



THE MUSEUM  
OF ENGLISH  
RURAL LIFE



University of  
Reading

# THE MERL AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS REVIEW 2018–2019



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Inside front cover Object from *The Outside In*,  
an exhibition by the artist Steven Claydon



# INTRODUCTION

**This has been an exceptional year for the quality and range of our activity. And it is equally notable for increasing visitor numbers since the reopening of our new galleries and learning spaces. Last year alone Museum visitors rose by nearly 40%, reaching and exceeding our targets well ahead of schedule.**

An important driver has been both the rising profile of the Museum, locally and nationally, helped by the success of The MERL's social media but also distinctive programming and projects, many in community partnerships. Together these have brought more diverse audiences and opportunities to work with creative practitioners who have helped interpret collections in innovative and exciting ways. Highlights include the premiere of new work by renowned musician and dancer, Hannah James, *Muscle Memory*, performed at The MERL Lecture as the culmination of the *Museum of the Intangible* project and two art interventions in the galleries from two leading artists: *The Outside In*, an exhibition by Steven Claydon and Maria McKinney's *Sire* exhibition.

We are very proud that The Museum of English Rural Life's success has been recognised nationally, regionally and locally in the past year – through winning the prestigious 2019 Museums and Heritage award for Marketing, Bronze Award in the Small Visitor Attraction of the Year category at Tourism South's Beautiful South Awards, as well as the 'Little Ankle Biters' local Museum of the Year.

Our ambitions to grow academic engagement with collections has shown a similar step change in research usage and in teaching with collections: by nearly 90% for research visits and by more than 30% for sessions led or supported by UMASCS with special collections. University investment through the Collections Project has helped attract new research funding with over twenty other UK and international universities working with us in the past year. Interest in our teaching offer has also seen a sharp rise in the number of student numbers benefitting from collections-based teaching and in the variety and number of modules using collections.



# DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

**Sustaining our digital transformation has remained an important aspect of our work, with the main focus on finding ways to make digital engagement part of our everyday work.**

Interest in our approach to social media has come from far and wide, with staff participating in Culture24's *Let's Get Real* initiative, which looked at human connections across digital channels, and presenting at the *Discovering Collections, Discovering Communities* conference.

New websites have been created for the Special Collections and Art Collections, as well as an overall portal for the University of Reading's collections, ready for launch in March 2020. New online exhibitions have been added to The MERL website and rare books content is to appear on Google Arts and Culture.

Behind the scenes, staff have been exploring new ways of working digitally, from increasing the digital components of our marketing to exploring digital platforms to support volunteering, the shop and donations. We want these new tools to make it easier for our visitors and supporters, and to free up time for us to concentrate on preserving our collections and making them more accessible.

Acquiring and sustaining our digital skills is still a big challenge. The archive team have been working to build their knowledge of digital preservation and apply it, practically, to our collections, particularly the archive of the film-maker Stephen Dwoskin, which is a partly digital collection.



A still from Stephen Dwoskin's *Djn Amo*

# AUDIENCE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Over the last year The MERL and Special Collections has welcomed a broad range of visitors and users, many of them through particular projects.

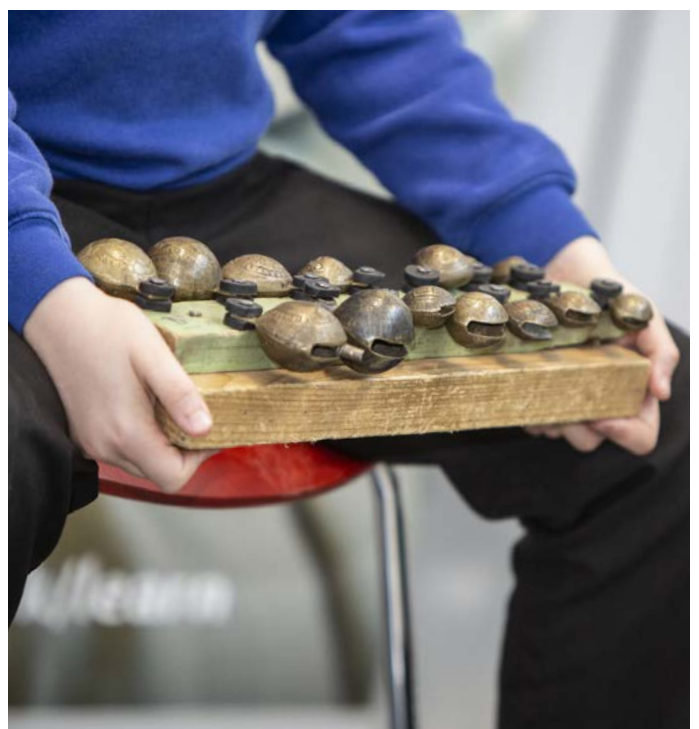
During 2019 The MERL, in partnership with Reading Museum, was awarded a Cultural Commissioning grant through the Reading Place of Culture, Great Place scheme. This enabled us to offer three sets of activities aimed at developing the wellbeing of older people, including some facing dementia. A series of reminiscence sessions were offered at the Royal Berkshire Hospital and at The MERL and gardening activities were developed at The MERL. Finally, a programme of dance for health workshops was commissioned that combined simple stretches and movements with an exploration of the themes of rural life that The MERL illustrates. At the same time, Reading Museum offered their reminiscence boxes to the project and offered training to care homes. The whole project was evaluated by colleagues in the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences.

