

7. The Hermitage

Dr Roy Brigden was Keeper of the MERL for 30 years until his retirement in 2010. He tells us that he is comfortable in the knowledge that he is very nearly as old as the Museum itself. Here he looks at a drawing that depicts some of the earliest items to be acquired in 1951, and at the work of its creator Thomas Hennell, to help draw out some threads on the backstory of the Museum.

Thomas Hennell, Drawing of The Hermitage, 1939

Pictured here, inside a thatched hut built for the purpose in his garden, is the assortment of old everyday items acquired by author and journalist H. J. Massingham (1888-1952) whilst investigating the changing countryside of the 1930s.



Drawing showing interior of a hut called The Hermitage by Thomas Hennell (MERL 85/59).

The hut was dubbed 'The Hermitage' because it looked rather like the eighteenth century naturalist Gilbert White's summer house of the same name, as illustrated by Eric Ravilious in *The Writings of Gilbert White of Selborne*, selected and edited with an introduction by H. J. Massingham (Nonesuch Press, 1938). The individual objects in the collection and the stories behind them formed the basis of

Massingham's book *Country Relics* of 1939 with extensive further illustrations by Thomas Hennell (1903-45). In the preface he says 'All the exhibits in the Hermitage will be returned to their respective counties at my death. It seems to me right that I should have a life interest in them only'. What in fact happened was that in 1951 Massingham gave the whole collection, over 250 objects in all, to the University of Reading, where it formed a key founding component of the new Museum of English Rural Life.

To take an example, in the centre of Hennell's drawing and just below the window can be seen a set of team or latten bells. These would have been mounted atop the collar on the lead horse of a team pulling a wagon to provide a form of early warning to traffic coming the other way, particularly on a narrow or winding lane. In *Country Relics*, Hennell provides a more detailed drawing of the bells and Massingham explains that they came from Mr Trotman, 74 years old and formerly head-carter at Woodlands Manor at Mere in Wiltshire. Massingham's point, developed through conversations with Mr Trotman and others like him, was that the countryside had been brought low by a relentless march towards industrial and scientific agriculture which was wrecking the land and the lives of those who depended on it. The answer in his view was a return to farming in smaller, less mechanised units supported by the infrastructure of craftsmanship and the accumulated knowledge accruing from previous generations. Hence he collected objects embodying the skills of the past in the hope of pointing the way towards a sustainable future.

From his childhood days in a Kentish rectory, Thomas Hennell felt at home in the countryside and was a close observer of everything that was happening there. In the late 1920s, having completed a training in art and teaching, he began a series of more systematic forays into the country, mostly by bicycle, to draw and record the practices, the equipment and the people, associated with what he regarded as a more traditional way of life, based on horse power and manual labour, that was fast disappearing. I am going to reference at this point [Object 5 in 51 Voices that explores the strawcraft of Fred Mizen of Great Bardfield in Essex](#). The artist Tirzah Garwood, who was living in Great Bardfield at the time with her husband Eric Ravillious and Edward and Charlotte Bawden, wrote in her memoir of their first encounter with Hennell in 1931. He was on one of his field excursions and coincidentally found a bed for the night next door, where his bicycle, with an ornamental top of straw from a haystack tied to it, was found the following morning. They all became good friends.

