

OLD GLORY

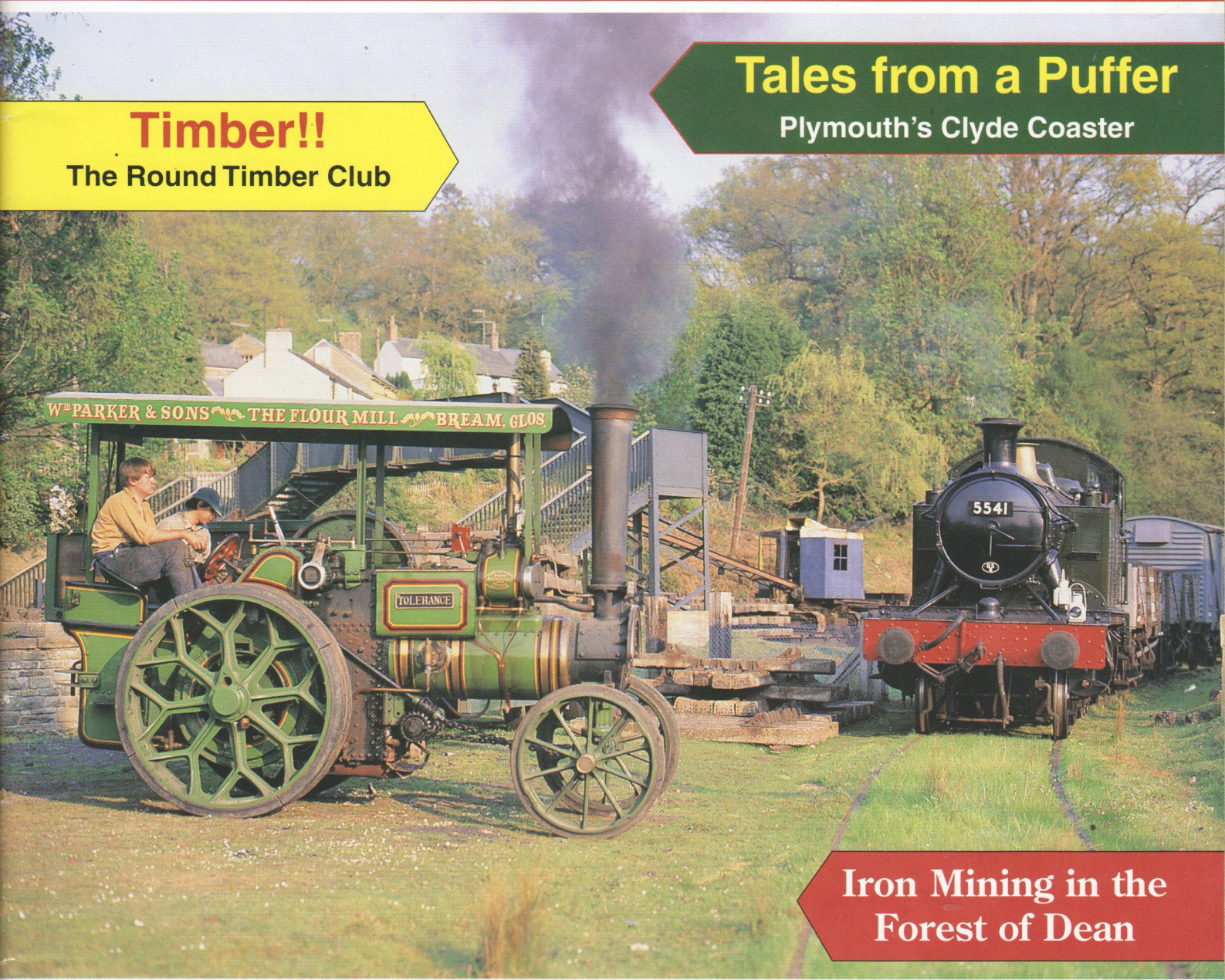
VINTAGE RESTORATION TODAY

Timber!!

