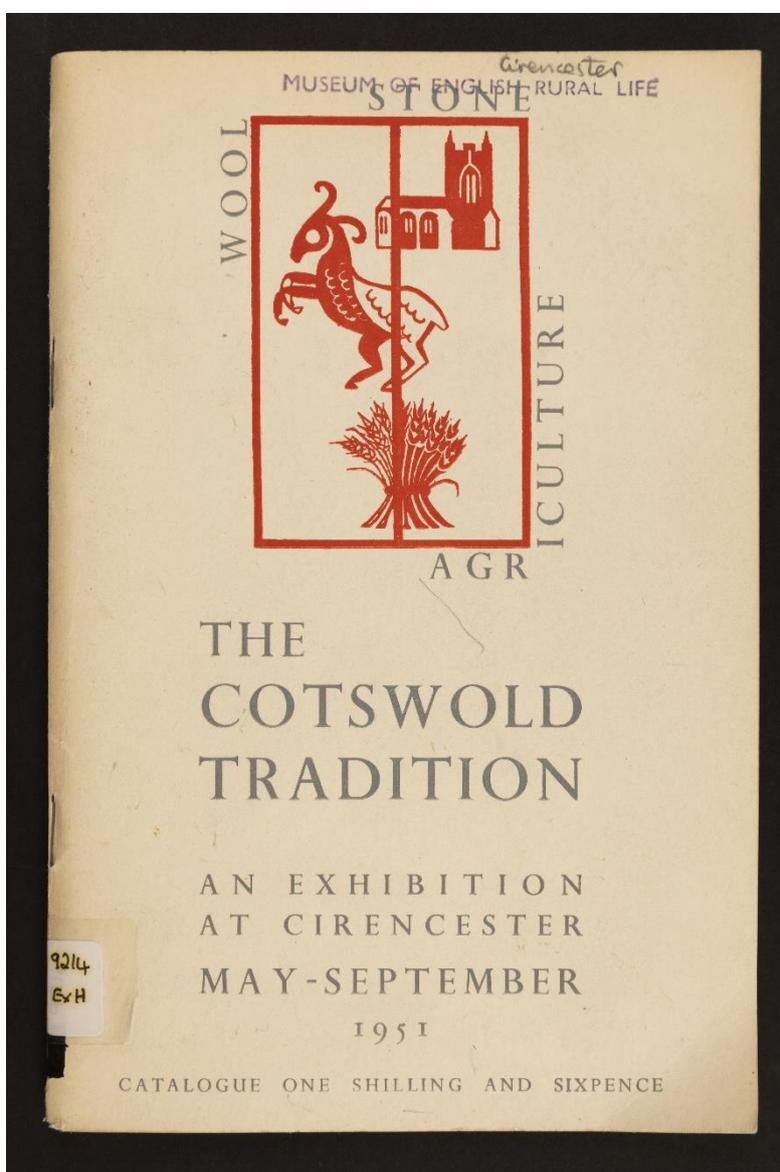


30. Cotswold Tradition

This response features Dr Caroline Morris, Collections Assistant at the Corinium Museum, in discussion with Dr Ollie Douglas, Curator of MERL Collections. We join them to find out more about a regional Festival of Britain display. Documents at The MERL indicated that items given by rural writer H. J. Massingham in 1951 were placed rapidly on display at Cirencester Park. Based on these tantalising references Ollie began to dig deeper and was delighted to find Caroline able to fill in many of the gaps. With unique archives at her disposal and eager to find out more, she revealed a more exciting exhibition history than expected.

Exhibition catalogue, *The Cotswold Tradition*, 1951



Cover of a copy of the catalogue for *The Cotswold Tradition* held at The MERL (MERL Library 9214 COT).

saying that the records and visitor's comments book *'are being preserved'* but it doesn't say where. I would imagine there would have been photographs too but we don't appear to have any in our collection. The current (9th) Earl Bathurst approached us at the Museum for information to give to The MERL (so it looks as if he doesn't have them), and the Gloucestershire Archive or Heritage Hub (which houses the Bingham Library Trust Collection) didn't list them. Although they did have the records of the Cirencester Arts Club which referred to *The Cotswold Tradition*. I wondered about this material so booked myself into the archive to have a look at a couple of the files catalogued – perhaps it was their contribution specifically. When I looked through just two of the seven files listed, I found that in fact this was specifically a collection of committee material. It contained letters to and from the committee and minutes of meetings: there was a plethora of material to get my teeth stuck into.

