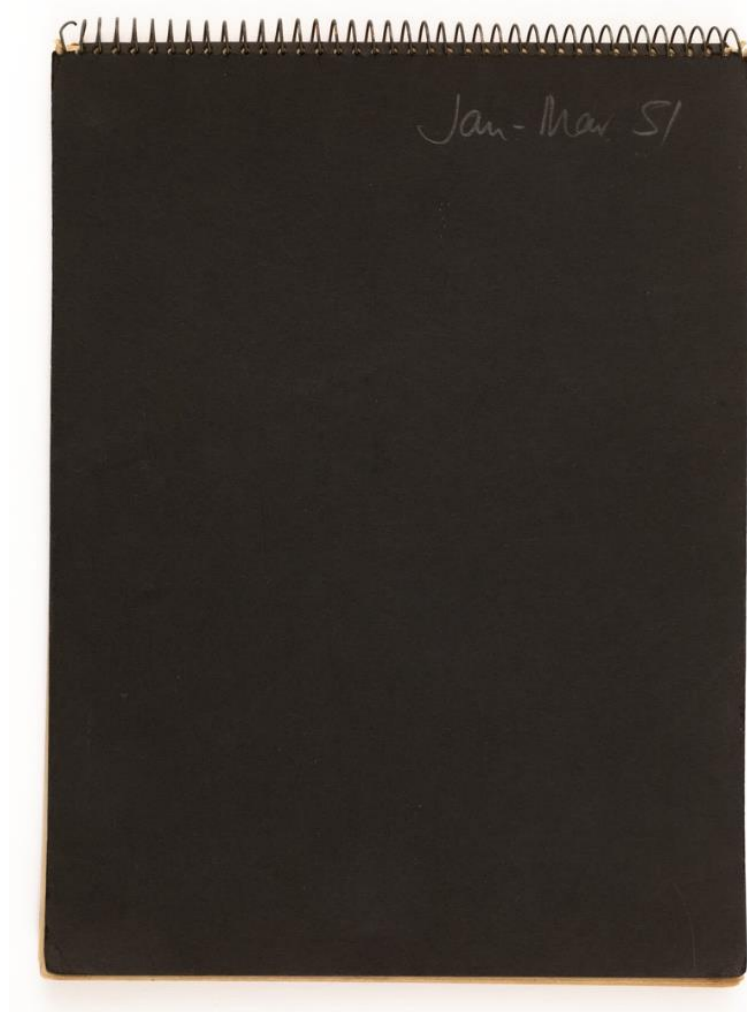


34. Festival Landscapes

In this piece, the Landscape Architect Annabel Downs digs into the archive holdings of the Landscape Institute, housed at The MERL. She explores connections to the striking landscape designs brought about by the creative atmosphere of the Festival of Britain team, focussing in on a sketchbook of ideas from the papers of mid-century architect, planner, and landscape architect, Peter Shephard.

Peter Shephard, Landscape design sketchbook, 1951



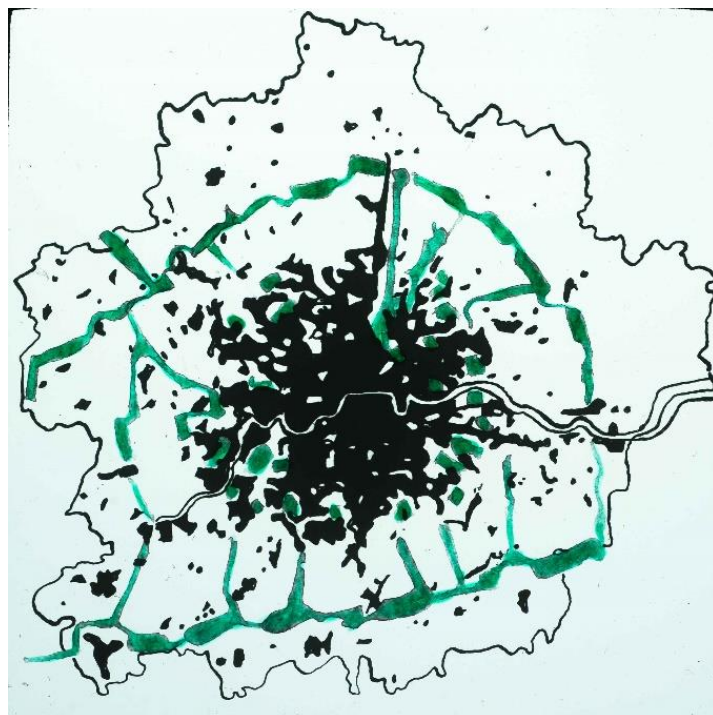
Front cover of Peter Shephard's sketchbook, dated January to March 1951 (MERL AR SHE DO1/1/10).

