

Acton Scott

Information for Stakeholders

Background

Acton Scott Historic Working Farm was the vision of Thomas Acton who established the museum to demonstrate historic farming techniques. It has been operated by Shropshire Council, as tenants of the Acton Scott Estate since the 1970's.

Over the past four decades Acton Scott Historic Working Farm has welcomed thousands of visitors from across Shropshire and further afield and in more recent years gained international fame on television. Now is the time to explore a new future for the Farm, a future that builds on its remarkable agricultural heritage and evolves to ensure that it is relevant and engaging to the next generation.

In 2008 the lease was extended for a further 30-years as a condition of receiving substantial funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and ERDF for the development of a new entrance barn and toilets, and renovation of the café and Black Barn. This project also funded additional staff, activities and workshops.

With the broadcast of the BBC's 'Victorian Farm' television programme numbers peaked in 2009 at about 45,000.

After an initial decline visitor numbers plateaued at about 20,000 per year. Since then, the Farm has operated with a deficit of £168k per annum which has been subsidised by Shropshire Council.

Work began in 2019/20 on the development of a new business plan for the attraction, which focused on diversifying the offer to help drive income and reduce the subsidy from the taxpayer. Developing a more commercial approach to the farm has been difficult, however, within the constraints of operation as a Victorian working farm, the size of the car park and lack of accessibility by public transport.

The farm employs 14 full and part time staff as part of the Museum Services team, supported by around 15 active volunteers.

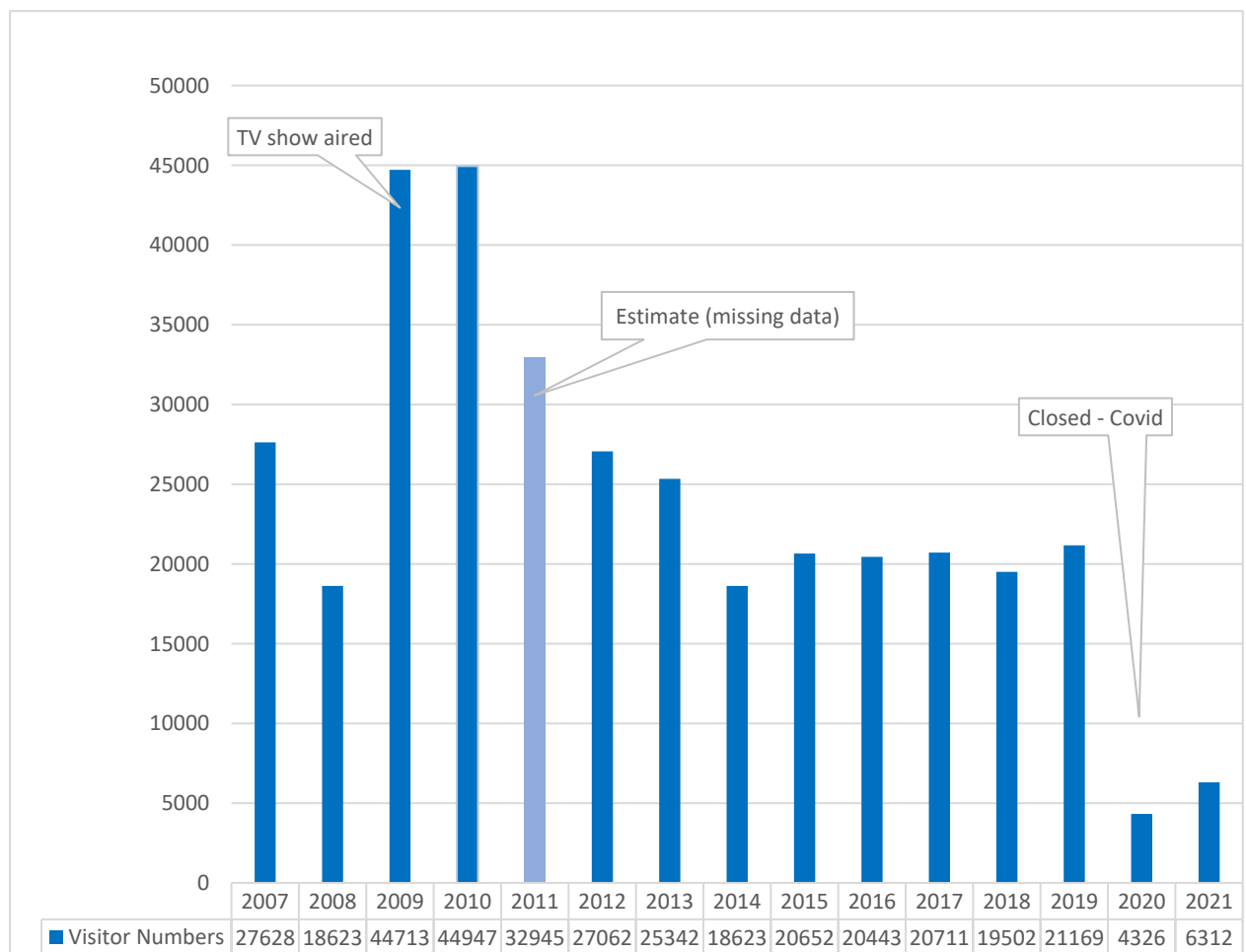
Acton Scott Historic Working Farm is highly regarded by both Shropshire residents and visitors. We genuinely welcome the thoughts and suggestions of both the local community and supporters of the Farm from across the county.

