

ACTON SCOTT

Historic Working Farm



Welcome to Home Farm



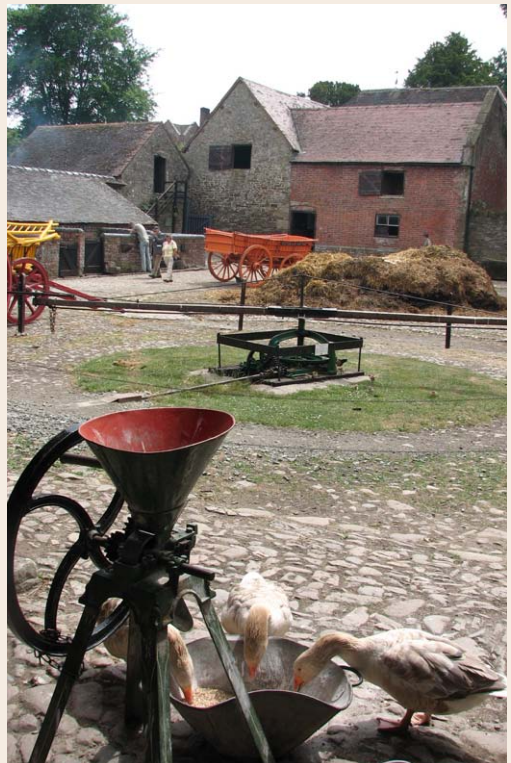
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Acton Scott Historic Working Farm

is one of Britain's leading working farm museums. Originally the Home Farm of the Acton Scott estate, the site is now a centre for the preservation of Victorian farming methods using traditional skills and horse-drawn machinery.

There are no tractors used on this twenty three acre hill farm today, only horses along with a skilled and dedicated team of men and women. The livestock are breeds that a farmer living in this area from around 1870 to the 1920's might have kept. Many of the agricultural vehicles and implements have been conserved and restored and are now used to work the land. On-site craftsmen keep them maintained and in good working order. During the Victorian period the Home Farm was farmed by a bailiff and provided the estate owner with milk, eggs, grain, potatoes and meat. On many country estates the Home Farm would have been considered a model farm and used to demonstrate modern agricultural practice to other tenants.



The farmyard at Acton Scott today



View of the Shropshire Hills from the Long Mynd

An Ancient Landscape

Acton Scott is situated in the Ape Dale, one of the many attractive valleys within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

To the north-west of the farm lies Wenlock Edge, a limestone ridge formed over 400 million years ago when Shropshire basked under a shallow tropical sea. Around 25,000 years ago the ice sheets of the last ice age advanced across the country and it is the ice, wind, water and frost that shaped the hills and valleys you can see today.

Acton Scott gets its name from the family that have owned the estate for nearly 900 years. 'Ac' comes from the Saxon for oak trees and 'tun' from settlement, while 'Scott' originates from the medieval Reynold le Scot who held a share in the manor in 1255. The Acton family continue to live here today at Acton Scott Hall.



Acton Scott Hall



We know that people have lived in the Shropshire Hills for over 4,000 years. Archaeologists have found prehistoric flint tools used by Neolithic hunter gatherers nearby at Alcaston.

In 1817 road improvements made just north of Acton Scott hall revealed the remains of a building thought to be part of a small Roman-style villa. A later excavation exposed evidence of an even earlier Iron Age farm, probably the home of a family who grew crops and kept livestock. It is likely that the same family later went on to occupy the villa.





Acton Scott Hall

The Making of the Estate

The first official record of the estate appears in 1086 in the Domesday Survey when the land was owned by Roger de Montgomery. The land had previously belonged to Edric, a Saxon lord who was forced to forfeit his lands to the Norman invaders. He is remembered as the folk hero Edric the Wild, famous for his fierce opposition to Norman rule.

By the end of the 16th century the Acton family had acquired most of the land in the parish. Acton Scott Hall was built around 1580 on the site of an earlier dwelling and was one of the earliest brick houses in Shropshire. Family records show that in the mid 18th century Edward Acton began modernising and improving the Home Farm. By 1769 he had rebuilt the farm yard to be both elegant and functional. Edward was also an enthusiastic plantsman and responsible for planting orchards and woodland around the estate.