The Round Timber Club

Tales from a Puffer

Plymouth's Clyde Coaster



Iron Mining in the Forest of Dean

London's Buses Reversed

We Visit the Cobham Bus Museum



An American 1917 Fordson F, the first tractor in the collection.

Graham Finlayson visits a privately-owned French Agricultural Museum.

To find the *Musée du Machinisme Agricole* on the map, look for St Antonin-Noble-Val. It is in Tarn et Garonne, to the north of Toulouse, NW of Albi, SE of Cahors and SW of Rodez. Seemingly defying logic, though it's in Tarn et Garonne, it lies on the broad slow-flowing Aveyron. The countryside hereabouts is, said a visitor, "Like Dorset, only more so": rolling green hills, some of them forested, and chalk cliffs that plunge to the river.

St Antonin is historic – a



French Leave

Roman settlement and Edwardian spa with a well-preserved old centre of mainly 12th to 15th century buildings. The Maison de l'Amour is situated

conveniently near to the English Barracks and it's believed that the two establishments had a busy and mutually satisfactory relationship during the 100

Years War.

Get on the road that virtually encircles the village, pass the gendarmerie, and you'll see the signs for the Grotte du Bosc and for the Musée du Machinisme Agricole. Follow the direction indicated up the D75, which winds uphill for two miles or more until, shortly after levelling out on the plateau at the top, you'll see the sign to the grotto (another local attraction) on the left and, immediately, the Musée: a collection of old and new barns on the right; once there, you have a good chance of meeting the





1916 Ruston Proctor portable engine.

useful suggestion, only to receive a reply in the occitan patois: "Pute de drole – sorta d'aqui, tu foutre coup de pé au cul" (very loosely: "You snotty nosed kid, bugger off or you'll get your arse kicked!").

The flow of recollections had started when we asked him what made him begin his collection of tractors and machinery. "I wanted to be able to show my grandchildren what the old machines were like."

Twenty years ago, at a local breaker's yard where he had gone to look for a part, three old Fordsons were being unloaded from a truck. The first one off, toppled over and smashed its radiator, the second one fell off the ramp and broke a wheel and Emile asked: "How much for the third?" He paid 700FF. There and then his collection had started.

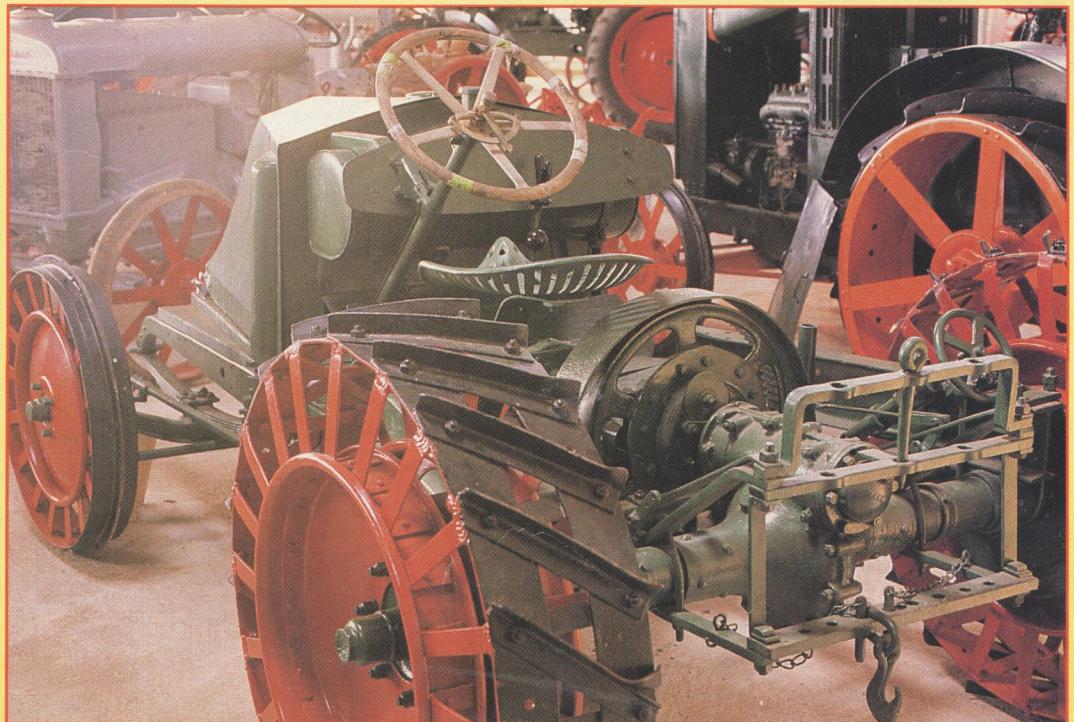
His mother had died when he was five, his father died when he was 15 and he had maybe two years' schooling, starting at six years old and attending only when father had no work for him to do. After father's death, apart from managing their own small farm with his younger brother, he worked with itinerant gangs of farm workers who served the farms in the region.

