



Charles Laycock

How museum is helping to preserve Devon's rural past

Torquay Museum is more than just a town museum. At times during its 175 years of history it has collected items from across Devon.

This is particularly true of its rural life collection displayed as 'The Old Devon Farmhouse'.

This exceptional collection relating to lost rural farming communities is the most important of its kind in Devon and perhaps the whole South West region.

The existence of the Old Devon Farmhouse gallery is largely the legacy of one man, Charles Hey Laycock.

His original vision was to preserve an entire farmhouse and contents, a hugely ambitious task in the early 20th century, the next best thing was a 'life-size' model in lath and plaster, or better still in cob, of a typical old farmhouse, complete with its furniture and household utensils, as they appeared up to about 50 years ago. These words written by Laycock in 1924 convey his passion for preserving and displaying all aspects of a traditional Devon way of life.

Laycock led a double life. In Torquay and London he was Charles H. Laycock, the Oxford-educated son of a wealthy Huddersfield family, which had relocated to Devon in the 1890s.

He was a classic example of an Edwardian middle-class collector, who through the inheritance of accumulated family capital

Veronika Valigurská
Torquay Museum

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The Old Devon Farmhouse gallery

could afford to dedicate his entire life to the furtherance of his personal interests.

At his Moretonhampstead home he was Old Charlie Laycock, Devon countryman, speaking its dialect, singing its folksongs and living in his collection.

From 1936 Laycock began to present various items to Torquay Museum, these joined collections already presented to the museum by Mrs Marjory Fielden and soon a Devon folk collection began to grow.

Laycock also made plans for the long term preservation of his collection, by means of his will.

Following his death in 1943, Torquay Natural History Society found that he had left to the museum all the articles from his Moretonhampstead home and the sum of £10,000 to build the current gallery for the permanent display and preservation of his collection.

In addition to these collections, numerous individuals have donated hundreds of specimens relating to the traditional life of Devon.

Together they form one of the finest regional collections to be found in any English museum.

The current gallery was completed in 2001 and during lockdown has undergone a considerable renovation.

The walls have been repaired from the accumulated damage of hundreds of thousands of visitors and the exhibits have been vacuumed and several new items have been put on display.

The gallery is a treasure trove of rare and sometimes uniquely Devonian objects many of which predate the industrial revolution.

As well as the research done by Laycock, the collection was also the subject of a book *The Old Devon Farmhouse* by Peter Brears published in 1998.

To book a Christmas visit with sounds and smells visit the museum's website.



The interior of Charles Laycock's house in Moretonhampstead

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