The musicians in residence project delivered in partnership with the English Folk Dance and Song Society entered its second year. Pete Flood led a series of workshops on 'Rough Music' for young people, working alongside members of the music service, Berkshire Maestros. Jackie Oates researched songs women sang as they tackled piecework, both in the home and later in factories. She sang her songs at a gathering of the Mewes Knitters group, and later at the University's stand at the Royal Berkshire Show.

Our commitment to community engagement is increasingly acknowledged within the local area and The MERL hosted a Dementia Action Awareness Day and welcomed groups from across Reading.

Young people are a particular focus for The MERL and Reading Museum as part of the Arts Council England Funded business plan delivered by Museums Partnership Reading. A youth strategy was prepared during 2018 and in 2019 the first phase of delivery included the development of new online learning resources for students and teachers addressing issues of contemporary as well as historic rural life. A schools offer has been built around these resources aimed at both primary and secondary schools. At the same time, our Widening Participation Project Officer has participated in onsite and outreach activities aimed at young people from areas of low participation in higher education.

A number of young people studying at Activate Learning, Reading's further education college, have taken part in supported placements. These have had a focus on developing their 'ready for work' skills but each young person has been given an opportunity to choose an activity. One student worked on an exhibition drawing on The MERL's archives and gained an Arts Award for the project. Others have focused on working with front of house staff and in the café.



# PUBLIC PROGRAMMES AND EVENTS

Public programming activities for the last year included two 'Late' events: one on the Ladybird Books theme hosted by Reading Museum to complement the Ladybird exhibition and another that linked with the national Being Human festival on the theme of 'Folk'.

The MERL continued to welcome children and families during school holidays and offered arts and other activities. During the year, a highly successful addition to the galleries was the introduction of two virtual reality experiences devised in partnership with the Department of Art; one was an immersive version of our popular 'seasons' animation and the other a chance to 'round up' Dartmoor sheep virtually while sitting on a quad bike.

During term time, the Friday Fledglings activities for under 5s continued to attract new visitors. The MERL's offer earned us the 'Little Ankle Biters' award for Best Museum in Berkshire, voted for by families with young children.

Major events included:

- 2018 MERL Annual Lecture *Stepping out of time*
- *The Outside In*, an exhibition of three sculptural installations by the artist Steven Claydon
- *Maria McKinney: Sire* exhibition, exploring selective breeding and genetics in contemporary cattle farming
- MERL Seminar Series: *Looking at Ladybird Books*





**Left** Research in the Ladybird Gallery

**Top** Musicians from the folk band 'Maggie Lane' performing at the Folk Late event

**Bottom left** Visitors enjoying a pop-up display of folk objects at the Folk Late event

**Bottom right** A detail from the Sire exhibition

# COLLECTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE

The MERL, Special Collections and the University's Art Collection have continued to provide support and source material for a variety of research, engagement and collections enhancement projects, and investment has been made in collections care, including storage assessment, and access to collections.

## Bursaries and fellowships have fostered new research interest and creative practice with the collections:

- Heritage and Creativity Institute for Collections (HCIC) Early Career Research Fellowships for Evan Gledhill and Jack Thacker.
- A HCIC Residency for Dr Andy Willimott (History) to develop an ERC bid on the theme of Utopias.
- A HCIC Residency for Dr Nicola Wilson (English Literature) to develop a funding bid on the theme of Publishing and Class with the Archive of British Publishing and Printing.
- James Bowen as the Poultry Club of Great Britain MERL Fellow.
- Robert McCrum Creative Fellowship with the Samuel Beckett Research Centre.

