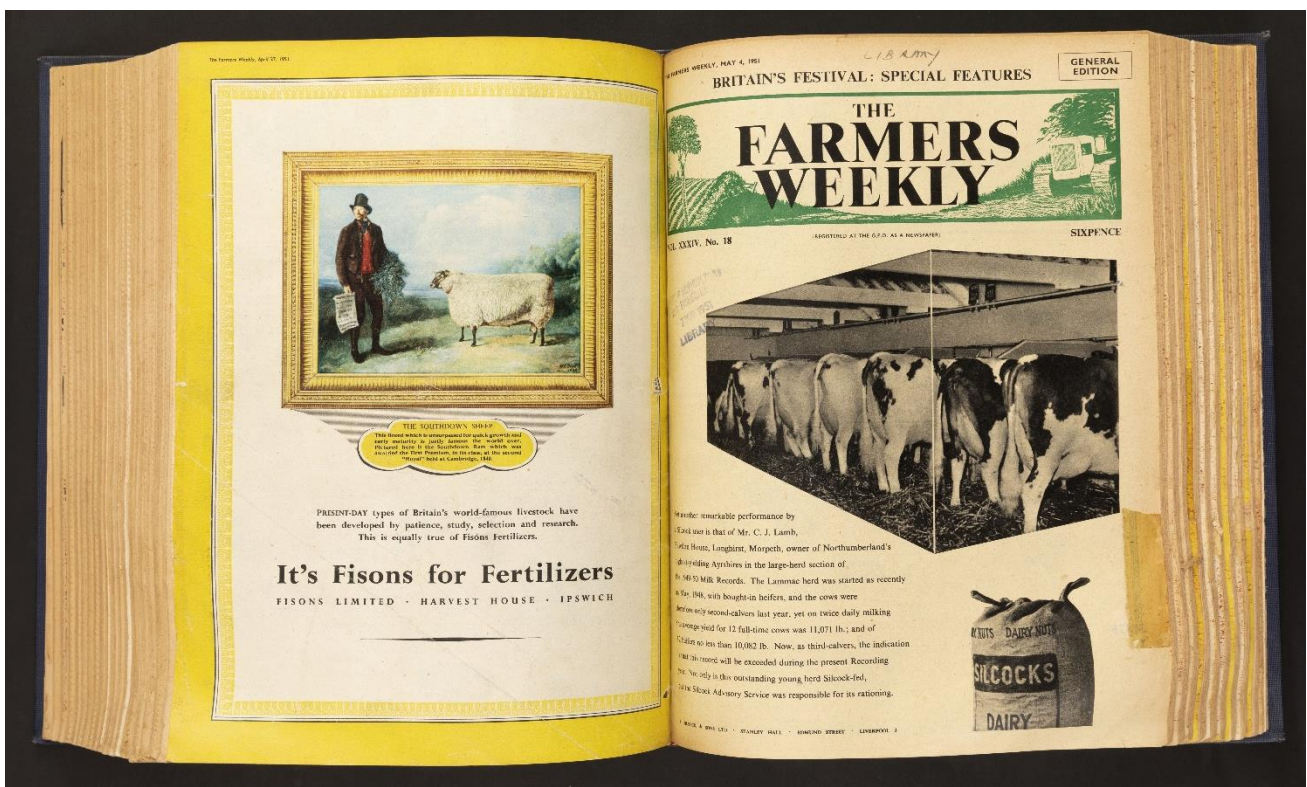


20. Farmers Weekly

In this response, historian Professor John Martin revisits the special issue of Farmers Weekly in which the Festival of Britain was presented. In doing so he introduces us to the world of agriculture in 1951. In the aftermath of war, the farming sector was undergoing complex policy and technical changes that came to impact heavily on how food systems developed over decades to come. Arguably we find ourselves in a similar period of rapid transformation today.

