

11. The Country Year

In this piece, Curator of University Art Collections Dr Naomi Lebens explores the intersections between art and the Festival of Britain, revealing the little-known story of some artworks that were lost shortly after 1951. The preparatory mural designs she writes about only arrived in The MERL a few years ago. This also offers a fruitful moment for her to reflect on contemporary art interventions at the Museum and the development of holdings in her care.

Barry Evans and William Kempster, Designs for The Country Year, 1951



One of five surviving preparatory designs for The Country Year, this one showing potato-lifting (MERL 2019/7)

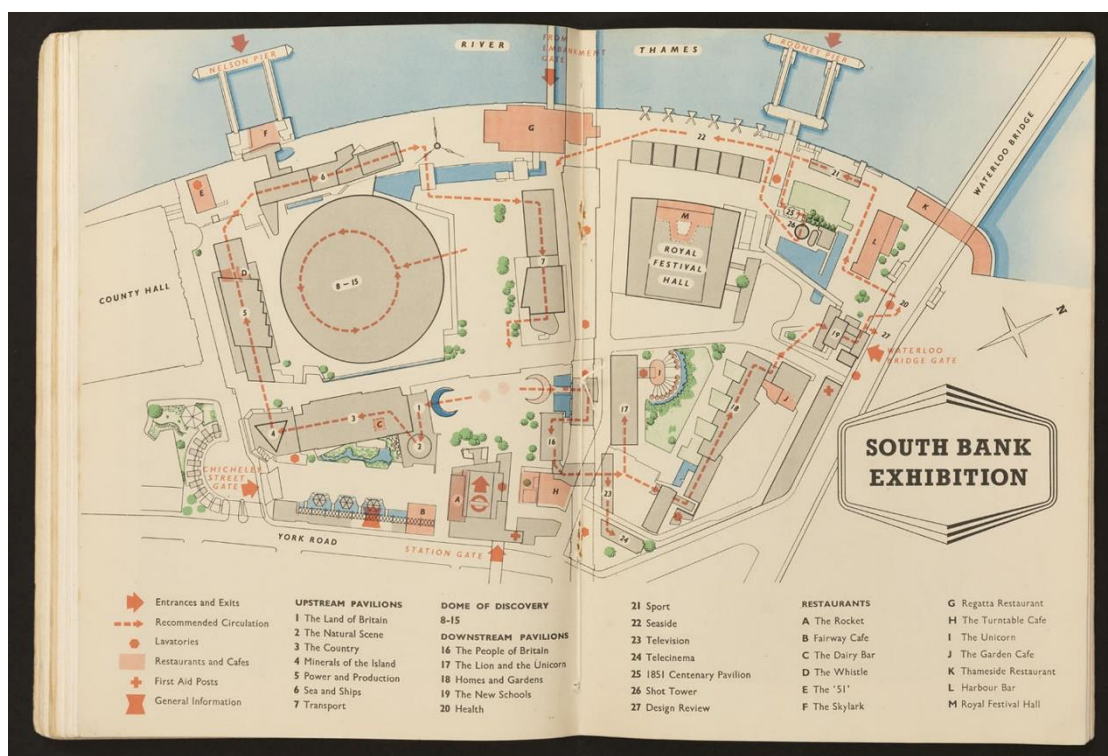
Artists were integral to the look, feel and, in many respects, the story of the 1951 Festival of Britain – the post-war “tonic for the nation” intended to showcase recovery and celebrate national achievements in diverse realms of human endeavour: past and present, from funfairs to farming. Opening in May and lasting until September 1951, the Festival was a national and travelling event, but its main site was a 27 acre area on the South Bank in London. Two large buildings were erected, the Dome of Discovery and Festival Hall. The wider site was divided into a number of pavilions, exhibitions, restaurants and cafes, and a map was produced to guide visitors through a recommended route. Temporary installations of sculpture and artworks were distributed throughout. The most famous is the Skylon, the 300ft tall sculpture by artists Philip Powell and Hidalgo Moya collaborating with engineer Felix Samuely. The design was chosen out of 157 entries for a “vertical

feature” for the Festival and its name was the result of a public competition—Mrs Sheppard Fidler’s winning entry combined the terms “Sky” “Pylon” and the newly-invented fabric “Nylon”.

