

31. Biscuit Tin

Reading Museum works closely alongside The MERL, as reflected in the current collaboration as part of an Arts Council England funded project entitled Museums Partnership Reading. In celebrating this and in recognition of the fact that Reading town that has been home to The MERL for the past seven decades, we wanted to invite our colleagues from the town Museum to be a part of our anniversary celebrations. As such, this response has been penned by Matthew Williams, Museum Manager of Reading Museum. Here he explores an object chosen from their collection, which echoes and reflects the holdings and themes of The MERL.

Biscuit tin, Huntley and Palmers, 1951–1952



Biscuit tin from the Huntley & Palmers Collection at Reading Museum (REDMG 1992.2.384).

Reading in 1951 – Looking to the Future

In 1951 Reading was looking forward to reconstruction and expansion after a decade of hardship and austerity because of the Second World War. Even after the war ended shortages and rationing continued. The bomb site in Friar Street remained as *'an ugly scar on the face of the town'*, and the town felt shabby after years of neglect. This was compounded by the harsh winter of 1947, which was followed by some of the worst floods ever seen in the Thames Valley. Over 1600 homes became submerged in Reading alone.



Mrs Switler being helped from her flooded home, Tilehurst, Reading, in March 1947. Photograph from Reading Chronicle Collection (REDMG 1980.36.A921.3).

Post-war, whilst the town's major industries were stepping up production (especially for export), companies like Huntley & Palmers, Reading's world-famous biscuit makers, still faced challenges. The rationing of ingredients lasted well into the 1950s, while severe labour shortage exacerbated production problems.

Both public and private sectors faced these labour shortages, and by the late 1940s overseas workers were being recruited from the Commonwealth, British colonies, and Ireland to help with post-war reconstruction. The arrival of the *MV Empire Windrush* in 1948 is an iconic image of migration and has given its name to the first generation of Caribbean migrants. From the 1950s thousands of workers came to Reading, especially from the Caribbean, Indian, Ireland and Pakistan.

The new arrivals of the 1950s and 1960s have had a lasting contribution to Reading's social, economic and cultural life.



Huntley & Palmers employee checking Cornish Wafers, around 1960 (REDMG 1997.130.314).

Despite facing challenges to making its biscuits Huntley & Palmers was able to start making its famous decorative biscuit tins again, many featured pretty and cheery rural and coastal scenes. Tin plate was rationed and alternative materials like aluminium were sometimes used.



Detail showing a painting of Dunster Village on Huntley & Palmers tin, 1951-1952 (REDMG 1992.2.384).

The 1951 Huntley & Palmers tin to which this piece is a response features a watercolour of the historic Dunster Village in Somerset. A slice of 'olde England' that was much visited by holiday makers to the nearby seaside resort of Minehead before the Second World War. The exteriors of picturesque cottages often concealed homes that were in poor condition and lacked any form of modern heating, lighting, bathrooms, and kitchens. It was the same picture in urban areas, due to both sub-standard accommodation and major housing shortages due to the stopping of house building during the war and extensive bomb damage.

Severe housing shortages also impacted Reading. It was calculated in 1945 that 3,750 families didn't have homes of their own and were living in crowded conditions until they were able to move. The situation in Reading was further exacerbated by an 11% increase on the pre-war population recorded in the 1951 census.

In these circumstances, vacant military camps became potential living accommodation for squatters. In Tilehurst, Ranikhet Camp was taken over by 80 families, 200 people moving onto the site between 24 to 27 August 1946. Reportedly, squatters ignored the military guards as they moved in. This occupation followed that of a camp in Whitley by 40 families a few days earlier.



Squatters moving into army huts at Ranikhet Camp, Reading, August 1946. Photograph from Reading Chronicle Collection (REDMG 1980.36.A862.2d).

The housing need was being met by the building of traditional and prefabricated homes by Britain's local councils, both rural and urban, with substantial government subsidies provided by the 1946 Housing Act. Reading started to build pre-fabs as soon as the war ended in 1945, and by July 1950 it was celebrating the completion of its thousandth council house. The Mayor of Reading, Alderman A. F. Clark, handed over the keys to Mr K. J. Slater and his family in Tilehurst.



The thousandth council house in Reading, July 1950. Reading Chronicle Collection (REDMG 1980.36.B265.1).

By 1952 large-scale housing estates were being built on former agricultural land on the outskirts of Reading. At Southcote, beside the main Bath Road, the Council acquired 150 acres of land for a large new housing estate, with schools, shops, health clinic, pubs and churches being added over the next ten years.



Aerial view of the Southcote housing estate by 1960 (REDMG 1980.36.D187.6a-b).

To add to the housing problems Field Road in Coley was one of several areas in Reading to suffer from subsidence damage, including a major incident in September 1951, when a large section of the street partially collapsed. The problem was caused by the chalk mines that were created in and around Reading from the eighteenth century onwards to extract chalk for use in making bricks. Over the next two hundred years people forgot where most of the mines were, and houses were built over many of them.



Mining subsidence at Field Road, Reading, September 1951. Photograph from Reading Chronicle Collection (REDMG 1980.36.B395.2c).

The expansion and development of the University of Reading, with purchase of Whiteknights for a new landscape campus in 1947, and the establishment of The MERL in 1951, were key parts of the town's post war development. Reading Museum has always had a close working relationship with The MERL. In fact, a model of a Barrett, Exall & Andrewes threshing machine given by Reading Museum to the University of Reading's Faculty of Agriculture was transferred to The MERL in January 1951 (and this item featured as the first object chosen for the 51 Voices project).

Today, we form a strategic partnership called Museums Partnership Reading, that is part of the Arts Council England's National Portfolio (2018-2022). We work together to provide cultural opportunities for Reading's young people and diverse communities, through schools, volunteering, digital engagement, and exhibitions.

1951 marked a tipping point in Reading's growth, from a town that had hardly changed since 1939, towards the major social, economic, and architectural developments that would chance the face of Reading forever.

Further Information (online):

For more information about the biscuit tin see – [REDMG 1992.2.384](#)

For online resources about Empire Windrush produced by Reading Museum see – www.readingmuseum.org.uk/resources/windrush-day/windrush-day-enigma-arrival

For more information about Huntley & Palmers archives held by Special Collections and The MERL see – <https://collections.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/collections/huntley-palmer/>

For an old portal about Huntley & Palmers history see – <http://www.huntleyandpalmers.org.uk/>

For more about Museums Partnership Reading see – <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/reading-museum-and-merl-working-together>

For more about the Barrett, Exall & Andrewes model thresher see – [MERL 51/2](#)

Further Information (not online):

Daphne Phillips, *Coronation Reading: A portrait of the town as it was in 1953* (Reading Libraries, 1977)

Joan Dills, *Reading: A History* (Carnegie Publishing, 2019)