

RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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Above: The author's ancestor
George Webb Hall 1796–1843
(courtesy of Michael Brandon-
Jones)

The Agricultural Meeting at Bristol in 1842

This magnificent oil painting of 'The Country Meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society of England' by Richard Ansdell (1815–1885) is 16 feet wide and depicts 127 gentlemen at the trial of implements at Bristol in 1842.



Right-hand side detail

By permission of Salford Museum & Art Gallery

The agricultural meeting took place over four days from 12th to 15th July and the trial of implements was held on the second day in a field at Sneed Park in the occupation of George Webb Hall. The trial commenced about 5.30am and in the course of the day thousands of spectators visited the spot.

The following day the entire area of the show-yard next to the Victoria Rooms in Bristol was thrown open to the public. Upwards of 50,000 people were admitted to view all the machines and implements as well as the live-stock. Although the idea for a painting

of members of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE) to hang in the Council Chamber was suggested by Earl Spencer and the Duke of Richmond, it was the Manchester art dealer Thomas Agnew who commissioned the picture at a cost of 1,000 guineas. Agnew planned to have the picture engraved and offered to send the original oil painting to London 'to grace the hall of the society' if he sold 300 prints of the engraving. Several months before the Bristol meeting Richard Ansdell began painting a series of individual

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Michael Brandon-Jones, retired University of East Anglia art history photographer, discovers the story of a celebrated 19th century painting

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figure studies, all painted from life. The society own 45 of these exquisite oil portraits which were included in the controversial sale of the RASE Collection in July 2014, only to be withdrawn just before the auction following a strong protest. It is possible that some preliminary sketches for the painting were produced in July 1841 at the third annual Country Meeting held in Liverpool. Both Ansdell and Agnew had strong links with that part of the country. According to the artist the painting was supposed to be finished by the end of July 1842, which was just two weeks after the Bristol meeting. The only way to make sense of this deadline is to assume that Agnew's decision to commission the picture was taken at or soon after the Liverpool meeting in July 1841 and not at Bristol a year later. For a while Ansdell had a temporary studio in the headquarters of the RASE at 12 Hanover Square, a perfect location convenient for members of the society who happened to be in London. One month before the Bristol meeting Ansdell was still hard at work on the last of the portrait studies, sometimes five sitters in one day, and he was about to start on the huge canvas. In order to get from one end of the painting to the other he installed a small railway in his studio.

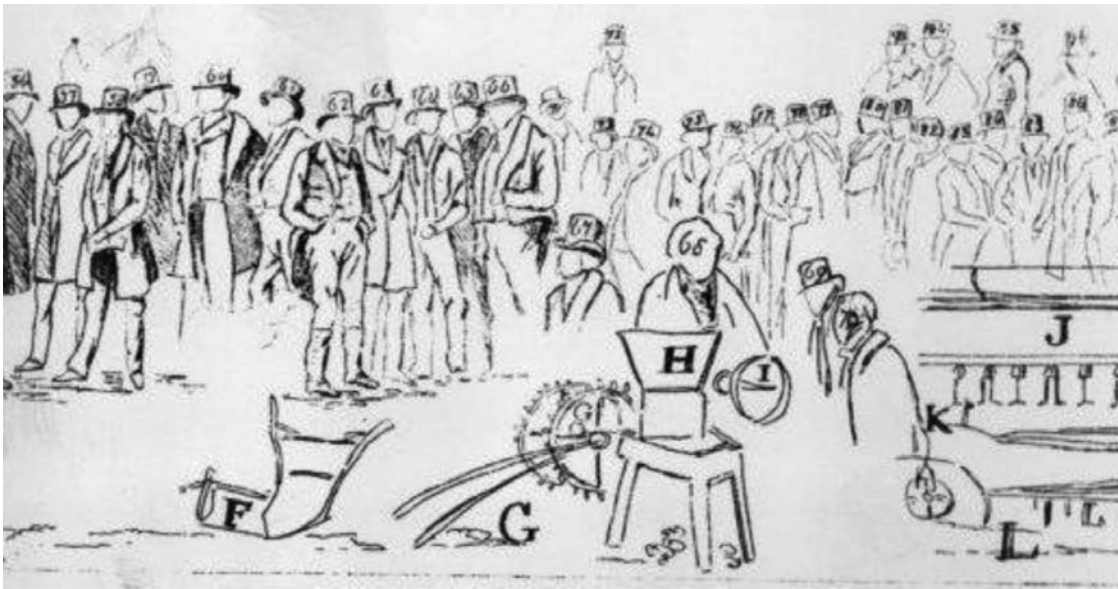
In the foreground of the painting there are sixteen of the trial implements, including Ducie's Cultivator, a Charlbury Subsoil Plough, Cottam's Cycoidal Grubber and a Suffolk Swing Plough. An artist was at the trial ground to record the scene, however it is not known whether Ansdell himself visited Bristol and in the time available sketched the implements in the field, or of necessity had to use published engravings of the machines. About 40 reporters from the London and provincial newspapers were in Bristol for the Country Meeting and at least one artist from the *Illustrated London News* was present.