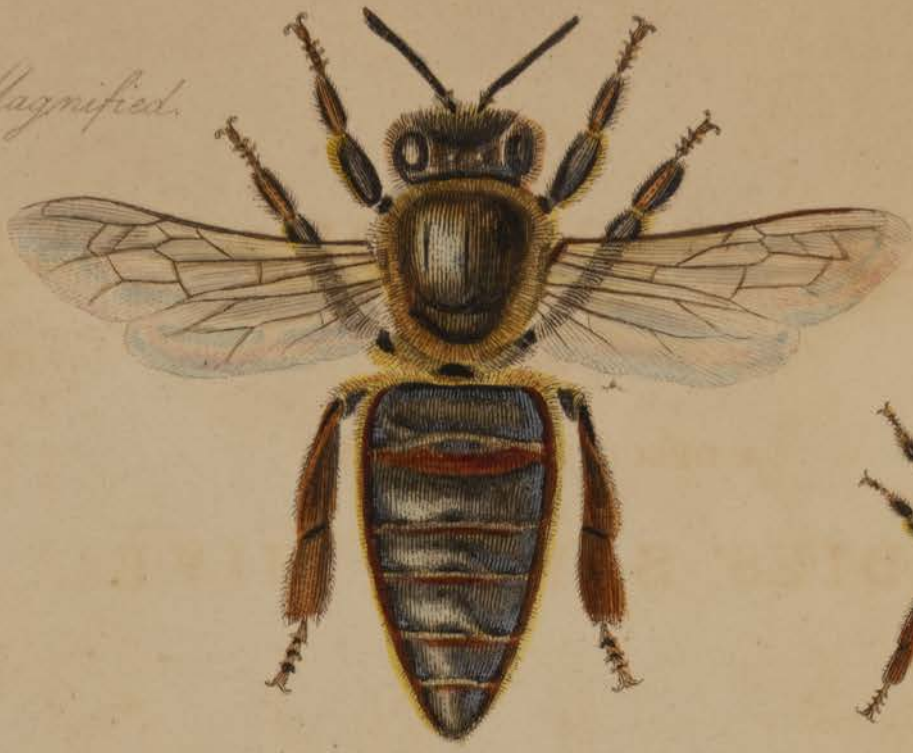
## Project funding has enabled access to a wide range of collections including:

- The Poultry Club of Great Britain generously provided funding to The MERL for the *Transforming Poultry Heritage* project in memory of Graham and Janet Starkey. This year the Club also funded James Bowen as the Poultry Club of Great Britain MERL Fellow.
- The University Strategic Fund 'Collections Project' funded further cataloguing of the Cole Library.
- The Landscape Institute (LI) has funded further cataloguing of the LI collections and the successful Friends of the Landscape Library and Archive at Reading (FOLAR) symposium on *Landscape and Children: design for children's play* attracted over 50 participants.