The Farmers Weekly, 'Britain's Festival: Special', 4 May 1951

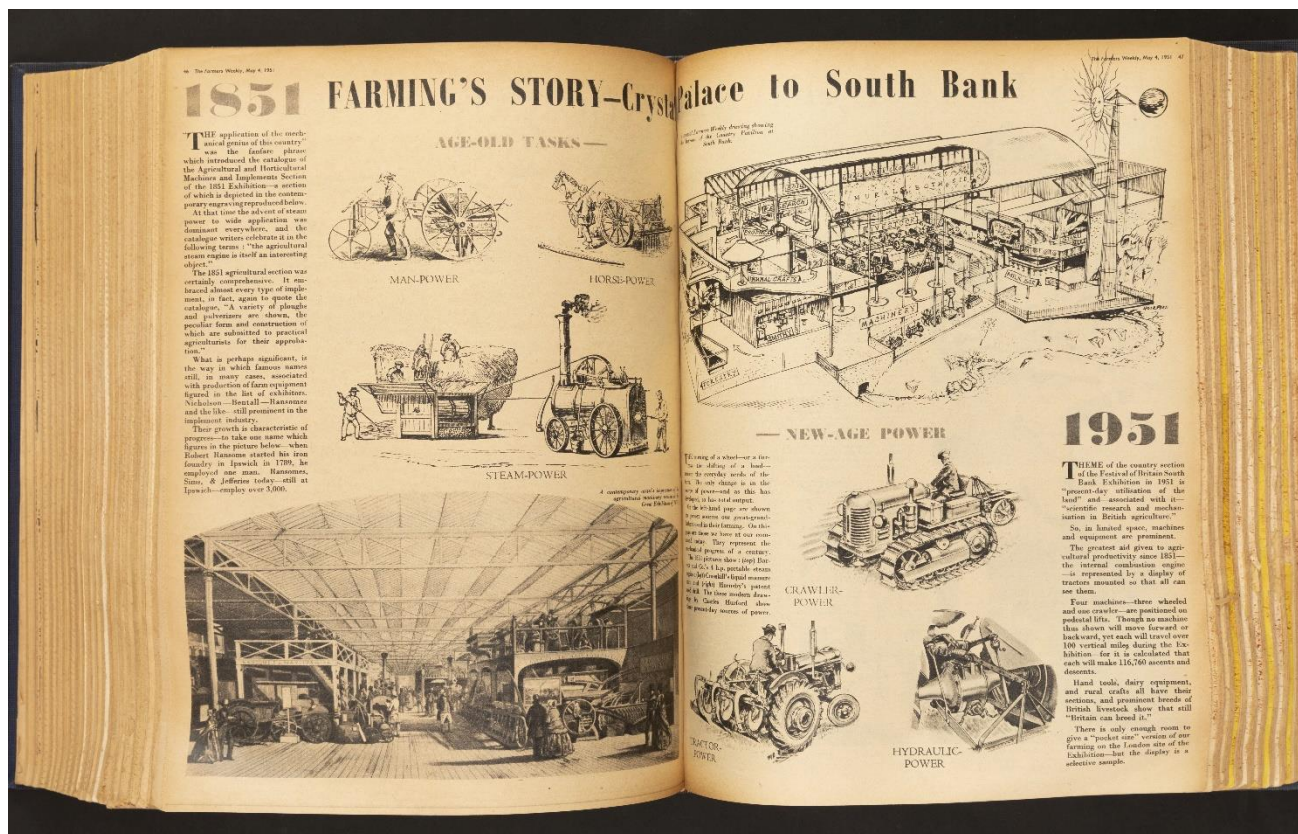


Cover of 'Britain's Festival: Special Features' issue of *The Farmers Weekly* magazine dated 4 May 1951—image copyright and courtesy [Farmers Weekly](#) (MERL LIBRARY PER OPEN ACCESS--FAR/MERS-W).

1951: Continuity and Change

The year 1951 is considered a key turning point in the history of modern Britain. A notable highlight was the Festival of Britain which was arranged by Clement Attlee's Labour government in part to commemorate the centennial of the Great Exhibition of 1851. More importantly, its aim was to promote a feeling of successful recovery from the Second World War. Located on the South Bank in London, it attracted about 8.5 million visitors to fun-filled educational exhibits and events both in the capital and across the country. In the Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL), you can view one of a series of Festival of Britain wall hangings from the Country Pavilion depicting farming and the variety

