The grass is always greener

While some rural museums are losing specialist collections knowledge and struggling to stay relevant, capital projects have helped others to flourish. Simon Stephens reports

Making rural collections more sustainable, relevant and engaging to visitors were among the issues discussed at the annual meeting of the Rural Museums Network last month.

The event, which was held at Beamish: the Living Museum of the North, gave delegates the chance to discuss the challenges facing museums with rural collections, including the loss of specialist expertise about the subject.

“There is a constant narrative of rural museums being a contracting sector, and to some extent that is true, but in other cases it is not,” says Oliver Douglas, the curator of collections at the Museum of English Rural Life (Merl), which is part of the University of Reading.

“There are lots of examples of museums going from strength to strength.”

Merl is among the rural museums that has benefited from a recent capital project – the museum reopened in October 2016 following a £3m revamp, helped by £1.8m from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

But Merl is fairly unusual in that it is a rural collection in an urban area. Many similar collections are in more rural locations, with the associated challenges of transportation and staffing. But many of these museums are also thriving, particularly those that have benefited from large capital investment.

Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury reopened in 2017 following a £2.4m redevelopment. The museum, which used to be a local authority museum, is now part of the South West Heritage Trust.

“We have a strong relationship with our county council partners, which comes with a certain amount of funding – and that is in a good place,” says Sam Astill, the head of museums at Somerset Museums Service.

“The redevelopment meant that we have been able to run the museum on a sound footing. We introduced charging, including an annual pass scheme, learning from the success of independent museums such as Beamish and the Black Country Living Museum. The pass generates revenue and creates long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with visitors.”

Astill says that since reopening, the museum has worked hard to celebrate its collections and make them relevant to visitors, by working with local photographers and artists, for example. “We have also had success going beyond collection types that you would think about as rural, such as fine art and costume,” he says. “We have found that bringing in different types of collections has been successful because it has allowed us to tell new stories.”

The Weald & Downland Living Museum in West Sussex has also been reinvigorated by a large capital project. It took 10 years to plan, with the final stage completed last year. A key aim was to make the museum more sustainable.

“The planning stage identified what the museum needed, but achieving it was a major project, and we are still working hard to maximise the outcomes,” says Lucy Hockley, the museum’s cultural engagement manager. “This includes continuing and building on much of the activity work, including outreach, which in a rural area is important in working with partnership with other organisations to overcome isolation.”

The Rural Museums Network itself secured Arts Council England funding as a Subject Specialist Network at the start of the year. This has helped it to promote learning and encourage a wider understanding of the UK’s rural heritage.

A key programme is Reap the Rewards: Benefiting from Rural Networks, a series of regional events designed to support those non-specialists who are working with, or looking after, rural and agricultural collections.

Another aim is to map rural collections across the UK. These Rural Museums

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Network activities are related to wider concerns that specialist collections knowledge is being lost, a worry shared by many other Subject Specialist Networks.

**Ensuring relevance**

One response for many working in museums with rural collections is to make sure that the collections are relevant to today’s audiences. “We want to be part of a wider conversation about why these collections are valuable,” says Douglas at Merl, citing topics such as food security and biodiversity. He has also been trying to encourage colleagues to think about how collections can feed into current debates over issues such as decolonisation.

“We need more work that finds connectivity, whether in terms of the relevance of rural museums in wider contexts of social justice and decolonising, or other major and global challenges,” says Douglas. “Rural museums are important and relevant, and we need to build partnerships that help underline and emphasise their role and importance.”