crop by animals. This nineteenth-century sled was used in the Canary Islands, Spain, and has teeth made from pieces of lava. In England, when more labour-intensive threshing processes gave way to machine power, people lost work and the changes resulted in violent protests.

PRM 1899.13.1



5 Winnowing baskets

After threshing, crops are winnowed to further separate grain from chaff. This involves throwing the mixture into the air so that the lighter unwanted chaff blows away. Crops can be winnowed by hand, using tools such as these baskets from Picardie, Seine-Maritime, France and Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Mayen, South Sudan. In Europe, the nineteenth-century drive for efficiency led to the invention of mechanised solutions to this job. Today, harvesting, threshing, and winnowing can all be carried out by a single machine – the combine harvester.

PRM 1920.21.13 and PRM 1979.20.81

6 Shepherd's whistle

Herding is the practice of moving farmed animals as a group, often with the assistance of working animals, such as dogs. This whistle from Sibiu in Transylvania, Romania, is in the shape of a horned animal, probably a ram. It may have been used by a shepherd for communication with sheepdogs. Although sheep are still kept in many parts of the world for their meat, milk, wool, or skin, sheep farming remains a form of animal husbandry that has not been significantly intensified.

PRM 1993.72.1



7 Manure tally

How does dung help us produce food? People have used animal manure to enrich soil for many thousands of years. Compared to modern artificial fertilisers, applying excrement to farm fields can be labour intensive. This late-nineteenth-century tally stick was used by a carter in Worcestershire, UK, to keep count of cartloads of manure taken to the fields. In many places dung is also mixed with straw and dried to form dung cakes, which are then burned as fuel.

PRM 1901.50.1

8 Harvest trophy

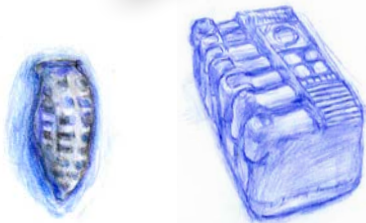
How do you like to celebrate? At harvest time farmers reap the benefits of their investment. Trophies used to be made to mark the end of harvest, often with the last cut of the crop. This practice occurred across Europe from at least the 1700s, with specific places favouring particular designs. This 'lantern' was made in Conderton, Worcestershire, UK, in 1931. The mid-twentieth century saw selective breeding of dwarf cultivars able to support heavier seed heads but lacking the strength or flexibility to produce elaborate straw designs like this.

PRM 1941.9.3

9 Amulets

What symbols do we use to represent farming life? These models of (clockwise from top left) a maize-head from Lima Region, Peru, a herd of goats from La Paz, Bolivia, and a llama, reveal the close relationship between people, plants, and animals within a farming society. Such representations also had a symbolic role, as amulets that were buried to promote herd and crop fertility. The objects demonstrates the importance of beliefs and practices that link farming to seasonality and nature.

PRM 1919.1.4, 1919.1.5 .1, and 1921.92.138



11 Milling tools

How is flour produced? Before powered mills, grain was processed by hand. This was normally done daily using groundstone tools, like these examples from Central America. The mortar or bowl is from the Chiriqui Province, Panama, and the muller is probably from Costa Rica. Archaeological and ethnographic evidence show that the same tools were used to prepare other foods, dyes, medicines, and even metals. Different milling technologies have emerged globally over time, including the use of wind, water, and draught animal power.

PRM 1950.3.1 B and PRM 1884.10.28



12 Castration thorns

Pigs were first domesticated around 11,000 years ago in the Tigris Valley, modern-day Turkey. Pigs are largely reared for meat. Male pigs are castrated to reduce aggression, prevent unwanted reproduction, and to improve flavour. Similar practices also occur in other animal husbandry contexts. Thorns like these were used by Rengma Naga people in Nagaland, India, to close and help the healing of castration wounds on a pig.

PRM 1928.69.1186



13 Sickle blades

Use of curved handtools for harvesting crops predates the earliest farming. The first sickles had flint blades but they later employed metal. Similar objects are found around the world. In the UK they were common until the nineteenth century when scythes and mechanised reapers took over. These examples include a Neolithic

example found in 1937 in Jutland, Denmark, and another excavated in 1911 in Faras, Lower Nubia, Egypt. Faras was later flooded by the Aswan Dam, a project based largely on the need for irrigation for farming.

PRM 1937.12.10 and PRM 1912.89.50