Twelve months later than originally planned Ansdell's finished painting went on display at a gallery in Maddox Street, London. It was advertised as containing upwards of one hundred and twenty portraits of eminent agriculturists at 'The Country Meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, for the Trial and Inspection of Implements'. Although the scene is said to represent the meeting at Bristol, there is perhaps a good reason why the picture was given a less specific title and why the landscape setting is not immediately recognisable. Not everyone shown in the painting visited Bristol for the Country Meeting in July 1842. It was impossible for the celebrated Norfolk landowner the Earl of Leicester (Thomas William Coke) who died on 30th June 1842 to have been present. Coke refused membership of the RASE and thought they would 'do more harm than good'. He favoured the 18th century 'practical farmer' over 'Practice with Science' the motto of the newly formed society. ('Coke

of Norfolk' Susanna Wade Martins 2009 ref: Holkham MS E/C1/2, 37-38) Research by Prof. Mariko Ogawa has proved that the famous German chemist Justus Liebig was not in England in July 1842. ('Liebig and the Royal Agricultural Society Meeting at Bristol, 1842' *Ambix*, vol 55, no2, July 2008) If a list printed in the *Morning Post* on the 18th July is an accurate record several important figures in the painting were also absent: the Dukes of Bedford, Rutland, and Northumberland, Earl of Hardwicke, Lord Western, Lord Burlington, Lord Camoys, Earl Lovelace and Earl Talbot. Of the 127 gentlemen shown in the picture perhaps as few as 70 were present at the agricultural meeting in Bristol. Thomas Agnew, who was elected a member of the RASE in June 1842, probably drew up a list of people he wanted in the picture, although he may have taken some advice from senior figures in the society. Agnew was a successful print publisher who clearly knew what pictures appealed to the general public and the historical accuracy of the painting was less important. Several eminent members of the RASE who were at the Country Meeting in Bristol are missing from the painting including at least thirty Members of Parliament and titled gentlemen.

Richard Ansdell's ability as a portrait artist was much admired by everyone who saw the painting: '[the] figures are variously grouped in a range, as they may be supposed to have stood when inspecting the agricultural implements at the last great meeting near Bristol. They present many likenesses which will be readily recognised, and throughout all there is a decision of character which bespeaks a pretty faithful copy of nature.' (*Essex Standard* 7th July 1843) On 3rd July 1843 Thomas Agnew had the honour of showing the painting to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at Buckingham Palace. Her Majesty at once recognised all the members of the aristocracy and pointed them out by name. The painting was then taken to Derby and after a few days at the Midland Hotel it went on exhibition at the Country Meeting of the RASE in a tent next to the Pavilion. Probably the entry charge of one shilling went to Thomas Agnew to pay for his expenses which included the cost of a printed copy of the 'key-plate' given to visitors. The 'key-plate' of course helped identify both the figures in the painting and the trial implements, but equally important it served as an advertising leaflet which stated that the painting was to be engraved by Samuel William Reynolds. The public display of the painting meant that Agnew was able to start a list of subscribers wishing to purchase a copy of the engraving two years before it was published. One advertisement for the engraving went so far as to say that no one ought to be without such a memorial of the first friends and staunch supporters of the RASE.