He remembers the machines he has 'met' in his life: in 1946 (aged 13) he had driven an old 1928 AM26 Austin tractor for one hour and, totally hooked, he longed to be old enough to have his own tractor. He recalls helping with the 'battage' (threshing) when the power was supplied by a 1914-18 war Renault-built Caterpillar canon-pulling tractor adapted for agriculture.

By 1953, he had bought his first tractor: a steel-wheeled American Deering. It was the same year that he inherited his share of the family farm properties. Now he had 19 hectares and his tractor and the three family horses had been reduced to two,

proprietor-curator.

Aged 10, Emile Rames was already driving a reaper drawn by a pair of oxen; his father had adapted the seat so that the small boy could reach the controls. Young Emile was fascinated by mechanical power and, whenever tractors or other powered machines were working in the neighbourhood, he would go and watch, studying how they were started up and what they could do. He had watched so carefully that, when a tractor driver, recently graduated from horses or oxen, was having difficulty with his machine, young Emile would make a



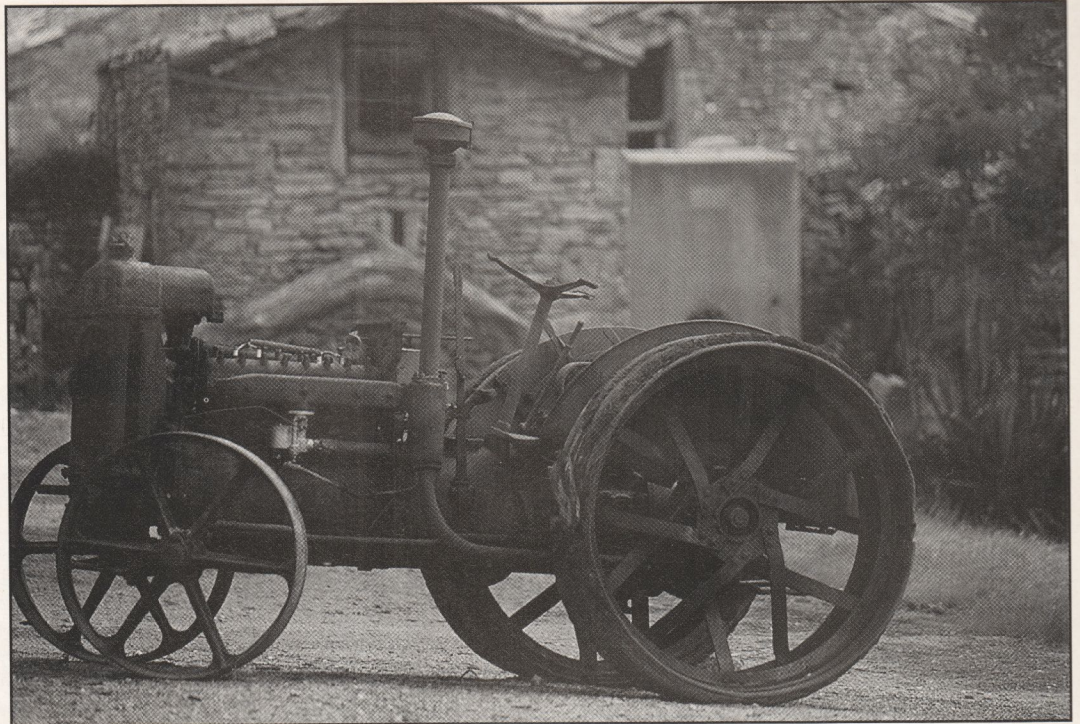
Left: A general view of the Museum.