Timeline

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|-----------------------|--|
| 1975 | Shropshire County Council becomes tenants of the Acton estate to run the farm |
| 2008 | Heritage Lottery Funding for new barn, renovation of existing buildings, and toilets and re-signing of a 30-year lease |
| 2009 | Victorian Farm Television show airs – peak visitor numbers |
| 2020 | Farm open for three months – Covid |
| June 2021 | Farm closed to the public following e-coli outbreak |
| January/February 2022 | Public engagement to explore the handover to a future operating model |
| April 2022 | Report and recommendations to cabinet |

Data

Visitor Numbers



Budget

| | 14/15 | 15/16 | 16/17 | 17/18 | 18/19 | 19/20 | 20/21 |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Staff Costs | -£195,765 | -£215,914 | -£194,449 | -£188,860 | -£222,169 | -£227,706 | -£183,577 |
| Premises, Repairs and Maintenance | -£48,353 | -£52,160 | -£44,347 | -£46,962 | -£51,050 | -£53,514 | -£56,666 |
| Transport | -£7,654 | -£1,583 | -£2,667 | -£3,538 | -£2,143 | -£748 | -£778 |
| Livestock, Stock and Equipment | -£14,046 | -£11,762 | -£9,087 | -£14,891 | -£23,027 | -£66,170 | -£40,007 |
| Catering | -£7,049 | -£17,037 | -£17,062 | -£18,027 | -£17,192 | -£1,846 | £0 |
| Clothing | -£64 | -£88 | -£53 | -£175 | -£157 | -£62 | -£415 |
| Office Expenditure | -£5,280 | -£4,732 | -£7,979 | -£2,041 | -£2,261 | -£3,394 | -£1,111 |
| Services | -£7,673 | -£3,907 | -£4,189 | -£7,797 | -£9,914 | -£8,270 | -£4,532 |
| Communications | -£3,485 | -£4,590 | -£3,731 | -£2,678 | -£2,344 | -£1,900 | -£1,429 |
| Grants, Memberships and Subscriptions | -£214 | -£212 | -£155 | -£270 | -£110 | -£280 | -£64 |
| General Supplies and Services | £0 | -£250 | £0 | £0 | -£180 | -£180 | £3 |
| Movement in Reserves Adjustments | -£9,039 | £0 | £0 | -£23,312 | £0 | £0 | £0 |
| Income | £151,268 | £120,443 | £108,830 | £110,360 | £158,251 | £196,541 | £49,608 |
| Total | -£147,354 | -£191,792 | -£174,889 | -£198,191 | -£172,296 | -£167,528 | -£238,968 |

Notes

Employee Costs include salaries, national insurance, pensions, redundancy payments, recruitment costs, staff travel

Premises, Repairs and Maintenance – rent, rates, maintenance of buildings and grounds.

Livestock, Stock and Equipment – primarily livestock and animal equipment, shop stock, learning materials and exhibition costs.

Services includes vets and farrier's bills, marketing, advertising, event speakers.

Communications – phone, mobile, broadband etc.

Movement in Reserves Adjustments includes overspend, surplus, capital expenditure

Fixed costs, such as council supplied corporate services, such as HR, Finance and IT have been removed.

