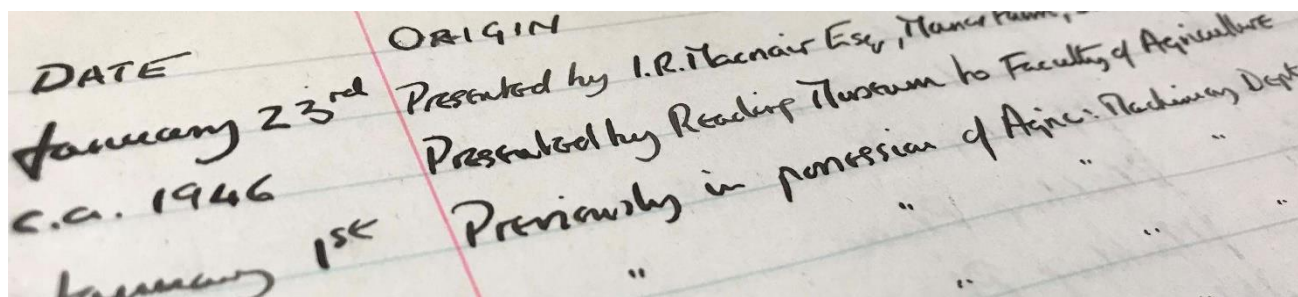


1. Model Thresher

Curator of MERL Collections, Dr Ollie Douglas, introduces us to the first of our 51 Voices selections and the second object to be formally recorded as part of the Museum's founding collection in 1951. This small, unassuming model may seem unexciting at first glance but harbours amazing links to historical narratives of display, technology, education, protest, and colonialism. So, read on to find out more about how extraordinary stories of life and death and of public display are hidebound to the history of object that once belonged to Reading Museum.

Barrett, Exall & Andrewes, Model threshing machine, circa 1847

This object's two main links to 1951 are the date of its arrival in the collection—January 1951—and the number it was allocated—51/2. The '51' here stands for the year it entered The MERL, and the '2' stands for the order in which it entered the collection. In other words, at some point in January 1951, object 51/2 became the second artefact to be recorded formally in a shiny new accession book. The object in question is a small, clockwork model of a threshing machine and may already be familiar to many of our regular visitors. Some may have even had a chance to get hands on with it. It's been on the Museum's handling trolley in our galleries and has played a regular part in our public programmes in recent years, helping to tell different stories about the farming past. It seems fitting to be starting this exciting project by telling the story of something so many of our audiences may have been able to see and handle.

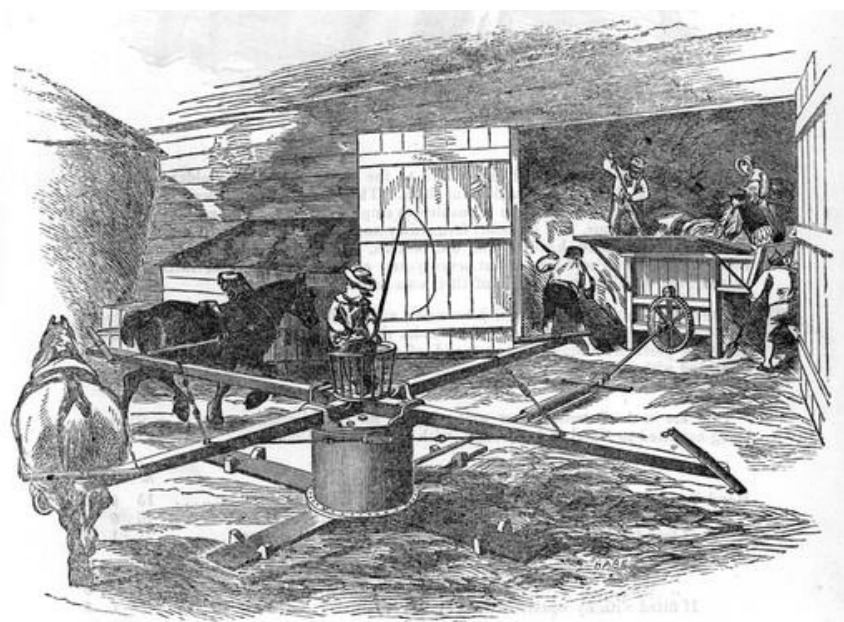


This detail shows a note of origin made in the Museum's accession book in January 1951, indicating that the model threshing machine was 'Presented by Reading Museum to [the] Faculty of Agriculture' in circa 1946.

But the model threshing machine isn't only relevant to 1951 because of *when* it entered the collection. It also helps tell a more detailed story about the Museum's journey to the Museum in the first place. In about 1946, it was transferred from our longstanding friends at Reading Museum to the Faculty of Agriculture of our parent institution, the University of Reading. It was almost certainly placed into immediate service, performing the same kind of educational and instructional role that we still aspire to with our collections today. Indeed, The MERL still hosts teaching sessions for many

students from across the University, including those studying as part of degrees taught in the School of Agriculture, Policy and Development. Today's teaching sessions make use of historic collections and narratives to help the next generation understand processes of adaptation and change, as well as many other different facets of the past. Although we might not present these stories in quite the same progressionist ways as our 1940s predecessors, we do still speak to groups about threshing machines, using our *Forces For Change* gallery and unique objects such as this very model to communicate the story of such technologies and their development in visual and tactile ways.