The painting was exhibited in several towns and cities including Bristol, Southampton, Shrewsbury and Newcastle. One of the first places to display the painting



The key-plate: Wilkie's Swing Plough (F) Dibbling Machine (G) and Turnip Cutter (H)

was the Town Hall, Ipswich with the proceeds going to the East Suffolk Hospital. The reporter from the *Ipswich Journal* on the 18th November 1843 was full of praise for the 'most talented' Mr Ansdell. The portrait figures of the 'leading agriculturists in the Kingdom' were said to be astonishingly accurate. In January 1844 'The Country Meeting' was exhibited at Mr Agnew's gallery in Manchester, known as The Repository of Arts. Not surprisingly it was while the painting was on display in the formal setting of an art gallery that it received the most detailed attention and artistic appraisal in the *Manchester Times*:

'In the grouping of such a great number of characters considerable skill, of course, was required to prevent its having a degree of stiffness about it, and this the artist has accomplished with a measure of success beyond all praise.'

The newspaper also referred to a specific event that occurred at Bristol which is depicted in the painting. An exhausted peasant lad is sitting with his head against the turnip-cutter near the chain harrow which he had drawn with great labour a considerable distance to the trial ground. In May 1844 the citizens of Bristol had an opportunity for the first time to see the picture. The local newspaper commented on the portrait figures, 'many of whom will be instantly recognised by Bristolians', but the reporter from the paper failed to notice that the field chosen for the trial of implements was in fact the countryside near Bristol. At the Country Meeting in 1844 held at Southampton the painting was exhibited in the great room at Best and Snowden's library in the High Street. A review of the exhibition in the *Hampshire Advertiser* 13th July paid tribute to Mr Ansdell's skill as a self-taught artist; '[the picture] contains 130 portraits of the most distinguished Agriculturists, all admirably grouped and finely painted. The animals are Landseerian, and a dog in the

foreground, which appears to move as the spectator passes from one side to the other of the picture, is a miracle of art.' Incidentally in the same newspaper the new medium of photography was advertised as a means of obtaining a portrait of visitors to the show-ground or a picture of the prize-winning cattle: 'The Photographic and Daguerreotype Institution, Portland Terrace, Southampton - daguerreotype pictures of the Prize and the other Cattle may be taken on the ground adjoining the Show Yard'.

Eleven of Ansdell's full-length figure studies were published under the title 'Agnew's Engraved Gallery of Portraits of Eminent Agriculturists'. The series included the Duke of Richmond, the late Earl of Leicester and Henry Handley, RASE president. The engraving of the Country Meeting at Bristol was published on 12th November 1845. The RASE received a framed impression of one of the first class proofs, but the original oil painting was never presented to the Society. In 1868 the picture was given to the Art Gallery at Peel Park, Salford by Thomas Agnew who donated other valuable works of art to the museum. It was reported in 1886 that the painting had been 'destroyed', but following a letter to the gallery in 1956 the RASE learnt that the large canvas had been 'rolled up' and was still at Salford. Richard Ansdell's remarkable painting is now on long-term loan to the RASE. In 2007 the society published a short article by Phillip Sheppy with the biographical details of several gentlemen in the picture; a full report of the Bristol Country Meeting, the Pavilion Dinner for 2,400 people and the prizes that were awarded can be found in contemporary newspapers and the *RASE Journal*. The author's unpublished research of the Bristol meeting includes a full provenance of Ansdell's painting.

NEW DISPLAYS AT THE MUSE

*Susanna Wade
Martins visited the
MERL shortly after the
opening of the
new exhibitions*



Introduction to the Museum's displays at the entrance

19th October saw the opening of completely redesigned exhibition galleries at The Museum of English Rural Life at the University of Reading. Founded in 1951, at a time when farming was changing rapidly as tractors replaced horse power and rural crafts were disappearing, it was originally sited on the Whiteknights campus of the University. A display shows how much of the collection was gathered by taking stands at Agricultural Shows, talking to visitors and encouraging them to give relevant material.

In 2004 the Museum moved to St Andrews Hall, a brick Victorian Gothic house on the edge of the London Road Campus, designed by Sir Alfred Waterhouse for Alfred Palmer of the Huntley and Palmer biscuit company. While the building provided good office space and a home for the extensive archive collection and library, it was hardly suitable for displays and so with the help of a major lottery grant the first building phase took place and new displays were installed in 2005. Ten years later it was time for further extensions to the building to include an enlarged education studio, shop and reception area, and for new design-led re-displays of much of the unique collection again with help of £2million from the National Lottery and further grants from the Wellcome Trust and others, bringing the total to £3million. This inevitably led to long discussions between curators and designers, with input from several present and past members of the BAHS committee.