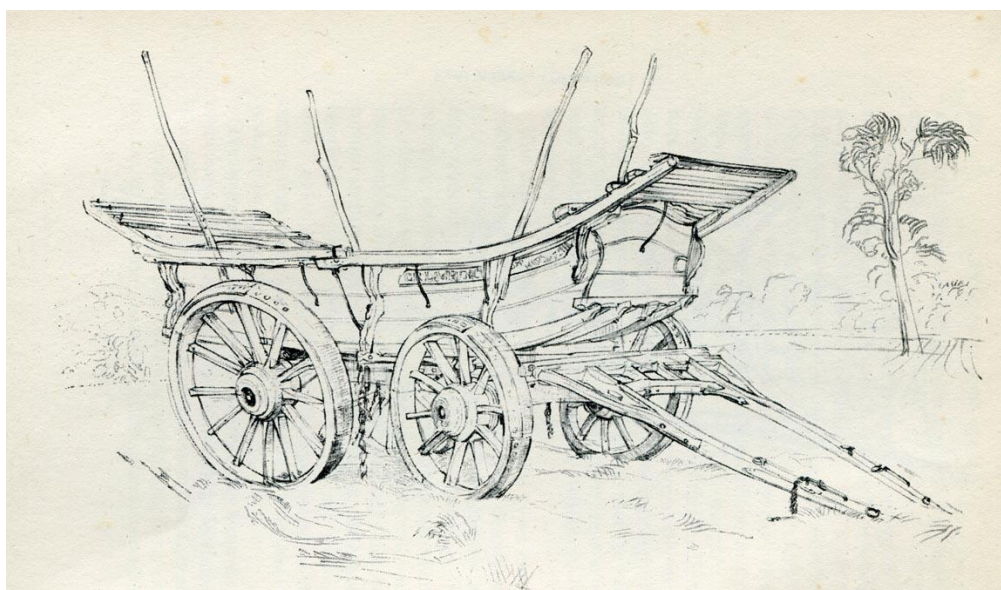
In the same vein, it is worth mentioning that Hennell was also a friend of Muriel Rose, who in 1946 put together The British Council international touring exhibition *Rural Handicrafts of Great Britain*, much of the material from which subsequently came to The MERL in 1960-1961 to form a vital core of its craft collections. Rose, Hennell, and Bawden were holidaying together in Switzerland in the late summer of 1939, visiting the Zurich International Exhibition for example on 1 September, before scrambling back to England as the War emergency took hold. *The Countryman at Work* was a

posthumous publication in 1947 gathering up a series of earlier articles Hennell had written on country crafts. One of them was about the Winchcombe pottery, and several items from there were included in The British Council exhibition and are now at The MERL.

To return to the early 1930s, the result of Hennell's accumulated researches in the field was his landmark book *Change in the Farm* first published in 1934. Its purpose was summarised in the opening words of the Preface:

'In every farmyard, outhouse and contingent building throughout the country are to be seen – piled-up relics of past generations of farmers – the remains of old ploughs, waggons and implements crumbling away behind the new steam-thresher and brightly-painted iron rakes and harrows. The following compilation is an attempt to collect and arrange some of this lumber, whose wormy and twisted forms with their crust of fowl-dung may prevent their uses from being discerned, though upon closer scrutiny their character becomes recognisable.'

He goes on to do just that both visually, through his finely detailed draughtsmanship, and through a text taken from his background reading and from information picked up on his travels.



Hereford wagon from *Change in the Farm* (1934). This drawing was later reproduced in *The English Farm Wagon* by J. Geraint Jenkins (University of Reading, 1961). Jenkins conducted a major collecting and recording project on wagons from The MERL.

The countryside of the 1920s and 30s was indeed littered with junk, no longer wanted or needed, and overtaken by the social, economic and technological changes that had been accelerated by the First World War. Hennell was one of a small band of people across the country documenting what they saw. Elsewhere in the MERL collection, for example, is a set of very fine drawings dating from 1925 of old farm equipment in Gloucestershire by William Simmonds; in Yorkshire, Wilfred Crosland and Bert Frank had started collecting material in the 1930s that would ultimately come together to form

the Ryedale Folk Museum; the Gloucester Folk Museum was established in 1935 and staff from the agricultural college at Wye in Kent were acquiring old farm and related material from 1931. All this was a prelude to the great flowering of rural museums across the country that came in the second half of the century, with The MERL as an early outlier. It is perhaps an irony that my generation of young curators in the 1970s was equally keen to document the technology of, and the people associated with, the new farming of the inter-war period, which had in turn been superseded by the agricultural revolution of the 1960s.



