“Don’t Make Fun of the Festival”: Art, Design and Entertainment at the Festival of Britain.

Background Notes

Jo Walton —10 September 2025

Abram Games’ design for the Festival logo, 1948

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The event that would become the Festival of Britain was first posited in 1943, when members of the Royal Society of Arts, among others, lobbied Members of Parliament with the suggestion that a major exhibition should be staged in 1951 as a commemoration of the Great Exhibition, held in London's Hyde Park a century before. Unsurprisingly, MPs had other things on their minds at the time and it was not until after the end of the Second World War, in 1945, that the idea resurfaced.

The Great Exhibition, which had been held from May to October 1851, was certainly worthy of a centenary celebration. This remarkable enterprise had brought together nearly 14,000 exhibits from around the world, including the Koh-i-Noor diamond, the latest British railway locomotives and American agricultural machinery, sumptuous textiles from India, and ceramics from the English midlands. Over six million visitors had made their way to the structurally incredible Crystal Palace, built to designs by Joseph Paxton, using iron columns and girders and over 300,000 panels of plate glass **(1)**. The cathedral-like building was a marvel in itself; filled with the newest examples of the world's industrial production it was a spectacle like no other and led to numerous international exhibitions which continue to this day.

Figure 1. A view of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, 1851

While the idea of a grand celebration in 1951 appealed to many, there were those who felt that post-war Britain could ill afford any sort of jamboree. It would not be until 1947 that it was announced that there would be "a national display illustrating the British contribution to civilization, past, present and future, in the arts, in science and technology and in industrial design*",* and even then, there was no consensus about quite what form this would take.

In a country devastated by the privations of war and with more than 3 million homes damaged by 1945 (roughly a quarter of the British housing stock), there were huge constraints on man power, money and materials. What building materials would be available? Would timber be cheaper than steel and concrete? If the focus of the Festival was to be a single exhibition site, where should it be? A rural or brownfield site would be larger, but would need expensive infrastructure to enable visitors to get to it. A city-centre location would be easy to reach, but what about over-crowding? And surely the Festival should bring together the whole country, not just focus on one small area of London?

Under the leadership of Gerald Barry, an early supporter and erstwhile editor of the *News Chronicle,* a masterplan for the Festival began to develop. Barry was determined that the very best of art, architecture and design should be showcased at the main exhibition site in London, while the entire country should be encouraged to celebrate in their own ways with local events, travelling exhibitions and projects that would leave a lasting legacy. He brought together a brilliant group of young architects and designers, led by Hugh Casson, and the transformation of the designated exhibition site on London's

South Bank, between Westminster and Waterloo Bridges, began **(2).**

Figure 2. An aerial view of the South Bank Festival site, by J.Harvey, 1951

The theme of the South Bank exhibition was *The Land and its People* with half the site (the area upstream) being about the physical nature of Britain – the land, minerals, natural world, sea, ships and transport – while the downstream area dealt with the culture, homes, gardens, schools, sports and recreations of her people. The largest structure on the site would be the Dome of Discovery, designed by Ralph Tubbs, which, at 365 feet across, was the largest aluminium structure that had yet been built.

Alongside the Dome was the most striking element of the exhibition site, the tall, delicate Skylon, designed to be a 'vertical feature, visible by day and night' and created from aluminium, steel and wire. While Hugh Casson insisted that it had no deeper significance than to act as a marker for the site

when seen from a distance, wits in the Press soon determined that it represented the state of the British economy – it had no visible means of support.

Interspersed amongst the remarkable new buildings of the exhibition were art works, murals and sculptures by the leading artists of the day. Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein and Barbara Hepworth were among the many sculptors creating works for the site. Ben Nicholson, John Piper and Edward Bawden contributed murals. New styles of furniture and textiles were designed and the brightest of colours were used to decorate everything – umbrellas, flowers and colourful screens made the exhibition into a joyous and exciting experience. When asked, in later years, what he remembered of his visit to the South Bank, the playwright Arnold Wesker answered, "What do I remember? What everyone remembers . . . brave colours, exhilarating shapes, thrilling designs . . . the communication of courage".