Right: A converted Renault 10/20 car into a tractor.

This Austin is one of many wrecks awaiting attention around the farm.

as one was sold to pay death duties. While working for the itinerant labour gangs, he had, nevertheless, had his own employee on his land – a Portuguese who worked the two oxen 12 hours a day – but the oxen were phased out with the advent of the tractors. Did he regret the retirement of the animals? “Non, mais c’était un grand soulagement pour les boeufs!” (“No, but it was a great relief for the animals!”)

Now he was a small contractor in his own right and, after two years of working all hours, he changed the Deering for a McCormick M, financing it (to the disapproval of the conservative locals) on hire purchase. He still worked



‘équipe’, we’d be woken at 4.00am with a coffee and prune” (The ‘prune’ being the potent eau-de-vie made from the ubiquitous local plum). Then he recounted the day, as any good Frenchman should, by the programme of feeding: “We’d work till 8.00am when petit déjeuner would perhaps be soup, cheese, patés, sausage and wine – maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of a litre to a litre per man. I used to mix mine with the soup. At midi (12.00) we’d stop for a large lunch...” Here Emile’s eyes gleamed and he rubbed his hands – evidently a good memory, “...and one would drink another litre of wine. At four we’d stop for a goûter: salads and a cold spread and may be another litre of wine.” That’s a lot of wine?

“They had to get rid of it – the whole countryside was vineyards then. At 9.30pm we’d come in for dinner and another litre or more of wine – and there’d be dancing and sometimes someone would stand on the table and sing a song; there was a wind-up

Above: Another restoration project – a Citroën Fire Engine.

with the farm labour team and, by now, had graduated to driving a Field-Marshall with them. He mentioned that, on tour with the team, he’d often sleep under the tractor or on straw in a barn. Didn’t the farmers provide beds? “Oh yes, but I preferred straw to being bitten by fleas and bed bugs”.

So he was working for his own customers who were mostly his neighbouring farmers, working with the touring team and, when there were gaps in this schedule, he and two or three friends would tour the Gaillac wine region by bicycle, picking up casual work in the vineyards. Always he worked long hours to pay for his desire for better tractors. How long? “Well, working with the

Right: A Merlin thresher for lucerne and clover seed, built in 1900 by Vierzon.





Getting down to the restoration work.

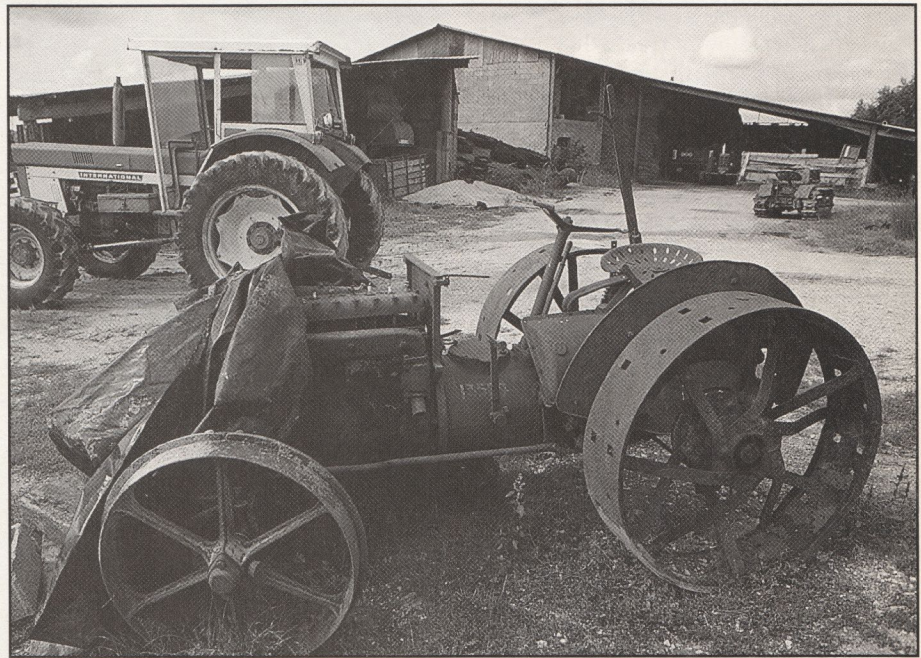
locals. Much of his contracting now was for three or four ageing neighbouring farmers whose land he farmed on a 50/50 basis. He did the work, and the profits were split between them.

