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DUSTING OFF OLD ENGLAND

John Piper's long-lost mural for the festival of Britain languished in a barn for decades. Now it's back on the South Bank.



Finding a long-lost, major work by an important artist gathering dust in a barn? It's a ridiculous cliché. But that doesn't make it impossible. Next week sees the unveiling on the South Bank of a mural, *The Englishman's Home*, at 50ft long and 16ft high a genuinely mighty example of the work of John Piper, one of the most popular British artists of the 20th century.

Commissioned for the 1951 Festival of Britain, *The Englishman's Home* was one of several murals created for the event and was exhibited on the southern facade of the Homes and Gardens pavilion. It has been shown only once since, very briefly, at the hot-ticket cultural destination of Harlow Technical College. At the time of its creation the festival director Hugh Casson called Piper's work "the one mural on the South Bank we cannot afford to lose". Which is apt because, of the large-scale outdoor works, it turns out to be almost the only one we didn't. But, says Conor Mullan, the 20th-century British art enthusiast who was first alerted to its barn-bound existence, it was a close-run thing.

"The festival was run on the enthusiasm of the people who did it," he explains. "They were highly idealistic, they had come through this awful war, but the problem was that at the end of the whole thing nearly all of the big murals were destroyed"

This is a common problem with large-scale murals, says the 20th-century art dealer Paul Liss : "Often these projects, which at the time were very important, have by virtue of their size disappeared, often just through neglect. Another significant mural commissioned for the festival was by Edward Bawden — it was put in a warehouse to protect it, then the warehouse was demolished but no one thought to look at what was inside it."

In an attempt to display some of the treasures of the festival, "this one was sent up to Harlow," Mullan says, "and Harlow sort of said: 'What are we supposed to do with it?' And so it went into a box for many years. For a very short period in the 1970's it went up at Harlow Technical College, then it came down again and it went into a barn."

Whisper it, but you can sort of see why. The mural, important and beautiful though it is, is also, well, absolutely massive. Forty-two separate exterior plywood panels finished with gesso — you can imagine all but the most culturally ambitious local authority being at somewhat of a loss what to do with it.

Eventually, the Harlow Arts Trust, an entirely voluntary organisation which deals almost exclusively with sculpture, contacted Mullan with a plea for help. He called Liss. The trust had already sold the mural at auction to a private collector, but Liss managed to acquire it (now rather unfashionable, Piper's work doesn't command the huge sums of some of his contemporaries) and through the efforts of the 20th Century Society and the enthusiasm of the Southbank Centre's artistic director Jude Kelly (who happens to be a big fan of Piper), it was taken on for the Festival celebrations.

A major force within the British Abstract movement in the 1930s, counting Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore among his friends, Piper often exhibited with the abstraction-focused Seven and Five Society. At the beginning of the Second World War, however, he was commissioned to record bomb-damaged sites, as well as buildings that were expected to be destroyed. The work had a huge effect on him, with the result that, despite Nicholson's accusation of treachery, Piper never returned to abstraction, sticking with figurative painting — especially of British landscape and architecture — to the end of his life. At the time of the Festival commission Piper was at the height of his powers — he also designed the South Bank pleasure gardens for the Festival, with the cartoonist Osbert Lancaster — but unlike most of the other mural artists, he elected to paint the entire work himself. "In general the artist kind of does the big bits and then assistants and students fill in the gaps," Mullan says, "but that's not the case with Piper. It took him months and months, and there are pictures of him ; painting it in the garden in Fawley Bottom [in Oxfordshire] where he lived, on this huge scaffolding pole with his kids playing around him."

A sort of primer of the best of English architecture, according to research by Professor Alan Powers at the University of Greenwich, the mural includes the dome of Castle Howard in Yorkshire; the gables of Kelmscott Manor, Gloucestershire, the former residence of William Morris; the bow-fronts of Regency Square, Brighton; the royal arms over the gateway of East Barsham Manor in Norfolk; and a Victorian red-brick villa identified as Piper's mother's house, among others. The cottage at the bottom in the middle of the composition was based on No 6, Station Road, Yeovil. No one quite I knows why. "The funny thing is it fully ignores I the contemporary architecture of the time," Mullan says. "That's not what he felt it was about."



The art historian Roy Strong said I recently of Piper: "I consider him the equivalent in the 20th century of Constable. No other artist has epitomised England so powerfully and with such passion and depth of feeling." Mullan's hope is that its exhibition on the South Bank and subsequent star billing in the V&A's *British Design 1948-2012* exhibition, opening next March, will mean that eventually a home is found for this wonderful but unwieldy work. "It's a bit like doing a renovation job on a house," Mullan says. "You can't think about it too much, you must just let your heart lead. But I think there are places: every time I walk into a municipal building now I see spaces it could go!"

The Piper mural will be unveiled at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London to launch the Southbank Centre's Festival of Britain 60th anniversary celebrations on April 22. It will then be shown in the V&A's *British Design I 1948-2012* exhibition from March 2012, then tour internationally.