Landscape Tales from the Riverbank

Opportunities like the Festival of Britain are as rare as hen's teeth where so many different architects, landscape architects and other designers, are brought in to work side by side and sometimes together to celebrate one event. Many of the architects and landscape architects taken on to work on

the main festival sites in London at South Bank, Lansbury, and Battersea Park, were young and many probably not well known at the time. For all of them it must have been such an exciting opportunity to be involved in designing—even if temporary—public places that were to be celebratory, educational, and, above all, fun. What a contrast to all the other projects they might have been working on since the war. And of course, the Festival would have added a distinguishing extra to their CV's. Possibly of even more value were the many new and useful contacts made during this time.

The idea of celebrating the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851 came initially from the Royal Society of Arts in 1943. It was subsequently picked up by industrial designer John Gloag and newspaper editor Gerald Barry and others, resulting, via the Board of Trade, in the appointment of Herbert Morrison as the minister responsible for the Festival in 1947. He was deputy prime minister (to Clement Atlee) and Lord President of the Council at the time. Before this, Morrison had been an elected member of London County Council (LCC) and leader from 1934-1940. During his time as LCC leader, amongst other things, he established the mechanism to secure land for the start of London's Metropolitan Green Belt.



Unattributed early-twentieth-century plan of the Green Belt (MERL SR OSS PH5/J59).

Morrison was also responsible for the evacuation of a million children from London at the outbreak of war. It was this action that inspired one of the founder members of the Institute of Landscape Architects (ILA), Marjory Allen. Following the recent death of her husband Clifford, she began her work campaigning for children's needs. She started with the establishment of wartime nursery centres. She went on to influence the 1948 Children Act to include regulation of living conditions of children in care, she introduced adventure playgrounds into the UK, she became President and

Chairman of Nursery School Associations of GB, founder president of the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education, and social welfare liaison officer to the UN International Children's Emergency Fund. Morrison, a close and loyal friend of hers since the early 1920s, actively supported her work. A few years after the Festival of Britain he proposed to her, but she never remarried.

Civil servant Max Nicholson was secretary to the office of the Lord President of the Council, and he helped with the Festival. He became widely known as an ornithologist, environmentalist, political advisor, administrator, and author, and founded or co-founded a host of organisations including the British Trust for Ornithology, Political and Economic Planning (with Gerald Barry), World Wildlife Fund, and the Nature Conservancy. He was also director and chairman of many conservation-based organisations.¹ It was a significant step, particularly for the landscape profession when in 1966 Nicholson sought to focus his attention on large scale land reclamation and form Land Use Consultants (LUC).² His plan was to establish an interdisciplinary environmental partnership along with Cliff Tandy, a qualified architect and landscape architect, and John Herbert, a qualified landscape architect and planner. Both of these men had worked in local and central government, and in Herbert's case, the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB). However, Nicholson was challenging the codes of all the institutes involved as he himself didn't have any of their professional qualifications. As this proposed partnership was contentious, and his prospective partners were active members of the ILA, two separate businesses were formed until the professional bodies tweaked their rules. One of LUC's first commissions was to deal with the restoration at Aberfan following the colliery tip disaster of 1966.