Re-opening Costs

To reopen the site to the public safely, the council's Property Services Group has commissioned surveys and estimated the costs of the required work.

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| E-coli safety compliance including new handwashing facilities, fencing, and animal housing upgrades. | £130,920 |
| Essential drainage and other safety repairs | £92,064 |
| Total | £222,984 |

The future

Over the past four decades Acton Scott Historic Working Farm has welcomed thousands of visitors from across Shropshire and in more recent years gained international fame on television. Now is the time to explore a new future for the Farm, a future that builds on its remarkable agricultural heritage and evolves to ensure that it is relevant and engaging to the next generation.

Whilst the Council can no longer afford to subsidise the farm, over the next few months, we will be working with the Acton Scott Estate to help develop the vision, identify alternative operating models

and consider new approaches. Community and stakeholder engagement will begin in February with a view to understanding:

- the views of different stakeholders about the situation
- aspirations for the future and making Acton Scott Historic Working Farm relevant for current and future generations
- options for viable alternative uses of the site
- options for alternative organisations who are interested in operating the site
- visitors' perceptions of the Farm and the services it offers. These perceptions will inform the future operation of the site

A report summarising the findings from this engagement will be shared with the Acton Scott Estate and recommendations regarding the Councils involvement are planned to be presented to Cabinet for a final decision in April 2022.

We look forward to hearing your ideas and meeting those who would like to take the farm forward with a new vision.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is Shropshire Council considering withdrawing from managing the Farm at Acton Scott?

Shropshire Council, like many other local authorities, is facing an extremely challenging financial future. The Council predicts that it will spend 80-85% of the total disposable budget on Social Care next year. The Council also predicts that all the Financial Strategy Reserve will be depleted over the next two years. Shropshire Council needs to prioritise statutory functions and publicly owned venues, and this means that the Council is no longer able to allocate the required investment to reopen and subsidise the farm on a private estate.

If falling visitor numbers are the issue, why doesn't Shropshire Council just advertise the farm more to attract visitors?

| Budget | 14/15 | 15/16 | 16/17 | 17/18 | 18/19 | 19/20 | 20/21 |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| MARKETING & PUBLICITY | £3,119 | £2,462 | £1,757 | £4,482 | £6,206 | £4,006 | £1,718 |

The Council has modelled the number of visitors required to operate without subsidy and has determined that the farm would require visitor numbers in excess of those achieved in 2009, when the farm enjoyed a period of national and international exposure. The farm is unlikely to be able to attract this level of visits without similar exposure, and even if the numbers required could be achieved, they are more than the site could accommodate in its present format.

Why doesn't the council hold different events at the farm to increase revenue?

The Farm has an annual program of events, including plant sales, engine rallies and folk events as well as traditional events based around the seasonal farming calendar. Shropshire Council leased the farm from the Acton Family with the agreement that it would be run as a working farm depicting rural life at the turn of the century. This was Thomas Acton's vision, and we know from the feedback from our visitors that it is the unique attraction of the farm. This does mean that the scope of events that we are able to hold on the farm is limited within the lease agreement. To retain the unique offering at Acton Scott we have had to forego other commercial opportunities.

With all this considered, why would a different organisation be interested in running the farm?

Shropshire Council, as a local authority, recognises that it has overheads and financial and operational challenges that other businesses or organisations do not:

- The total cost of staffing the attraction by the council is high, and while the council values all its volunteers, they can only be used to complement and support the work of paid staff.
- Local Government procurement frameworks can mean that repairs and maintenance are more expensive
- There are grants and funding opportunities available to charitable organisations and trusts that the council cannot access.

This is why Shropshire Council is committed to helping the Acton family and local community discover an alternative, more sustainable solution.

What about the historical machinery and collections?

The Council is looking at alternative ways for more people to access and enjoy the collections as well as contribute to retaining Shropshire's rich rural history. These could include making the collection available online, leaving parts of the collection at the farm, on loan, or finding alternative venues to display the collection. Shropshire Museums began a project in 2017 to review and rationalise the county's agricultural collection. The service has recently received support from the West Midlands Museums Association 'Fit for Purpose' scheme to progress this programme with the aim of ensuring a sustainable future for this important collection.

Why hasn't the Council considered different options for the Farm?

A number of options have been considered, to see if there is a more cost-effective model for managing the farm. These have included a rare breeds farm, a country park, and a wildlife haven but none of these are considered appropriate or show a break-even position.