He was farming altogether around 130 hectares now and, with his brother and a hired hand, they'd keep the McCormick going 24 hours a day, using up to 200 litres of fuel: one of them would maintain a ferry service, by motorcycle, carrying jerrycans of fuel. Sometimes there were setbacks though, when, maybe a plough would break when it hit a stone. The Suez crisis helped him because many neighbourhood farms could not get fuel for their tractors, but Emile's local supplier favoured him because he always paid cash on the nail for his fuel.

Over the 10 years from 1955-1965, he went through the range of McCormick tractors and, once he started the

gramophone..." Dancing? "Oh yes, there were plenty of girls around – you see there'd be maybe 30 people at a table and the girls from local farms would come to help. I remember that they'd keep the (3 litre) bottles of wine cool by lowering them down the well in a basket until it was just above water level." You drank any water? (St Antonin N-V is a spa village, famous for its health-giving water, which is marketed in plastic bottles today). "Non, non, non! D'you know, a cousin of mine, who is now dead, drank an average of eight litres of wine a day?" Wasn't everyone always drunk? "I remember one man who always went to sleep drunk at around 1am, when the dinner and dancing were over, but at 4.00am he'd be standing in the barn doorway, his forco (pitchfork) in his hand shouting 'Atal arrivé, un pao' (I'm the first to arrive) – and he'd be perfectly sober."

Emile was buying land; his first extra piece of territory was 16 hectares, bought with a Credit Agricole loan at 2% interest! This too, was considered rash by the

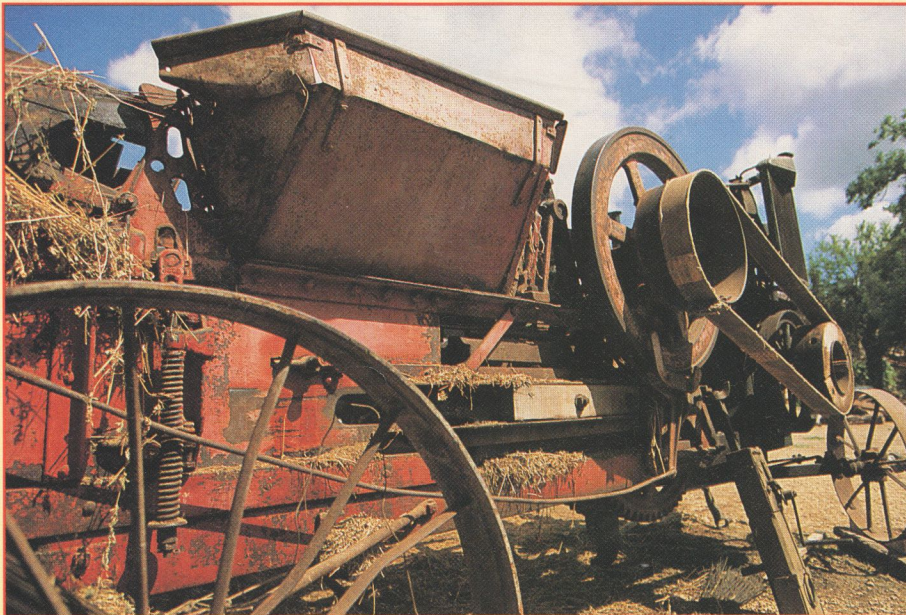


Above: All around the farm there are wrecks awaiting attention like this Austin?



collection around 1970, he found his "collectibles" through his contracting contacts. Hadn't the German occupation denuded the region of what might have been collectible tractors? "Not really: it was always a poor region agriculturally and so most of the tractors around at that time – and there perhaps only around 10 working in our neighbourhood – were too old to interest the Germans. Any valuable tractors were hidden under piles of faggots

The Ransomes Locomobil. The barn behind houses a display of small stationary engines and also early rotavators.