Principal designer, Misha Black, later reflected on the objectives of the Festival scheme:

“The first was to demonstrate the quality of modern architecture, landscape architecture and town planning; the second to show that painters and sculptors could work with architects and exhibition designers to produce an aesthetic unity.” [Quoted in Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier (eds.), *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951*, (London: 1976), pp.103-4]

A cohesive visual rhetoric – or “festival-style” – to showcase British progress across science, industry, technology, and the arts. This was the enormous task that the Festival Office set about commissioning an army of artists to deliver.

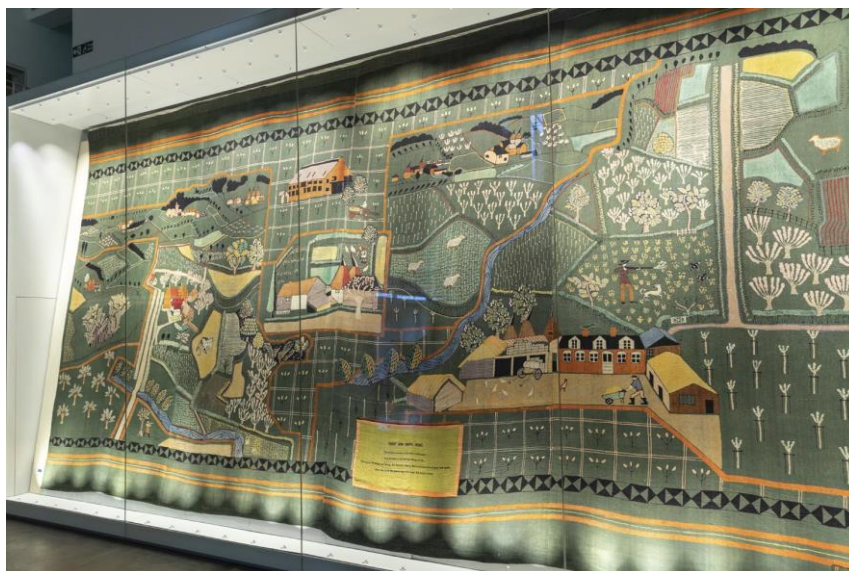


Map of the Festival site, as featured in the South Bank Exhibition Guide (MERL Library 1770-COX)

In the Country Pavilion (stop number 3 on the map), the story focused on the history of farming a varied landscape and how science had revolutionized modern British agriculture, livestock, and breeding. Exhibits ranged from rural crafts to agricultural machinery. As the exhibition guidebook grandly announced:

“It is, then, finally, the farmer and his family that we owe the prosperity and permanence of our countryside”.

Few artworks from the pavilion can lay such claims to permanence. The vast majority of Festival artworks were designed as temporary objects that were later deconstructed, damaged or lost. However, some incredible pieces have survived. In the MERL's collections, nine large textile wall-hangings by Michael O'Connell (1898-1976) and five mural designs by Barry Evans (1923-2007) and William Kempster (1914-1977) provide a rare insight into how the story of "The Country" was translated into "festival-style".



One of the original O'Connell wall-hangings on display in The MERL – the Museum also holds the original cartoon designs for these artworks. The hanging shown here depicts Kent (MERL 63/18/9).

O'Connell was charged with depicting the versatility and variety of British farming for a background display in the upper balcony of the pavilion. His response, based on extensive travel and meticulous research, was to create a hanging of seven main panels woven from rayon hopsack then painted, died and printed—each capturing the distinct farming character of a particular geographic region (Rutlandshire, Scotland and Wales, Cheshire, Northern Ireland, Yorkshire, The Fens, and Kent). An introductory panel and a separate key showing the symbols used throughout for crops and animals completed the set, which were sewn and hung together before being separated after the Festival. O'Connell's highly stylized language of curved and geometric forms, simplified figures, bold outlines, and striking colour palette (dominated by deep "English" green with key notes of orange) presented Festival visitors with a mid-century remake of the pastoral landscape.

