

Churchill Island: farming in a museum

CHRISTINE GRAYDEN, CHURCHILL ISLAND

Churchill Island Heritage Farm is a unique environment that uses farming activities to showcase rare trades and provides visitors with a special experience. Christine Grayden shares the objectives of the farm and the wide-ranging jobs performed by the farm staff.



While farm demonstrations are nothing new in Australia, combining them with an accredited museum is definitely different. Many attendees at the Museums Australia (Victoria) 2016 annual conference will remember Churchill Island Heritage Farm as the bucolic setting for the Thursday evening event. Beautiful vistas, historic gardens, original settlers' cottages and the restored homestead all exist harmoniously alongside sleek farm animals, café and retail space, and a visitor centre featuring historic information.

Churchill Island is located approximately 90 minutes from Melbourne and is connected to neighbouring Phillip Island via a single lane bridge spanning a mangrove inlet. Visitors often feel as if they have stepped back in time as they enter the historic Amess House and Rogers' Cottages, thanks to the period furnishings (1860s-1890s). The beautiful gardens and weathered outbuildings complete the picture of a heritage farm, but these elements are not the only recipes for success.

The fact that Churchill Island is so highly regarded as a visitor destination is due in no small part to the people that bring the farm to life every day; Farm Coordinator Trevor Heywood and his two Farm Assistants Toby Degoumois and Peter Officer. When Trevor arrived nine years ago he brought not only considerable experience in farming life, but also ideas about how to truly engage with visitors whose origins are much more urban than rural. Daily farming demonstrations soon began with two machine shearing demonstrations, hand cow milking, whip cracking and working dogs. Visitor numbers increased dramatically and now the island has over 137,000 visitors per year.

Each of these farm workers brings a unique background to their roles. Trevor hails from a farming family and has worked as a shearer as well as event manager specialising in weddings. Toby has been a station manager, horse breaker, mine worker, and shearer, while Peter started his farming career as a jackaroo before moving on to work as a shearer, stock and station agent, sheep and cattle auctioneer, farm manager, and water diviner.

Below top and centre: Farm Coordinator, Trevor Heywood (left) and Farm Assistant, Peter Officer giving a shearing demonstration at Churchill Island Heritage Farm.

Bottom: Two of the three Clydesdale horses, Syd (left) and Max, taking a rest after work on the farm. All photos: Christine Grayden.

The skillsets these men bring all contribute to the effective running of the island. When the shearing demonstration area was set to undergo a rebuild, Trevor, Toby and Peter joined forces to enhance the visitor experience.

After completion of the shed to bring the entire area under cover, Toby completed the steel fabrication for the new tiered seating, and Peter restored and installed the old shearing machinery plant, then built the seats, yards and gates.

There are also typical farm duties in the mornings such as feeding and watering the animals, changing animal bedding, fencing, making gates, collecting and delivering livestock, animal husbandry, and pasture renovation.

Visitors come from Asia, Europe, UK and North America, many of them on coaches as part of a tour to Phillip Island which often includes the Koala Conservation Centre, the Nobbies and the Penguin Parade. However, the experience they get at Churchill Island is very different from the other venues.

Trevor says, "It's important to have the interactive side of the demonstrations. Visitors can milk the cow and try their hand at whip cracking. They can handle the greasy wool straight off the sheep's back, and pat the Clydesdale horses. They can really get a feel for rural Australia, both past and present and feel that they are part of the experience."

It is the interaction with the visitors which the farm workers like best about their jobs. To see the amazement on the visitors' faces when milk spurts from the cow; when the newly shorn fleece is thrown in one piece onto the skirting table; when a visitor achieves a resounding whip crack—these make the hard work all worthwhile.

"On Churchill Island we are keeping the old skills alive and sharing them with the public. It's important for us to share our knowledge and show visitors something of Australian rural heritage and bush culture. This is life before the mobile phone and plastics, and many of our visitors have never seen anything like this before."

Christine Grayden, Churchill Island Curator. Churchill Island Heritage Farm is managed by Phillip Island Nature Parks and is open from 10am-5pm daily (except Christmas Day 2-5pm).