A 1922 McCormack Baler.

imported with the US Forces in 1917. It later found work in the Gaelic vineyards, but proved too fast and the cat-tracks damaged the vines. And the third choice is his Ransomes 'Locomobile' (portable) – restored at the museum. English steamers have a lot of cachet here.

Other choice exhibits include an early Renault 10/20hp car, which had been kept in a barn and converted into a tractor by a local man in 1944 (when no new tractors were available). Emile says it is as good as the small pre-war Fordson – and has better brakes. Rare, too, is the 1922 Renault PE 20hp with its radiator aft of the engine. Few survived because it was 'pas grand chose'.

He believes another rarity is the 1934 H1 Société Française 40hp (No.188). He doesn't think any of these French machines were exported to the UK. This one has its wheels converted from steel

in the farm courtyards. Every bit of spare cash went into buying old tractors." How much? "I don't know, if I started to calculate, I'd be sick."

Now he owns around 80, already about 40 of them are restored to working order, and housed in the museum buildings which were built with family and friends, and without the aid of grants or any special assistance. As more machines are restored, he'll need more new buildings – the present ones are already packed.

In addition to the tractors, there is a wide range of other agricultural equipment, most of it in working order, restored on site. Most of the restoration is done by Emile and his farmer son Gerald; a friend, who is a steam expert, helps with the restoration of the steam 'locomobiles'. Both the steamers he owns are this type (non-self propelling). His eyes go wistful when he expresses his 'grand rêve': his great dream is to own a British showman's traction engine. His current prize piece is the (fully working) 1914 International Harvester Titan. Number two is, may be the (US) 10/20hp Clevelam cannon-puller built in 1914 and



Above: 1935 Lanz Bulldog built in Germany.

blades to solid rubber. Pneumatic tyres were an option at the time.

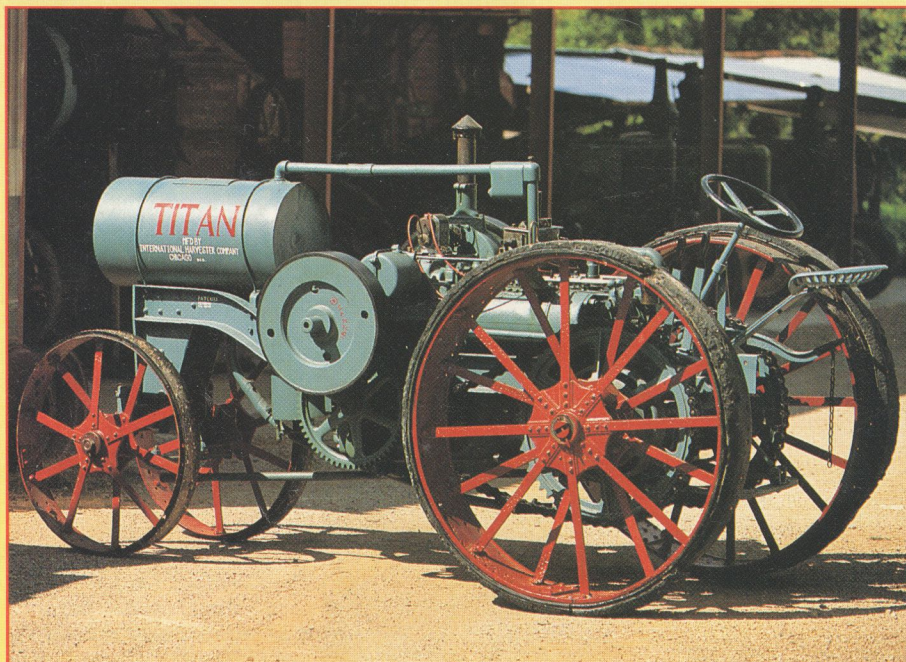
What about photographing the German rarity, a 1935 Lanz Bulldog? Its engine will run on any oil – even burning old sump oil. "Well, we cannot move it just now – the blue tits are nesting in it."