Brought over	456	18	3 $\frac{1}{2}$
for 6 packs of cards	00	3	0
for Fish	00	3	0
Cakes	00	0	9 $\frac{1}{2}$
Muscles	00	0	6 $\frac{1}{2}$
Turns of Ballon	00	0	10
10 for 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ of Washlights	00	3	0
for Carriage of the Sea & Coffe	00	1	0
others	00	0	8
lost at cards	00	2	0
for eggs	00	0	0
for 2 Couple of Rabbits	00	1	0
14 for 8 Couple of Bowls	00	1	0
for the Cooper	00	3	0
Gave 3 poor poor men	00	1	6
for the Man for the pig	00	1	3
16 for a collar of Brandy from Bracco	1	12	0
for the Michels Bill	00	3	8
for Dish &ysters	00	3	6
for Berry grave	00	6	10
for Muscles & cakes	00	1	0
for Rabbits	00	1	0
for Eggs to Wash	00	0	8
Gave George	00	2	0
17 for the money for the	00	4	6
for the money for the	00	0	6
19 for the money for the	00	2	6
	473	1	5

Edward Acton's cashbook: a fascinating insight into life on the estate. Private collection



Thomas Pendarves Stackhouse

Edward had one daughter, Susannah who married the Cornish landowner and botanist, John Stackhouse. Her eldest son, Edward, inherited the Pendarves estate in Cornwall leaving the second son, Thomas, to become actively involved with running the Acton Scott estate.

Private collection

Continued working on the new road which was begun last autumn. Enlarged the garden and put up the wooden fence at the bottom. This summer was remarkably dry and warm, the crops in this parish were in general very good ... In the autumn altered the stables and made the new saddle room. Put up the stove in the old servants hall from which warm air is brought in pipes to the rooms above.

Journal of Thomas Pendarves Stackhouse 1818

Between 1807 and 1820 new gardens were laid out around the Hall and many of the dilapidated timber framed cottages and farm houses were re-faced with stone. Hedges and woodland were planted, boundary walls constructed and a new road network established. In essence the farm landscape we see today was shaped at this time.

Thomas eventually inherited the property on the death of his mother in 1834 and assumed the name Acton. He died a year later and his widow Frances was given a life tenancy of the estate. She continued to make improvements to the farm and the lives of the tenants on the estate.

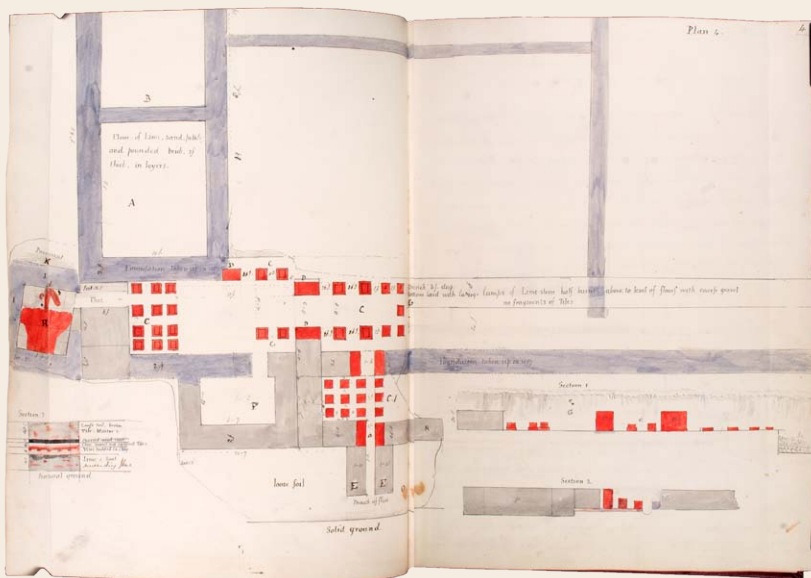


Frances Stackhouse Acton

Frances Stackhouse Acton was born in 1794, the eldest daughter of Thomas Andrew Knight, celebrated botanist, horticulturalist and president of the Horticultural Society. Frances had a happy and enlightened childhood, moving in the society of scientists and eminent natural historians.

Private collection

At the age of 17 she became engaged to Thomas Pendarves Stackhouse and one year later they were married, arriving at a dilapidated Acton Scott Hall during a terrible flood. Frances Stackhouse Acton was an accomplished artist and antiquarian and was responsible for the first excavation of the Roman villa. She illustrated and published many books on the history and architecture of the county.



