



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.

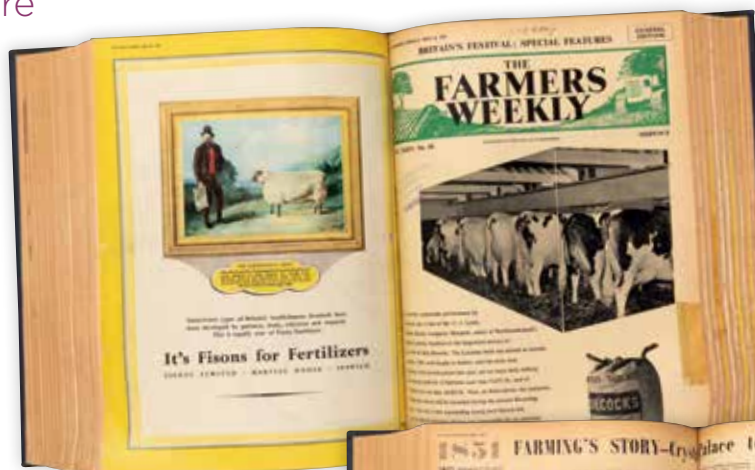
"By working with different people and communities, collections are being reimagined in surprising and, at times, challenging ways," he says. "Some of the objects were simply acquired by the museum in our foundational year, while others speak of the history of that mid-century moment that marked such 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.

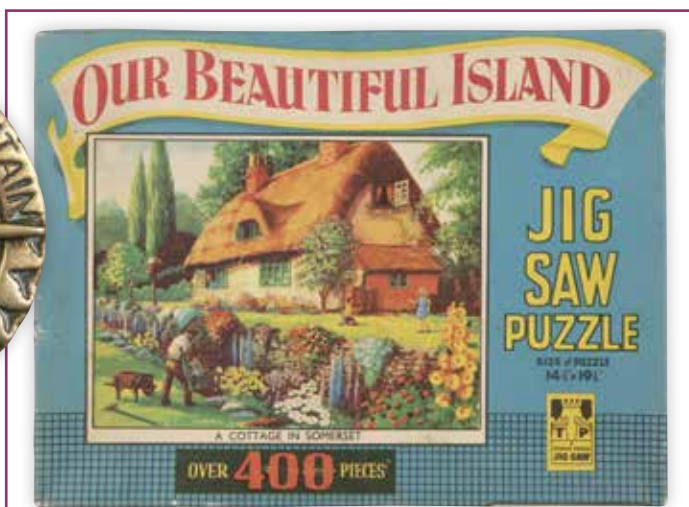
According to farmer's son Ollie, there are many parallels between that moment and now. "Then, the nation was in a phase of post-war reconstruction, and now it's one of post-pandemic reconstruction. Then, the organic movement was emerging; now sustainability is very much coming to the fore in terms of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



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

Brasses like this were originally made to adorn heavy horse harnesses. This example is one of many souvenirs sold to commemorate the Festival of Britain



Images similar to this one appear on many jigsaw puzzles showing the countryside as a rural idyll – timeless and nostalgic. It epitomises the 'chocolate box' representation of rural England still presented in many areas of popular culture. It is likely that this 'cottage in Somerset' was – and perhaps still is – a real building

Crop protection was seen as a key part of national food security in the post-war period – an era when farming was on the cusp of using many more synthetic pest management methods. This poster evoked the war spirit to encourage growers to combat vegetable pests, with the figure at the top wearing a steel helmet and the language echoing patriotic wartime messages



This model of fictional pub **The Bull** was based on a real pub that the creator of *The Archers* liked. The radio programme was first broadcast nationally on the day Merl was founded

of world conflict and was grappling with the implications of the break-up of the British Empire. As we move beyond the Covid crisis, the same emotions of change and hope are again relevant and timely – although we face many new social and environmental challenges.”