Farmworkers resting, an example of one of Hennell's quick sketches made in the field (MERL 96/60)

In 1941, Hennell was invited by the War Artists' Advisory Committee to submit paintings recording wartime agriculture. Working in watercolour, and building on rapid sketches made on site in real time, he succeeded in creating immediacy and atmosphere without sacrificing accuracy. His subsequent coverage of combat operations as a War Artist on mainland Europe and in the Far East used the same technique, until his untimely death while still on active service in 1945.

It was some decades before interest in Hennell's rural significance began to revive. I am reminded by the museum number on *The Hermitage* drawing that it wasn't until 1985 that we accessioned it as an object in its own right rather than treating it as simply an appendage to the Massingham collection. Three years later, the first biography of Hennell appeared and there is now a second. In 1989, he was amongst the 87 artists whose work was included in a sumptuous and unsurpassed exhibition, *This Land is Our Land*, at the Mall Galleries in London. There were over 500 exhibits in all, from medieval to modern, drawn from public and private collections around the country. The occasion was the 1989 Festival of British Food and Farming, a year long celebration marking the 150th anniversary of the Royal Agricultural Society and the centenary of the Ministry of Agriculture. With more than a passing nod to both 1951 and 1851, under the patronage of Prince Philip, and with extensive input from The

MERL, the festivities also included a summer exhibition and events in Hyde Park, attended by one million people, and spin-off exhibitions that travelled the country.



Watercolour 'Harvesting Scene', early 1940s, with a tractor-drawn machine cutting corn and binding the sheaves (MERL 96/57).

We took the opportunity to add further Hennell material to The MERL's collections in 1996 following an exhibition on the artist that was hosted jointly with Newbury Museum the previous year. Comprising a selection of fifteen drawings and sketches purchased from his sister Elizabeth, they date primarily from the period in the early 1930s when Hennell was gathering material for *Change in the Farm*. A watercolour was also added, purchased from a private collector, showing a mechanised harvest scene from the opening of the Second World War, and illustrating those very changes that had prompted his earlier work. Responding to change and dealing with change is part of the human condition, and one of the reasons why we have museums.

Further Information (online):

To view works by Hennell set to music – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7V6brFILVNE>

For further information on *The Hermitage* drawing – [MERL 85/59](#)

For further information on the watercolour harvest scene – [MERL 96/57](#)

For further information on an ink and wash drawing of farm buildings – [MERL 96/58](#)

For further information on other Hennell drawings at The MERL – [MERL 96/59](#), [96/60](#), [96/61](#), [96/62](#), [96/63](#), [96/64](#), [96/65](#), [96/66](#), [96/67](#), [96/68](#), [96/69](#), [96/70](#), [96/71](#), [96/72](#), [96/73](#)

Further Reading (not available online):

Hennell, T., *Change in the Farm* (Cambridge University Press, 1934)

Hennell, T., *The Countryman at Work* (The Architectural Press, 1947) – includes a memoir of Hennell by H. J. Massingham

Kilburn, J., *Thomas Hennell: The Last English Watercolourist* (White Lion Publishing, 2019)

Kilburn, J., *Thomas Hennell: The Land and the Mind* (Pimpernel Books, 2021)

MacLeod, M., *Thomas Hennell: Countryman, Artist and Writer* (Cambridge University Press, 1988)

Massingham, H. J., *Country Relics* (Cambridge University Press, 1939)

Spargo, D., (ed.) *This Land is Our Land: Aspects of Agriculture in English Art* (Exhibition catalogue, London, 1989)

Ullmann, A., (ed.) *Long Live Great Bardfield: The Autobiography of Tirzah Garwood* (The Fleece Press, 2012)

Warren, C.H., *Miles From Anywhere* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1944) – with illustrations by Thomas Hennell