*Queen Magnified*



QUEEN



*Worker Magnified*



WORKER

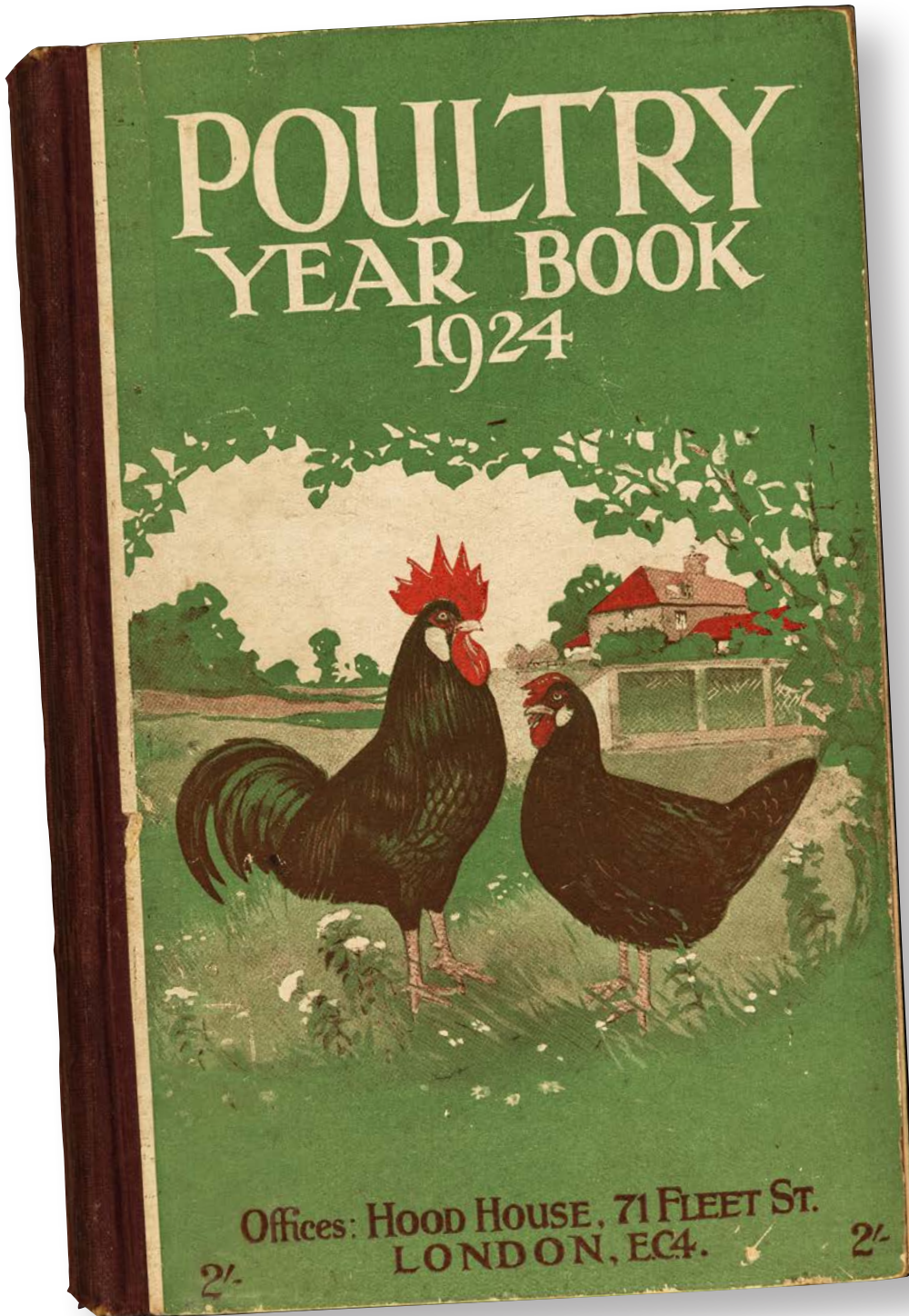


*Drone Magnified*



DRONE





Previous page left Illustration from *De aquatilibus* by Pierre Belon (1553) from the Cole Library

Previous page right Frontispiece from *The management of bees* by Samuel Bagster (1834) from the Cowan Bee Collection

Left *Poultry Year Book*, 1924 from the David Scrivener Collection

Above Detail from a leaf from a French Book of Hours, c. 1300 (MS 5650/89) from the European Manuscripts Collection

Top right Photograph of Mr R.F. Smith's Bower Farm, Eynsford, Kent (1957) from the Farmers Weekly Collection

Bottom right Drawing of a clapper stile from the Open Spaces Archive, n.d. (1900–1940)

- The Open Spaces Society has funded a two-year project to catalogue and preserve the Open Spaces Archive, an academic fellowship and an academic symposium. Work started on the project in December 2018.
- The Eva Crane Trust funding for the cataloguing of the Cowan Bee Collection, donated by Defra (the Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs)
- Penguin Random House has funded further cataloguing of the Penguin Random House items in the Hogarth Press, Jonathan Cape, Chatto and Windus, The Bodley Head and other predecessor firms now owned by Random House.

**Research collaboration, engagement and related impact activity including:**

- An exhibition *The Chicken and the Egg: Celebrating Poultry Heritage* featured items from the David Scrivener Collection, the Poultry Club Collection and documents relating to the National Poultry Test.
- *Ladybird Books: How it Works*, an exhibition and Late event hosted at Reading Museum as part of Museums Partnership Reading, celebrating the history of the nation's favourite children's books.