Smart showcase

The exhibition highlights Merl’s efforts to find new ways to approach gathering, telling and reimagining the history of the countryside. This is partly to take advantage of digital opportunities and partly because, as agricultural technologies have got bigger and more expensive,

it becomes impossible to act as a “collecting repository” in the way it traditionally has.

“Part of how we do that is by linking contemporary voices to the collections we already have,” says Ollie. “Heritage and history can sometimes feel dry to some people – but the more we talk about its importance and resonance now, the more accessible it becomes and the more it becomes everybody’s heritage. We need to understand where we’ve come from to understand where we might head in the future.” ■

● Visit merl.reading.ac.uk/explore/online-exhibitions/51-voices to find out more

INTERACTIVE WORKSHOP



ADAM STEAD

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.

Adam, who uses art to educate, inform and explore agriculture, has created “HaikuMoo”, giving participants the

chance to understand more about dairy cows. The initiative features an interactive website with instructions on how to draw a cow, while learning about dairy breeds and terminology.

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 HaikuMoo 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.

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 the “oldies” of our industry to hang up their flat caps and hand the reins over to new entrants, though a sentiment I don’t entirely disagree with, is one I have little faith in.

Pay older farmer money. Older farmer retires. Land available. New entrant 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 the biggest barrier facing new entrants is capital.

Heck, affording a house deposit is a daunting enough prospect in the current climate. The idea of taking on a farm tenancy and then having to fork out on machinery, livestock, feed, seed, fertiliser... and then forming a successful business model in the mere five-year window that seems standard for



a farm business tenancy these days? Mind-boggling.

That’s not to say it can’t be done, but there are huge obstacles. Realistically, freeing up land and expecting new entrants not to be outbid on an unlevel playing field is far-fetched. So, what is the alternative?

In 2018, the Country Land and Business Association pointed out that if one-quarter of farmers in England aged over 65 were to enter into a share-farming agreement, there would be nearly 8,000 new entrants. 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. But I still feel that the focus surely needs to be more on helping the new in and less on pushing the old out.

Harper Adams University graduate **Charlie Beaty** 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.

Bay Farm Tours
Agriculture of the world Adventures you'll never forget

Lincolnshire 19th to 24th Sept 2021
Cheshire & Peak Dist 20th to 25th Sept 2021
Lake Garda 3rd to 12th Oct 2021
Provence & the Rhone 7th to 14th Oct 2021
Lincolnshire 10th to 15th Oct 2021
Cyprus 25th Oct to 2nd Nov 2021
Vietnam 12th to 25th Jan 2022
New Zealand 3rd to 27th Feb 2022
Sri Lanka 24th Feb to 13th Mar 2022
Israel 6th to 14th April 2022
Southern Hebrides 23rd Apr to 1st May 2022
Devon 1st to 6th May 2022
Lake Garda 1st to 10th May 2022
Holland & Tulip Cruise 1st to 10th May 2022
Isle of Man 15th to 21st May 2022
Orkney 19th to 27th May 2022
Tuscany & Umbria 22nd to 30th May 2022
The Black Forest 23rd May to 1st June 2022
American Rockies 1st to 16th June 2022
Norway 5th to 13th June 2022
Sweden 8th to 14th June 2022

What's coming up?

ICELAND, GEYSERS AND GLACIERS
2nd to 9th September 2021

- Agricultural Museum of Iceland
- Pingvellir, the world's oldest parliament
- Tour of The Golden Circle
- Gullfoss & Great Geyser
- Sagnagardur Visitor Centre & Secret Lagoon
- Agricultural visits

CHESHIRE & THE PEAK DISTRICT
including Chatsworth House
20th to 25th September 2021

- Visit to Jodrell Bank
- Guided tour of Chester
- Visit the Anderton Boat Lift
- Guided tour of Chatsworth House
- Agricultural visits

Bay Farm Tours.co.uk

Contact us
Tel: 01524 423444
Email: info@bayfarmtours.co.uk

Bay Farm Tours
35 Euston Road
Morecambe
LA4 5DF

PHOTOS: MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE, UNIVERSITY OF READING

RICHARD STANTON