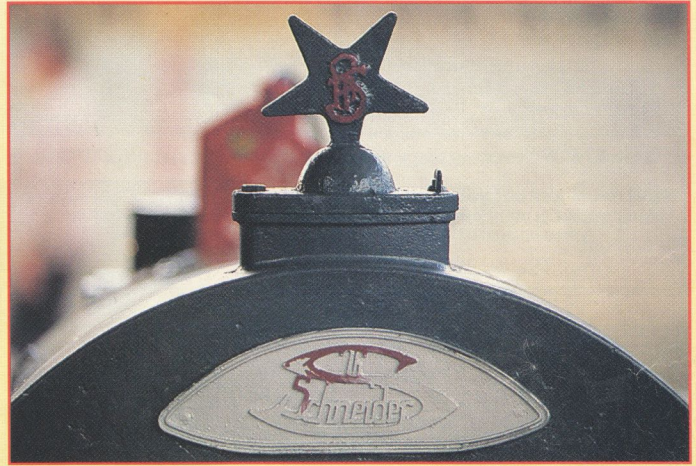
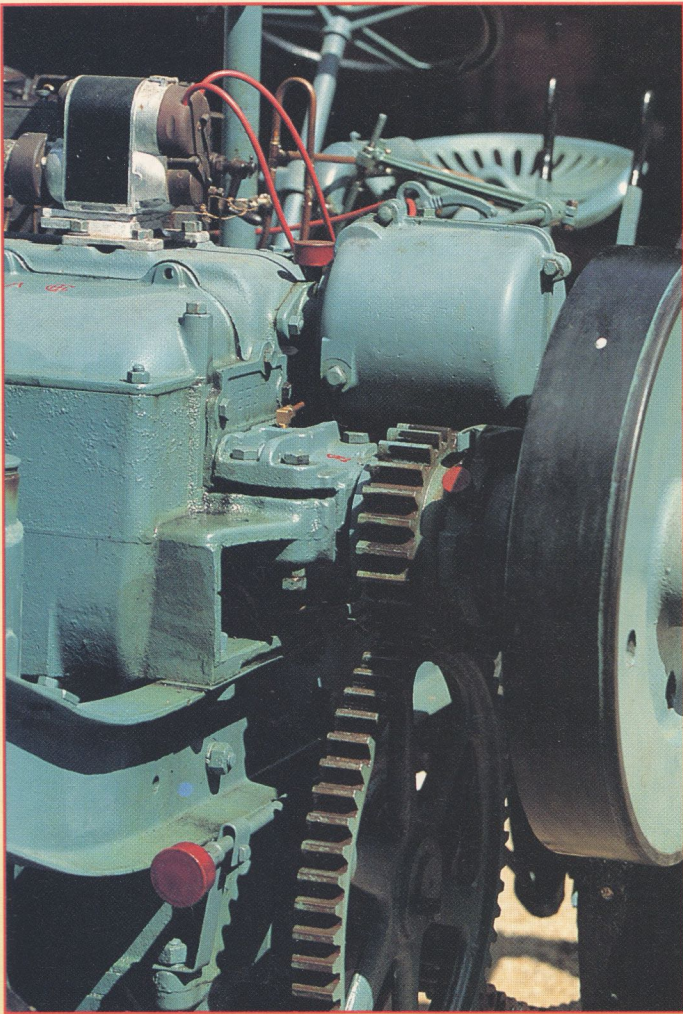
Another cannon is the 1919 French Schneider (No.409) seemingly inspired by the Clevelam design, but with more advanced suspension. The canny French made this with greater performance flexibility so that, when it retired to Civvy Street, it was a useful worker in the vineyards.

