

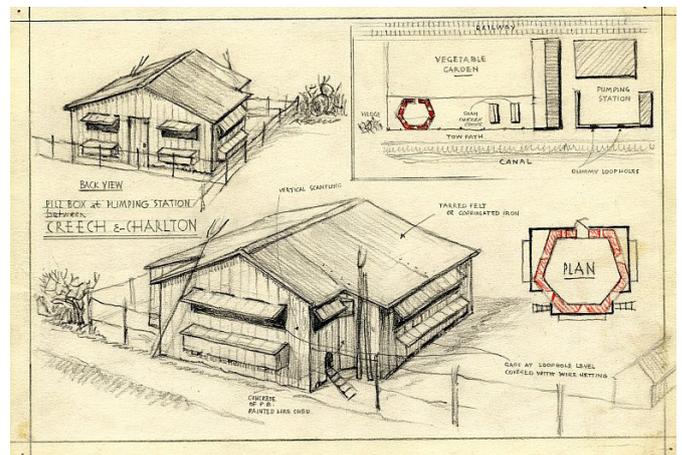
OLIVER MESSEL



Oliver Messel (1904–1978) was one of Britain's most successful stage designers.

During a career that spanned more than 50 years he created sets and costumes for theatre, opera, musicals, ballet and film. Messel's unexpected association with the West Country relates to the period during the Second World War when he was based in Somerset to design camouflage for pillboxes.

Messel was born in Sussex and educated at Eton. He studied painting at the Slade School of Fine Art where he was taught by the celebrated Henry Tonks. Messel made masks for a production of the ballet *Zéphyre et Flore* in 1925 and went on to collaborate with many leading directors in the English theatre. In the 1930s he began to work in film and travelled to Hollywood for several major productions including *Romeo and Juliet* (1936). In 1946 he designed sets for the famous production of *Sleeping Beauty* which reopened the Royal Opera House after the war.



Camouflage by disguise. A machine gun emplacement disguised as a small cottage on a hillside overlooking the river Parrett.

Messel travelled extensively and forged friendships with prominent society figures including Cecil Beaton, Noel Coward, Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford.

Messel joined the army in 1940 and was posted to the Royal Engineers as a camouflage officer. For a seven-week period he designed pillbox camouflage on the Taunton Stop Line. After the fall of France in June 1940, the military created a range of defences to stop a Nazi invasion. The Taunton Stop Line ran through Somerset and was intended to be a defence against German attack from the west.

The artist Julian Trevelyan, a fellow officer and friend, described Messel as 'in his element' camouflaging pillboxes, 'many as gothic lodges' and others as 'caravans, haystacks, ruins and wayside cafes, always with great attention to detail'. In 2016 a rare collection of drawings made by Messel was given to the Somerset Archives and Local Studies Collection. The drawings show designs for pillbox camouflage and illustrate Messel's great skill and imagination.

After the war Messel continued to work in film and theatre, winning an Academy Award in 1960 for best set direction for *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959). He moved to Barbados in 1966 where he continued to work, creating architectural designs for private homes. In Messel's lifetime same-sex relationships were illegal, but because of his background and social connections he was able to live as an openly gay man with his partner Vagn Riis-Hansen.

Oliver Messel died in Barbados on 13 July 1978.



Oliver Messel, 1936
(© National Portrait Gallery, London)



Camouflage by merging. This colour illustration is accompanied by a description of how to camouflage pillboxes using foliage and brushwood.