The South Bank Exhibition was long-planned (MERL Library 1770-COX – see 51 Voices item 8 'Festival Guide').

One of Nicholson's early roles in connection with the Festival of Britain was to preside over the Great Exhibition Centenary Official Committee which Morrison established in late 1947, with members

appointed from relevant government departments. The whole exhibition concept moved on from being a large international exhibition to a national event embracing industry as well as the sciences and arts, demonstrating the activities, achievements and way of life of an entire people, and with events and activities spread across the nation. There were many practical reasons that shaped this progression of thinking in post war Britain including the availability of money, materials, labour, transport, and determining which site. As observed later by Gerald Barry, appointed as director-general of the Festival in spring 1948, this new idea was:

‘something that no nation had ever attempted before. ... [it was] at once both more modest, yet more ambitious; more simple, yet much more complicated. Instead of embracing the whole world it was to be restricted to our own country... instead of being confined to a single exhibition it was to cover, in a whole series of events in a wide variety of places, nothing less than the activities achievements and way of life of an entire people.’³

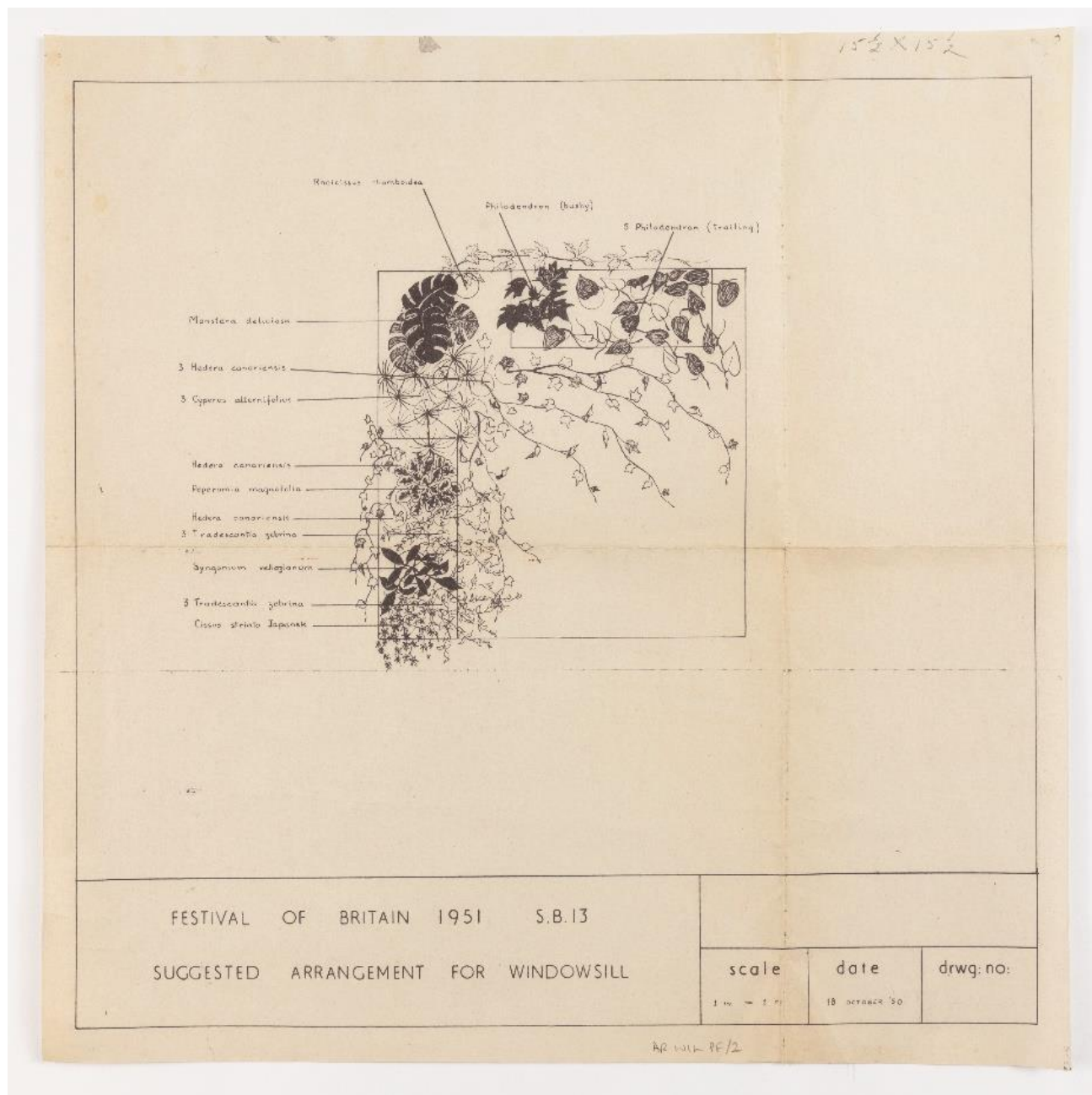
A hierarchy of mostly small committees was established to help develop and then realise all the ideas for the Festival.