The result is a series of theme-based, rather than chronological, displays incorporating a breath-taking

selection from the collection of more than 25,000 objects, 4.5 kilometres of archive shelving, a 100,000 volume library and over one million photographs. While traditional themes for rural life museums such as the farming year and crafts are tackled, they are presented in new and engaging ways. The farming year display, for instance, includes modern farming techniques such as vaccination and pregnancy scanning as well as farm machinery. The section on crafts includes videos of craftsmen and the ways they are adapting to modern needs.

More thought-provoking displays explore the links between town and country. The million or so urban horses used mainly for transport had to be fed from the countryside. Town dairies were a feature of most cities before the railways provided links to rural producers. The demand for agricultural machinery led to the development of urban manufacturers. Different perceptions of the countryside are also explored. While the urban dweller saw the fresh air and open fields as healthy, the insanitary cottages in which the majority of the rural population lived, alongside the lack of access to medical facilities, meant that conditions in remote villages were far from healthy.

The whole question of who uses the countryside and how it has been and is now used, from the great landscaped parks of the wealthy, through field sports to modern rambling are all covered. The influence of the rural idyll has led to country fashions such as Barbour jackets, Land Rovers and Aga cookers finding their way into urban settings, not to mention *The Archers*.

MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE



Left and below: Two of the craft displays on wood turning and basket making



Left: The dairy display including a huge range of milk bottles.



Above and right: Parts of the farming year displays on hay making and sheep dipping in the summer





One of the many wagons in the wagon walk

The main impression gained through the well presented displays is of the wealth and variety of the Museum's collection. The highlight of the exhibitions has to be the Museum's unique collection of wagons from across England, all lined up in the 'Wagon Walk'. These mostly resulted from collecting by early curator, Geraint Jenkins, and provided material for his definitive book on the subject. This might have presented a rather dry experience, but with the help of a series of illustrations and information panels giving the history of some of the exhibits as well as the reasons for regional differences beside small displays of wheelwrights', and wainwrights' tools all accompanied by sound effects of rumbling wagons and their builders' workshops, the whole experience is an inspiring and informative one.

Display to accompany the panel on Branwell Evans

MERL photos courtesy of P. Wade-Martins



Alongside these major displays are the small panels about individuals covering people such as Joseph Arch, Eve Balfour and George ('Romany') Branwell Evans who presented from his caravan in the 1930s a series of programmes on gypsy life for children's BBC.

The ability to wander through the glass-fronted museum stores situated on a second floor allows the full extent of the object collection to be appreciated.



Handheld implements in the Museum's stores as viewed through glass doors

The only problem with such object-rich exhibitions is that of labelling which has not as yet been fully solved. To label each object would be very distracting. The likely solution will be to have small A5-size cards covering a single display and giving a minimum of explanation but giving an accession number which will provide a route to more details in an on-line database. For this to be successful there will need to be easy access to computers or good enough wifi to allow people with handheld devices within the museum. If it works, it could well be an exemplar for other museums to follow.

► The Museum opening hours are Tuesday to Friday 9am–5pm, Saturday and Sunday 10am–4pm

www.reading.ac.uk/merl

Telephone: 0118 378 8660

Redlands Road, Reading, RG1 5EX

Admission is free.

FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES

British Agricultural History Society Spring Conference

3–5 April 2017

The conference will be held at Plumpton College East Sussex. Further details will be available on the Society's website: www.bahs.org.uk

European Rural History Organisation (EURHO)

11–14 September 2017

The conference will be held at the University of Leuven, Belgium. Call for papers opened on December 1st. Further details on the conference website: www.ruralhistory2017.be

Farming in East Kent in 1816

One man's view of the post Napoleonic War agricultural depression

It is 200 years since the Board of Agriculture, published its report *The Agricultural State of the Kingdom, 1816*. Concerned about the slump in agriculture, the Board had sent a questionnaire to farmers across the UK.