The Percheron is a French-built Lanz; 1,900 were built, but it is now a great rarity.

Not long after the Museum opened in 1992, a local contact introduced a man from the Paris region. "He arrived in a

A 1914 International Harvester Titan.

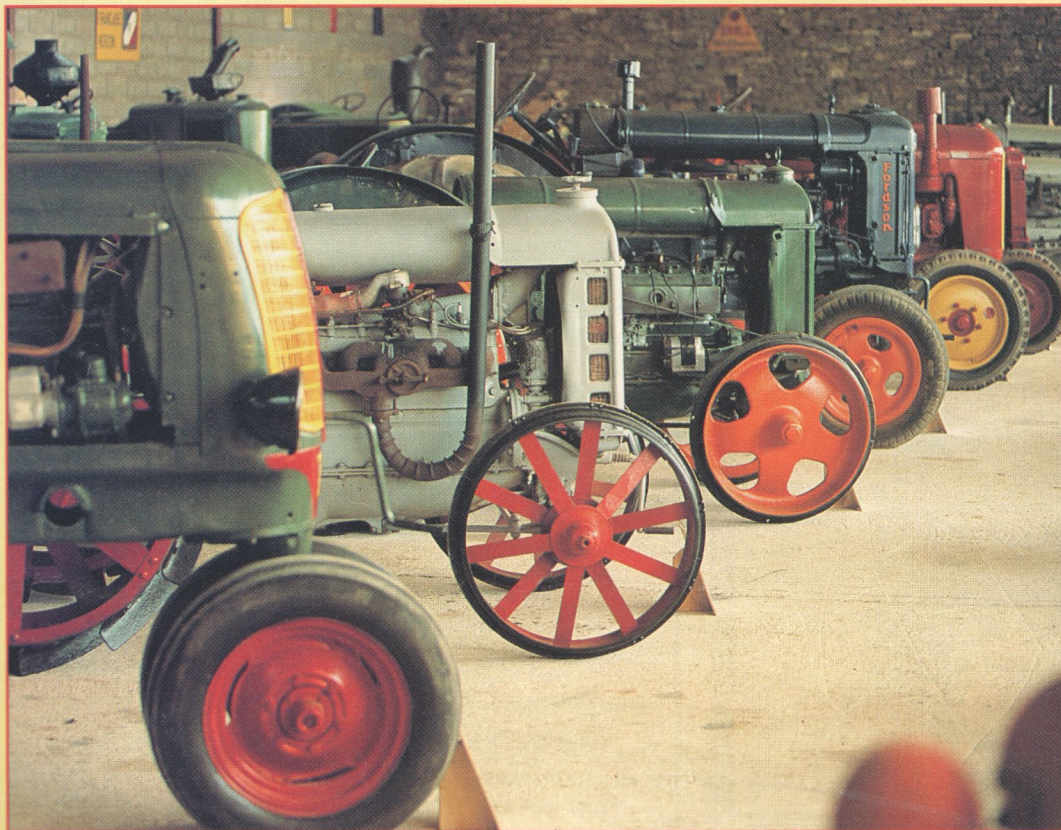




Above: The Titan in detail.

Top right: The 1919 Schneider.

Right: The badge detail from the 1919 Schneider.



big car and was a bit arrogant – he had been given a subsidy to start a ‘musée agricole’ (Emile gives a scornful emphasis to the word ‘subvention’ [subsidy]). “Il est arrivé comme un type à pognon” (He came like someone with money to burn). He says: “J’achèterai ça, ça, ça, ça...” He said he wanted the Ransomes, too” So what did you do? “I said they were not for sale.”

Emile is walking through the museum expounding to visitors and stopping, here and there, to swing a starting handle to start a machine. When the old engines bang into life, his face lights up: “Sometimes I think that, in my retirement, I’d be better off without all the tractors, but I get such satisfaction when the engine of something I’ve rescued from a bramble patch fires, and it’s alive again.”

A small selection of tractors inside the Museum.