

5. Lion and Unicorn

'Building Connections' Collections Researcher, Nicola Minney, delves into the story of a mid-century straw craftsman and his contribution towards the Festival of Britain. Here she responds to a striking image of this celebrated maker and to the skilled photographer who took this portrait. She shares how and why she came to learn about straw work, and draws us into the interconnecting networks of creative life in one special corner of 1950s Essex.

John Tarlton, Fred Mizen with Lion and Unicorn sculptures, 1951

In a previous museum post, I had already explored the world of straw plaiting and straw craft. I was quietly confident that I was actually pretty good at it and could probably plait together a hat of some kind without much trouble. Since researching the work of Fred Mizen I have re-evaluated my straw skills and realised I am better off sticking to something like baking.

As one of the Collections Researchers for The MERL's current *Building Connections* project, I have been able to delve deep into the histories of different objects in the collection looking for new stories, perspectives, and backgrounds to objects and archives. Our first major piece of work was researching items in the Museum's Welcome Case, where I came across one of Mizen's creations, a piece of straw craft shaped like a shepherd's crook. Despite the limits of researching in lockdown, I have been able out more about Fred Mizen and why his work was featured at an event as significant as the Festival of Britain, and why he was so important to British craft.



Detail from photograph by John Tarlton showing Mizen alongside his sculpture (MERL P TAR PH1/3/3/7/1).

Fred Mizen

Fred Mizen was born in the village of Great Sampford, Essex, in 1893. Not much is known about his early life other than that he worked on various farms in and around Great Bardfield, Essex, during his

youth, and his family were involved in thatching in the village for generations. This was when he would start his corn dolly making, learning the craft from other farmworkers.

At age 21 Mizen joined the Royal Garrison Artillery as a Gunner in 1913 to fight in the First World War. During service he lost his left eye and a finger from his left hand from a gunshot wound in 1917. He was honourably discharged and awarded the Silver War Badge which was given to all those military personnel who were discharged due to wounds or illness.

Name.		Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
MIZEN.		R.G.A.	G.N.R.	40617
MIZEN		—	—	—
<i>Adewick F.W.</i>				
Medal.	Roll.	Page.	Remarks.	
VICTORY	R.G.A./115-B.	1504	D.O. 4-10-18	
BRITISH	do.	do		
15. STAR	R.G.A./183	245	1914-15 Star Brought to charge. C.R.N. 599-d/9920, 2734/dst. Re-issued I.V. 523/a. d/19. 11. 20. Auth. —	
On Hon. B. List	R.G.A./863.			
Theatre of War first served in	France.			
Date of entry therein	13.2.15.			
				R. 1389. 2734/dst.

This card shows Mizen’s war record, indicating that he first served in France in 1915.

He returned to Great Bardfield and worked as a gardener, farm labourer, and thatcher around the village and local area. His work with straw plait was becoming well-known among the traditional crafters of Britain and much of his work was also taken abroad to showcase the talent of British crafters.

Great Bardfield

Great Bardfield was featured in *Life in an English Village* illustrated by local resident Edward Bawden in 1949. Alongside local landmarks like the church and pub, many faces from the area also featured in the book. Local artist John Aldridge and Fred Mizen were pictured standing at the bar, complete with one of Mizen’s own straw creations suspended from the ceiling. Bawden also illustrated some of Mizen’s creations elsewhere in the book.

Great Bardfield held art exhibitions each year, attracting the attention of national press and thousands of visitors, which showcased the talents of local artists John Aldridge and Bawden, as well as Audrey Cruddas, Eric William Ravilious, and Sheila Robinson.

British Crafting

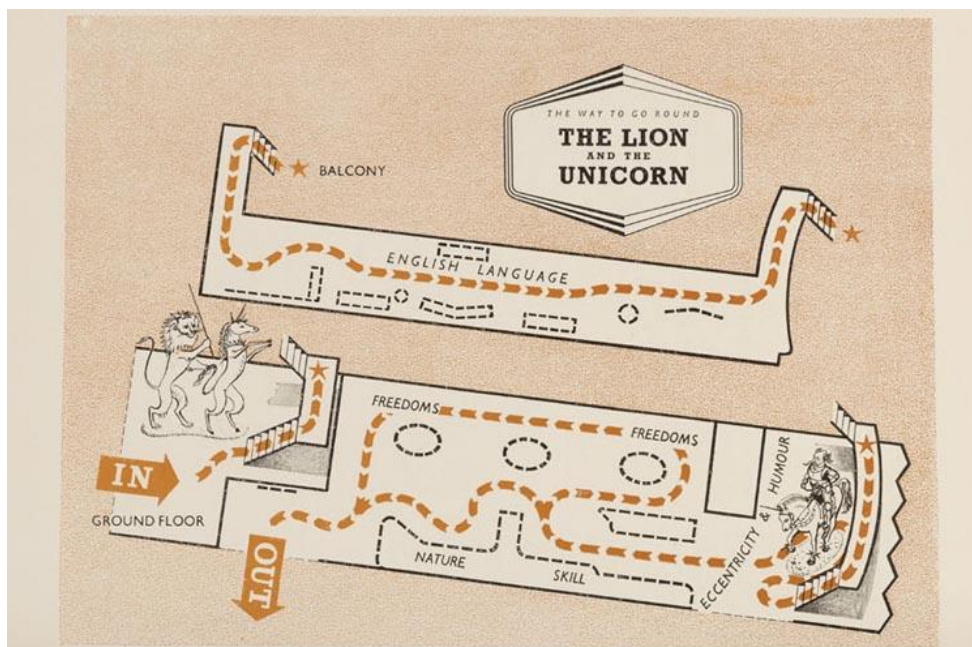
In 1928 Muriel Rose started the Little Gallery near Sloane Square in London. The aim of this venture was to sell craft products collected through the Rural Industries Bureau scheme and promote British craft simultaneously. The early items were more commonly made by women from mining communities in Wales and Durham, as a way of sourcing more financial support for these areas.

