

Collecting 20th Century Rural Culture at MERL

This is a new kind of project under way for the period 2009-12 at the Museum of English Rural Life with £95,000 worth of backing from the Heritage Lottery Fund's Collecting Cultures initiative. We are one of 22 museums around the country participating in the £3m scheme which is all about providing money for acquisition of collections material, thereby counteracting to some degree, however small, the relentless whittling away of museum purchase funds over the years.

Our programme is about collecting material that says something about the countryside, our relationship with it and its role within society generally, over the course of the 20th century. It might be thought that as a museum of rural life this is something that we should have been doing anyway. Whilst it is true that we aim to interpret the countryside in a way that is relevant to all, particularly today's largely non-rural and suburban audience, it is also fair to say that we have for some long while been working against a host of constraints.

In the first place, our collection, in common with rural museums everywhere, is dominated by the nuts and bolts of working the land. MERL was established in the early 1950s to memorialize the passing of a countryside powered by the horse to one powered by the tractor and the internal combustion engine. It is a collection dominated by tools, implements and machines that say a great deal about the technology and techniques used in the countryside but remarkably little about the countryside itself and its cultural place in our society over time.

Secondly, for years our collections have grown through a process of almost automatic accrual: that is to say through the steady accumulation of similar material. Ideas about what a rural museum collects have become very ingrained. People tend to offer more of the same; curators tend to accept more of the same. So the collection gets bigger but it doesn't move forward; it doesn't leap out into new areas. Hackneyed perceptions of the rural past get reinforced as a result and the old stereotypes get steadily more entrenched.

Thirdly, there is the conundrum of contemporary collecting. Technology dominates the collection but we're not collecting the more recent technology of the countryside partly because it's just too big and difficult to deal with and partly because its appeal to the visiting public may be negligible. We're shying away from it and consequently the object collection fails to tackle satisfactorily the second half of the twentieth century and virtually falls short of confronting the last quarter of the century at all.

Fourthly, apart from a few high status bits of technology – the special steam engine or the special tractor – there is almost no convention within rural museums of purchasing material for the collection. Most new acquisitions are in the form of donations and almost by definition of very modest financial value. Without a tradition of buying, rural museums rarely have a purchase fund of any note or a track record with agencies offering

purchase grants. In consequence, the higher monetary value material rarely comes their way. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The result of all this – and my comments relate to MERL but I would suggest the issues affect the whole sector – is that we've rather backed ourselves into a corner as far as the dynamic of the collection is concerned. The purpose of this project, therefore, is to make a break away from all of that and start a new programme of collecting that confronts these issues. At least half of the funding has to be spent on actual purchase of material for the collections with the remainder going on a range of linked outcomes including an exhibition, publication, learning programmes, and specialist meetings. The first of these is on November 4th in the form of a one day academic conference at MERL entitled 'Representing Rurality: Culture and the Countryside in the 20th Century', with a keynote address by David Matless, Professor of Cultural Geography at the University of Nottingham and author of *Landscape and Englishness*.

Purchase of additional material for the collections is the nub of the project so what are we trying to collect and why? The first thing to say is that we are not trying to collect the kind of material that we already have, for reasons already explained. So we are not looking to add significantly to our collections of farm machinery and equipment. Secondly, we want to include more contemporary material amongst the selection we make, although the project is about the whole of the 20th century and to abide by HLF rules everything must be at least 10 years old. Thirdly, we need, in part to demonstrate justification for the funding, to target some relatively high status items that it would otherwise be virtually impossible for us to acquire through our normal acquisition processes. Fourthly, we want to acquire material that will build together into a story about the place of the countryside in 20th century culture that will engage urban and rural audiences alike.

To accomplish these purposes, the first thing we did was simply divide the 20th century into ten decades and allocate a minimum of £5,000 to each for purchases, to be spent on one object or more likely a series of objects per decade. This is obviously a rather crude but nevertheless I think necessary device aimed at ensuring that the whole period gets its fair share of treatment.