Thomas Oakley Curling, a tenant farmer at Shuart Farm on the North Kent coast, was one of 326 farmers who replied to the questionnaire. The respondents were parish clergy, landowners, their agents, or, like Curling, tenant farmers on large acreages. The majority indicated that there was real and widespread distress caused by the agricultural depression. Curling's response was published in the report. His parents, Thomas Curling and Catharine née Oakley had taken on the tenancy in 1780. When Thomas senior's brother, John Curling of Goldstone, Ash-next-Sandwich died in 1798, he took on the management of that farm as well. The two farms together totalled 500 acres, a large acreage for the time. At 450 acres Shuart was by far the larger property. The farmhouse today is a substantial building, parts of which date back to the sixteenth century, suggesting that the farm was a prosperous one. When Thomas Oakley Curling married Jane Becker in 1804, he took over full management of Shuart Farm and his parents moved to the smaller farm at Goldstone.

During the Napoleonic Wars the army had required considerable food supplies. With the victory at Waterloo, this market dried up. Surviving soldiers returned home from battlefields worn out, many with serious injuries and unfit for work. Decreased demand for agricultural produce greatly reduced farmers' incomes, which affected employment.

In his letter, Thomas writes that farmers with bigger enterprises had diversified sources of income. This enabled them to manage for longer, but ... there are many of them now in great distress, who at one time might have made from £5,000 to £10,000, by the sale of their stock and crop; their friends obliged to call money from them by their own necessities, which the farmer finds impossible to replace in his business ...

Farmers are not keeping as many animals as before, and every acre devoted to arable is 'cropped, to produce something [however small the yield] towards preventing total ruin'.

The result was that the stack-yards were empty. Graziers could not keep as many animals as normal on the land. It would be of no help to increase the price of produce as there was so little to sell or to use for feed. The farmer threshed the next crop as soon as possible

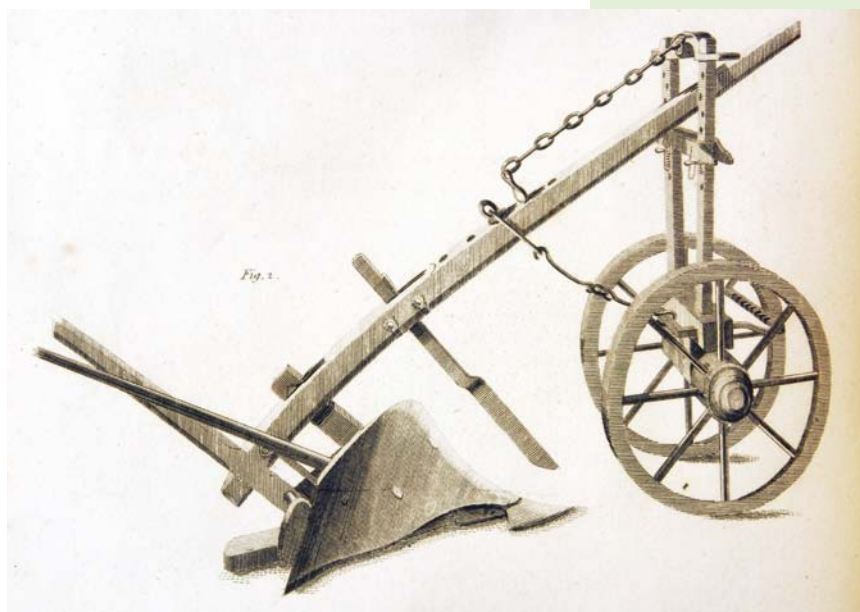
to try to make ends meet. Thomas thought that the only hope was if the government took 'more decided steps than any yet adopted' to relieve farmers by keeping the price of corn high, implying that the Corn Laws, introduced the previous year, were being inadequately implemented. He warned that another year like this would bring many who might formerly have been described as 'men of property' to complete ruin.

With very little work for agricultural labourers, unemployment increased. They received support from the 'poor rates'. To receive this they did whatever work could be found for them by the parish overseers, for example mending the roads. Thomas implied that this was not real work, the men receiving only as many pennies as they would have earned shillings when farming. Men who would normally be reliable workers fell in with 'the worst of labourers and broken down smugglers', who were a bad influence. They became the first to be sent to the parish to receive 'relief'. This in turn put additional financial pressure on large farmers and property owners because they paid the Land Tax Assessment, administered at parish level, to fund the 'poor rates'.

Thomas commented, 'The young are not deterred from marrying by the present want of employment ... knowing they must always receive sufficient for existence from the poor-rates ...'