Plan of the Roman Villa from the notebooks of Frances Stackhouse Acton



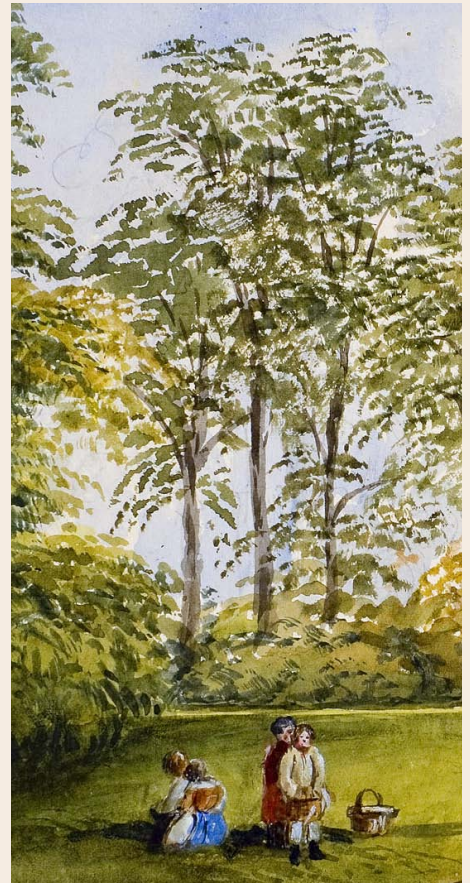
On the event of her death in 1881, a local newspaper records how much Frances was loved and respected by the local community.

Funeral of Mrs Stackhouse Acton

The remains of a much-beloved and sincerely lamented lady were deposited today in the grave – in the church yard of Acton Scott on Friday January 28th 1881, by the side of her husband, whom she has survived by more than a generation and her only child, who died young.

... She left behind a name which was a household word for all that is good, kind and benevolent. She never refused an application for assistance and responded to appeals from far and near. To local tradesmen she was a kind patron, spending all her money in the neighbourhood and with no desire to change as long as well and faithfully served. Her servants grew grey in her service, and looked up to her with affection and respect... No heart ever more overflowed with kindness and charity to all mankind than hers.

Salopian Shreds and Patches Feb 1881



Watercolours by Frances Stackhouse Acton



Acton Scott School c1900

Reading, Writing and Arithmetic

One of Frances' most significant gifts to the Acton Scott estate was the school and school house built in 1866 at a cost of £600.

The new school replaced a small 'dame school' that took place in a two roomed stone cottage elsewhere on the estate.



Mr & Mrs Williams and pupils c1890

The schoolteacher lived in the right hand side of the building while the schoolroom occupied the left. The average attendance was of about 47 children aged between 5 and 12 years old. The teacher was assisted by a 'pupil teacher', a past scholar aged between 13 and 18. Children came to the school from the surrounding villages on the estate, some walking over 4 miles from home and back again in the afternoon.

Victorian schools were required to keep a log book and the principal teacher was obliged to make an entry at least once a week. Mr Williams was the teacher between 1875 and 1900 and whilst he kept his entries to the bare minimum they still offer insight into life at the school. The most common entry is a reference to the low attendance of pupils, sometimes because of severe weather, sickness and bad coughs, but usually because of the availability of work on local farms.



‘Opened school with a very small number of scholars who are, some of them, engaged in the harvest and others are picking whinberrie and blackberries’

September 9 1890

Holiday in celebration of Inspection of school by K.M.I and the Diocesan Inspector. Summary of report received this day of which the following is a verbatim copy.

‘The children are clean, cheerful, well-mannered and orderly.

They have passed a successful examination in the elementary subjects, and their intelligence and general knowledge are satisfactory.

Greater variety of method in arithmetic is needed among the lower classes.

The elder scholars work well sums requiring thought. The sewing is good. I should like to see knitting’

July 28 1874



School pupils c1911



George and Mary Miles c.1880 ©Shropshire Archives

In the 1870's farms across the country faced an uncertain future.

Britain started to import cheap grain on a large scale from the North American Prairies and Argentina causing the price of home-grown wheat to drop. On top of this a series of unusually wet summers followed by a number of summer droughts conspired to make the job of the farmer even more difficult.