In the 1940s, Muriel Rose was part of a project which selected British crafts to be exhibited in America and Canada. This led to the British Council creating their own collection of British rural crafts with Rose as their *Council Crafts and Industrial Designs Officer*. In 1946 Muriel curated an exhibition of British crafts, which would be sent to Australia and New Zealand.

In looking for makers Rose asked another corn dolly maker, Sid Boatman, to make a corn dolly to send for the exhibition. “When Fred heard of this, he took the sheaf of wheat and the next day the dolly was done, Muriel getting a lesson in the craft in the process.” The Museum also holds the material Rose collected on behalf of the British Council, including the Boatman and Mizen pieces.

The Festival of Britain: The Lion and Unicorn Pavilion

The 1951 Festival of Britain was a post-war showcase of the best that Britain had to offer. The *Lion and the Unicorn Pavilion* was an in-depth look at the British people, through their language, character, skill, sense of humour and desire for freedom.



The location of Mizen’s enormous sculptures can be seen clearly in this plan from page 16 of *The South Bank Exhibition Guide* (MERL Library 1770-COX).

The lion and the unicorn respectively are symbols of England and Scotland, and their combination represents their coming together in (a sometimes somewhat reluctant) Union of crowns. The lion was

said to represent Britain’s strength and realism, and the unicorn its fantasy, independence, and imagination. These were all qualities that the organisers (modestly) felt were all part of the British character.

*“The Lion and the Unicorn were fighting for the crown,
the lion beat the Unicorn all around the town.
Some gave them white bread, and some gave them brown,
some gave them plum cake and sent them out of town.”*

Fred’s Contributions

Mizen also made several small corn dollies or straw craft sculptures depicting largely rural objects such as a scythe, rake, barley fork, and shepherd’s crook. Some reports note that these items were displayed in the *Lion and the Unicorn Pavilion* under the category ‘Skill of Eye and Hand’, which showcased the work of painters, artisans, and other crafters of Britain. However, photographs suggest that they actually featured in the rural crafts section of *The Country Pavilion*.

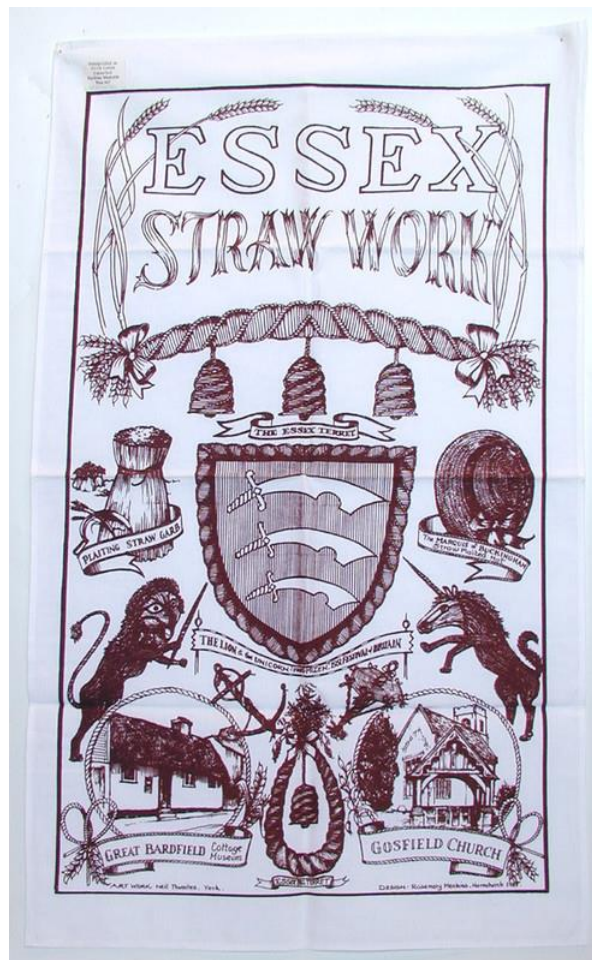


Detail from a photograph by John Tarlton of Mizen’s lion sculpture, completed and ready for transport to London to be placed on display (MERL P TAR PH1/3/3/7/2).