Almost a decade earlier, during the highly unusual ten-year term that Geoffrey Jellicoe served as President of the ILA from 1939, he encouraged and enabled Institute members to join Government advisory committees and other influential organisations. In the same spirit, he and his Council invited a selection of key people to join the young Institute, even though some were never to practice directly or earn fees as landscape architects. And so, it is no surprise to see some of the Festival committees peppered with some of these same people. Professor Sir Patrick Abercrombie had a seat on the Council, the Festival’s top committee. The principal author of the *County of London Plan* (1943) and the *Greater London Plan* (1944), he was one of three Vice-Presidents of the ILA Council at this time. On the Festival’s Council for the architecture, town planning, and building research committee was Professor W.G. Holford, architect, town planner, and consultant to the Central Electricity Generating Board at this time, he was also serving on ILA Council; Jaqueline Tyrwhitt had two roles on Festival committees, as member of the planning sub-committee, and as scriptwriter for the town planning pavilion exhibition. Strongly influenced by Patrick Geddes, she had been a member of the ILA since 1938.

Much of the committee work designing the theme and the content of the Festival was done in the first year without knowing the size or location of the site, or even if it was to be inside or outside. Although the main exhibition was to be temporary, existing parks considered as possible venues including Hyde Park, Crystal Palace Park, and Osterley Park were all rejected by the Government, some because of objection to the use of so much public open space for such a purpose, others because of poor accessibility. By February 1949 the Festival Council concluded that the South Bank site between

County Hall and Waterloo Road 'was the only site which was at once sufficiently spectacular, central and in harmony with the theme of a new Britain springing from the battered fabric of the old to be acceptable.'⁴ In a speech to the House of Commons, Morrison said:

'I can picture this new south side after the Festival is over. There will be a fine new concert hall, with restaurants and other amenities, right on the river bank'.



Suggested arrangement for a Festival of Britain windowsill the assistant D.E. Willis (MERL AR WIL PF/2).

The South Bank was to be the venue for the main part of the Festival exhibition, and the layout of the exhibition here had been planned by Hugh Casson and his team. Frank Clark was appointed as Landscape Consultant to the Festival Office in February 1949, with Maria Teresa Parpagliolo

Shephard, the Italian landscape architect, as his deputy. They also had the Regatta Restaurant Garden to design. Maria Shephard had already had a brief taster of working on a world fair project when in 1940 she had been appointed as head of the planning department for parks and gardens to celebrate 20 years of fascism at Mussolini's World Exhibition in Rome.⁵ In addition, Maria Shephard had support from two personal assistants, Susan Henderson and D.E. Willis who may have also been landscape architects.