Recalling Misha Black's note about "aesthetic unity", Evans and Kempster's five surviving mural designs echo something of the character of the O'Connell hangings in their bold use of colour and simplified shapes. Less schematic and more narrative in their subject matter, however, each scene demonstrates a key activity in the farming calendar: haymaking, lambing, harvesting, ploughing and potato harvesting. The group shares high horizon lines and activity is always concentrated in the foreground of the scene, thus emphasizing elements of continuity and change. This was the overall

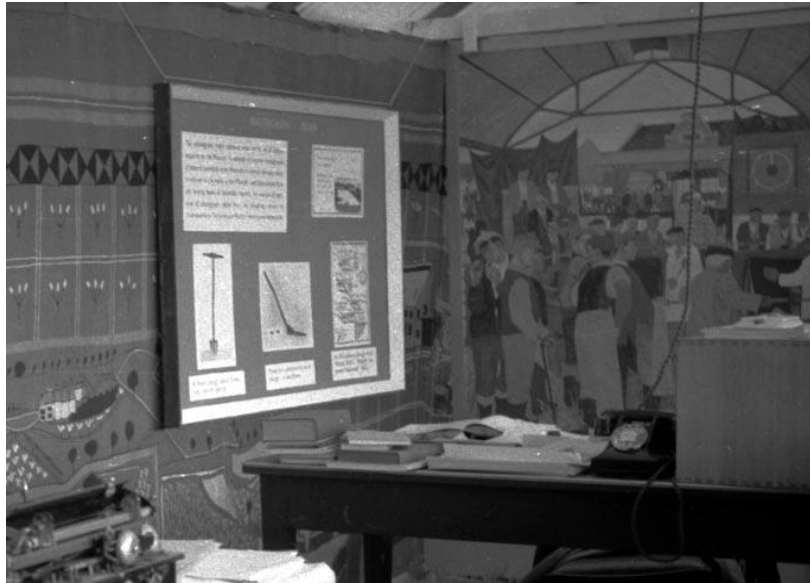
theme of the series, which in total comprised of twelve designs for murals representing months of the year and countryside activities completed therein. Inscriptions on the designs in The MERL collection record that ploughing represents November and potato-harvesting October. The finished murals were suspended as part of a carousel-style structure called *The Country Year*, also exhibited in the in the Country Pavilion not far from the O’Connell hangings.



The Country Year ‘merry-go-round’ structure in situ in the Country Pavilion. The ploughing image is visible, as are two panels for which The MERL does not hold the designs. The carousel turned on an electric mechanism.

Evans later reflected that, whilst he and Kempster usually carried out their own research, “for the Farming pavilion, there was a theme convener called Laurie Lee, the writer. He was a few years older than me, probably in his thirties, a delightful person to work with”. The question of what, or what not, to include in *The Country Year* may therefore have been beyond the sole responsibility of the artists; but recalling a frequent theme of the Festival, collaborations between artists and other professionals did not always go smoothly as everyone considered how and what things could or should be represented. A review of the Country Pavilion in *The Engineer* (1951, volume 191, p.671), for instance, had this to say about the series:

“In this part of the Pavilion there are also displayed twelve coloured panels, painted by William Kempster and Barry Evans, to depict the country year, month by month. The panels which describe ploughing, cultivating, haymaking, corn harvesting and potato lifting all show the impact of mechanisation on agriculture. There is, however, no reference to the combine-harvester, which is by now extensively employed in this country”.



This is The MERL stand at the 1952 Royal Show. Visible to the right-hand side (behind the telephone) is the lost September panel from *The Country Year*, which showed a 'Young Farmer's Rally' (MERL 35/1542, detail).

When the Festival was dismantled the original murals from *The Country Year* series were sent to The MERL, where they were later joined by the O'Connell hangings. We know this because there are photos showing the murals suspended in the Museum's open-air trade stand at the Royal Show at Newton Abbot in 1952. This is the event that the set piece display in The MERL's current *Collecting Rural England* gallery is loosely based on, and an important moment in the early history of the Museum. What happened after that is, sadly, unknown. The murals don't appear to have been accessioned as MERL objects. Perhaps they were sent elsewhere or simply didn't survive the 1952 Royal Show. No trace of them has since been found. The fact The MERL was generously given five designs for the murals by the estate of Barry Evans in 2019 is therefore especially welcome, and we can be sure it will take good care of them!



Harvesting, as shown in the preparatory sketch held by The MERL. Instead of the modern combine harvester, the machinery shown includes tractors, reapers, a threshing machine, and a steam engine (MERL 2019/5).