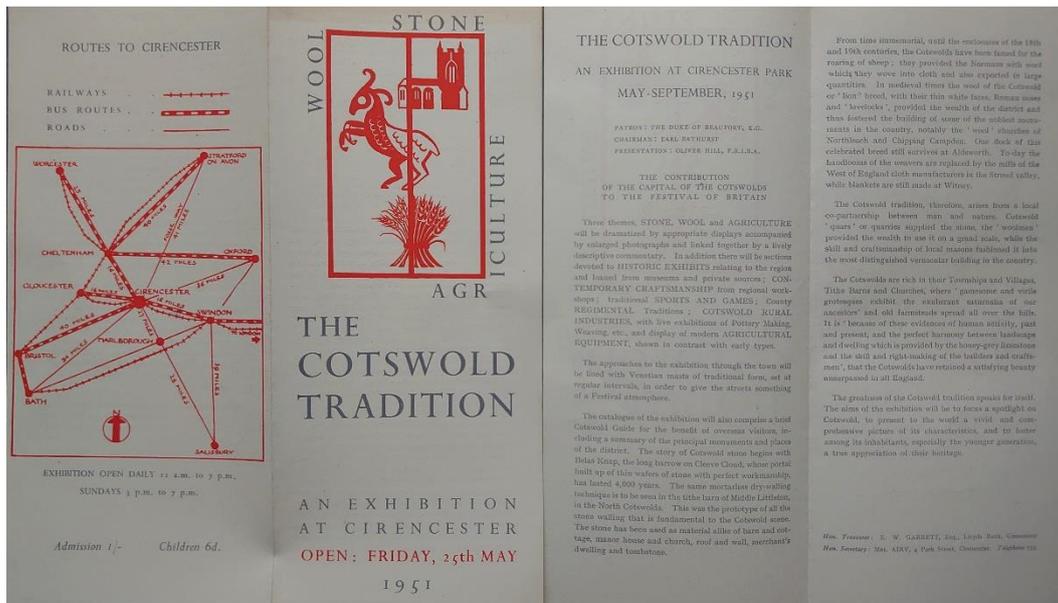
OD – As you know, we can find out a bit about the purpose of the exhibition—*The Cotswold Tradition*—from the catalogue. It ran from May to September and these dates tally neatly with the national programme of the Festival of Britain. From the sources you have to hand, can you give me a sense of what key messages the organisers of the exhibition hoped to communicate? To what extent did these aims appear to echo and reflect the core themes of 'Land' and 'People' that were threaded throughout the Southbank displays and national programme of the Festival? Was the finished display what they had in mind, or had the ideas evolved as the planning process unfolded?

CM – This exhibition was the district's response to the national call for a Festival of Britain. On both a press release (of some sort) and a leaflet publicising the event, the statement declaring *'The Contribution of the Capital of the Cotswolds to the Festival of Britain'* gives us some idea of their aims:

"The greatness of the Cotswold tradition speaks for itself. The aims of the exhibition will be to focus a spotlight on Cotswold, to present to the world a vivid and comprehensive picture of its characteristics, and to foster among its inhabitants, especially the younger generation, a true appreciation of their heritage."

Three themes—Stone, Wool and Agriculture—were to be *'dramatized'* in display alongside enlarged photographs linked with *'lively descriptive commentary'*. There were to be sections devoted to historic exhibits, contemporary craftsmanship, sports and games, county regimental traditions, rural industries, and agricultural equipment. There were also plans for live exhibitions of pottery, weaving, etc.