The weather, in the run-up to the opening and during the course of the exhibition, was appalling. Yet, despite the doomsayers, the South Bank Exhibition and the nearby Pleasure Gardens in Battersea Park were huge successes. For a nation still dealing with rationing, shortages, insufficient housing and a tremulous economy, the optimism and gaiety of the Festival offered hope for the future.

And if you could not get to London, then the Festival came to you. There was a travelling exhibition which visited, Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham and Manchester. A Festival Ship – the Campania – that took it's own small exhibition around the ports of Britain. Glasgow and Belfast held exhibitions on

industry and farming and across the UK villages, towns and cities held pageants, built village halls, put on plays, planted gardens, sewed embroideries and celebrated in whatever way seemed best to them **(3).**

Figure 3. A rare survival. Festival motifs on a building at 219 Oxford Street

Advertisers made the most of the Festival. The biscuit makers, Huntley & Palmers took a full-page advert in the Festival programme, stressing that their biscuits were just as good as they had been when they won a gold medal of the Great Exhibition of 1851. *The Lady* magazine invented a Festival cocktail, which mixed cold tea with gin, sugar and lime juice and they illustrated Gerald Barry – mastermind of the whole enterprise – enjoying (?) the refreshing beverage.

Of course there were some people who hated it all. Playwright Noel Coward felt it was all *too* squalid and made his feeling plain in his song from *The Lyric Review of 1951*;

"Don't make fun of the Festival, Don't make fun of the Fair

We down-trodden British must learn to be skittish / And give the impression of devil-may-care

We must pull together, in spite of the weather / That dampens our spirits and straightens our hair"

The noted conductor Sir Thomas Beecham was equally scathing, viewing the whole thing as "a monumental piece of imbecility and iniquity" and designating the only permanent survival from the exhibition site, the Royal Festival Hall, as "a giant chicken coop".

With a change of Government in the summer of 1951, the new regime swept away all trace of the exhibition (except the not yet completely finished concert hall) as soon as it closed in October. The Skylon and the Dome of Discovery were demolished and the land they stood on would remain empty for decades.

The eventual legacy of 1851's Great Exhibition can still be seen today in the area just south of the original site. The profit from the event went towards buying the land on which now stand the Albert Memorial, the Royal Albert Hall, Imperial College, the Science Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. The presiding genius of the Great Exhibition, who had insisted on its international focus, was Queen Victoria's beloved husband, Prince Albert, and the creation of a cultural quarter – named Albertopolis - was a truly fitting memorial after his untimely death in 1861.

The legacy of the Festival of Britain is not so easy to see, as the innovative structures which formed the main exhibition site were quickly destroyed and quite a number of the artworks were carelessly mislaid. However, the *spirit* of the Festival, with its new forms of design and lettering, its colourful modernity and lightness of touch, influenced a whole new

generation of artists, designers and craftspeople. The 1960s world of Habitat and Mary Quant, the mini skirt and Mini car and a light, bright modernity in our homes and surroundings owes so much to the design pioneers who struggled to create a new vision on a derelict bombsite in London in 1951 **(4)**.

Figure 4. Henry Moore: Reclining Figure, 1951 (Tate)

Books – you might find some of these interesting as background reading

Trevor May; *Great Exhibitions* (Shire Library, 2010)

Barry Turner; *Beacon for Change. How the Festival of Britain shaped the Modern Age* (Aurum, 2011)

Elain Harwood and Alan Powers (eds.); *Festival of Britain* (Twentieth Century Architecture 5 – The Journal of the Twentieth Century Society, 2001)

Harriet Atkinson and Mary Banham; *The Festival of Britain: A Land and its People* (I.B. Tauris, 2012)

You might also like to watch a BBC documentary from 2011, which is available on YouTube at

The 1951 Festival of Britain - A Brave New World (BBC) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZrTHBnLYfM