

BACK TO THE LAND

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For six days in September this year artist Jo Roberts became the Temporary Keeper for the Repatriation of Rural Artefacts at Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum (LSAG&M). She selected 11 rural artefacts from the museum collection, which she took 'back to the land'.

The project was devised to complement an exhibition about local rural life, called This Green and Pleasant Land, which opened at LSAG&M on 19 October 2013 and will run until 12 January 2014. The aims of the project were: 1) to (re)connect rural artefacts in the collection with local rural sites and 2) to develop a new and exciting way to engage audiences with collections.

The decision was made early on to work with an artist in order to have a fresh and exciting perspective on the interpretation of the rural artefacts. LSAG&M had worked with Jo in 2007 on an exhibition called Finding a Way Through, which explored the links between the river Leam and the creative journey of the artist. Jo's work often encourages people to view the world around them in a new way, which fitted in well with our aims here. She was commissioned to work on the project in January 2013.

Jo's proposal was to select a number of artefacts and take them back to where they came from, or places that they had a connection to, in order to make real the links between the artefacts in the collection at LSAG&M, which is located in the centre of Leamington Spa, and the surrounding rural area. At each location an expert speaker would lead a tour and facilitate discussions about the object and topics pertinent to it.

I was used to taking objects out of the museum for outreach sessions and talks. However, in these instances they were taken from the stores to classrooms or village halls; Jo was proposing that we take them to fields and allotments! For me the prospect of doing this was both exciting and a little scary. We assessed the potential risks to the objects and weighed these against the likely benefits.

From a shortlist of relevant artefacts Jo selected 11 to 'repatriate'. These ranged from a delicate silk bookmark to a vicious looking badger trap. She then researched the artefacts to draw out any common links. Six distinct themes emerged, with one or two objects connected to each. These were: the impact of industrialisation on rural life; the importance of hedgerows and natural barriers; farming in the 20th century; buying local and sustainability; growing your own; and the changing role of beer.

We considered having one talk a week over the course of six weeks, but ultimately decided that an intense programme of one talk per day over the course of a week would be more effective. We also thought that this would give people with varying commitments over the week the opportunity to attend at least one talk.

The task was then to find relevant speakers and venues for each talk. This proved to be the most difficult and time consuming aspect of the project. The issues revolved around the fact that we had 12 separate elements (six speakers and six venues) to appoint and then allocate to mutually convenient slots in the week. Although Jo and I divided the task between us, it took three months to finalise the programme.

The venues were a mixture of private and public places, none of which we knew very well or had control over. Two weeks before the talks began Jo and I carried out a 'recce' of the six venues. We made notes about parking; assessed access; decided on the best way to display the objects; and noted whether there were toilets nearby. Five of the six venues were open-air and so we also planned a contingency for rainy days. All of this information was written up as an itinerary and sent out to the attendees one week before the programme started.

The first talk took place at Stoneleigh Abbey, a large country house about five miles from Leamington Spa. The 'repatriated' object was a mid-nineteenth century bookmark from an industrial exhibition, which was a starting point for discussions about the impact of industrialisation on rural life. Over the course of the week the talks took us to a wood; a working farm; a community farm; allotments; and a field/micro-brewery.

In order to facilitate high levels of engagement with the artefacts we limited places on the tours to ten. This gave the participants the time and opportunity to probe the artefacts and the stories attached to them. One participant commented that it was easier to view the object when some of the "museum barriers" had been removed. The evaluation also shows that understanding about the objects was improved by presenting them in settings where they would have been used. For example, the speaker at the allotments demonstrated how he would use the bean dibber that we had taken along.

The small number of participants also encouraged interaction with the speaker and so the talks took the form of discussions rather than formal lectures. A participant at the first event noted on the evaluation form that what s/he would remember most was the "discussion and rapport between speakers and attendees". Many of the participants booked on to more than one event and by the end of the week there was a core group of regulars, which engendered a light and friendly atmosphere.

The evidence in the evaluation forms and comments from participants suggests that the Back to the Land programme was extremely successful in achieving the aims of the project. Although the events were very time intensive to organise, this was offset by the level of engagement the participants experienced. Now the format has been established, I'm keen to carry out similar events in the future. Following the events,

one participant wrote a series of folk songs inspired by the talks. He will perform these on the closing day of the This Green and Pleasant Land exhibition.

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