Image of location on the South Bank site from Peter Shephard's album of images (MERL AR SHE PH3/2/2).

By December that year, Peter Youngman and Peter Shephard were appointed as the two commissioned landscape architects working on the Upstream and Downstream sections respectively (the Hungerford Bridge forming this dividing line). How were these appointments made and were there any other names in the running? Clark was a friend of Misha Black, one of the Festival co-ordinating architects for the upstream section and involved in the design of the Regatta Restaurant, amongst other roles. And Clark and Youngman knew each other from before the Second World War. We know that Shephard had shared a room with Hugh Casson while at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning (1944–1947), and shortly after he joined Derek Bridgwater as a partner, Casson asked Shephard if he would like to do the landscape for the Festival south bank site and part of the Live Architecture exhibition.⁶ The appointment letters show that Shephard had twelve areas associated with buildings and their architects in his brief, and Youngman had eight. They both also

had public fairways, concourses and circulation space to deal with, and other places for landscape 'where nobody would have to walk'. Shephard referred to this as 'space left over in planning' or 'slop'.⁷

Clark's commissioning letter shows that his appointment covered nineteen months, with varying amounts of input. They required one third of his normal working hours from March 1949 to October 1950, followed by his full-time engagement for the next six months, and for the final period covering the four-month duration of the Festival itself, back to 1/3 time. It is interesting to note that running concurrently with his part-time/full-time/part-time appointment with the Festival, Clark was leader of the landscape diploma course at University of Reading, teaching two days a week in term time. He also taught in the department of Civic Design at Liverpool University, he did consultancy work with Holborn Borough Council and in 1948 was appointed landscape architect to Stevenage New Town.

In the month before the Festival opened, Gordon Patterson, one of Clark's students at University of Reading, was recruited to help Maria Shephard. Perhaps this was the equivalent of work experience and maybe there were other similar new landscape architects also involved. According to Shephard, Maria Shephard 'ordered all the plants and kept everything in line. She was so practical, imaginative, enterprising'.⁸ Youngman was equally impressed with her organising skills and her intriguing work.