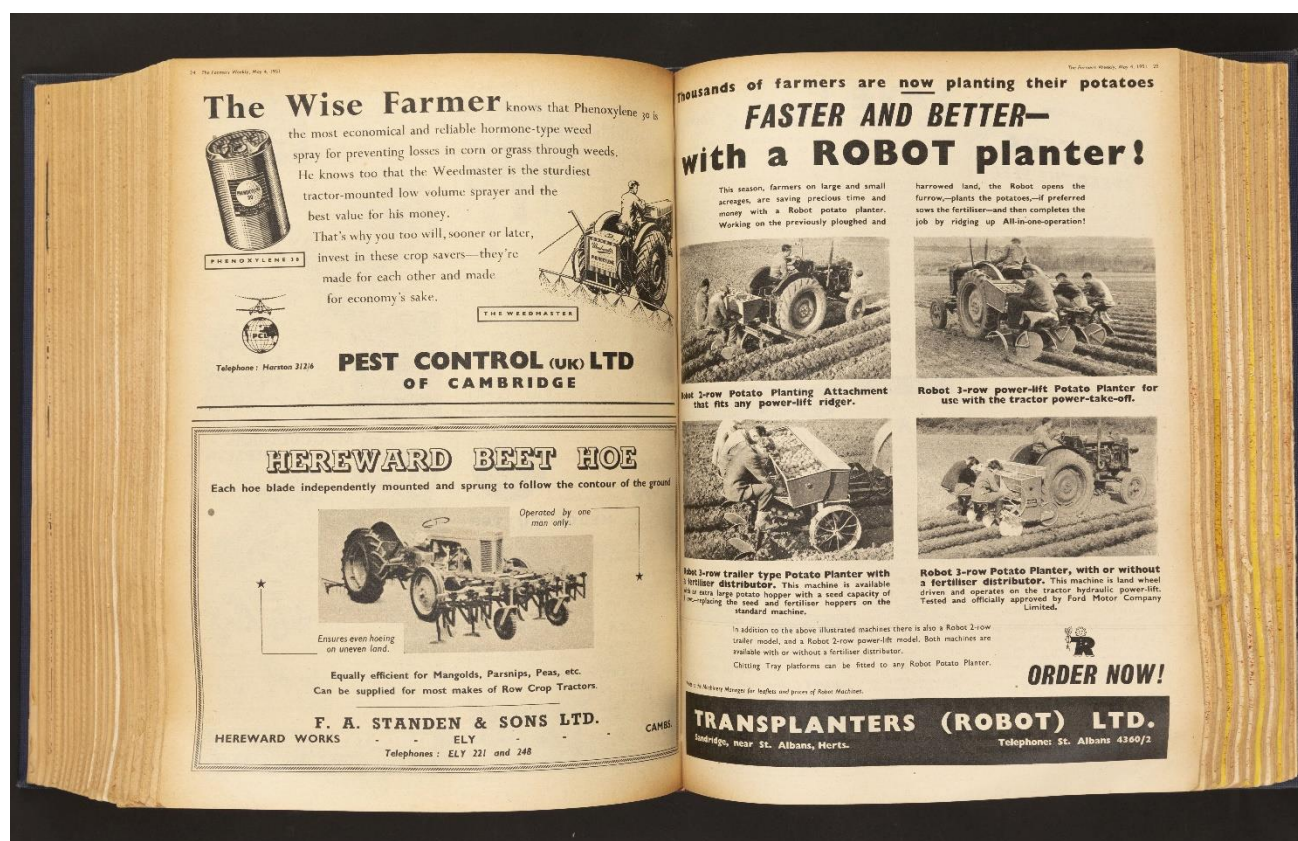
of landscapes in Britain. In spite of reservations about its cost and scope, the Festival turned out to be a financial success. It was always planned as a temporary exhibition, running for five months before closing in September. However, following the general election in October which saw Clement Attlee's Labour government replaced by Winston Churchill's Conservative administration, the decision was quickly made to level the South Bank site removing virtually all traces. It is widely believed that Churchill along with his Cabinet colleagues considered that the Festival acted as a piece of socialist propaganda, a celebration of the achievements of the Labour Party and their vision for a new post-war Britain.



Double-page spread from 4 May 1951, comparing 1851 with 1951—image copyright and courtesy [Farmers Weekly](#) (MERL LIBRARY PER OPEN ACCESS--FAR/MERS-W).

Immediately after the end of the war in Europe in 1945, the Labour party under the leadership of Clement Attlee had been swept to power based on a programme offering radical reforms in social welfare, housing, nationalisations and public healthcare provision. However, given the country's precarious financial position, these aspirations proved to be very difficult to implement in practice. The economic impact of the war had been even more profound than the First World War. Calculations undertaken by the Treasury indicated that by the end of 1945 one quarter of the country's pre-war assets had been liquidated as a result of Britain's commitment to the war effort. Not only was it necessary to reconvert industry to peacetime needs, but physical damage needed to be repaired and funds made available to deal with the wartime disinvestment. In an effort to alleviate the financial crisis, the Labour government had secured a low interest \$13 billion loan from the

United States of America in December 1945 known as the Marshall Plan. If the country was to begin to pay its way in the post-war world as well as to meet the demands of reconstruction, a sustained expansion in the volume of exports was required, possibly as high as 75 per cent above that achieved in 1938. In order to reconcile the competing demands of implementing a radical programme of domestic reform while at the same time paying its way in the world, wartime rationing not only continued but intensified. This included the introduction bread rationing, something which had been avoided during wartime. To implement such measures would have been a symbolic blow to civilian morale which would invariably have result from the rationing of this staple component of the British diet.



