

## Festival of Britain: fun that forged the future

In 1951, the Festival of Britain was the perfect antidote to post-war gloom and austerity. As the Southbank celebrates the Festival's 60th anniversary, Barry Turner explains how its clean, modern style inspired a generation of young creative talent.



The Royal Festival Hall and other specially erected buildings at the site of the Festival of Britain on the South Bank of the Thames Photo: GETTY IMAGES

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By Barry Turner

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It was a time of hope. After six years of post-war austerity – making do on very little – the Festival of Britain brought good news. One day, not far ahead, the country would enter an age of peace and plenty.

At the heart of the Festival was a sampler of the future Britain: an exhibition on the south bank of the Thames, close to Waterloo Bridge. The best of young talent in technology, art and design came together to show what they could do. It was a revelation.

Something of that excitement will be rediscovered this Easter with the 60th anniversary celebrations to be held on the very site of the Festival. But, in recreating many of the features of the 1951 exhibition, the organisers have stopped short of reproducing the iconic buildings that so impressed a generation more used to soot-

blackened façades and bomb craters.

The Festival centrepiece was the Dome of Discovery, “a shining cranium of invention”, as one observer said of it. At 365 feet in diameter, it was the largest construction of its kind in the world. For the young caught up on science fiction, it was a flying saucer made real.

But for most visitors, the abiding symbol of the Festival was the Skylon, 300 feet of slender steel and aluminium, an outsized exclamation mark, held in place by high tension cables. Like the Eiffel Tower, it served no practical purpose except to make people stop, stare and wonder at the marvels of technology.

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[Divers search for missing Skylon \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/8270118/Festival-of-Britain-divers-to-search-for-missing-Skylon.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/8270118/Festival-of-Britain-divers-to-search-for-missing-Skylon.html)

['A tonic for the nation' \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/8270351/Festival-of-Britain-1951-A-tonic-for-the-nation.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/8270351/Festival-of-Britain-1951-A-tonic-for-the-nation.html)

[Festival of Britain in pictures \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8270360/The-1951-Festival-of-Britain-in-pictures.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8270360/The-1951-Festival-of-Britain-in-pictures.html)

[Dreaming of a spire: the Festival of Britain \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8270252/Dreaming-of-a-spire-the-Festival-of-Britain.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8270252/Dreaming-of-a-spire-the-Festival-of-Britain.html)

[The Festival of Britain \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/uknews/8448698/The-1951-Festival-of-Britain-on-the-South-Bank-in-London-in-pictures.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/uknews/8448698/The-1951-Festival-of-Britain-on-the-South-Bank-in-London-in-pictures.html)

[Festival of Britain revived \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/8270180/Festival-of-Britain-to-be-revived-for-60th-anniversary.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/8270180/Festival-of-Britain-to-be-revived-for-60th-anniversary.html)

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While giving due prominence to Britain’s proud heritage, the Festival was foremost a showcase for modernism – clean, smooth design for buildings, furniture and labour-saving devices for the home and the workplace. More than 10,000 items were on display, from high-speed locomotives to lipsticks.

Innovations that are now commonplace but were then beyond the average family budget – washing machines, fridges, vacuum cleaners – promised a domestic revolution. In the Telekinema thousands saw themselves for the first time on live television and watched movies in 3D. From the Shot Tower, radio signals were bounced back from the moon.

If the Festival was an exercise in popular education, it was also meant to be fun. A spirit of celebration was

called for. “I want to see the people happy,” declared Herbert Morrison, the Labour minister who battled for the Festival against cynical Cabinet colleagues, while Gerald Barry, former newspaper editor turned Festival impresario, talked of “a tonic to the nation”.

This was to be an exclusively British affair. The focus was on national identity, a proud Britain on display to the rest of the world. Moreover, it was a Britain bursting with creative energy that knew how to enjoy life.

There was fun aplenty. It could be found in the vivid displays, such as the massive butterfly window, the life-size model of a killer whale and live huskies fighting their way through an Arctic blizzard. It could be found on the river promenade with its seaside holiday makeover complete with deck chairs, ice cream stalls and, an optimistic touch, sunshades.