Then came further overseas competition in the meat market. In 1882 the first cargo of refrigerated mutton was brought by steamship from New Zealand. Seven years later over a million carcasses a year were imported to meet demand from a growing urban population.



Stacking stooks at Acton Scott today

Many farmers stopped growing grain and simply used their land to graze animals. Tenants were forced to quit their farms and many were tempted to try life in Australia, America and New Zealand. The 'Shrewsbury Chronicle' ran advertisements telling of low cost emigration to Canada where substantial land grants awaited adventurous settlers. And of those that remained about half a million male agricultural workers also left the land to seek better wages in the growing industrial towns.

In the Shropshire Hills regular hiring fairs for workers continued to take place but records show a gradual decline in farm labourers and an ever changing population drifting through Acton Scott.

EMIGRATION TO CANADA.

Government ASSISTED PASSAGE, at reduced fares. Pamphlets, and all information on application to the Managing Directors.

DOMINION LINE TO CANADA.
Consisting of Eleven Powerful Steamers.

Fares—
 Cabin, £10 10/-
 Steerage, £8 6/-

Through fares to all parts of Canada and United States on the lowest terms.—Apply to FLINN, MAIN, & MONTGOMERY, 24, James St., Liverpool; or to their local Agents.

In 1882 it was estimated that there was one pig to every four people in Shropshire.

Anyone with a large enough garden could keep a pig in a sty. A young weaner pig could be purchased and fattened up on garden and household waste to produce a good supply of meat, which could be salted and preserved to feed a family for months.



Tamworth pig at Acton Scott

The local breed of the Midlands is a sandy coloured pig that takes its name from the Staffordshire town of Tamworth. Tamworths are good foragers with the long snout of their hog ancestors. They have a wiry coat which helps them to withstand the extremes of temperature of an outside life.

The pig provided ham, pork, bacon, sausages and preparations using the offal, such as brawn made from the head and black pudding from the blood.



Sheep and horse fair, Church Stretton c1905 ©Shropshire Archives

Shropshire Sheep

The Shropshire Sheep has its origins on the nearby Long Mynd. During the first half of the nineteenth century the Shropshire Sheep was crossed with the Southdown to get rid of its horns and to make it more docile and suited to the enclosed lush, low lying pastures as well as the hills. Today they are rarely seen but can still provide the farmer with early fat lambs and a good clip of fine quality wool.



Feeding the chickens c1908 ©Shropshire Archives

Poultry

Ducks, geese, chickens and turkeys were important to the farmer for eggs, meat and for their feathers, used to make pillows and mattresses. It was usual to find a wide variety of poultry on a typical Shropshire hill farm and today at Acton Scott there are Light Sussex and Dorking hens, Brecon Buff geese, Aylesbury ducks and Norfolk Black turkeys.



Dairy maids c1915 ©Shropshire Archives

Dairy Cows

By 1900 the Shorthorn Cow had overtaken the Longhorn in popularity and was providing Britain with the majority of the nation's milk. Examples of both the Longhorn and Shorthorn breeds can be seen at Acton Scott.

The first practical British milking machine was made in 1895 but hand milking was widely practiced until after 1920. The method was labour intensive as one pair of skilled hands was required for every 10-12 cows in milk. Today at Acton Scott the cows are still milked twice a day by hand.



The coming of the railways to rural areas meant that by 1908 over 80% of milk left the farm in liquid form while the remainder would have been converted into butter and cheese on the farm and taken to regular local markets.



Image courtesy of The Sutcliffe Gallery



The Bailiff

At Acton Scott the bailiff and his family lived in the cottage attached to the threshing barn.

Originally there was no farmhouse and the farm was run from the Hall. In the nineteenth

century, when accommodation for a farm bailiff was required, the end of the barn was converted into a cottage. The bailiff was responsible for the running of Home Farm and, as the senior farmer on the estate, received the annual rent payments from the other tenant farmers.



©Lion Television Ltd 2009

In 2008 historians Alex Langlands, Peter Ginn and Ruth Goodman spent a year on the Acton Scott Estate recreating the life of a tenant farmer in 1885. Lion TV recorded this time-travelling experiment and created The Victorian Farm series which was first broadcast by the BBC in 2009.

