

The announcement that the University is to establish a Museum of English Rural Life may well have given use to <sup>rise</sup> suspicion and perhaps <sup>suspicion</sup> fear in the boldest hearts. Fear that Reading may soon ring to the sound of such antique names as pottles, pooking forks, peels and parpens; suspicion that honest and progressive thought may give place to an embarrassing old world folk consciousness. (It was in fact no accident of fate that it has been christened 'Museum of Rural Life' and not 'The Museum of Folk Culture' or 'The Reading Collection of Byegones'. Neither is there danger that agricultural students will in future be asked to produce a certificate of practical proficiency in pooking or that students in the School of Art will be required to wear the traditional Berkshire smock at their labours. (It may, however, seem fitting that the new venture is to some extent associated with the Agricultural Machinery Hall, which generations of students have been in the habit of referring to as 'The Museum'.

As the mechanization of the countryside progresses, hand in hand with the industrialization of the rural crafts, the old hand tools and rudimentary machines are disappearing on to scrap heaps with alarming rapidity. With them pass their associated skills. Frequently, now, one hears such statements as, 'Old so-and-so is the last man in these parts that can use that', or 'That old such-and-such hasn't been used in my day.' Yet, paradoxically enough, old methods cling tenaciously in the countryside; tools that were common hundreds of years ago are still to be seen in use side by side with modern ones, particularly in the more remote geographical areas. Gradually, however, old practices die, almost un-noticed and the equipment associated with them is frequently in danger of disappearing for ever.

A great deal of valuable collecting has already been done by regional and local museums both public and private. It is interesting to note how the articles to be found in one museum vary greatly from those in others, not only because of different



farming systems but also on account of the almost incredible variation in techniques. The names, of course, of different objects and even parts of objects vary equally. No museum in England has, so far, set out to form a collection of rural equipment on a countrywide basis. Such a collection could gradually build up the story of rural practices and throw light on the evolution of different methods, a field of study which has been peculiarly neglected in the past. This is possibly because we are only just becoming conscious of the far-reaching changes that have taken place in the countryside in comparatively recent years, particularly in the last ten. Those who have seen the 'folk' museums of Scandinavia may realise the immense field that remains to be opened up in this subject and the small amount that we in this country<sup>have</sup> contributed towards it. Wales has recently made an excellent start at St.Fagans.

How far Reading can go towards forming the nucleus of a national collection remains to be seen, but with its agricultural tradition it would appear to provide a very suitable setting for the study of this particular problem. It is also a subject of wide appeal to many people in the University, be they agriculturists, historians, geographers or connected with the fine arts.

In the early stages the museum will be strange by normal concepts. Its prime aim is to form a reference collection, 'library' or 'workshop' - call it what you will, for research. There is no display building in which the public can gaze their fill of stuffed, moth-eaten farm horses covered in conventional trappings, for exhibits will be stored away, carefully preserved, where they can, however, be inspected by those genuinely interested. When a nucleus collection has been formed consideration will have to be given to the whole question of display.

In the present phase we are anxious to collect anything and everything connected with rural life, particularly farm

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implements and tools, equipment belonging to rural crafts and some purely domestic equipment, though obviously not such things as furniture and costume which are already adequately catered for. It will be particularly important in the early stages to keep the museum alive and thus enable people to take an interest in it as it develops. It must not have the opportunity to develop into a dead collection of 'mothballed' objects. It is intended, for example, to display all acquisitions for a period at the end of the Machinery Hall next to the glass doors so that both the interested and the merely curious can see them. As soon as an object is acquired full details will be recorded on an index card and a photograph will be attached to the back. This card will be displayed with it and will eventually be placed in a filing cabinet in the Library.

It will not always be easy to provide sufficient detail about acquisitions because the people from whom they come may know little about their origin. A considerable amount of research will therefore be necessary to build up a reference index which will help with this work and make detailed identification easier; the Library has already made a start on this somewhat involved task.

If this venture is to be a success it is important that it should be given wide publicity so that anybody who may be able to help us will hear about it. To this end a note has recently been sent to museums, to the press and to individuals. We are of course in a position to make purchases where necessary, but we shall be very glad to receive both gifts and loans; much of the stuff we need is not of great value in the antique sense, and will frequently be found, no longer used, in farm buildings and houses. Already, at the time of writing, the collection numbers some 160 objects most of which have come to us as a result of a most generous benefaction by Mr. H. J. Massingham who has presented to the Museum his entire collection. The majority of these articles are described in his book, 'Country Relics', published by the C.U.P. in 1939.



The collection, therefore, is under way and it seems likely that it may expand fairly fast. Some of the articles already obtained would be difficult to find in the countryside today. We have for example a set of latten bells for attaching to the lead of the wagon team for warning approaching traffic. Other objects may still be found in use though fast disappearing such as haybond twisters or the breast plough. Yet another class, exemplified by the seedlip or sheep shears are worth preserving for although they may still hold their own against more modern methods they have remained unchanged for many years. One item in the collection, a spade, hand forged in 1850, looks much like any spade that might be used today.

¶ There is not unnaturally a sting in the tail of this article. That is, a request that anybody who is keen should help us to create a Museum worthy of Reading not only by showing interest but also by keeping their ears and eyes open in the countryside for material ~~that may be of use~~. If you see something that looks likely, either bring it back if you think it's worth while (preferably asking the owner first), or tell us about it if it is too big to go in your pocket or if the owner will only part with it by sale. It is particularly helpful if you can tell us something about its history. Resources may be taxed if you produce an inanimate metal object, knowing nothing as to its purpose or origin. Preferably, we should like to know (1) Who owned it, (2) Where it came from, (3) How old it is (even as vague as 'it was hanging in the cowshed when my father's father was alive') and lastly, (4) Any information which describes how or why it was used in particular, or what that sort of thing was used for in general in that part of the country. This may seem a lot to ask but we would far rather have too much information than too little.

One final point of considerable importance: there is a limit to the size and type of object we can accept; four-wheeled wagons and tithe barns come within this category. So, in addition to collecting actual objects an attempt will be



made to build up an index of things which we <sup>cannot</sup> can't accommodate or move, or perhaps simply cannot get because the owner won't part with it. In this way we hope to compile, in time, a useful index of interesting records which will help to fill the gaps in the actual collection.

John Higgs.