

2. Sheep bell

Associate Director - Archive Services, Guy Baxter, shares the extraordinary history of the next 51 Voices choice, an animal bell with a performative past. This object sits in the Museum's stores, packed beside a vast array of similar items. Seeing it resting silently alongside so many other bells, little would you know this example has a far more metropolitan sound to its story, linking to fame, festivity, and the foundation of another cultural institution.

Whitechapel Bell Foundry, Sheep bell used as a prop, early 1950s

What could be more rural than a sheep bell? Hung around the neck to enable the shepherd to locate each animal, there is evidence that these have been used in livestock farming since Neolithic times. Animal bells, particularly cow bells, have seeped into the culture of many countries (most notably in European Alpine countries such as Switzerland). Yet the story of this particular bell can take us on a journey that is decidedly urban. This will come as no surprise to those familiar with The MERL galleries, where stories of Town and Country fill one of our largest spaces. As our audience's direct connection to the countryside has dwindled (in line with trends in British society), this is a way of connecting people to stories that lie not so far in their community's past. But it also reminds us that the links between the rural and urban are never far away. In this case they come not as single sheep but in flocks.



This image shows the bell-makers memorial wall inside the Whitechapel Foundry (Mramoeba, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

This bell could not have been made in a more urban location, the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in the heart of London's East End. At the time of the foundry's closure in 2017, it was the oldest manufacturing company in Great Britain, dating back to 1570. Among its achievements were the casting of the Liberty Bell, the recasting of Big Ben, and the design of the London 2012 Olympic Bell: the ringing of

this by Bradley Wiggins set off the opening ceremony, itself the story of England’s “green and pleasant land”, as transformed through the industrial revolution.



Janet White, aged 13, and Mrs B. White, ringing bells at Christchurch Priory, Dorset in the 1950s or 1960s. Two of the thirteen bells there are among the oldest in England, dating back to 1370 (MERL Archive P TAR PH3/2/8/5/19, photo by John Tarlton)

The sheep bell was made for a special occasion in 1951, but NOT for the Festival of Britain. Of course, the Whitechapel Foundry DID make the official Festival bell, which was sounded daily in the garden. Having made the short journey from the East End to the South Bank, the *Festival* bell found itself without a home when site closed, but eventually travelled back east and out into Essex, where the famous Kelvendon Bells (in the Grade I listed St Mary’s church) were lacking a tenor. More specifically, the 1608 tenor bell – made by Miles Graye I of Colchester - had cracked and the homeless *Festival* bell was a good fit as a replacement. That bell still bears a Lion and Unicorn design.

Conceived as a nationwide “reaffirmation of faith in the country’s future” following years of war and austerity”, the *Festival of Britain* also marked the centenary of the *Great Exhibition* in the Crystal Palace – the first international “Expo” and as firm a statement of Victorian economic and imperial confidence as one might ever hope for. The *Foundry*, of course, exhibited at the *Great Exhibition* (a hemispherical bell, five feet in diameter – in the general hardware category). But it seems that the *Foundry* also benefitted – as Kelvendon did 100 years later – from the items on offer when it was dismantled. According to the artist Pearl Binder, writing in the 1930s, the heavy oak beams supporting the ceiling in “the dusty, whitewashed foundry where the biggest castings are made” came from the Crystal Palace.

Whitechapel bells were not just for special occasions. They hang in churches up and down the land, contributing to a feeling that England is a timeless, unchanging place – for what could evoke the sense of continuity better than the sound of a peal of bells from a rural church tower? These church bells speak to a sense of national unity, to an ancient network that is both impressively tangible (of large stone buildings and weighty metal) and intangible (a sense of place, the sound of ancient tunes, the rhythms of the ecclesiastical calendar, the memory of bells rung in alarm or in victory). John Betjeman tries to capture this sense of rural England in *A Subaltern's love song*, "Into nine-o'clock Camberley, heavy with bells, And mushroomy, pine-woody, evergreen smells."

