

Commensality and Care Workshop

The third in our series of in progress workshop took place in December 2022 when we were very generously hosted by [The Museum of English Rural Life](#). The focus of the workshop was the animals that we share our lives with, particularly on farms and in rural areas although we contrasted this with animals that bridge the rural urban divide. In particular we considered animals that we *choose* to share our environment with as opposed to those we might not.

Another focus of this workshop was to bring together other Wellcome Trust funded projects [FIELD](#) and [The Chemical Empire](#) to promote cross-project discussion about human, animal and environmental health.

We started off with an introduction to the museum and its incredible collections including its library and archives much of which can be searched [online](#). This was followed later in the day with a tour of the museum from curator [@OllieDouglas](#) and even later with an opportunity to see some of the animal related objects from the collection.

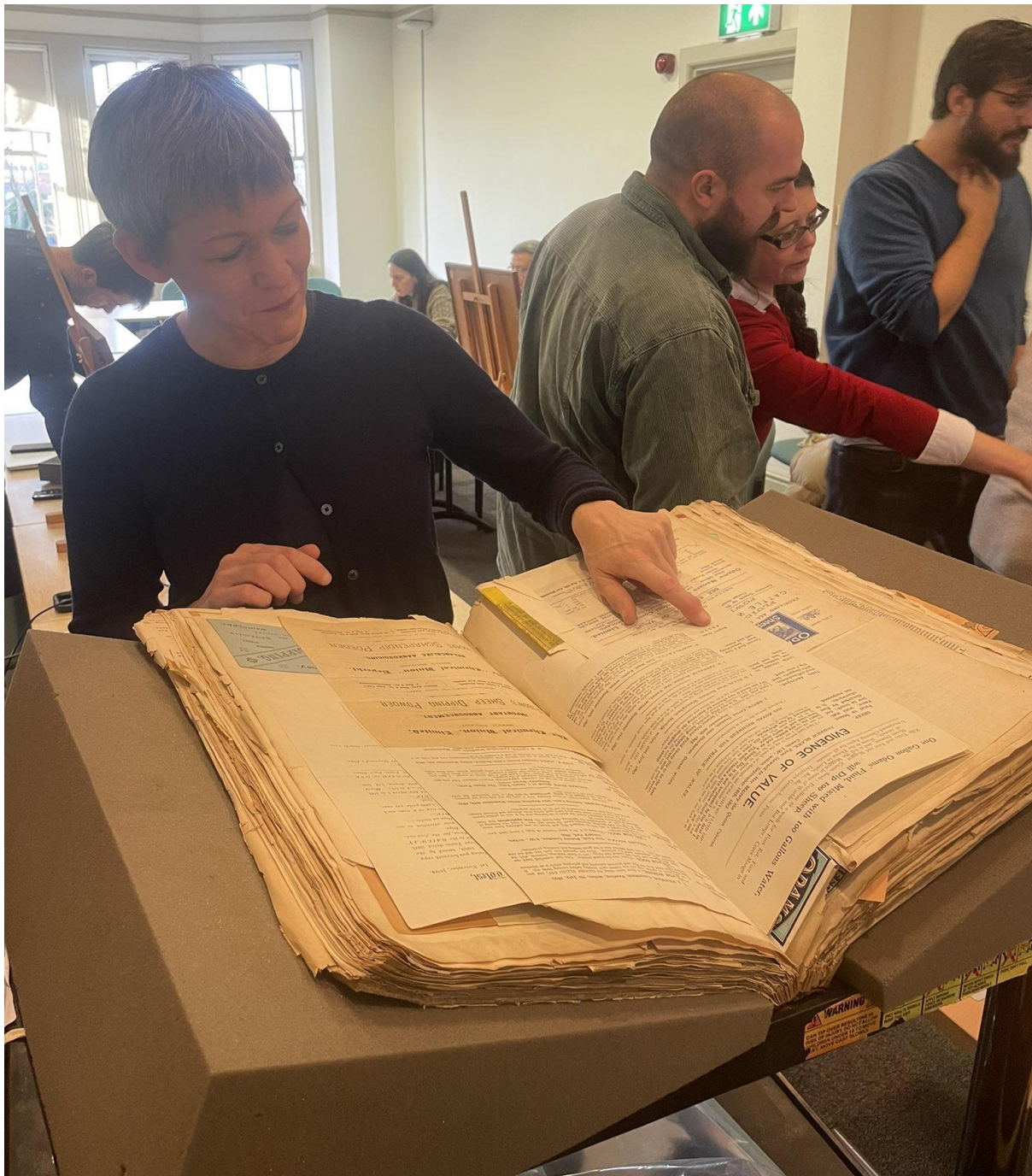
Our discussions centred on three main topics: pests, livestock, and archives and collections themselves through which we know and learn so much about our relationship with pests and livestock throughout history.

Beginning with pests, Angela Cassidy started the discussion with a presentation of what makes an animal a pest. This was followed by a presentation from Blessing Chidimuro on the lives of ‘pest’ foxes and how their diets differ between rural and urban areas. Meanwhile Thomas Lean ([The Chemical Empire](#)) and Karen Sayer ([FIELD](#)) discussed *control* of pests - crop pests and the use of pesticides and rats and rat control respectively.



Angela Cassidy, Felix Sadebeck and Riley Smallman examine items from The MERL's archive on pest animals

This was followed by presentations on cattle feeding and health in Roman literature (Felix Sadebeck), grazing and feeding of cattle in modern regenerative agriculture (Hannah Mortimer) and caring for livestock with endemic diseases (Abigail Woods ([FIELD](#)))



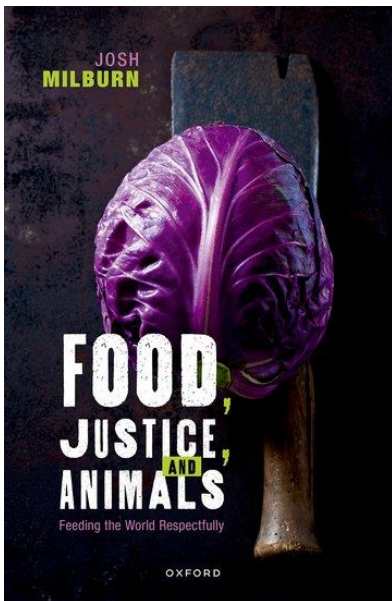
Abigail Woods examines an item from The MERL library on livestock health

We then widened the discussion into a much broader conversation about care for and about collections such as The MERL and how academics, curators and archivists can collaborate to ensure that such collections can be simultaneously used *and* conserved. The aim is to ensure greater understanding of how human relationships with other animals, food and wider environments have changed over time is essential.



Juliette Waterman, Riley Smallman and Herre de Bondt examine illustrations of birds from The MERL's collection

A highlight of the workshop was a presentation on the subject of 'Animal rights and food: Can we have our cow and eat her too?' from [Josh Milburn](#) which touched on themes we'd been thinking about throughout the workshop: care for and about livestock, the environment and ourselves. The presentation was based on material in the forthcoming book [Food, Justice, and Animals](#).



Our warmest thanks to the team at the MERL for their warm welcome, hospitality, enthusiasm and making the workshop run so smoothly and to everyone who contributed to the workshop's success.