Double-page spread from 4 May 1951 showing farm innovations including pest control and so-called ‘robot’ planters —image copyright and courtesy [Farmers Weekly](#) (MERL LIBRARY PER OPEN ACCESS--FAR/MERS-W).

With regards to agriculture, from the onset the Labour government had decided that the wartime system of guaranteed prices and support for the agricultural sector should be continued in peacetime. This commitment was formally enshrined in the landmark 1947 Agriculture Act. In the words of the Minister of Agriculture Tom Williams the aim of the legislation was:

‘to promote a healthy and efficient agriculture capable of producing that part of the nation's food which is required from home sources at the lowest price consistent with the provision of adequate remuneration and decent living conditions for farmers and workers, with a reasonable return on capital invested.’

This pioneering legislation had two interrelated aims; first, the promotions of stable agricultural sector intend to ensure fairer returns for farmers and workers and second, to encourage efficiency by providing long-term financial support to encourage farmers to participate in investment initiatives. Such a programme in peacetime was virtually unprecedented. Not since the introduction of the Corn Laws in 1815 had the state committed to guarantee prices for agricultural produce. A system of annual price reviews provided the opportunity to calculate the extent to which production costs had increased since the previous year, thereby allowing for an assessment to be made of the extent to which farmers these would need to be compensated by an increase in farm support. In order to promote efficiency, the increased costs were not usually fully recuperated by a corresponding increase in financial aid, but rather farmers who wished to remain competitive were encouraged to become more productive by adopting innovative farming methods informed by the application of science to agriculture. This process was further facilitated by the shift in the farm support system from guaranteed prices to grants and subsidies intended to encourage the adopting of more productive scientific methods, a process assisted by the state sponsored *National Agricultural Advisory Service* (NAAS) and other advisory agencies. Such initiatives were specifically intended to promote a scientific revolution in British farming. This legislation provided the policy framework which was to remain in place until Britain's entry into the *European Economic Community* in 1973 and continued in modified form up to the present day.

In spite of the stimulus to agricultural production provided by the 1947 Agriculture Act, the balance of payments crisis, coupled with the adverse impact on agricultural production as a result of the 1947 winter made food shortages even more acute. Collectively they prompted the need for the further expansion of agricultural production. In the summer of 1947, the Government announced a five year plan intended to increase agricultural production by approximately 20 per cent by 1952–1953, setting targets for each of review commodities. It emphasised increasing livestock production, especially milk, which had the highest monetary value, along with the greater domestic production of fodder crops and grass in order to enable reductions in imported animal feeding stuffs. The higher guaranteed prices in 1947 were specifically intended to provide an extra £40 million per annum to promote infrastructure improvements as part of a programmed to increase efficiency.

However the continuation of rationing controls and food shortages helped to undermine support for the Labour government which only won the 1950 general election with a majority of only five seats. The Conservative party slogan to 'Set the People Free' was extremely popular. Their electoral campaign advocated the idea of greater individual control, self-reliance and a movement away from state control over

people's lives countering the Labour party's more socialist policies. Free-market economic policies and individualism have continued to dominate Conservative political thinking to this day.



Headline about weather from 4 May 1951 showing how farmers in 1951 faced some challenges that were not political—image copyright and courtesy [Farmers Weekly](#) (MERL LIBRARY PER OPEN ACCESS--FAR/MERS-W).

Difficulties in governing with such a small majority promoted the Labour government to call another general election in October 1951. By this time austerity budgets, continued rationing, identity cards (abolished in 1952) and housing shortages led to a further reduction in the number of Labour MPs which were elected. Labour's loss of power in part reflected problems with the electoral system; despite winning the popular vote and achieving both the highest ever total vote (until the 1992 Conservative Party win) and highest percentage vote share, Labour won fewer seats than the Conservative Party. This election marked the return of Winston Churchill as Prime Minister and the beginning of Labour's thirteen years in opposition. This was also the last election in which the Conservative Party did better in Scotland than in England.