They definitely seem to have embraced the Festival of Britain themes of 'Land' and 'People'. The Cotswolds were built on the wool industry, even into the nineteenth century with the Stroud textile mills; it was built from stone which is so associated with the area and, until recently, agriculture was integral to the Cotswold way of life. There is a sense that the committee wanted to present the area as richly as any national exhibition of Britain.



The full span of the exhibition leaflet, which highlights key focal subjects, routes to the venue, and offers a summary of the broad theme and purpose of the show.

What was so intriguing to me after going through the Corinium Museum documents was that because we didn't have photographs, I just had the design to go on; and that seems to have been crossed through in pencil at some point. So, I was left wondering whether that meant this was a rejected plan, it was certainly ambitious. The planned giant wicker work hand holding a swathe of fabric would have looked amazing. The Gloucestershire Heritage Hub came to my aid as they have a copy of the booklet produced after the festival period that contained lectures given over the season. I was really excited to open the booklet and discover black and white photographs of parts of the exhibition used as illustrations between the lectures. The giant hand did indeed look pretty amazing.



A design sketch of the giant wicker work hand intended for inclusion in the Wool section of the exhibition.

On reading a little further into this booklet (*Cotswold Heritage: Lectures on the Cotswolds delivered at the Cotswold Tradition Exhibition*) I realised that the concluding article was not one of the

lectures, but an article called 'A Thousand Years of Cotswold Tradition' by the former editor and architectural advisor of *Country Life*, Christopher Hussey. The *Country Life* magazine had allowed the committee to reproduce their article in this booklet and his descriptions of the exhibition add real life to my impressions of the display. At the start of his article Hussey states that:

'Cirencester's compact but brilliantly displayed exhibition is the contribution of the Cotswold capital to the Festival of Britain. It may be singled out from the numerous local exhibitions promoted under the Festival scheme because, almost alone outside London, it is designed round a living theme (as contrasted with historical retrospection or industrial display), and because it is in itself a notable instance of the modern art of display... more moving than any of those on the South Bank... there is a note here that was equally applicable to the main Festival exhibition but seems to be designedly muted in it, namely the continuity and the traditional co-partnership between man and nature.'

However, I cannot really tell how much the exhibition evolved or whether it turned out as they had planned it, although I may discover more when I return to look at the other five files.

OD – I'd like to check the list of Massingham objects that went to these displays against the catalogues that we both have access to, and also against any listings or correspondence you have to hand about the items the curators were keen to borrow. Can we tell if they wanted to borrow more things or other things? What did they end up putting on display? Was it all shown in one place or were the objects borrowed from The MERL woven throughout various bits of the display?

CM – I don't have enough information to answer this specifically. However, from the catalogue they were ambitious in the quantity of things that they borrowed from quite a number of different sources: this included Queen Victoria's riding whip lent by HM Queen Mary. Of course, they had the benefit of having 8th Earl Bathurst and the Duke of Beaufort in their corner as it were, so they could call in many favours to make the display really rich.

The exhibition seems to have been predominantly in and around one building on the outskirts of Cirencester Park but which was also very close to the railway station and walking distance to the centre. What was, by then, called the Old Museum was built in 1851 by the 4th Earl Bathurst to house the large Four Seasons and Hunting Dogs Roman mosaics discovered in 1849. It opened to the public in 1856 and also contained some other artefacts discovered in the town or from the Bathurst's personal collection.