Richard Carter was recorded as ‘workman bailiff’ at Home Farm in the 1891 census. He arrived at Acton Scott in 1882 with his wife Eliza, who is known to have been in poor health, and their two children, Clifford and Annie. They subsequently had two more children who were born at Acton Scott. Eliza died in 1889 aged 40 and in 1890 Richard married Hannah Chappell, a housemaid at the Hall. Richard finally retired to a small holding on the estate and died in June 1906 aged 57.



Tugford c1905 ©Shropshire Archives

“Yes I suppose that times were harder then. But I’m glad that I was born to see that way of life on the farm. I’d much rather have grown up then than now. You see we didn’t know any other way of doing things and we didn’t expect as much as people do today.”



Walking to market, Church Stretton c1900 ©Shropshire Archives

The Bailiff's Wife

The bailiff's wife had a very important role on the farm. She not only had to raise a family and keep her home in order but she also had to contribute to the farm income by managing the dairy, attending local country markets, feeding the poultry and helping with manual farm work when required.

Monday was washing day always, nothing else but washing. Tuesday it was baking and ironing. Wednesday was a churning, buttermaking day. Thursday was market day. Friday was always a cleaning of the house right through practically. Saturday we had to deliver the customers eggs and butter that had been ordered on the Thursday.

Domestic chores had a set routine but feeding the family was probably the most time consuming of all household work for the bailiff's wife. Most of the food was home produced and the family supplied their own meat by keeping a pig, poultry and by catching rabbits. Bread was still the staple food.



The bailiff's wife toasting bread in the cottage at Acton Scott

Mother used to use the old fashioned bakehouse, fill it full of sticks, set fire to it and burn it and get it red hot. Then get the sticks out and ash and get it red hot. She used to bake 16 loaves, big, what we used to call 'oven-bottom' ones, you know, just flat on the bricks.

Milk was brought in night and morning – put in large round pans and later skimmed off for butter.

On churning days the cream was put into a round churn and the handle turned until the butter was formed.

It was then well washed, salted and made up into half pounds for sale.

We had our own round butter print.

Making butter was equally time consuming and required hard work and skill. The money needed by the bailiff's wife to buy weekly provisions came from the sale of poultry, eggs and dairy produce. Hens and ducks were kept for eggs and meat whilst turkeys and geese would be fattened for Christmas. All the produce had to be packed in baskets and taken into town on Market day.



Brecon Buff geese at Acton Scott



Working the horses at Acton Scott

The Heavy Horse

By the second half of the nineteenth century the use of oxen for farm work was becoming rare, and the horse was taking over as the major draught force in agriculture.

A large number of working horses were cross breeds of a size best suited to the farm and farmer. However the three distinct breeds of indigenous heavy horse - the Suffolk, Clydesdale and Shire - came to be recognised for their capacity for hard work. And it is the Shire, the most widespread of these working horse types that can be seen at Acton Scott today.

The stables and adjoining harness room are not farm buildings but originally formed the stable block for Acton Scott Hall. The stable interior with its high ceilings and decorative woodwork was fitted out c.1830 for the carriage horses from the Hall. The farm horses were kept in the low building that today houses the cows.

Instructions for the working horse

<i>Two clicks of the tongue</i>	<i>Move forward</i>
<i>'To me'</i>	<i>Turn left</i>
<i>'Away'</i>	<i>Turn right</i>
<i>'Steady'</i>	<i>Slow down</i>
<i>'Whoa'</i>	<i>Stop</i>
<i>'Back'</i>	<i>Reverse</i>

The Bailiff took his instructions from the Hall but he in turn managed the Waggoner who was responsible for the welfare and management of the horses. Today the Waggoner and the horses still work most days of the week carrying out whatever seasonal tasks are required.

You had to get up about six or quarter to in the morning to feed them and get them ready see. And you went out to work at half past seven when it was light. I've seen them out with the hurricane lamps, hung on the hames of the horse harness waiting for the light to come and start. And you went out till 12 o'clock when you came in and had two hours for dinner so as you had an hour getting your food ready for the horses at night...and then you went out to work again till it got dark in winter; 6 o'clock in the summer, the six days of the week like.



Ploughing with heavy horses ©Shropshire Museums

Farm Trades and Traditional Skills

As well as directly employing a variety of labourers on his farm, the bailiff would have been dependent on the skills of other craftsmen.