Continues overleaf

LucyAnn Curling is an amateur genealogist. She has been engaged in family history research for a more than a decade. Her paternal ancestors had their roots on the Isle of Thanet in Kent as mariners and yeomen farmers. For a review of the early Curlings, see www.curlingofthanet.wordpress.com, a site set up in collaboration with Clive Boyce. Four generations of her paternal ancestors left a fascinating paper trail which she is now collating into a book.



Kentish plough, described as 'a powerful instrument in stiff strong soils, but very heavy and used with four horses abreast'. (Dickson's Agriculture 1804, p40)

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This depression even affected ploughing style. Old 'Kentish ploughs' required four horses, a man and a lad to work the field, but to economise, farmers were using two-horse ploughs which operated by the ploughman alone. Young unmarried men, who cost the farmer less, were employed in preference to more experienced married labourers. Thus the income of whole families was jeopardised, adding to the burden on parish funds. Thomas mentioned that 'some benevolent characters' have taken on unemployed labourers, thinking that the crisis will be temporary, but Thomas thought they are wrong and being unable to support these labourers long term would ultimately send them to the parish too.

His recommendations included: prohibition of all corn imports for two years, High duty on imported materials, alteration to the poor laws, standardisation of rates and no farmers to be exempt, support for the poor at national rather than parish level and the establishment of factories to provide work.

The conventional historical view has been that the Corn Laws were a tool of the upper classes to

manipulate the law to their financial advantage, but this is only partly true. Curling's letter demonstrates that the agricultural middling and labouring classes were struggling financially. They too saw tightening restrictions on imported grain together with better support for the poor as essential to avoid mass destitution.

The first incarnation of the Corn Laws, imposing exorbitant import taxes on corn, had been introduced the previous year. Thomas got his wish that they be enforced more rigorously. Everyone who supported these laws failed to anticipate the disastrous effect which the higher cost of grain would have on the price of bread, the staple diet of thousands of city-dwelling factory-workers and rural labourers alike. A vicious circle ensued: corn prices remained high; bread became increasingly expensive; workers could not afford this basic food, demanding lower prices, but high corn prices were seen as essential to the country's economy. Reformers in parliament struggled for thirty years to get the Corn Laws repealed, only succeeding in 1846.

Thomas Oakley Curling and family gave up the struggle and emigrated to Van Diemen's Land in 1822.

NEW BOOKS

Rural Society and Economic Change in County Durham – recession and recovery c.1400–1640

by A T Brown, published by Boydell, price £60. ISBN 9781783270750

This book examines the development of agrarian capitalism, estate management, tenure and the land market, social mobility, the gentrification of merchant wealth and the emergence of the yeomanry in the region. Brown argues that the period should be seen as a long agrarian cycle in which landholding patterns established in the 15th century affected the distribution of profits between different types of lords and tenants.

Farmers, Consumers and Innovators – the world of Joan Thirsk

edited by Richard Jones and Christopher Dyer and published 2016 by University of Hertfordshire Press, £16.99. ISBN 9781909291560

The book is a result of a conference held in honour of Joan in 2014 at the University of Leicester. Papers cover some of the many fields in which Joan was interested and have all been inspired by her revelation of a lively, varied and developing rural scene. Chapters on regional differences, farming methods, conflicts over land, shopping opportunities, fashion and consumption present fresh insights into a world that was undergoing transformation well before the Agricultural Revolution.

Dry Stone Walls, History and Heritage

by Angus Winchester has just been published by Amberly, price £14.99. ISBN 9781445651484

The book traces the history of dry stone walls from medieval times, although the standard form probably dates from the Tudor period. The great era of wall rebuilding in the uplands dates from the 18th and 19th centuries. The numerous regional variations are considered. The book also looks at why walls were built and how they functioned as a part of a hill farming system. The book is fully illustrated with 180 prints illustrating regional variations and the place of walls in the landscape.

DVD: Akenfield

The classic Peter Hall film based on Ronald Blythe's portrait of a Suffolk village and first released in 1973 has been re-released by the British Film Institute National Archive

'A profoundly romantic work of sublime poetic realism, *Akenfield* boasts compelling performances from its cast of non-professional actors (drawn from the living communities of several Suffolk villages) and a sweeping, rhapsodic orchestral score composed by Michael Tippett'.