The manufacture of the bells evokes a very different place and sense, one than is urban, hard and man-made, but that has its own fascinating traditions, stories and layers of history. Pearl Binder's description reminds us that, for all the great bells' uses and destinations, their origins lie in a rough neighbourhood, where metalworking skills might well be used for the forgery of coins:

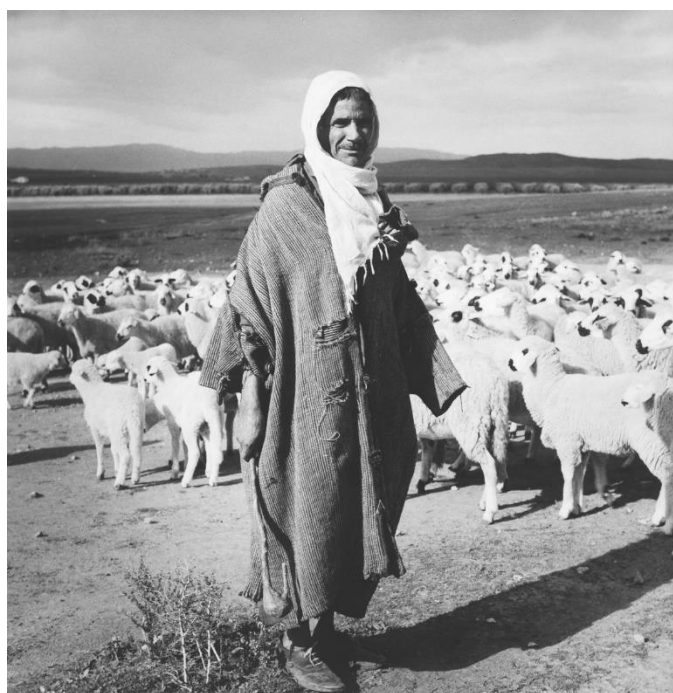
"A secret flight of worn stone steps leads down below to a chain of mouldering windowless cellars where the pot-holes are stored. From the construction and disposition of these cellars, their site on the notorious highway to Colchester in what used to be a notorious neighbourhood of crimping dens, and from the fact that Dick Turpin frequented the old Red Lion Inn, less than a stone's throw away, it seems reasonably certain that they were once used as a coiner's den."

From Turpin to Jack the Ripper to the Krays, Whitechapel had long been as tough an urban environment as any. Yet Binder found great beauty here as well, especially at the moment when a bell is cast, and as much in the movement of the workers as in the object they created:

"First the molten bell metal is lifted in its vessel from the crucible by ten men pulling steadily together. The orange-hot vessel is tilted, pouring the liquid metal in a dazzling pool into a large beaker and showering bright sparks like fireworks in all directions. The workmen, in caps, leather aprons, and heavy gloves, stand ready, their serious faces lit by the radiance. Not a word is spoken. They move without instruction, grouping and regrouping with natural unison."

Our modest sheep bell echoes some of these themes of town and country. The sound of an animal bell may not have the grandeur and the symbolism of a church bell - let alone a great ceremonial bell – but it is one of the underlying, everyday sounds of the countryside. A sound that perhaps we do not even notice. It is the sound of something that has become a powerful idea in art, music and literature – the idea of a "pastoral life", i.e., that of a shepherd or shepherdess, in tune with the land, the seasons and the animals in their care. Of course, the ideal is often at odds with the reality of rural existence: throughout history, shepherding has most often been poorly paid and of low social status. But this particular sheep bell has less to do with the pastoral life itself and a LOT to do with a famous example of the literature.

According to the information provided when the bell came to the Museum, it was made for a 1951 production of William Shakespeare's most famous pastoral comedy, *As You Like It*, a play in which nobles and courtiers pretend to be shepherds – giving the author plenty of scope to both celebrate and criticise country life. The principal character in the story of our sheep bell – the man who commissioned its manufacture and donated it to The MERL – also embodied a fascinating mixture of town and country. His name was Bernard Miles (later Baron Miles, only the second actor to be given a peerage in the UK), one of the most extraordinary English actors and theatre managers of the twentieth century. Miles grew up on the outskirts of London but his father Edwin, a market gardener and a strict Baptist, taught him the ways of the country and the value of hard work.