It could be found in the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion, where typical British eccentricities included an egg roundabout and a smoke grinding machine, though there was not enough room for the deflatable rubber bus for going under low bridges.

But the best fun of all was to be had when, every night, the South Bank was transformed into a riot of coloured lights, a sparkling cityscape where crowds gathered for open-air dancing led by one of the big bands. The popular enthusiasm was unquenchable even if, not infrequently, the dancers had to wear raincoats.

Whether it was for pleasure or enlightenment, few visitors to the Festival realised what a struggle it had been to bring it to fruition. Finding a site was an agonising process. Initially, the South Bank was rejected as too small, a mere 27 acres. Moreover, it was divided by the rail lines to Charing Cross. But it returned to favour with London Council plans to build a concert venue, soon to be called Festival Hall, and a river wall that would prevent flooding and reclaim four acres.

As head of the architectural team, Hugh Casson comforted himself that he had a fabulous view from Big Ben to St Paul’s to work to and that most of the site had already been cleared in the Blitz.

Deciding on where to hold the Festival was only the first of many impediments to delivering it on time. With the scarcity of building materials, the South Bank was not the first priority.

As the Festival mastermind, Gerald Barry was beside himself with frustration as the government demanded cutbacks on what was already a modest budget. Bright ideas such as an elevated walkway from Trafalgar Square and a helicopter link with London Airport had to be ditched.

The unions on site were in perpetual conflict with the contractors, while demarcation disputes were broadcast by the familiar call of the shop steward – “All out!” Differences were invariably settled by a bit extra in the pay packet. “A good time and a half was had by all,” Casson reflected.

But the biggest challenge was the weather, the winter leading up to the Festival being one of the wettest on record. “Rain again” was almost a daily entry in Barry’s diary. After each downpour, London clay turned to a

glutinous swamp sucking in bulldozers and other heavy equipment. For the designers and organisers, it was a nerve-stretching duel with the elements.

There was no escaping the fact that the South Bank was short of space. The solution was to spin off the more specialised exhibits to alternative sites. This in the end turned out to be a virtue since the Festival was able to go nationwide.

So it was that the latest in industrial power went on display at Glasgow's Kelvin Hall, Belfast played host to a Farm and Factory Exhibition while at the Science Museum in South Kensington, Dr Jacob Bronowski recreated the story of science with such acclaim that it became a dry run for his Ascent of Man, one of the most popular television series ever.

As the Festival spirit took hold, towns and villages across the country clamoured to do their bit. York scaled the cultural heights with its cycle of medieval Mystery Plays performed for the first time since 1572. Manchester restored the blitzed Free Trade Hall, and in Coventry, Lady Godiva rode again. Hardly anyone missed out on a Festival carnival of some sort.

So was it all worthwhile? As a national morale-booster the Festival was an undoubted success. The South Bank attracted eight and a half million visitors, with around the same number clicking the turnstiles at Battersea. Arnold Wesker, a late teenager at the time, experienced a "dynamic spring of creative energy". Other talents of his generation – Mary Quant, Terence Conran, David Mellor – were inspired to strike out on their own. The Festival style revolutionised advertising and photography. "The Festival", said one critic, "served notice on the days of varnish, brown paint and porridge wallpaper."

But in architecture, Britain's first real taste of modernism endured in quite the wrong way. The Festival ideal of lightweight, low-rise building with plenty of space fell to the arrogance of brutalism, a style with the dull uniformity of slab-like piles of smeared concrete.

A reminder of the betrayal is today on the South Bank where, in place of the Festival Dome and the Skylon, we have the National Theatre, the Hayward Gallery and the Shell building, monuments to the failure of imagination and a dedication to the trite and tawdry. With memories of the Festival of Britain refreshed by its 60th anniversary, this prime location deserves better.

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Barry Turner is the author of *Beacon for Change: How the 1951 Festival of Britain Shaped the Modern Age*. See our cut-price book offer on page 27

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