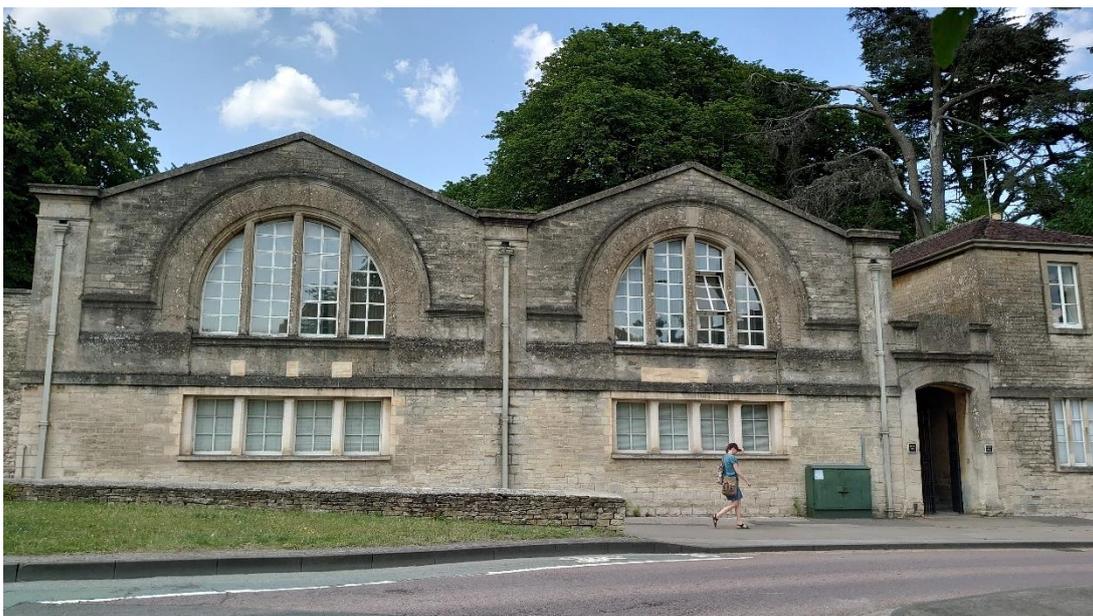
Some of the Massingham objects were displayed in the agricultural section of the exhibition beside the sheep 'totem symbol' and made up a substantial portion of that display. A selection of tools used by a dry-stone waller and stone slater from the Massingham collection were displayed in the stone section, which also included medieval stonework and a section of dry-stone wall. It's also worth noting that the part of the catalogue that describes this section includes extracts of Massingham's writing on stone.

OD – Thinking a bit more about the foundational role of the Massingham collection here at The MERL, we know that a good number of his objects were placed on temporary display in the University of Reading Library in 1951, before the Museum itself had its own premises. We have a handful of photographs of Massingham himself on site at this exhibition. These images reveal that this exhibit was far removed from my present-day expectations of what a temporary exhibition is. Indeed, it was more of a pop-up and table-top-based ‘show and tell’ than a carefully designed or painstakingly curated display. Was the exhibition at Cirencester Park a similarly informal production or was it larger and more carefully designed?

CM – The Cirencester exhibition was very ambitious and of course had the benefit of using the existing old museum building. Approaches to the exhibition were lined with Venetian masts ‘*of traditional form*’ to give streets ‘*something of a festival atmosphere*’. Indeed the ‘*Approximate Apportionment of Expenditure*’ says that they wanted to spend £79 on the masts and £15 on bunting. The exhibition was designed by Oliver Hill, an architect and exhibition designer. The committee chair, Earl Bathurst rhapsodised about his work in a letter of 1952:

‘At no other time have so many priceless Gloucestershire treasures been displayed to the public. Certainly, never in so exciting a fashion as designed by Mr Oliver Hill MBE, our director.’

The exhibition was built by Newcombe Beard (now called Beards, and who have since been involved in various gallery renovations at the Corinium Museum, including the recent Heritage Lottery Fund project). Amongst the archives we have invoices and letters between Newcombe Beard and the committee. The initial apportionment of expenditure sent to the committee in July 1951 was £1893.17.7d (approx. £59,105.32 in contemporary terms). By May 1952, the final receipts and payments had been calculated and final expenditure was £5973.15.8d (approx. £186,433.41) with construction costs coming in at £3194 16s 6d. (approx. £99,706.02).



The Old Museum building at Cirencester Park, as used as venue for The Cotswold Tradition in 1951.

