

Family enjoying the exhibits at the Museum of Rural Life

The ‘Our Country Lives’ project will see the museum, which is owned and managed by the University of Reading, redisplayed and expanded to create an exciting and innovative visitor experience.

The new museum will explore the relevance of rural life, past and present, to our modern and urban lives, explaining its vital place in addressing questions of identity, environment, sustainability and health.

New galleries and digital displays will take visitors to the heart of the countryside. Increased space will allow never seen before ‘hidden treasures’ to go on display. There will be more opportunities for visitors to handle objects, bringing the stories of the people that live on and work the land to life.

Existing spaces will be radically redesigned to enhance the visitor experience. An improved welcome area will include a larger shop and better facilities. The much-loved MERL garden will become an integral part of every visit too, with extra play facilities for children and new food and crop-based planting, reflecting the themes of the displays inside.

Isabel Hughes, MERL curator, said: “Our Country Lives’ will connect people to the countryside like never before. The exciting transformation of our galleries will address more recent 20th-century history and showcase the vital links between town and country. New displays will tell the fascinating stories of the people who use agricultural machinery, tools and implements. Parts of our Collection, never seen by the public, will take centre stage.

“We also have exciting plans for new events and activities in the coming years, working closely with the local community as well as our rural followers. Ten years after moving to our purpose built gallery, we are thrilled to be able to take forward our plans for the next decade.”

Stuart McLeod, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund South East, said: “This is an engaging project which will give visitors and local people from across the community the chance to explore and learn about changing rural life across England. The ‘Our Country Lives’ project will build on the museum’s existing success by revitalizing existing displays and exhibitions, creating new learning spaces and improving the visitor facilities. These changes, combined with an exciting programme of educational activities and volunteer opportunities, will bring the museum into the 21st century making it a great place to visit for all.”

The first phase of ‘Our Country Lives’ is due to begin this autumn. There will be a period of closure for the work to take place. During the closure the museum will continue to work with local communities who will have a chance to participate in an exciting range of projects and activities.

The museum’s first acquisitions were recorded in 1951. Established by members of the Department of Agriculture at a time of major economic, social and technological change, MERL was the first museum of its kind in the country. It houses designated collections of national importance relating to the history of food, farming and the countryside.

Sir David Bell, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Reading, added: “The University is very proud of the Museum of English Rural and the treasures it holds. Redisplaying its collections will ensure they can be enjoyed by new generations of students and academics, as well as the local community.

“Although we live in an increasingly urban and globalised society, all of us have ancestral links to rural communities and activities. This Heritage Lottery Fund grant will ensure MERL continues to be a portal to our rural past and engages all who walk through its doors.”

Further information

University of Reading: James Barr, Press Officer on 0118 378 7115, email: pressoffice@reading.ac.uk.

HLF press office: Laura Bates on 020 7591 6027, email: lbates@hlf.org.uk.