- *Colours more than Sentences*, an exhibition celebrating the many different illustrated editions of Oscar Wilde’s famous poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, on loan from a private collector.
- A display of treasures from the European Manuscripts Collection, an important new acquisition generously presented to the University by a private collector with the support of the Art Fund.
- A HCIC-funded MERL Late for British Science Week.
- *Thinking forward through the past: Linking science, social science and the humanities to inform the sustainable reduction of endemic disease in British livestock farming* – The MERL’s partnership with Kings College, London and Leeds Trinity in a four-year collaborative project funded by the Wellcome Trust involves the digitisation of photographs and film held at The MERL. [field-wt.co.uk/](http://field-wt.co.uk/)
- Work continues on an interdisciplinary AHRC project led by Dr Rachel Garfield in collaboration with University of Reading, Special Collections to preserve and catalogue the archive of the acclaimed experimental filmmaker, director and cinematographer Stephen Dwoskin.
- A successful funding bid to the University of Reading and Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation’s Trust for a collaboration between the hospital and the Centre for Health Humanities *Stories of Ageing: Patient Experience and Patient Care* which includes engagement with the collections. [research.reading.ac.uk/health-humanities/research-themes/funded-projects/](http://research.reading.ac.uk/health-humanities/research-themes/funded-projects/)



# ENGAGING OUR STUDENTS



The third year Museum Studies exhibition *Frontiers* ran across university sites during February, March and April 2019.

We were awarded funds from the University's Diversity and Inclusion fund to run a project with students and volunteers in order to encourage more students with disabilities to volunteer with our collections.

As part of Museums Partnership Reading we piloted a photogrammetry project creating 3D digital models of objects from The Museum of English Rural Life and the Silchester collection at Reading Museum. The project was designed, delivered and evaluated by students Diana McNutt and James Lloyd.

# VOLUNTEERING

Seventy-two volunteers contributed 4,896 hours of their time to work on particular projects at The MERL and Special Collections. The hours donated compared to 4,213 the previous academic year, an increase of 16% on the previous year.

Key achievements this year have included:

- In January 2019, The MERL and Reading Museum, the two Museums Partnership Reading institutions, achieved joint Investing in Volunteers accreditation
- The development of new volunteering opportunities, including photogrammetry; community journalism and film editing, and experimenting with accommodating micro-volunteering roles (short term frequent assistance or monthly, rather than traditional once a week)
- 19 of the 31 new MERL volunteers recruited in 2018–2019 are young people under 25 (61%). The baseline for the previous year was 30% under 25.
- 12 of the 31 new volunteers stated they came from a BAME background (39%). The previous baseline was 16%.



Top Volunteers assisting with visitor activities at the More Than Human Late event