Cutting thatching spurs, Bucknell c1900
©Shropshire Archives



The wheelwright, Aston Eyre c1900
©Shropshire Archives

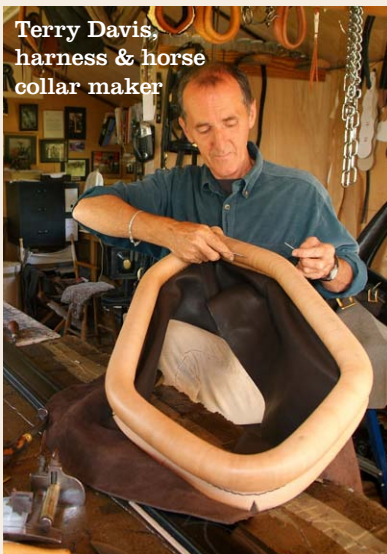
These would include men who visited the farm to undertake specialist tasks such as hedge laying and the steam threshing contractor. Itinerant workers such as the bodger produced simple furniture while others made hurdles, besoms, baskets and rakes as they passed through the estate. The 1881 census for Acton Scott includes the names of three clog makers from Lancashire who were living in the village.

By the late nineteenth century most ploughs and large metal wheeled farm implements would have been mass produced and readily available from a network of local agents and suppliers.

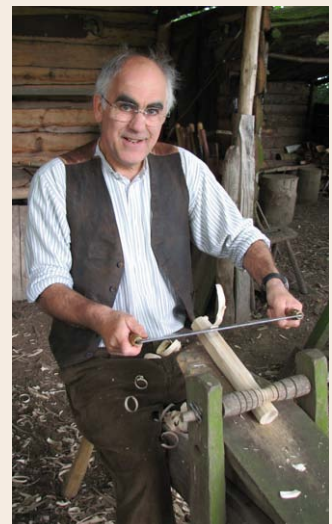


No rural community could have existed without its Smithy. The wheelwright, would have required iron tyres for his waggon wheels along with a constant supply of nails. The local saddler and harness maker needed hooks and chains and all woodworking trades wanted specialised cutting and edging tools. Before 1979, the blacksmith would also shoe the horses but, by law, this can now only be carried out by a farrier.

The wheelwright continued to produce wooden vehicles for farm use as there was little development in the mass production of wagons. The hub of the wheel is made from elm; the spokes are formed from oak and the feloes that fit together to form the outer ring of the wheel are made from ash, elm, oak or beech. The final part of the process is the metal tyre fitted with the help of the blacksmith.



Leatherworkers were in great demand until the beginning of the twentieth century producing harnesses for the two million working horses. Many concentrated on just one section of the craft - some made harnesses, some collars, while others focused on saddles and bridles.



Ian Wall, the bodger
at Acton Scott



Tractor drawn manure spreader c1920.

Image courtesy of Whitchurch area Archaeology Group

©Shropshire Archives

The end of an Era

During the mid to late nineteenth century many labour saving farming implements began to arrive in the countryside and companies such as Ransomes, Sims and Jeffries of Ipswich achieved worldwide fame.

The availability of reasonably priced seed drills meant that farmers no longer had to broadcast seed by hand. Inventors and manufacturers were quick to see the potential for increased efficiency in the labour intensive harvest and the self-binder reaper appeared in the 1870's. Here the corn was cut and bound into sheaves before being delivered to the side of the machine. With a reaper binder like the one in use at Acton Scott, ten acres of corn could be cut in one day as opposed to the one acre that could be cut by one man with a scythe.

Having cut the corn with mechanical reapers, it still required threshing in order to separate the grain from the straw. Machine threshing in a 'drum' or 'box' had been available to farmers in the mid nineteenth century and some fifty years later a more refined version of steam engine had been developed to power it. The considerable cost involved in purchasing a steam engine and threshing machine meant that this task was the role of itinerant contractors who journeyed from farm to farm.



Steam threshing takes place at Acton Scott every autumn.

Not all the farmer's tasks were revolutionised in the same way. For the majority, ploughing the land still involved horse power until the internal combustion engine gradually replaced animals as a source of power. On many farms, the only alteration to machines was a discarding of the horse shafts and the fitting of a tractor hitch!.



Acton Scott Historic Working Farm is an award-winning museum as well as a centre for the practice, training and conservation of traditional rural skills. A programme of courses takes place every year. Contact us to find out more.



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