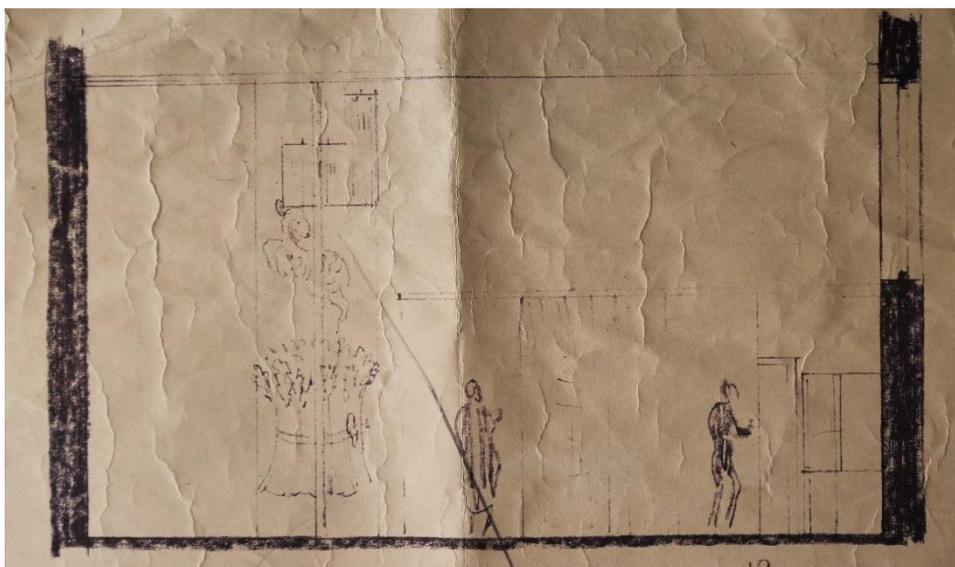
OD – Of course, it looks like the Massingham objects formed just one small fraction of the Cotswold material on display in the exhibition. What do we know about the other objects and where they came from?

The stonework display was largely made up of photographs; examples of stone craft from around the Cotswolds including prehistoric, medieval, and eighteenth-century stone. However, they also had a section of dry-stone wall and a Cotswold stone roof specially made by local artisans; a seventeenth-century tomb and some medieval stone corbels were lent by two local churches.



A design showing one elevation from the proposed layout of the stone section, including a tomb on the right.

The wool section had objects which, along with individual lenders, had been lent by several textile manufacturers from the Cotswolds, the Country records office, and The Weavers' Company of Cirencester.



This sketch shows a side elevation of the design for the Wool displays.

Objects borrowed from the Massingham collection dominated the agriculture section, but this is almost equalled by a Mr Pritchard of Stow-on-the-Wold: who lent objects including tools, smocks, a bee skep, a fox trap, and a double Gloucester cheese stand. Lady Apsley lent her horse brasses.

Perhaps inevitably the Handicrafts section included many Arts and Crafts objects, by known artists such as Ernest Gimson, William Simmonds, Alfred Powell, and C.R. Ashbee. The Bathursts were patrons of several Arts and Crafts makers, but many people lent objects for the display. These works were shown beside contemporary work from weavers and carvers.

The historical exhibits were in seven cases and included a lock of Nelson's hair. The lenders read like a 'who's who' of Cotswold landowners: Capt. EGS Spencer Churchill, Lord Vestey, Col. Chester Master, Mrs Dent Brocklehurst, Duchess Beaufort, Lord Dulverton, Countess Bathurst, and Sir Frederick Cripps. This last name is notable because he too had a private museum in Cirencester and his collection came to the Corinium Museum and made up the main part of its early collections alongside the Bathurst collection. There were institutional lenders too: the Bingham Library, Corinium Museum, Gloucester Museum, and churchwardens, rectors, and vicars from various parishes.

The house was also thrown open for *The Cotswold Tradition* and visitors could walk around the Bathurst family seat, having access to six of its rooms.

Over the five months 43,500 people visited, including 8,225 children. However, in the end, judging by the final accounts and a letter from Earl Bathurst in 1952, it was not financially successful.

OD – We hold some items that were made fresh for display as part of the Southbank displays of the Festival and were subsequently dispersed to Reading when the exhibition came to a close. Do we know whether any of the objects displayed in the Cirencester Park exhibition were commissioned to order? If objects or artworks were shown that were not on loan, do we know what became of those items afterwards?