For those of you who don't know, threshing machines represent one of the two main processing technologies found in modern combine harvesters, which are so-called because they *combine* the cutting of a crop—*reaping*—and the separation of grains from stalks—*threshing*. This was once a much more hands-on process but when horse-powered machines like those shown by this demonstration model were introduced this made threshing not only easier, but cheaper, faster, and more efficient. This technological adaptation was first introduced in the late-eighteenth century but began to take more substantial hold during the first half of the nineteenth century. This is well over a century before the object in question was given by Reading Museum to the University. And, it was evidently used in the Faculty of Agriculture for almost 5 active years before retiring to its ultimate home as part of The MERL's founding year collection.



BARRETT, EXALL, AND ANDREWES'
PATENT FOUR HORSE THRASHING MACHINE WITH PATENT GEAR WORK,
AS IN OPERATION.

This illustration shows the same type of horse-powered threshing machine. It is from a catalogue of agricultural machinery featured at the Great Exhibition, as published in May 1851 (MERL TR RAN P1/B1/11).

The model itself has another local connection and a deeper history of display that precedes its place at Reading Museum. It was made in 1847 in Katesgrove Lane, Reading, for the agricultural engineering firm Barrett, Exall & Andrewes. This company exhibited similar machinery (perhaps

including this very model) at the *Great Exhibition* in London in 1851. Exhibitions of farm machinery at this event marked a phase of significant rural change. Preceding decades had seen unrest in the farming world, with the inequities of mechanisation and labour coming to the fore in protests that became known as the *Swing Riots*. Work opportunities were being partly eroded by machine power, and horse-driven technologies like this kind of machine were bolstered by newer, steam-driven equivalents. Threshing machines were such an important part of this story that they even get a fleeting mention in the *Great Exhibition* sequences of the popular ITV drama series *Victoria*. Curators like me get stupidly excited when mainstream TV programmes include references to obscure agricultural machinery! Similar processes of machine labour and changing work patterns play a part in discussions about employment to this day. Debates concerning ‘automation’ and the ‘gig economy’ represent similar processes playing out in our own twenty-first century world.

Of the rioters in 1830s Berkshire who were tried for protesting against such technologies, most were simply imprisoned, although a few were punished by being transported to Australian prison colonies, and one was even executed by hanging. Of those former farm labourers sent overseas to experience a different rural world altogether, at least one of them – Thomas Mackrell – would later turn his hand to farming in Tasmania. His story helps hint at how some of the very same people who had suffered the harshest consequences of technical change here in England would go on to play a part in the appropriation of indigenous land and the imposition of European-style farming practices in colonial contexts. Indeed, throughout these spaces, the myth-making rhetoric of settler-colonialists implied that indigenous populations such as the Australian First Peoples (including Aboriginal, Tasmanian, and Torres Strait Islander communities) were hunter-gatherers and incapable of cultivating, exploiting, or managing their environments. This has, of course, been proven false and it is now widely recognised that European models of agriculture, inclusive of mechanised solutions like threshers, represent only one of many diverse solutions to food production and agriculture.

Later stages of the complex processes of imperial expansion and global trade would entail the export of British-made farm machines—produced in the ‘dark satanic mills’ of England’s urban factories—to overseas territories, where they played a direct part in contexts of colonial imposition, exploitation, and violence. These same landscapes drove the development of bigger and more powerful farming technologies, which in turn came to help shape the ‘green and pleasant’ land of England itself. The sizes of some of the fields and gateways that we see in the modern English countryside represent expansions and modifications introduced comparatively recently to cope with these larger forms of machinery. Of course, returning to our model horse-powered threshing machine, it represents a technology that would have been farmyard rather than fieldside. Fixed in its position, quite possibly in a threshing barn or structure of some kind, the full-size machines would also have served like their model counterparts as object of display, with which to show off to ones agricultural peers.

So, this unassuming model served as an object of demonstration 100 years before the *Festival of Britain* was mounted in 1951, and a century before the Museum began to use it, once again, to educate and engage. It speaks to a dynamic period in agriculture, and the shifting powers, technologies, and politics of that complicated world. Its place in this very first listing helps show how the Museum was geared from the outset towards looking backwards, and to charting an inward-looking, anglocentric history of farming practice. Their vision back in 1951 was to tell a story of how English people farmed and to record examples of the machinery they used. But, of course, our rural worlds reached much further afield than this in both 1851 and in 1951. If this model threshing machine teaches us anything today, perhaps its biggest lesson is that the English countryside, much like us, can at once be intimately connected to global and urban people and places, as well as to local and rural lives, and that these material lessons in the demonstration of complexity and connectivity can span centuries, cultures, and institutions.

Further Reading:

On Barret, Exall & Andrewes machinery – 1851 Great Exhibition, ‘Official Catalogue Class IX [Barret, Exall & Andrewes]’ (Graces Guide to British Industrial History, https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/1851_Great_Exhibition:_Official_Catalogue:_Class_IX.:_Barrett,_Exall_and_Andrewes)

On The MERL’s colonial connections – Ollie Douglas, ‘Colonialism and development in the mid-century Museum of English Rural Life’ (Global Development Website, University of Reading, July 2020, <https://research.reading.ac.uk/global-development/colonialism-and-development-in-the-mid-century-museum-of-english-rural-life/>)

On the Swing Riots in Berkshire – David Knight, *The agricultural Swing Riots of 1830 affected many local communities* (The Penny Post Website, March 2019, <https://pennypost.org.uk/2019/03/the-history-of-the-swing-riots-in-berkshire/>)

On the model threshing machine itself – Collections Database entry for [MERL 51/2](#)