

Festival of Britain showed a forward-looking country

Richard Morrison

January 21 2011 12:01AM

Unlike today, the 1951 Festival of Britain reflected a nation eager to look to the future

Presenting a snapshot of disgruntled young people in the mid-1950s, John Osborne called his greatest play *Look Back in Anger*. That has always struck me as the most un-British of titles. The British almost never look back in anger. *Au contraire*. We lead the world in the art of looking back in hazy affection. Nostalgia is our national painkiller. There isn't a tribulation or humiliation in our history that won't be resuscitated and romanticised into a much-loved corner of Heritage Britain. There's even a Spam Appreciation Society now. One day there will be fan clubs devoted to Norman Lamont, Watneys Red Barrel and the Hangar Lane gyratory system.

Meanwhile the Southbank Centre in London, with some sponsorship from MasterCard, is devoting the summer to a celebration of the 1951 Festival of Britain. Nostalgia? You'll be wading through it. Ray Davies will curate a 60-year parade of British pop music — not performed entirely by pensioners, I trust. Radio 3 will jump on board with a 1950s light-music weekend, showcasing all those relentlessly jolly *Music While You Work* melodies by composers such as Eric Coates. Wayne Hemingway brings his Vintage Festival, promising a riot of 1950s fashions and bric-a-brac. (Why doesn't he just run guided tours of my wardrobe?) Eccentric but tamed “national treasures” such as Tony Benn and Tracey Emin will be eulogised. And Heston Blumenthal, who possibly *does* belong to the Spam Appreciation Society, is to recreate the delights of 1950s afternoon tea — though with his own quirky “take”, obviously. I look forward to the tripe-and-onions eclairs.

I'm sure it will be fun, though it will have to be enthralling to attract the eight million punters who thronged to the South Bank for the original Festival of Britain. But I wonder if this summer's nostalgia-fest, while wheeling out the trite fripperies of 1950s life, misses the essential point about that jamboree. Astonishingly, for a cultural event devised by the British, it was largely focused on the modern and the future.

If so, it's a pity — because the biggest lesson that the Festival of Britain can teach us is the importance of cultural institutions being brave and visionary in difficult times. We think we are going through an era of austerity? Just consider the dreadful state of Britain in the late 1940s, when the festival was conceived. Clothes and food rationed. Cities pockmarked with bomb craters. The country paralysed by the century's most savage winter. The Empire fallen. The economy chronic. The pound devalued from \$4.03 to \$2.80 in a single day. VE-Day euphoria long evaporated. Life drabber than a Spam sandwich.

Yet as Barry Turner shows in *Beacon for Change*, a scintillating new history of the Festival of Britain (published in May by Aurum Press), the festival's organisers vowed to provide not just "a tonic for the nation" but an invigorating glimpse into a brighter world. Drawing inspiration from Scandinavia and Italy, the temporary buildings erected on the South Bank stunned visitors with their colour, clean lines, lightness and grace. It was Modernism done with a dash of British irony, and people loved it. Little wonder. Compared with the mock-Tudor semis of suburbia, stuffed with dark drapes, vile wallpaper, drab linoleum and sideboards heavy enough to withstand attack by torpedo, this was a visual revolution. And it brought to the fore a new generation of designers who would transform the look of British life. Terence Conran, for instance, got his first job at the Festival of Britain.

But what astonishes me is everything else that Britain's arty types achieved in the phenomenal six years after 1945. So many institutions that we now consider the bedrock of our culture — from the Edinburgh Festival, National Theatre and Royal Opera to Radio 3 and the Philharmonia and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras — were conceived in that ostensibly "bankrupt" era, while edgy spirits such as Francis Bacon, Eduardo Paolozzi, Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett stirred up a national culture that was stagnating in a backwater. It was as if all the creative energies suppressed in the previous six years of war, or commandeered for military purposes, erupted like a volcano.

The most apt celebration of the Festival of Britain's 60th anniversary would be to blow up all those universally hated Brutalist buildings dumped on the South Bank in the 1960s and 1970s (yes, I do mean the National Theatre, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Hayward Gallery), hand the razed acres to the most radical young British architects, designers and artists of today — just as the bomb-cratered South Bank was handed to young architects in 1949 — and say: "Go on, dazzle us!" Alas, such a revolutionary leap into the future is unimaginable today. And besides, would MasterCard sponsor it? Instead, we do what comes most naturally to the British: wrap ourselves in a cosy fug of nostalgia, to the dapper ditties of Eric Coates and the comforting tinkle of afternoon tea.

© Times Newspapers Ltd 2011 | Version 1.12.1.0 (17065)

Registered in England No. 894646 Registered office:

3 Thomas More Square, London, E98 1XY

[My Account](#) | [RSS](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Display advertising](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Contact us](#)