

Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) blossoms after redesign by Pringle Richards Sharratt and studio GuM partnership

A unique collection opens to new audiences

Capturing over a Century of English Rural Life, the Museum's extraordinary collection has been revitalised and made relevant again through a striking series of ten galleries. Each carefully designed space incorporates different learning styles and areas of focus to draw visitors into the stories and landscape of the English countryside.

The £3.3 million HLF-funded project has been led by architects Pringle Richards Sharratt with exhibition design studio GuM. Director Penny Richards commented: "Our aim was to make this as much a destination for rural buffs as local families. We've done this by contextualising this extraordinary collection: telling stories and creating curiosity about rural lives and landscapes and showcasing the historic value of every day life. The sheer range of objects has been both the central challenge and the joyful opportunity of the commission."

A key requirement of the project was a responsive and iterative interpretation strategy. The team developed the design working with MERL's curatorial team, the Museum's volunteers, University of Reading students and craft groups. Artefacts from a tiny sheep dog whistle through to the iconic Fordson tractor, are displayed, with cross cutting themes of fashion, craft, food and technology to draw more urbanite visitors into the collection. Visitors will delight in the impressive 'Wagon Walk', and the new mezzanine area houses the Museum's unique collection of over 40 ploughs, for the first time providing forensic analysis of the objects.

Kate Arnold-Forster, Director of the Museum, commented: "We are delighted with the new interpretation of the collection. GuM and Pringle Richards Sharratt grasped the brief expertly and have delivered a multi-layered experience that encourages curiosity; allowing our visitors to unlock hidden meanings and forge new connections with the collection. Objects present as relevant but yet intriguing – a skilful balance."

Pringle Richards Sharratt provided architectural guidance for interventions to the existing gallery building and proposed areas in which the museum could expand its popular activities for families. The welcome area has been improved; circulation routes offer new and returning visitors different ways of engaging with the collection; and additional educational, display and storage areas supplement opportunities for more in-depth learning.

As exhibition designers, studio GuM worked with the museum's curatorial team to identify key objects and highlight the stories, skills, technologies and traditions of rural life. The team also commissioned a number of exciting new works to enliven and enhance the collection, including life-size sculpted willow horse.

The Collection

Established at a time of major economic, technological and social change, the collection comprises approximately 25,000 artefacts. All of the objects are contained within the Museum and its mezzanine stores. Working with the Museum, GuM used a novel classification system to structure the experience. A chronothematic approach was used and objects were designated for their contribution to the visitor experience, such as 'icons', 'threshold' (inviting visitors into a rural narrative) or 'markers', (objects to help orientate the visitor). Some objects are clustered and densely displayed, referencing barns and rural outbuildings. Others are left to stand alone, inviting dialogue with visitors. Simple case displays, large-scale images and more complex digital interventions combine to create texture and intrigue throughout the galleries.

The Design Team

Award-winning architectural practice Pringle Richards Sharratt and Studio GuM are known for their significant portfolio of cultural projects. The team won 'The Art Fund Museum of the Year Award,' in 2013 with the William Morris Gallery in London's Walthamstow. They have also been responsible for the entrance, re-display and research facilities at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, the V&A's Glass and Contemporary Glass galleries and more recently The Crime Museum Uncovered at the Museum of London. Studio GuM's current projects include 'Revealing the Charterhouse,' for London's Charterhouse, The Commandery : Civil War HQ, in Worcester, and The Garden Museum in Lambeth.

Gallery Highlights

The arrival area is now a large, light, multipurpose space. A new introductory case shows a microcosm of the collection, covering a huge range of crafts, tools, textiles and baskets. Designed with families in mind, it also includes a large model play farm, a much-requested coffee area as well as a gift shop. Generous spaces for workshops and more intimate exploration of the collection are provided. The education studio has doubled in size and now features a life-size 'talking' cow, developed to engage young visitors with disabilities.

Alongside the galleries, the visitor journey continues outside with the Garden, shepherds hut and 'edible galleries' or allotments. The grounds have been re-purposed and are now more easily accessible. Volunteer groups have planted raised "crop" beds, and are growing seasonal vegetables.

Gallery 1: Shaping the Land

This is an immersive threshold Gallery, introducing the visitor to the collection, and to the landscape of England. The gallery focuses around a single timber carriage, and a photographic image of the oak tree, by Fox Talbot.

Gallery 2: Year on the Farm

This gallery takes a look at the year and its seasons, with detailed displays covering tools and machinery, and activities such as lambing, ditching and haymaking. Smaller objects are densely incorporated using a ribbon of perimeter showcases.

Gallery 3: Town and Country

A more sparsely arranged gallery, which shifts the conversation to the juxtaposition of rural and urban life, focusing on how and where the edges and influences of these two worlds meet.

Gallery 4: The Making of Rural England

Contrasts continue in this gallery with two representations of the kitchen: as a cosy Hearth and Home complete with Aga, and the simple, Harsh Reality of country life. The gallery also explores woodland and traditional craft activities such as chair making, thatching, basket-making, bowl-turning, and ceramics.

Gallery 5: Collecting England

The origins of the collection are celebrated with a reinterpretation of the Museum's humble beginnings in a marquee at the 1952 Royal Show. Even the plough from the original collection is on display.

Gallery 6: The Wagon Walk

A stunning 65 m long gallery with 24 wagons and carts displayed in colourful glory along the Museum's central space. Viewed together, and with detailed interpretation, they now provide a powerful and engaging centrepiece of the collection.

Gallery 7: Forces for Change

Engages visitors with the technological innovations of the countryside, from the iconic Humphrey's Threshing machine to the subject of genetically modified crops. A large screen offers the visitor a choice of film from the museum's film archive.

Gallery 8: Our Country Lives

This gallery invites visitors to interrogate the 'Curiosity' objects on display. No information labels are provided. This room also contains a large-scale interactive game exploring country lives.

Gallery 9: Digging Deeper

A new bespoke mezzanine space houses the extraordinary collection of over 40 ploughs. Specialist, technical information is provided for each individual plough, allowing for a forensic examination of these iconic tools.

Gallery 10 : The Ladybird Gallery

The ladybird gallery is located on the mezzanine and is a celebration of the development of the Ladybird book, showing original illustrations and a huge display of books, showing their iconic illustrated front covers.

Notes to Editors

Images available on request. For these and further information please contact:

Penny Richards, Pringle Richards Sharratt Architects:
penny.richards@prsarchitects.com / +44 20 7793 2828

18 October 2016