The MERL also continues to preserve the spirit of the Festival of Britain in other ways. Over the last few years, it has introduced a growing programme of engagement with contemporary artists that has included a number of temporary installations in the galleries. In 2018, in collaboration with Reading International, the museum hosted *The Outside In* by artist Steve Claydon (b. 1969) who introduced three major sculptural installations around the objects on display, which included bringing in Melanesian objects from the artist's personal collection in direct opposition to the predominantly English things housed at The MERL. Rather than celebrating national identity, as the artists of the Festival of Britain were commissioned to do, Claydon sought to interrupt museum narratives and explore how meanings are formed around its collections. The sculpture *Live Objects in Transit*, for instance, comprised of an orange truss, a sheet of orange Formica and a lighting rig that transformed a nineteenth-century timber carriage into a showcase for Melanesian masks.

In 2019, the temporary exhibition *SIRE* was installed in an immersive display in the museum's open-access stores. Artist Maria McKinney was inspired by The MERL's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century livestock portraits and straw craft holdings to create nine intricately woven sculptures from straws designed for use in artificially inseminating cattle. Each referenced qualities farmers have looked to breed into modern cattle such as higher milk yields, more muscle, increased resilience to extreme climates, and lack of horns. McKinney completed her sculptures by mounting them to the backs of live bulls and taking photographs mimicking the formulaic style of traditional livestock paintings. In the exhibition, McKinney's large-scale photographic prints were suspended over ploughs, whilst the sculptures were displayed on plinths between object storage cabinets. Such encounters between contemporary art and the apparatus of rural life directly echo festival displays in the 1951 Country Pavilion, though the inferences from them are probably quite different.

To finish by briefly branching out beyond The MERL, the legacy of the Festival of Britain is also highly apparent in *Painting with Festival of Britain Ornament* (1991-2), an artwork soon to arrive in the University of Reading Art Collection. An impressive, large-scale work by Reading alumni and later visiting lecturer Clyde Hopkins (1946-2018), stylistically it belongs to the mid-period of his career where defined areas and interlocking shapes emerged from the more frenetic, expressionist and painterly work of his first decades as an exhibiting artist. Also apparent are the dabs, spots and pulses that would become his signature motifs. Elaborate titles are another integral feature of Clyde's work, and in this case the use of the word "ornament" was important. As his widow and fellow artist, Marilyn Hallam (b. 1947), explained:

"It was a 1950s word as far as Clyde was concerned, as dated as the Festival of Britain itself and its artifacts. Clyde had a great fondness for things that were considered 'cutting edge' in his childhood but which the 1960s ridiculed. I think he

imagined the ‘standing figurine’ on the right of the painting, the sort of thing that ought to have existed at that time.”

A quick comparison to the O’Connell wall-hangings, and the Evans and Kempster preparatory designs, underlines the extent to which Hopkins captured the indiscernible essence of the “festival-style” in *Painting with Festival of Britain Ornament* – not least in colour palette.



A new addition to the University of Reading Art Collection. Clyde Hopkins, *Painting with Festival of Britain Ornament*. Oil on canvas. 224 x 174cm.

Further Information (online):

For information about the five surviving designs for *The Country Year* see – [MERL 2019/3-7](#)

For information about William Kempster – <https://www.artbiogs.co.uk/1/artists/kempster-william-henry>

For information about Barry Evans – <https://www.artbiogs.co.uk/1/artists/evans-barry>

For information about the Michael O’Connell hangings see–
https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/online_exhibitions/then_and_now/index.html

For the Collecting Rural England gallery and to explore the set piece display virtually see –
<https://merl.reading.ac.uk/visit-us/galleries/collecting-rural-england/>

Some examples of sculptural (and other) survivals from the Festival of Britain –

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-festival-of-britain-1951-remarkable-survivals-historic-england/gAlyOIIc3eAELQ?hl=en-GB>

For information about Steve Claydon, The Outside In see –

<https://readinginternational.org/programme/steven-claydon-the-outside-in-at-the-merl/>

For information about Maria McKinney's SIRE see – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/event/maria-mckinney-sire/>

For the University of Reading Art Collection see – <https://collections.reading.ac.uk/art-collections/>

For information about Clyde Hopkins see – <http://www.clydehopkins.com/>

Readers may also be interested in the story of another Festival of Britain artwork, this time by the famed designer Edward Bawden. This mural was destined for another Berkshire agricultural institution. Much like the ill-fated Evans and Kempster originals, which as we know went missing shortly after their arrival at The MERL, this entire mural was also lost.

Read more about this parallel story here – <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/in-search-edward-bawden-mural-country-life/>