

RURAL MUSEUMS: Ten Years On

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Member Consultation
RMN AGM
May 2011

What is this project?

- funded by RMN with a grant from MLA through the UK subject specialist network
- reviewing where rural museums are ten years on since the report "Farming, countryside and museums" (MGC) and
- informing decisions about the future development of the network

Remember the year 2000?

In the news: Y2K, Millennium Dome, snow in April, Leo Blair born, new Harry Potter book, Eden Project, Harold Shipman sentenced to Life, Jonathan Aitken released early

Your soundtrack: Pet Shop Boys, Manic Street Preachers, Super Furry Animals, Britney Spears

Your movies: Chicken Run; Gladiator; Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Farming, Countryside and Museums main conclusions

"Whilst the Study found much that is good in rural life museums, and a few that are bright, lively and attractive to visitors, there are many others where the displays are tired and poorly interpreted. Stores are over-filled ... visitor numbers are dwindling and ... questions of viability will be asked."

Rob Shorland - Ball

Has anything changed?

"Generations are growing up with know little, and understand even less, of the countryside or of the source of much of our food that we eat.

Rural life museums have the skills to make connections, ... to explain, to entertain ... but most are still locked in the nostalgia of the horse-drawn era on the land."

Farming, Countryside and Museums main recommendations

- networks, partnerships and connections
- a database of principal collections, then identify the DNC
- communities of museums in each home nation helping each other as needs and resources allow
- promote sharing of expertise
- develop the potential for life long learning & community engagement

Stages of work

- 10 visits to selected sites
- selected interviews (face to face and telephone)
- consultation with members of RMN via a questionnaire
- follow up some questionnaires with phone calls

Questionnaire

- 53 circulated by post
- 28 returned
- statistically robust as over 50% replied
- **but** a self selected group (members)
- several key museums missing
- 4 from Scotland, none from N. Ireland

What and who?

- 14 independent
- 11 local authority (incl. 1 national park)
- 2 national
- 1 university
- at museum 10 years ago: 11
- at museum but in another position: 3
- not at museum: 13

42 different words describing the last 10 years:

- **challenge**
- professionalism/ Accreditation
- successful
- creative
- hopeful
- improving
- development/growth/ investment/ updating/refurbishment
- education [as a service]
- consolidation change
- survival interesting

Negative words

- rocky
- bad
- ugly
- difficult
- hard
- complicated
- uncertainty

Positive words

- active
- confidence
- dynamism
- expansive
- enterprising
- focus
- good
- popularity
- profile
- productive
- progress
- purposeful
- rewarding
- supportive "family"
- interpretation
- diversifying
- outreach
- partnerships

Drawbacks

- uncertainty, upheaval, fear of future
- little corporate memory
- decline of specialist collections expertise
- collections demands – The Distributed National Collection – important work for RMN
- orphaned collections
- museums closing: are they?

Last 10: good

- YES! 2 and survival 1
- collections 10
- more staff/vols 9
- new partners/better business mgt 8
- new displays 7
- new buildings/site/infrastructure 7
- dev. plan 7
- learning 7
- HLF 5
- Accreditation 5
- free adm/more visitors 4

Last 10: bad

- **reduced:**
 - staff numbers 10
 - school visits 2
 - opening hours 1
 - subsidy 5
- **more:**
 - red tape 2
 - demands on site 2
 - increased wear and tear 3
 - need for reg. investment 5

Opening hours

- **26 completed questionnaires**
- all year round: 10
- seasonal: 14 in total
 - 10 open from March/Easter/April
 - 1 mid-March to mid-November daily
 - 1 Nov. to March weekends only, then daily
 - 1 Feb. half term to Christmas daily (Jan and early Feb. weekends only)
 - 1 Feb. to Christmas daily
- by appointment: 2

Visitor roller coasters

- 8 steady
- 12 going up (1 went free in 2009)
- 1 going down
- 3 levelling off since 2000, 2005, 2007
- also:
 - free admission 2003, levelling off since 2007
 - fell rapidly 2001-7, now climbing
 - up since 2005
 - decline since 2007, then steady increase

Investment & Improvement

- 8 Front of House – shop, café, reception
- 4 DDA
- 9 collections/stores
- 11 redispays/interpretation
- 11 buildings/infrastructure/repairs
- 13 HLF projects
- 1 new museum
- 2 new expertise/staff

Turning green?

- **The Green movement:** is this a driver, an attraction for the public or not?
- many are now focusing on food and animals

Not just displays

- engaging with the outside world
- events: building visitors – important for all
- partnerships – most have them, crucial
- businesses, entrepreneurial activity
- a social conscience
- more rounded organisations

Interpretation

- rural life not agriculture – a change since 2000
- food, animals, how food is produced
- self sufficiency, nothing is wasted
- everything but the squeak
- famous for 15 minutes?

Main findings

- everyone has had some investment, many major investments, e.g. HLF
- everyone holds events
- loss of expertise and orphaned collections not as high a priority as we had expected
- are we more fit for purpose than in 2000?
- many are optimistic
- local authority museums are not!

How do you feel about the immediate future?

16 replies (all indep.)

- 5 optimistic
- emboldened
- hopeful
- improving

- challenging
- concerned
- cautious

- apprehensive
- pessimistic
- worried
- 2 uncertain

Rural Museums Network 1

- essential/important 5
- helpful occasionally 6
- AGM – nearby, always 3/5
- JISC mail is essential 11
- keeps us up to date 15
- Turning Green helpful 5
- wish could do more 7

Rural Museums Network 2

• work on DNC	9	10	1
• help with disposal	9	7	0
• JISC curatorial support	13	6	0
• colons interpretation	2	17	0
• developing learning mats	4	12	4
• advocacy for the sector (museums or rural?)	20	1	0