The return of the Conservatives to power also coincided with a shift in approach to managing the economy with the emphasis on dismantling the wartime and post-war rationing restrictions. Following the end of the Korean War in 1953, the British economy began to benefit from what was to become a world trade boom and increasingly favourable terms of trade for the manufacturing nations of the world. With the continuation of currency stability, stemming from the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944, Britain along with other industrialised nations experienced more than two

decades of industrial prosperity. The post-war boom which lasted until the economic crisis of the early 1970s was characterised by historically high levels of economic growth and employment. The increased supplies of food and a general relaxation of state controls led to an upturn in consumer expenditure which contributed to subsequent electoral success in 1955 prepared the way for the landslide victory of Harold Macmillan's Conservative administration in 1959 under the slogan 'You've have never had it so good'. The 1950s and 1960s were a prosperous time for British agriculture. Domestic food production increased more dramatically in this period than in virtually any other country, with a trebling of output and self-sufficiency rising from 40 to 60 percent between 1954 and 1973, and almost the doubling of total factor productivity between the 1950s and the 1990s. Such dramatic increases were the result of the more widespread application of scientific methods of farming. The magnitude of the increases in output and more importantly productivity of land and labour far exceed those achieved during previous periods of agrarian change, not only in Britain but also that achieved in other countries.

FERGUSON FIGHTS BATTLE FOR FOOD

Miss Sheila Brown, 18-year-old agricultural contractor of Chesham, Bucks, works for two days in complete farm collaboration held up by the tractor. Spring for 80 years. The test of handling her Ferguson equipment is a big factor in her ability to work such long hours without fatigue.

Between now and harvest there will be an unending stream of work for A. G. STREET's new farm pulling down old fences and erecting new ones, concreting roads, repairing a pipe here, a drunken gate post there as well as cleaning out the buildings—

AND A HOST OF RATS

TO BEAT THE FOOD CRISIS
Farm Faster with Ferguson

Ferguson tractors are manufactured for HARRY FERGUSON LTD., COVENTRY, by The Standard Motor Company Ltd.

Advertisement for the Ferguson System citing its potential in fighting global hunger, and a piece on modernising the farm by famed agricultural journalist A. G. Street from the issue dated 4 May 1951—image copyright and courtesy *Farmers Weekly* (MERL LIBRARY PER OPEN ACCESS--FAR/MERSW).

By the late 1960s British agriculture was considered the most efficient in the world. Since the early 1950s British farms became larger and more specialised with a higher proportion being owner-occupied. In explaining this trend it is necessary to appreciate the crucially important role the British state played whether under Conservative and Labour administrations. In the case of agriculture,

crucially in terms of policies it was continuity rather than change that prevailed during the post-war period regardless of changes in political administrations. When celebrating The MERL's seventieth anniversary, it is important to appreciate that it was against this backdrop that the Museum was established, with the aim of recording the practice of agriculture and character of rural life at a time when the countryside was experiencing unprecedented change following the Second World War.

About the author:

Professor John Martin is one of the UK's foremost experts in the twentieth-century history of food and farming. He serves on the Committee of the British Agricultural History Society, has held a MERL Research Fellowship, and in 2021 the University of Reading welcomed him as a Visiting Professor. He is widely published in his field and supported the Lion TV and BBC production Wartime Farm. He is a member of the British Library Advisory Panel for 'An Oral History of Farming, Land Management and Conservation in Post-War Britain'. As the biggest oral history project on British farming and rural land use for decades, the project is recording in-depth biographical interviews with farmers, landowners, scientists, and policymakers who have been central to the transformation of agriculture since the Second World War. For further information and examples of his recent work see his profile on [The Conversation](#).

Further Information:

For more about The MERL's run of Farmers Weekly see – [Farmers Weekly holdings](#)

For information about Farmers Weekly today see – <https://www.fwi.co.uk/>

For information about the Farmers Weekly photographic collection see – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/farmers-weekly-photographic-collection/>

For content about extreme weather produced as part of John Martin's MERL Fellowship see – https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/research/merl_fellowships_martin.aspx

For further information about the MERL Fellowship Scheme see – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/merl-collections/research-projects/fellowship-scheme/>

Click here to access Open University resources, supported by John Martin as part of wider Wartime Farm education initiatives – <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/whats-on/tv/ou-on-the-bbc-wartime-farm>