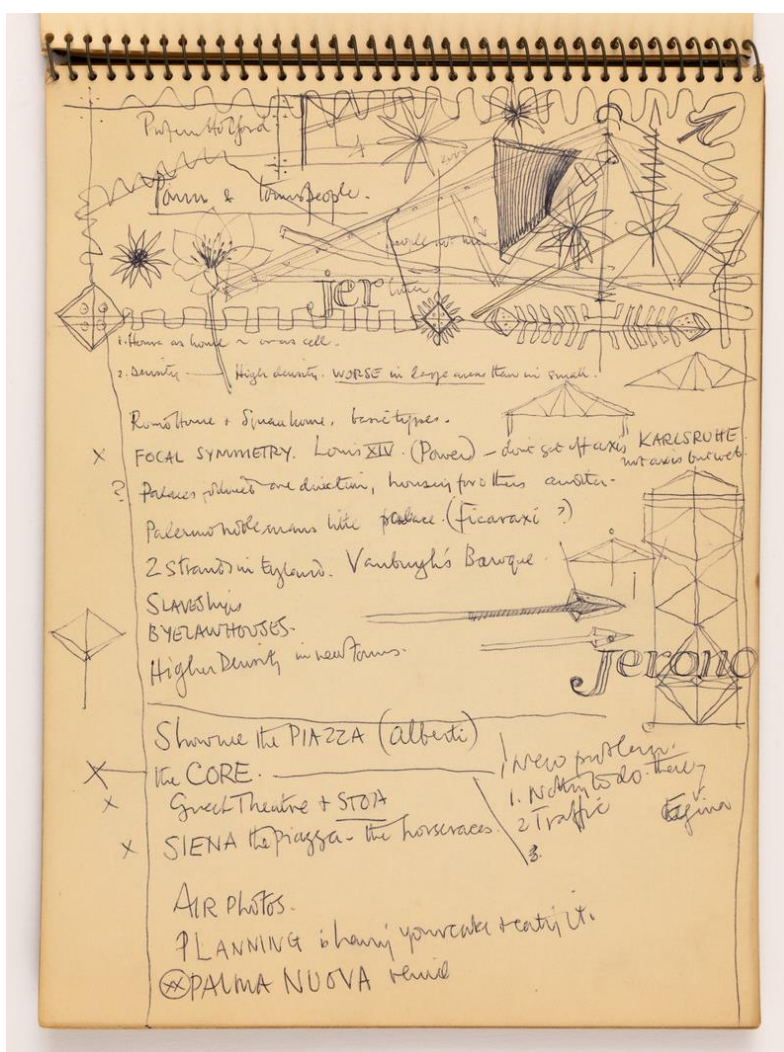


Newspaper cutting from The Times, showing complexity of the Pleasure Gardens layout (MERL AR DX2339/2).

Clark and the landscape team came in after the South Bank masterplan had been prepared, and they liaised with the various section architects and advised them 'on matters which were considered to be relevant to our job'.⁹ Clark was disappointed that only a part of the skills of this still young profession were recognised and employed. And perhaps even more disappointed because their 'principal work

was to act as horticultural advisers and to take charge of what has become known in festival circles as 'soft landscape.' Is this the first printed use of that term? As well as handling the designated garden areas, and finding opportunities for planting in left over spaces, the landscape architects also provided all the indoor plants for decoration within the buildings and pavilions.

Clark's draft report on the landscape architecture lists suppliers of plants, contractors, quantities of all the different types of plants, and describes the work undertaken by the landscape section.¹⁰ We learn that various ponds had to be topped up daily or twice daily because of leaks or evaporation, that six gardeners plus a foreman gardener were on permanent duty throughout the time it was open, and at weekends, when bedding plants were changed over, (and there were 75,500 bedding plants purchased), ten to sixteen men were engaged working during Saturday night till midday Sunday.



Page from Peter Shephard's sketchbook, dated January to March 1951 (MERL AR SHE DO1/1/10).

600 economical and lightweight large plaster plant containers were designed in the new Scandinavian style, for every corner and every fairway, and planted to provide a succession of colour throughout the season. With their wide rims, the planters unintentionally offered welcome relief as

temporary seating by the visiting public once the festival was open. This was neither anticipated nor welcomed by Clark as both plants and containers were damaged in the process. There was also the issue of the wet weather in May and August, and during the previous autumn, which affected the availability and quality of some plants. To Clark's eye, these containers did not provide the colourful displays he intended.



Page from Peter Shephard's sketchbook, dated January to March 1951 (MERL AR SHE DO1/1/10).

Listed amongst the 'principal suppliers of outdoor plant material' and along with familiar names of Hillier, Waterer, Wm Wood and several others, was the London-based Japanese designer, Seyemon Kusumoto. He had been involved with advising Herbert Goode on his Japanese garden at Cottered, Hertfordshire, and also designed and built a succession of Chelsea show gardens both before and after the Second World War. Hauliers Annis and Co, with no experience in horticultural works, were responsible for successfully moving seventy 20-50ft tall trees, using 'improvised equipment'. The trees had been identified from a few South England nurseries to help create a more mature landscape. These were root pruned the winter before planting and anchored underground using a complex construction made from welded angle iron set in concrete beams that held the base of each tree. Youngman commented later that this was one of the first times that large planting stock had

been used.¹¹ Only three of the seventy trees failed to survive. Clark noted that poplar, maple, lime, elm, turkey oak, ailanthus, acacia, whitebeam, mountain ash, silver birch, alder, and two different zelkova were all adaptable to transplanting at large size, but that evergreens (mostly evergreen oak) and beech needed special care. The lists cover a very extensive range of plants, indicative of the wide plant knowledge of these four landscape architects. There were over 7,000 shrubs including 1,000 climbers specified, 67,000 bulbs, 3,250 herbaceous plants, and the list goes on. The planting Clark noted, perhaps regretfully, was not ecological, natural or long term, this was exhibition planting - close planting without regard to future growth.

