

In this feature in each issue we look at one of the winners of National Heritage's Museum of the Year Award and what has happened to them since. The first winner in 1973 was Abbott Hall Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry, Kendal, and the second the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu, both of which we will visit in future issues. Our focus this time is on...

The Weald and Downland Museum

... at Singleton near Chichester

History doesn't stand still, even when it is embodied in a standing building. So an annual visit to the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum at Singleton near Chichester in West Sussex unfailingly rewarding. There's always something old that's new, and the museum hasn't stood still for a moment since it was the NH Museum of the Year in 1975.

This is a museum of buildings, mostly the wooden framed houses of the Sussex Weald from the Middle Ages to the 19th century, but with the 21st century now added. Its mission is to rescue important old structures facing destruction by dismantling them where they have stood, re-erecting them on the 50 acre site and explaining them to steady numbers of visitors of 130,000 a year.

Since 1965 when the historian Roy Armstrong borrowed the idea from Scandinavia of saving interesting old structures by transplanting them to a kind of reservation, the museum has grown. It opened in 1971, and in 1974 Chris Zeuner became director.

"I've had a vision for a long time that you can't expect museums just to rely on visitors to get what they can from objects. You must provide added value in a way that needn't be about people having a nice toy to play with" he said, shortly before his untimely death in 2001. "We need to use objects in a less precious way, and people are much better placed to do that in an open air museum where their imaginations can take flight."

When it opened in 1971 there were just seven buildings, but now, in its 34th year and its summer season just started, there are more than 40 structures, each with its own story and purpose, as well as sheep, cattle, chickens and four shire horses.



There's a watermill from Lurgashall in Sussex which operated there from the 17th century to the 1930s whose flour you can buy; a market hall from Hampshire; a Victorian school; a medieval shop; carpenters', plumbers' and brickmakers' workshops; barns; and a granary. Some of the interiors have been furnished to give an idea of how the buildings were used by their owners centuries ago, and there are historical gardens growing the herbs and vegetables necessary to sustain the household.

The offices and shop of the museum are now in Longport House, a Kent farmhouse which developed from 1500 to 1900 but was on the path of the Eurotunnel at Folkestone. It took two months in 1992 for a team of museum volunteers and archaeologists to dismantle the house brick by brick, with each brick recorded and numbered. It was finally opened in 1997.

The latest acquisition, however, is not a rescue but a creation, the "Downland Gridshell" (pictured above top), a dream Zeuner was not destined to see realised but which was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2003.

The two storey building is the museum's building conservation centre, with the year-round work of carpenters and other craftsmen at work mostly under the public gaze, and below the museum's hitherto stored 10,000 objects are now on display.

It was completed by Zeuner's successor,

Richard Harris. "I'd rather regretted that we hadn't put a basement under Longport House when we erected it, and then I suggested to Chris that we could build a new wooden framed building using new techniques instead of old ones" he says.

A structure made of latticed strips of oak, strong but also light and flexible, the Gridshell is believed to be one of only four in the world.

Following being Museum of the Year, Chris Zeuner instituted short courses in traditional skills and techniques which is informing modern architects and particularly structural engineers.

Changes have been made to the older buildings as new research has revealed more, and the medieval Winkhurst Farm has been moved next to the early 16th century Bayleaf to tell a story of late medieval rural life, with a garden growing appropriate plants.

But although re-enactments are not part of the ethic of the Weald and Downland, there are events through the year's middle months to give context to the buildings – fine food fairs, the heavy horses ploughing, early music afternoons and, as much for the local rural community as visitors, traditional animal breeds show.

"I hope that these development are going to reposition the traditional open air museum as a chronicle, not as a presentation of a past rural world" Chris Zeuner said.