Above Object handling with a volunteer at the Folk Late event

# STATISTICS

## Engagement

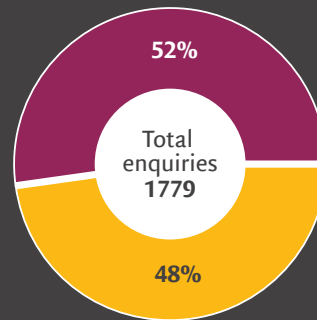
Gallery visitors welcomed

42,594

Reading Room visitors

2164

## Enquiries



## Student use of collections

Students involved in teaching sessions with collections

981

Teaching modules drawing on collections

30

## Reached through digital activity

Impressions 184,479,500



📶 = 5,000,000

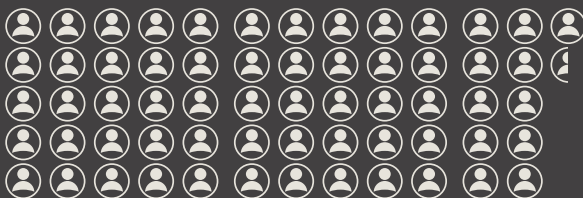
Engagement 9,612,600



📶 = 1,000,000

## Research use of collections

New research users 1228



👤 = 20

Archives produced for users in the Reading Room during the year 14,642

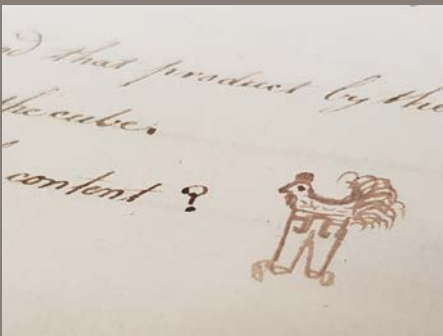


📖 = 500

New followers 98,500



👤 = 5000



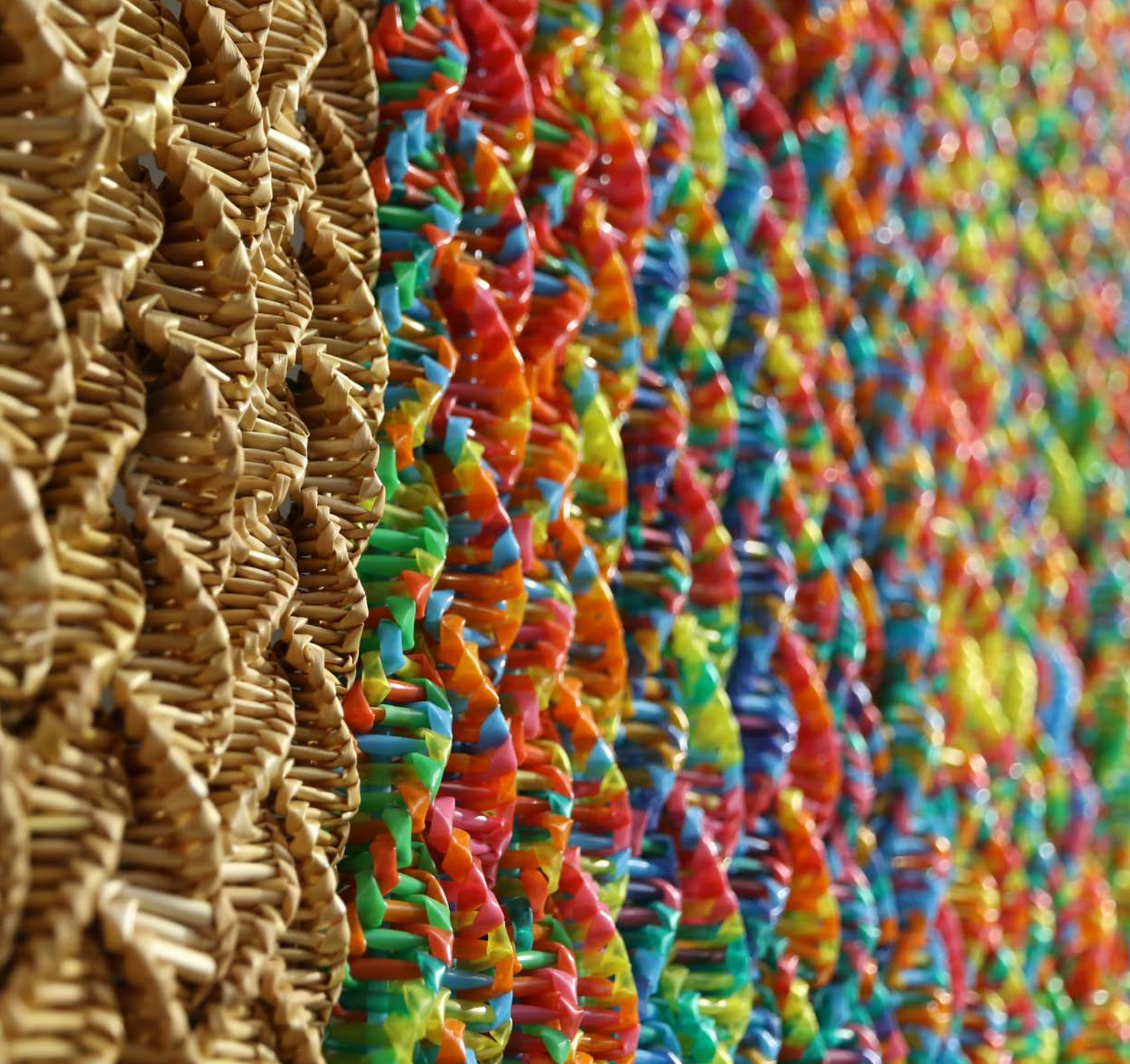
**Top left** The basket collection in The MERL object store

**Top right** Researching the Suttons Seeds Ltd archive in the reading room

**Middle right** Enjoying a cup of tea in The MERL cafe

**Above** Our tweet about an eighteenth-century notebook from the archives with a doodle of a chicken in trousers went viral

**Right** A young visitor enjoying our VR quad bike experience



A detail of *Production/Graph* by Maria McKinney from the Sire exhibition

## THE MERL AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS REVIEW 2018–2019

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