Clearly, we've given ourselves a very broad canvas on which to work and accordingly a diversity of ideas and opinions about what to collect is vital to the success of this project. It's one of the advantages of being a university museum that there is a wide range of expertise from different disciplines available to tap on site. We are also publicizing the project through professional and specialist networks like the Rural Museums Network, the British Agricultural History Society and of course the SHCG. Engagement with the public is important, for example by getting editorial coverage in the press and in magazines such as *Country Life* and *Farmers Weekly*, coupled with an invitation for people to submit their ideas. *Farmers Weekly* readers got into quite a lively debate on their message board about amongst other things binder twine and wellie boots when discussing what ubiquitous items from the 20th century countryside were worthy of being collected. In the Museum we have a regularly changing and updated display case

devoted to the project and we also have a project blog (<http://collecting20thculturalculture.blogspot.com/>) which acts as a continuously running record of what we are doing, what we are collecting and why, and which has a facility for feeding back comments.

So that's the background to the project. What I want to do now is go on and look at some of the things we have collected – or are thinking about collecting - and share some thoughts and reflections that have arisen as a result. One strand that we are working on is iconic objects of the 20th century that have a countryside connection, and particularly if the items concerned have moved from primarily rural associations across into mainstream culture. The classic example of this is the Landrover which first appeared in 1948 as a general purpose farming vehicle – one that you could harvest a crop with one day and go off to market in the next - but which subsequently in the latter part of the 20th century managed to mutate into a fashionable vehicle of choice for the metropolitan elite. The how and the why of that transition is what this project is about. In a similar category is the Aga which emanated from Sweden and was brought to this country in the 1920s. By the 1950s it had become indelibly associated with the farmhouse kitchen and from thence it became not only a style icon but a potent class symbol of the second half of the twentieth century, regarded now in these globally warming times with affection and derision in almost equal measure. If the right Landrover or the right Aga come along with the right story, we'll collect them.

A 20th century icon with a rural connection that we have already acquired is a Barbour jacket from the 1980s. Barbour began the century in the north east associated with prosaic workwear for fishermen and farmers and shepherds. Motorcycle wear was their best line in the 1930s. The all-weather outdoor gear they majored in during the second world war had obvious civil applications afterwards in the field and on the grouse moor. And then in the early 1980s, following the introduction of a lighter range of jackets – the Bedale, the Beaufort and in our case the Border – there was an extraordinary breakthrough into urban chic. So something that began as required wear for your average hunt follower, is now to be found being sported by Lily Allen and the like. This is all about symbols, associations and meanings attached to objects and there's a lot more for this project to explore along these lines.

We sourced that Barbour jacket via ebay, as we have with a number of other items purchased. They include some Laura Ashley material from the 1970s when smock type dresses and small floral print milk maid type dresses, with strong pastoral associations, were so fashionable amongst the baby boomer graduate generation. There is a Britains toy tractor, a Fordson Major, from 1948. Britains began as makers of toy soldiers but it was during the inter-war years that they also started making farm models in response to a growing demand for less militaristic toys. This is the classic farm tractor shape that seems to be embedded in every child's DNA, whether they're from town or country. Another ebay purchase, a Chad Valley Jig Saw from the golden age of jig saws in the 1920s, presents the classic country cottage scene – the *chocolate box* image of the countryside which occupies another shared part of our cultural DNA. That's what this project is about.

The whole programme could have been made for ebay and we have used it extensively. For all its frustrations, to have there on the screen an ever-changing searchable database of countless thousands of available social history items is a remarkable development for collecting purposes. Best of all, the facility to communicate with the seller, both during and after a sale, whilst not always productive, means that it is possible for the system to deliver up well-provenanced material with a story to tell.

Another theme we have been developing is the interaction between town and country over the course of the century. There is the idea, for example, of the countryside as a green lung for the town, a venue for outdoors pursuits and exercise, which was coming to the fore in the inter-war period. One way of representing that is with a poster from 1933 for special weekend rambler tickets on the southern railway. It was purchased from another type of internet auction site hosting a variety of specialist sales where the lots can be viewed together beforehand but where the auction itself takes place online.

We are also looking at the emergence of the suburb in the 20th century – neither town nor country – which has come to have such a pervasive impact for good or ill on English cultural life and values. It led to the purchase of a Triang dolls house from the 1930s, the classic suburban house with architectural echoes back to the first Elizabethan age combined with the mod-cons of a garage, indoor bathroom and electric light. Here were lifestyle aspirations being established and reinforced even at the level of children's play. That was acquired from a private collector with an all-consuming passion for collecting toys from the vast Triang range. The world of the private collector is a very good place to go for sourcing a particular object of a specific type and date. These people have a very focused and extensive knowledge of the detail which can be useful. However, their attention is usually on the object itself rather than on its provenance so the individual back-story of the item, so vital for museum purposes, is often not there. We have a beautiful object to present our theme with but we have no idea who was the lucky child it was bought for originally.