Page from Peter Shephard's sketchbook, dated January to March 1951, which features the heading 'FOB Landscape' [Festival of Britain Landscape] (MERL AR SHE DO1/1/10).

was subject to competitive tender, another contractor set out the Westmorland limestone section and Gavin Jones 'created the truly naturalistic setting with the Welsh sandstone'.¹²



Shepherd's design for moat garden and planting at the Festival of Britain (MERL AR SHE DO1/18/35)

Shepherd was in his element working on the Festival project, he referred to this as a 'golden time',¹³ and particularly since the emphasis of the landscape architect's role was about plants. 'The beautiful thing about the Festival was that we suddenly had a vast pedestrian area with 37 acres and no cars in it, but lots of people.'¹⁴ He had already been using sketch notebooks to record meetings, agenda, to do lists, and in between, drawings of his cat, sketch ideas for a project, and other drawings of birds from memory, we can see some of his emerging ideas about the festival. For some of his planting on the South Bank (site SB 21 Shot Tower and Courtyard) he specified 98 black poplars in various sizes, a tree he would have been familiar with from his childhood on the Wirral, but none were available.¹⁵ The other landscape architects tree selection covered a broader range of species. Shepherd sought out plants with dramatic and architectural form and foliage, 'the maximum effect of luxuriance in the shortest possible time',¹⁶ and amongst many others, he specified 120 *Polygonum sachalinense* (which we now know as the highly invasive giant knotweed) and 60 *P. cuspidatum* (Japanese knotweed).¹⁷ 'I am extremely fond of growing weeds' he said in a talk, 'anyone who has seen my gardens at the Festival will know that I like weeds.'¹⁸ What happened to all the plants when the festival closed?

Although this was a significant project in Shepherd's career, Youngman had some photos of his festival work taken before it opened to the public and kept them in his archive, but otherwise he doesn't appear to have written much about this project. However, he continued to work in association with 'his' festival architects, the Architects' Co-Partnership on the Brynmawr rubber factory and with the client the Earl of Verulam.



Shepherd drawing showing Festival grounds and St Paul's in the background (MERL AR SHE DO1/18/35)

Demolition of old and derelict buildings was required before work on the South Bank site could start, a new river wall was needed which would also provide additional space; for the festival itself, there were any number of associated works relating to access including two piers for water-bus transport, a bailey bridge across the Thames, a new roundabout constructed at the south end of Waterloo Bridge, new escalators installed at a couple of underground stations, large scale and off site visitor parking space was required for coaches and cars. Traffic and pedestrian circulation around Parliament Square was to be reconfigured and the square itself redesigned as a central island all this completed in preparation for the Festival. (Incidentally the planting here was not designed by a landscape architect, but instead by the Bailiff of the Royal Parks.) Many hotels, boarding houses and hostels still held under requisition by the Government needed to be released and spruced up for the visitors.

Throughout the time from inception to opening, there had been discussion in Parliament about all manner of things related and unrelated to the Festival of Britain that Herbert Morrison, and Nicholson behind the scenes, had to deal with, not least cuts to the Festival budget, using money and resources not on rebuilding the nation, anxiety about the Korean War which started in mid 1950, whether the events, including the exhibitions at the science and V+A museums, the Battersea Park pleasure gardens, and the land and sea travelling exhibitions could be legally open on Sundays. One of the biggest concerns for everyone involved must have been if everything would be completed on time for the opening.