CM – They certainly were, and there was a specific focus on local crafts people. We have one letter where the committee secretary writes to the local council for suggestions on particular crafts people to approach as well as businesses that might be able to contribute to the contemporary craft displays. Something which clearly happened as can be seen in the catalogue description of the Wool section. There was also of course the dry-stone wall and some of the live demonstrations outside the building would have resulted in more objects: basketry, spinning, beehives, and weaving.

We don't know what specifically became of the made for display objects. From the minutes of October 1951, we know that they discussed progress of returning of objects and recorded that only four items were damaged. They were to arrange taxis to return the remaining objects and Earl Bathurst offered to look after the remaining things to save on taxis. A slightly mysterious and tantalising mention is made of the return of the clothing of the 7ft high figures to Strachan Mill –

this is the only mention we have of these figures. There was discussion of whether the large photographs and craftsmen's work from the exhibition could be made more permanent, but again I have no further information on this.

OD – I'm also interested in those involved in planning, designing, and creating the exhibition. I'm guessing there must have been quite a few people involved and I'm brimming with questions about who they might have been. Was there any representation or input from the central Festival Committee or team in London? Who were the local voices and were they linked with local government or with other Cotswold-based organisations? Was there one leading curatorial voice or was it an amalgam of ideas from several individuals?

CM – We have some generic letters from the Festival committee but no specific mention of a representative that they dealt with. However, there was clearly communication and some recognition of their efforts. In a letter from Cirencester Park (so probably Earl Bathurst) from 1952 – is prefaced with a note that:

'Sir Gerald Barry, the Festival Director, proclaimed on the BBC that it was the best Festival effort outside London.'

As to local government, we have a letter from the council to the exhibition committee responding to their request for financial help either donation or as a guarantor amongst other things. There was no financial help from Cotswold Rural District Council, but local councils were permitted to publicise the exhibition. In a letter to parish councils, the CRDC clerk informs them of what is happening, telling them that no financial help will be provided. It ends with: *'Could I ask you to please refrain from enquiring of me whether "so and so" would be reasonable expenditure, because in the face of the ministry circular I am not able to give you official and specific guidance'*—this was underlined.

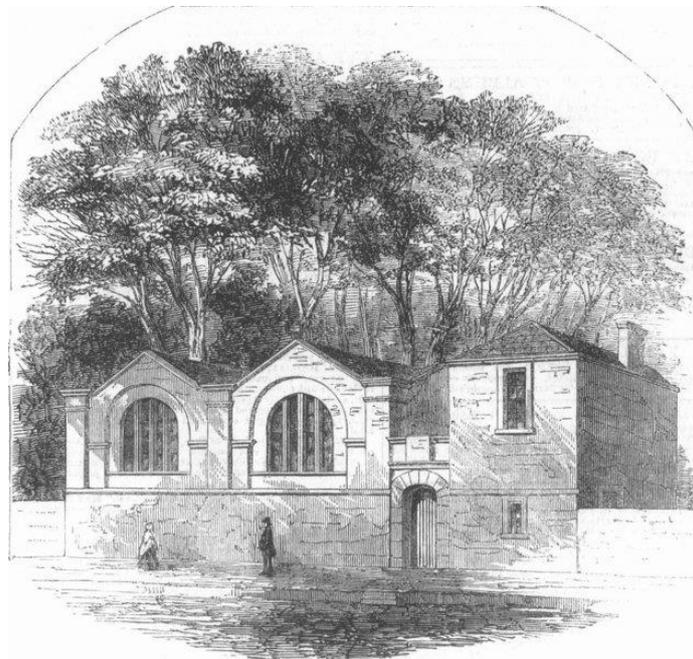
I believe that the local committee were the primary movers on this exhibition. The exhibition committee was filled with local worthies: the Patron was the Duke of Beaufort; the chair was 8th Earl Bathurst; the treasurer was the bank manager of the Cirencester Lloyds Bank; it also included Earl Bathurst's mother Lady Apsley and J. E. Jefferies a well-known local seed merchant and Cirencester Urban District councillor. This latter is where the Heritage Hub material may have come from. Most of the letters are addressed to or signed my John Jefferies and the impression I have is that because he was heavily involved in many local clubs and associations it would make sense that, although catalogued as 'Arts Club' material, they look to be his files. The hub has a collection of material associated with his long-established seed business and the Corinium Museum has many objects connected to the business, included a wonderful set of seed drawers about two metres tall and three metres wide.