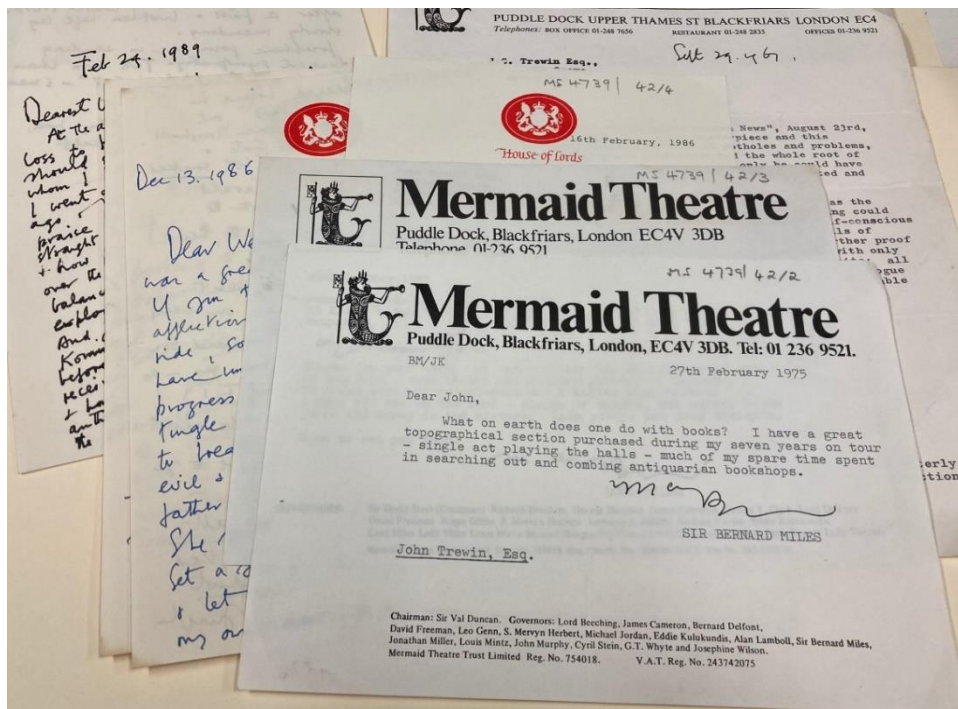


A Tunisian shepherd, photographed by John Tarlton (MERL Archive P TAR PH3/2/9/5/1). Recently, a festival has been established there to celebrate the work of shepherds, see <https://fanack.com/shepherd-festival/>

Miles worked his way into touring repertory theatre: his father had also taught him carpentry, enabling him to combine scenery construction with the playing of small parts. By the 1930s he had found his way into the cabaret and the final days of the music-halls in London, perfecting comic monologues (more on that later) and during the Second World War found mainstream success with the Old Vic company and on film, notably in Noel Coward's *In Which We Serve*. 1946 saw him portray the village blacksmith Joe Gargery in David Lean's celebrated adaptation of Dickens's *Great Expectations*. This is perhaps his most memorable film role and one that he might have been born to play: Miles's Joe stumbles painfully with his London manners, forever uncomfortable away from the forge and the country "larks". The British Encyclopaedia of Film, calls it the definitive performance in the role, noting Miles's "direct sincerity, a rich regional diction, and the ability to convey pain beneath a stoical exterior".