On 3 May 1951 from the steps of St Paul's Cathedral in London, the King declared the Festival open following a special service which he and other members of the royal family attended. To the east of the cathedral the adjacent area had been heavily bombed. This site was included as part of the festival works and although this is still not widely known, Shepherd designed the 1951 Festival Garden here.

More landscape architects, commissioned in their capacity as architects, were involved in the Living Architecture exhibition at Lansbury. Geoffrey Jellicoe and Peter Shepherd on housing, Judith Ledebour on old peoples' homes, Frederick Gibberd the shopping centre and marketplace. The Chief Officer of the LCC Parks Department Alec Robert Mawson (1935-1950) and the first landscape architect appointed to this post, was involved with the festival from the outset, as well as at Lansbury. Following his untimely death, landscape architect Lancelot Arthur Huddart was appointed to this post.

There was also, what turned out to be the most popular part, the Festival Gardens at Battersea Park and the work there of the landscape architect Russell Page *'who has probably had the most difficult job of all.'*¹⁹ But this and Lansbury are tales for another time.

With thanks to Camilla Beresford for her research findings for FOLAR.

Further Information:

For information about the sketchbook see – [MERL AR SHE DO1/1/10](#)

For more about the Peter Shepherd collection – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/shepherd-peter/>

For more about the Landscape Institute archives – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/landscape-institute/>

For details of the Friends of the Landscape Archive at Reading (FOLAR) see – <https://www.folar.uk/>

For additional references, online and offline, see full endnotes below.

¹ See <http://www.maxnicholson.com/>

² Thanks to Richard Flenley for information concerning the LUC practice set-up.

³ G. Barry, 'The Festival of Britain: 1951'. *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 100(4880), (1952) p.670.

⁴ PUBLIC WORKS (FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN) BILL, House of Commons Debate, 10 February 1949 vol 461 c546 Order for Second Reading read.

⁵ The Esposizione Universale di Roma was to open in 1942 but was cancelled when Italy joined WWII.

S. Dümplemann 'Creating new landscapes for old Europe: Herta Hammerbacher, Sylvia Crowe, Maria Teresa Parpagliolo' in S Dümplemann and J. Beardsley (ed.), *Women, Modernity and Landscape Architecture*, (Routledge, 2015) pp.28-30

⁶ S. Harvey (ed.), 'Sir Peter Shephard', in *Reflections on Landscape from interviews by I Laurie and M Lancaster* (Gower, 1987) p.62

⁷ Harvey, 'Sir Peter Shephard' p.66

⁸ Harvey, 'Sir Peter Shephard' p.66

⁹ H.F. Clark, 'Landscape Architecture in the Festival of Britain' *Journal of the Institute of Landscape Architects*, July 1951 p.2

¹⁰ H.F. Clark, 'Landscape Architect's Report Festival of Britain' The National Archive TNA WORK 25/3/A1/A3/3

¹¹ A. Downs, 'Notes of conversation with Peter Youngman on collecting his archive'; (unpublished) May 2003

¹² A. Downs, 'Notes'

¹³ E. Bennis, 'Gardens: in opposition to god-wottery' in A. Downs (ed) *Peter Shephard*, (LDT, 2004) p.106

¹⁴ Harvey, 'Sir Peter Shephard' p.65

¹⁵ TNA WORKS 25-28-D5 1-4 This tree has since become a quite rare with the loss of wetlands.

¹⁶ P. Shephard, *Modern Gardens*, (Architectural Press 1953) p.75

¹⁷ This was introduced in the 1850s to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Edinburgh and Kew and subsequently sold by a large number of commercial nurseries. History of Japanese Knotweed in Europe by Dr J. Bailey, University of Leicester <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/genetics/people/bailey/res/hist>

¹⁸ P. Shephard 'Indoor gardening', *Architectural Association Journal* July/Aug (1952) pp.22-30

¹⁹ H.F. Clark, 'Landscape Architecture in' p.2