I am really intrigued by this collection of correspondence. The committee comes across as decidedly fractious. Oliver Hill (architect and exhibition designer), who was the primary curatorial voice behind *The Cotswold Tradition*, seems to have been adept at making snap decisions without

consultation which put J. J. in an awkward position. Lady Apsley also took 'executive decisions' after promotional material had gone to press putting the committee to more expense. One member of the committee quit before the exhibition opened. From the correspondence and the minutes I've read so far, Mrs Airy the secretary, had quite a difficult time. In one set of minutes, it is reported that 'Mrs Airy said that as so much money was available for Venetian Masts etc could she have an assistant secretary...' Clearly, Earl Bathurst was heavily involved as chair, quite impressive when you consider the fact that he was only 24 in 1951. However, he clearly added to the troubled committee relationship. In a post-exhibition open letter from Mrs Airy to the committee members she expresses her displeasure at being unceremoniously relieved of her duties by Earl Bathurst.

OD – Thinking about the Estate, I'd love to know a bit more about Cirencester Park itself. What can you tell me about its mid-century history?

CM – The Cirencester Park Estate was originally laid out as a deer park by the 1st Earl Bathurst in the 1700s. One thing it is famous for besides being the location of the Polo club that Prince Charles plays at, is having the tallest yew hedge in the world. During the Second World War, the park was used for vehicle manoeuvres and an area by the Queen Anne monument was used as an Army hospital for the American troops. It has only been in recent years that it has been returned back to its original state. Perhaps most significantly for this conversation, the park had its own museum which was the original Corinium Museum. In the thirties plans were put into place to move the collection to a larger building and in 1937 the collection moved up the road to its current home (or rather half of its present home).



An image of the original Corinium Museum building as it appeared in the London Illustrated News.

This move was thanks to the 7th Earl and Sir Frederick Cripps, who also had his own private museum, which joined the Bathurst Collection in the new larger museum. Hence why for the 1951 Festival of Britain this building was available for *The Cotswold Tradition*.

OD – Why you think this heritage is interesting and important?

CM – I was trying to work out why I found this archive so fascinating to research. I think my previous academic research has a lot to do with it where I was looking at the development of biographical museums in the United Kingdom. It left me with an interest in, amongst other things, the folk/craft revival, and the beginnings of the heritage sector. *The Cotswold Tradition* sits nicely in that Venn diagram. There is something about the post-World War One to mid-century period which prompted a revival of interest with the rural past, tradition, and craft that seems to be a product of the Romantics and the nineteenth century but also completely of its time. The Festival of Britain was certainly about the modern—look at the Southbank—but intriguingly it appears to be rooted in an almost Romantic yearning for a lost rural past. That might be overstating it but there is something interesting going on that fascinates me.

The connection to the history of the museum in which I work is obviously pleasing too because I can apply my own research experience to the collection. This is something that can be more difficult with some of the archaeological collection.

OD – And finally, having revisited the history of a 1951 display through archives in your care and with the help of your expertise, I'd love to know a bit more about what's going on in terms of Cotswolds-based heritage today. With this in mind, can you tell me a bit more about your role and the institution you work for?

I'm a Collections Assistant for the Corinium Museum. We are an archaeological museum which displays the archaeology of the Cotswolds, and we are the Cotswold archaeological depository. We show the area from the Neolithic, through the Romans and Anglo Saxons to the medieval and ending in the nineteenth century. Obviously, we do have a lot of Roman material, and this is what we are known for, but our prehistory collection has recently been redisplayed and it is quite a sight now.