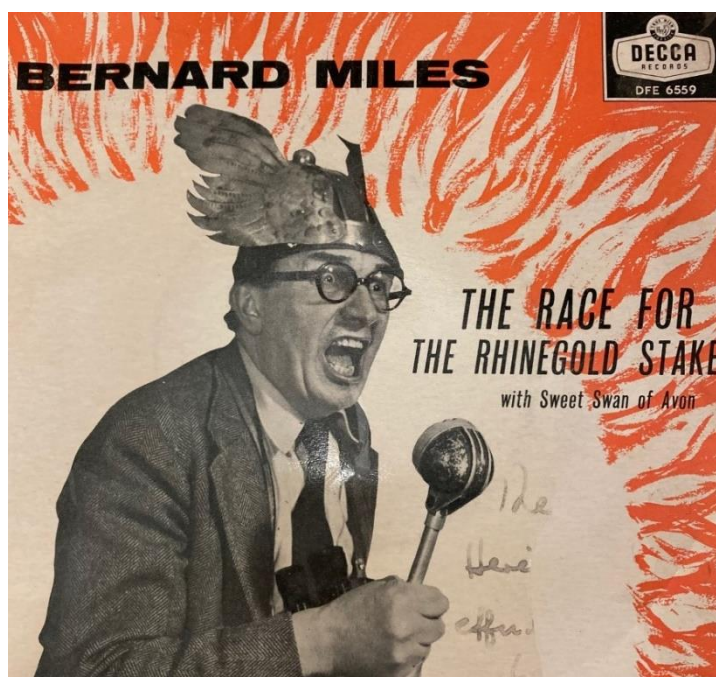
By 1951, Miles and his wife Josephine Wilson (herself an actor) had a grander project underway, one that was to dominate their lives and, sadly, leave Bernard in the end with no theatre, poor health and little money - though he remained greatly celebrated and admired. This was the Mermaid Theatre, which finally opened, in a war-damaged former dock near Blackfriars, in 1959 - the first new theatre in the City of London (i.e., the historic square mile) for over 300 years. In 1951 it was in its infancy and in an even less likely location – the couple’s back garden in the nineteenth century suburb of St John’s Wood, in northwest London. It was in this somewhat surprising location, nestled between some of London’s most famous green spaces (Primrose Hill, Regent’s Park, Lord’s Cricket Ground) but a long way from “theatreland” or any sheep pastures, that the bell was first put to use.

(Or so we thought – in fact, the notes made in 1954 when Miles sent it to the Museum seem to be wrong. As *You Like It* was performed by the Mermaid but in their 1953 season at the Royal Exchange in the City of London. The magnificent auditorium from the hall was recreated there, to great critical acclaim. For instance, J.C. Trewin found the performance of the play “in that noble setting” particularly memorable. *The Times* praised Josephine and Bernard’s performances but felt that the Elizabethan stage itself, used to create a beguiling visual spectacle, stole the show.



This image shows letters from Bernard Miles to theatre critic and close friend John Trewin. In some of the final letters Miles tells of his struggle with motor neurone disease and his disappointment with losing control of the Mermaid – though he continued to wish it well (University of Reading Special Collections MS 4739/42).

How did such an unlikely enterprise come about? It seems that in 1949 Bernard and Josephine were entertaining the opera singer Kirsten Flagstad at their house on Acacia Road, which they bought, as a near ruin with a wilderness for a garden, in 1945. This was Duff House, built in 1848 and for much of its life used as a school. It boasted a large hall, studio, or barn (accounts differ on this), which the school had used for plays, concerts, pageants, and recitals. Flagstad tried out the acoustics with an excerpt from *Fidelio* and, declaring them to be perfect, proceeded to sing carols and folk songs. Finally, she announced that if they were to convert the building into a theatre, she would come and sing in it (apparently for the daily salary of a bottle of stout).



Miles recorded many comic monologues and they sold well. This image, from 1959, is one of the few that did not take a rural theme. It is from a collection of correspondence between Miles and printer Rowley Atterbury, who developed the theatre's strong visual style. Miles put on a display of Atterbury's work in the Mermaid's foyer (University of Reading Special Collections MS 5347 C/1/137)

And so, the Mermaid was born. The *Festival of Britain* provided a useful target date, and the idea of building an Elizabethan-style stage (similar to Sam Wannamaker's recreation of Shakespeare's *Globe*) came to the fore. London's musical and theatrical world rallied round – Ivor Novello offered to join a committee but passed away early in 1951. The architect Ernst Freud (son of Sigmund) lived locally and designed the auditorium. The first performance was that promised by Flagstad – Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, which was recorded by EMI and also featured the rising operatic star Elizabeth Schwarzkopf. The letter from Miles offering the bell to the Museum in 1954 shows that by then he had changed the name of Duff House to Mermaid House.