I mentioned that this project was enabling us to purchase – a rare opportunity – some relatively high status or high value items of the kind perhaps not usually associated with a museum of rural life. And of course it is relative because in the art and decorative arts world the few thousand pounds we have to spend doesn't go very far. Examples so far include a big set-piece arts and crafts sideboard from the beginning of the twentieth century. Purchased from a specialist dealer, and made by Shapland & Petter in Barnstaple, it represents a re-working of the farmhouse dresser, industrially made but to craft principles, for the suburban villas of a new century. Then there is an original Grow Your Own Food poster from 1942, signed by the artist Abram Games, and purchased from his daughter so it comes with a unique package of detail and additional information. From the post-War era, we now have an original watercolour by Norman Thelwell entitled 'The Age-old custom of beating the balm-cake at Abbots Dawdling' which was reproduced as an illustration in Punch in April 1960 and which is timeless in its comment on the peddling of rural myth and bogus tradition.

At the other end of the scale, we are also acquiring low status objects, though these can be no less collectable nowadays, that make their own little contribution to the story about the place of the countryside in our culture. A thatched cottage biscuit barrel, a piece of Carltonware with a design date of 1932, came from Alfies Antique Market in Marylebone, a wonderful place to rummage through the material culture of the last century and talk to the very knowledgeable dealers who trade there.

From this it is apparent that commercial art and design are emerging as important project themes because of their capacity to crystallize the mood of an era in an accessible way for our purposes. They can also be tracked through the 20th century from arts and crafts efforts in the early years to boost rural industry, through to the inter-war period with artists such as Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden taking the inspiration they derived from the countryside into their more commercial commissions, and on into the 1950s with Terance Conran's Nature Study dinner service and Lucian Ercolani in High Wycombe re-working the Windsor chair of old into the Ercol range of furniture and a style icon for a new age. Spotting and locating these rural connections is greatly assisted by the ease with which material in specialist auction catalogues, whether from the London-based Christies and Bonhams or the principal regional auction houses around the country, can be scanned, and bid for if necessary, online. Always the drawback is that the transaction is conducted through an intermediary, the auction house, and not direct with the seller so that again the vital details of provenance usually suffer.

Another strand of the project is the representation of the countryside in popular culture. Feature films are an example and we have been acquiring film posters as a way into the subject. *Far from the Madding Crowd* of 1967 was the first big screen version of a Hardy novel. It was directed by John Schlesinger, starred Julie Christie, Terence Stamp, Peter Finch, Alan Bates etc, and was filmed on location in the Hardy country of Dorset & Wiltshire. David Shipman in his two volume work on *The Story of the Cinema* (1982) declared that there had never been a better film about the British countryside. *The Go Between* of 1971 was based on L.P.Hartley's 1953 novel and benefited from a screenplay by Harold Pinter. It was shot in and around Melton Constable Hall in north Norfolk and makes the stifling beauty of the golden summer setting a strong thread in the story. Other films present the countryside in a very different light: weird and menacing as in *Straw Dogs* (1971) with its stark Cornish setting or the wet, bleak and unwelcoming Cumbria of the darkly funny cult classic *Withnail & I* (1986).

Popular music and the countryside is a theme that surfaces at different points through the 20th century and one to explore with the help of memorabilia and the memories of those who participated. Latterly, it has been the music festival, from the Isle of Wight in 1970 when 600,000 followers descended in chaos on a farm to see Jimi Hendrix *et al* to the counter-culture pillar of the establishment that Glastonbury ultimately became. These and other avenues are taking the Museum into unfamiliar but rewarding areas of collecting, a long way from ploughs and wagons. In these early stages of the project we are opening up the territory and acquiring random pieces of a very large jigsaw. The real essence of the project, which will become more apparent and pronounced further down the line, is to

fit these pieces together into a picture that tells a story about the countryside and its place in our culture of the twentieth century.