Museum’s fascinating farming exhibition

The Museum of English Rural Life is running a year-long exhibition exploring and celebrating farming and the countryside through a series of special artefacts. Tim Relf finds out more

Photos of objects as varied as a clockwork tractor, a model thresher and a jigsaw puzzle have started appearing on the Museum of English Rural Life (Merl) website. It is part of the “51 Voices” project, which will see items associated with 1951 – the year the museum was founded – posted online during its 70th anniversary year, accompanied by explanations and creative responses.

The museum, which is part of the University of Reading, in Berkshire, is working with academics, specialists, artists and writers from different backgrounds to “link these items to the priorities and passions of the past, present and future,” explains curator Ollie Douglas.

“By working with different people and communities, collections are being reimagined in surprising and, at times, challenging ways,” he says. “Some of the objects were simply acquired by the museum in our foundational year, while others speak of the history of that mid-century moment that marked such a pivotal time in the countryside. It was a period of enormous change and a time of profound hope.”

Parallels past and present

There’s even a 1951 issue of Farmers Weekly in the exhibition, containing coverage of the Festival of Britain – a celebration of the nation and its achievements, designed to promote industry, arts and science, and accelerate post-war recovery.

According to farmer’s son Ollie, there are many parallels between that moment and now. “Then, the nation was in a phase of post-war reconstruction, and now it’s one of post-pandemic reconstruction. Then, the organic movement was emerging; now sustainability is very much coming to the fore in terms of policy,” he says.

“Then, as now, our relationship with Europe was also in flux, there was a lot of debate about the labour force and new technology was revolutionising farming. In 1951, the UK was still bound up in the complex aftermath of the war.”

This 1951 issue of Farmers Weekly featured the Festival of Britain. Critics had begun to suggest farmers were ‘feather-bedded’, but, as this special issue showed, the festival helped show farming is a modern industry and a force for good.
Next generation face ‘mind-boggling’ challenges

Defra's latest initiative is well meant, but doesn't go far enough, says Charlie Beaty

Defra’s new plan to offer a lump sum of up to £100,000 to new entrants gets land. Simple, no? It seems to be a black-and-white approach to a very grey problem.

In a recent National Federation of Young Farmers’ Clubs Agri steering group meeting, it was strongly agreed that share-farming agreements would allow new entrants to learn on the job, while gently easing older farmers into retirement. Share-farming isn’t big in the UK, but maybe we should take a leaf out of the Kiwis’ book on this one. And how about ploughing some of this “lump sum” money into further training, grants and loans, aimed directly at these new entrants? After four years at university gaining a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture, I walked away with no better idea of how to apply for a tenancy or do the VAT return. I am well aware that the older generation often find it hard to hand over decision-making to their younger counterparts. I’m extremely lucky on that front – I am always kept involved with decisions and made to feel like my opinion is valued. Sometimes, though, even I resent not being allowed to make my own mistakes.

Harper Adams University graduate Adam Stead has a keen interest in the livestock sector, being heavily involved in the beef and sheep enterprises at home, as well as the arable and contracting side of things. She is an active member of Warwickshire YFC and loves travelling the world.

INTERACTIVE WORKSHOP

Artist and dairy farmer’s son Adam Stead (left) has developed an interactive workshop series using digital technology and traditional art materials to help celebrate the Museum of English Rural Life’s anniversary.

The Berkshire-based artist – who often explores the use of reclaimed materials, sometimes sourced from dairy farms – is also running two workshops with Redlands Primary School in Reading for seven- to 10-year-old pupils.

All the cows drawn by the 60 pupils will be “put out to pasture” in a virtual field on the HakuMoo website.

The “agricultural sector sometimes struggles to engage with younger generations as a career path, and art projects can connect new audiences with agriculture, educating and inspiring them and fostering links with our rural history,” he says.

Visit dairylexicon.com to view Adam’s work.