Bernard and Josephine also presented *The Tempest*, where Bernard, as Caliban, was able to show off his skills as one of the country's leading character actors. Yet this was the point at which his career really shifted in a different direction, or more accurately, in two directions. The "town" side saw the Mermaid Theatre transfer to the City itself, firstly to a temporary stage at the *Royal Exchange* to coincide with the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and then to its more permanent home. But the "country" side did not disappear: Miles's music hall monologues developed into a series of popular recordings under the generic title *Over the Gate*. These are an odd mixture of nostalgia and bawdiness (though they would hardly trouble the censor today) with Miles deeply immersed in – and clearly enjoying – the character. This was not unrelated to his mainstream acting career in which he was known for mastering regional accents. Indeed, his 1952 *Macbeth* at the Mermaid was described by the critic Kenneth Tynan as a "Mummerset Mephistopheles".

Other than these performances and his annual appearances as Long John Silver, Miles began to put the running of the Mermaid – with what he admitted was missionary zeal - ahead of performing, saying that "Acting and not doing anything else bores me". But he still needed to pay the bills and the theatre was a substantial drain on the family finances. Fortunately, his rustic character proved useful in advertising voiceover work – the "pastoral" can clearly shift product. One early example in the Museum's collections is *The Rabbit Pest* (1941), where Miles's soft country tone mitigates the brutal subject matter ("The extermination of rabbits by cyanide gas as a permanent solution to the problem of crop damage"). The film purports to be wartime propaganda film about food production but is clearly all about selling the cyanide, which seems to be deployed with the minimum of protective equipment, preferably while smoking a pipe.

The film is an interesting precursor to his portrayal of Joe Gargery five years later. As he sets out the method for controlling the rabbits, one can imagine him instructing Pip at the forge – perhaps as his own father had introduced him to country ways. Dickens, like Miles, had both the town and the country in his upbringing. But the character of Joe Gargery may well owe a debt to an American, Dickens's great friend Henry Longfellow. In *The Village Blacksmith* (1841) he captures the idyllic rural scene and once again, we cannot escape the sound of the bells or the sparks from molten metal – the two sides to the story of our sheep bell:

*Week in, week out, from morn till night,
You can hear his bellows blow;
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,
With measured beat and slow,
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,
When the evening sun is low.*



The Village Blacksmith: this image shows a 1893 3-sided Huntley and Palmers biscuit tin decorated with scenes from a blacksmith's life and showing a church in the background (MERL 2012/419).

Further Reading:

On the end of the Whitechapel Foundry – <https://spitalfieldslife.com/2016/12/02/so-long-whitechapel-bell-foundry/>

Pearl Binder's description of the Foundry – <https://spitalfieldslife.com/2020/10/26/pearl-binder-at-whitechapel-bell-foundry/>

The Festival Bell – You can hear the sound of the bell here too
https://www.soundsurvey.org.uk/index.php/survey/radio_recordings/1950s/1779

On The Mermaid at St John's Wood – https://www.stjohnswoodmemories.org.uk/content/arts/music-musicians/mermaid_theatre

On Bernard Miles and his biography – there is no published biography, but Sheridan Morley wrote several pages about him in *Great Stage Stars* – <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6434460-great-stage-stars> – as well as his entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. For an assessment of his film career see: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/874227/index.html>

On Bernard Miles' monologues – You can access transcriptions of these here – https://monologues.co.uk/Bernard_Miles/Over_the_Gate.htm – and, for an example on video see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb7x4Y-7pOO>

On the sheep bell itself – Collections Database entry for [54/92](#)