



The Ryedale Folk Museum, Yorkshire

Manager Mike Benson gives a progress report

The museum has grown physically by buying more land which we've used to create poultry, pig and gardening projects, plus the wetlands/nature walks, and, arguably most importantly, for the development of the cornfield project, and more about that later.

In 1999 a series of new builds including a hearse house, a Victorian wash room and a high barn which is used to interpret wagons such as the gypsy caravan and the fire engine

Then in 2000 the museum started an ambitious HLF funded access project resulting in a 200% increase in regular volunteer time, more craft and domestic life demonstrations, more staff and volunteers trained in new skills., an increase in hands-on activities for visitors, and much improved physical access for all,

In 2002 the museum received £500,000 to develop the museum further just as Martin Watts, the influential curator who had led the museum to its successes, left to join the York Museum Trust.

In November 2004 I left my job as a shift steel worker and took on the manager's job at Ryedale Folk Museum, and found a number of challenges.

The first was to get the development project up and running, with a new state of the art gallery with the dual roles of championing local talent and bringing work into Ryedale that Ryedale folk would not normally have access to.

There would be a new resource/education block, a new store to hold the collection to a professional standard, a very large workshop, new display areas, new pathways, heating in the manor house and some remedial work to existing build – exciting, but by now the project was over budget. With great support from all stakeholders in the scheme, though, by November 2005 we held our first exhibition.

“Counterparts”, the education resource block, was being used by older folk working with an artist interpreting the wetlands, while in the workshop was a threshing machine which had stood idle as part of the collection. With help from pupils at Terrington School work started to research and restore the machine ready for a threshing day.

With support from county archives we are now developing our own archive, with heating in place, and we've opened through the winter, and with the



third gallery exhibition about to be put up we've ended up only £2,900 over budget – sheer relief!

Another challenge was to keep the museum relevant for all our visitors. We targeted teenagers from Ryedale, delivering some great projects culminating in a film, *Ryedale – This Countryside at War*, in which, trained by the BBC and working mostly out of school hours, they interviewed older folk for their reminiscences of homefront life in Ryedale during the Second World War.

After interviewing they produced drama re-enactments again filmed to produce a smashing film that was showcased at the recent Royal Television Society North East and Cumbria ceremony. the rapport between the young 'uns and older folk who have lived this rich life was fantastic, and placing education at the centre of the museum's activities.

We received funding to run science projects, a new discipline for the museum. We have run joint education projects with Dorman Museum in Middlesbrough, founded in 1904 but reopened in 2003 after a three year refurbishment, and the

Beamish North of England Open Air Museum near Durham, and we are working to develop sustainable stakeholder links with our local schools both through project work and inviting teachers to come on site.

Around 1999/2000 work began on the cornfield project. Along with other like-minded folk, Nan Sykes, a volunteer, had realised that arable plants and flora had practically disappeared, so with support from the National Parks and funding (and much more) from the Carstairs Trust, the museum allocated some land and six years later a book celebrating the success of the cornfield is being launched along with a photographic exhibition in the gallery. As well as the gallery and book we are attending local shows championing the project, and last year Chris Wilson was appointed to manage the project part time.

The museum has built on its outreach programme. We were approached by an artist working in the new wing at Malton Hospital to supply photographs of our historic buildings to go onto the walls of the nurses' workstation/communal area, and by the time negotiations were finished we had seven display windows built into a partition wall as part of a temporary exhibition area for the museum's collection in the hospital which changes quarterly and is supported by reminiscence sessions with folk not well enough to visit the museum.

The Ryedale Museum increased its paying visitors last year by nearly 4,000, and the volunteers on whom we depend have been terrific as we stay open longer, striving to move the museum forward – perhaps to being crowned museum of the year once again.