Mizen’s main contributions, however, were the two show stopping figures of a 7-foot-high lion with a mane of red wheat and 10-foot-tall unicorn. These were shown prominently, in the entrance of the *Lion and the Unicorn Pavilion*. His creations, which took six months to make, were seen by 8.5 million people during the full run of the Festival.

The lion and the unicorn pieces were so impressive that Selfridges purchased them to decorate their famous Christmas window display. Unfortunately, they were left in the basement of the shop and were eaten by mice, meaning we only have photographic evidence of these creations. The rest of Mizen's work from the Festival was donated to the Museum of English Rural Life.

His work was also later immortalised again in the *Heritage of Straw Festival*, which was held at Great Bardfield in 1989. The lion and unicorn featured with a collection of other straw materials on a tea towel designed by Rosemary Meakins.



The MERL holds an example of the commemorative tea towel, which features other important straw crafts from the area like straw plait hats and thatched roofs ([MERL 89/38](#))

Corn Dolly Mythology and Craft

Corn dollies have been used in British agricultural tradition since early Saxon times. Their uses vary from place to place, but they are closely associated with harvest. Corn dollies are normally made by plaiting the last batch of straw, corn, or wheat that has been harvested, and they were originally fashioned into miniature human form. This doll would then be kept in the farmhouse, barn, or buried in the field, which was thought to ensure a bountiful harvest next year.

As time went on, the traditional dolly shape was adapted to different shapes, like bells, anchors, animals, and crowns. Sometimes these are larger corn dollies, to be decorated with flowers, paraded through villages, and displayed in the local church.



An example of a straw craft 'corn dolly' in the form of an angel, as made by Doris Johnson ([MERL 86/67](#)).

Straw plaiting was a popular cottage industry in Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Berkshire and Hertfordshire and produced highly decorative items like hats and ornaments. Straw plaiting was undertaken by women and children, some of whom were taught in special straw plaiting schools. So lucrative was this industry that in the early-nineteenth century a woman could earn more through plaiting than a man would on the land.



An example of a plaited straw hat, as made by the person who donated it to the Museum ([MERL 64/181](#)).

John Tarlton

The featured photograph (of Mizen and his lion and the unicorn sculptures) was taken by John Tarlton, a professional photographer who documented various aspects of country life such as farming, hunting, the landscape, and various crafts. A countryman himself and brought up in rural

Essex, John Tarlton learned photography as a teenager in the 1930s, honed his skills during war-time service in the photographic unit of the RAF, and embarked on his independent career in 1945.



Photograph of John Tarlton enjoying a pint, from the Tarlton collection (MERL P TAR PH1/3/8/42/1-2).

Tarlton's images were featured in leading country magazines such as *The Field*, *Shooting Times*, and *Country Life*. His photograph of Mizen with the lion and the unicorn can be found in many newspapers, including the *Daily Mail*, which both advertised the upcoming Festival of Britain and showcased Mizen's skill.

Further Reading:

For a map of the Festival site at Southbank –

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/significant-events/festival-of-britain-1951/>

For a digital 'walk' around the Festival site – <https://alondoninheritance.com/eventsandceremonies/the-festival-of-britain-south-bank-exhibition/>

For more about the Lion and the Unicorn Pavilion –

https://alondoninheritance.com/eventsandceremonies/festival_of_britain_downstream_circuit/

For a detailed article about Mizen – <https://inexpensiveprogress.com/2279/fred-mizen/>

For further details of Mizen's family – <http://brianmizonhatching.co.uk/index.html>;

<http://brianmizonhatching.co.uk/page8.html>

For data on soldiers wounded in the First World War – <http://www.gilliesarchives.org.uk/archives.htm>

British Pathé film about the Festival featuring Fred Mizen – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGFVkJ_Q_bTE&feature=youtu.be

For information about the John Tarlton collection – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/john-tarlton/>

For examples of Tarlton's work –

http://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/collections/Archives_A_to_Z/Tarlton_online_gallery.aspx

For an in-depth look at Bawden's book – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eV8v7gIPdM>

For more about Muriel Rose see: Jean Vacher (ed.), 'Muriel Rose: A Modern Crafts Legacy' (Craft Studies Centre, 2006) – <https://issuu.com/studiohyde/docs/murielrose>