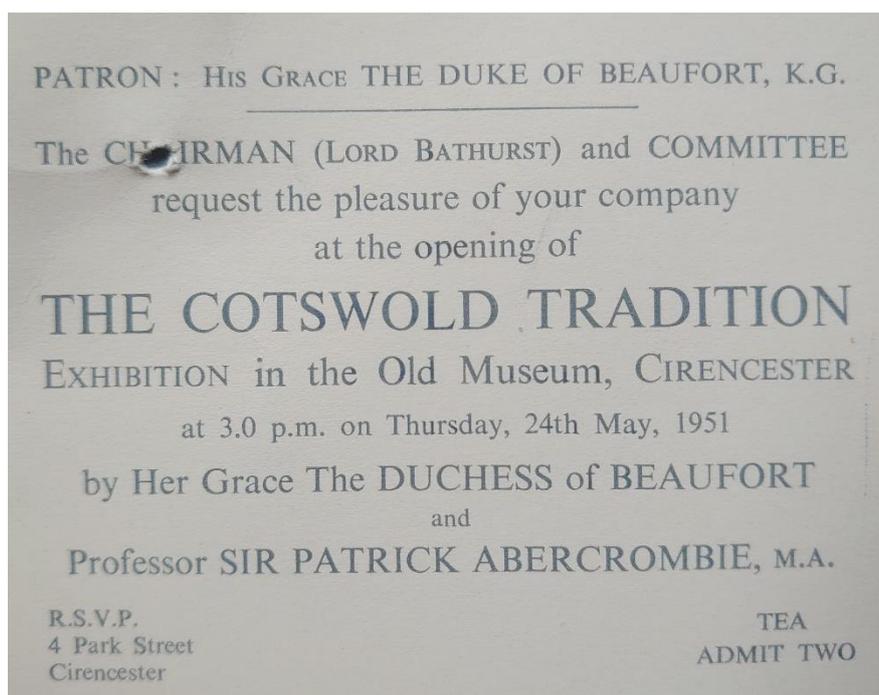
For a period in the eighties and nineties the then curator was regularly acquiring objects associated with Cirencester/Cotswold social and rural history. This was also because of the connection the Museum had with the "The Cotswolds Countryside Collection" at Northleach, which contained the extensive collection of Olive Lloyd Baker. She collected objects associated with disappearing rural life and crafts in a similar manner to Massingham collecting pre-World War One 'bygones', but in the 1960s.

One of my responsibilities is in our external store where, besides the archaeology shelves of Medieval abbey fragments for example, we have costume, social history, and rural life holdings. As may be clear from my enthusiasm in this conversation I have a particular love of our social and rural history, it's a joy to me to get to share some of the objects we have that people may not realise they want to see.

OD – Of course, 2021 has been an extraordinary year in its own right and for very different reasons. Are you keen to share news of any programmes or activities that you have been involved in throughout 2021?

CM – As lockdown one hit, the Museum was within months of completing a Heritage Lottery Funded project called ‘Stone Age to Corinium’, which involved major refurbishment of some of the galleries. The Director Amanda kept things going once the contractors were allowed back in and the new galleries were opened virtually a few months later than planned. I seem to remember a day spent cleaning glass cases. I swear dust waited for me to turn my head before returning.

Now we are actually open which is such a relief because the new galleries look amazing. I have so far resisted sitting in the reconstruction of a Bronze Age round house. We’ve been hosting virtual talks and getting very active on social media where some of our social history has been going down a storm on *TikTok*. Now we’re open I’ve been tasked with putting together tours of the stores over the summer. So, I get to do my favourite thing and go through boxes looking for interesting items from the non-archaeological collections to show to the public.



A formal invitation to the opening of The Cotswold Tradition, as held on 24 May 1951.

Further Information (online):

For more information about The MERL's catalogue copy see – [MERL Library 9214 COT](#)

For more about objects lent for display see – [Massingham objects linked to The Cotswold Tradition](#)

For more information about Corinium Museum see – <https://coriniummuseum.org/>

To see Corinium Museum on TikTok see – <https://www.tiktok.com/@coriniummuseum>

For more information about Gloucestershire Heritage Hub see – <https://www.heritagehub.org.uk/>

For more by Caroline Morris check out her blog – <https://magpieseven.wordpress.com/>