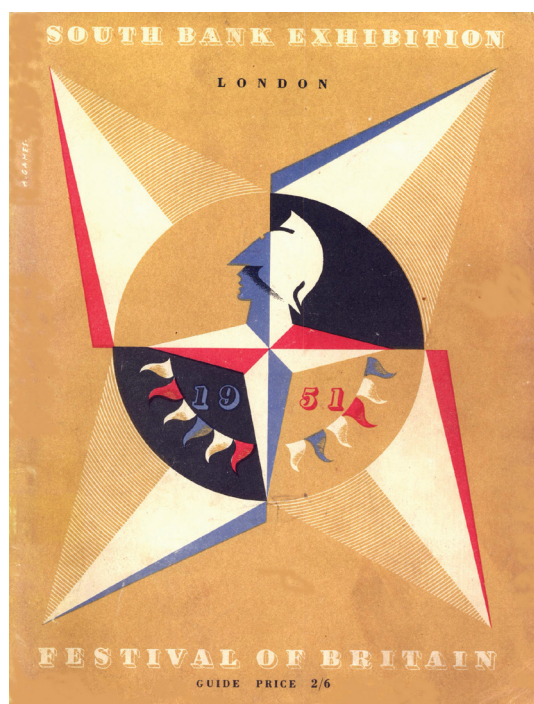


View of the Festival of Britain South Bank site seen from over the River Thames, with Skylon, Shot Tower and Royal Festival Hall all visible. There are partial views of The Islanders Sculpture (by Siegfried Charoux) and the Dome of Discovery.

Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo



Anniversary: Festival of Britain 1951

a tonic for the nation

Paul Bracey

The Festival of Britain was held 70 years ago. For many this provided a boost for the country after the deprivations of World War II and the economic struggles afterwards. It was designed to be educational and was held 100 years after the Great Exhibition. It was designed to show pride in the country. This article covers what happened as well as attitudes towards it. It also contains some ideas on how such an event might be used as part of teaching and learning.

The Festival of Britain was opened by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in a ceremony at St Paul's Cathedral on 3 May 1951, with a congregation of 3,000 people. During the course of five months the Festival was visited by 8.5 million people. It was to provide a tonic for the people of Britain after the damage caused by World War II and six years of rationing and austerity. At heart it was an educational undertaking with democratic values which also wanted to promote national recovery and attract tourists to Britain.

The main site was at the South Bank by the River Thames in London, situated on bomb-damaged

land between Waterloo Bridge and County Hall. The excitement this engendered is captured by David Davies who visited it as a child:

I only went for a day and most of the day was spent with, you know, just enjoying the fun of being out on those – in that sort of campus that they had but, you know, this is all part of saying the future's technology, the future's science and technology. But I think I remember what almost everybody remembered which was the Skylon, which was this incredible sort of cigar shaped needle that went up into the sky and didn't seem to be supported by anything. And the Dome of Discovery which was packed full of inventions, amazing British inventions... But it was inspirational... it was meant to be – you know, to inspire people to what could be done, you know, it made a mark on me.

David Davies tells the story of visiting the Festival of Britain exhibition of 1951, *Voices of Science*, British Library.

What would David and his family have seen at the South Bank exhibition?

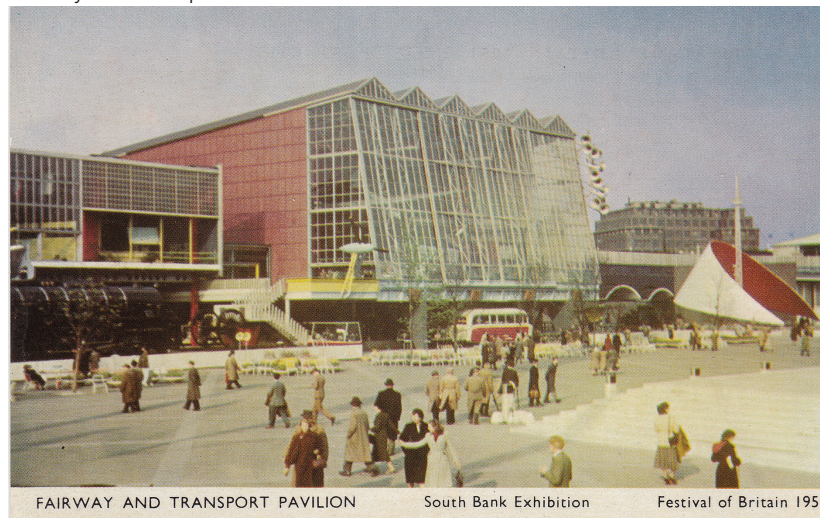
They would have been struck by the light, airy architecture around the site, together with a profusion of primary colours and geometric patterns on interior walls of the buildings. The Skylon which David particularly remembered was a vertical tower, 300 feet high, made of aluminium held in suspension by steel ropes and poles – ideas which were developed in future buildings including the Millennium Dome in 2000. David also mentioned the Dome of Discovery, a flat flying-saucer-shaped building, the largest structure on the site, taking up about half of the land. The third main building at the site was the Festival Hall, the first major public building to be constructed in London since before World War II. Sound quality and comfort were major considerations in the design of this building. At the same time the location of the concert space in the middle allowed for multiple access points and clear vision for everyone – a symbol of the democratic and utopian values on which the whole festival was based. This building earned the title 'The People's Palace' and remained important after the Festival for social meetings as well as concerts. There were many other pavilions including the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion, reflecting a vision of the British character based on the lion's courage and fortitude combined with the unicorn's eccentricity and good humour.

David had just one day to spend at the exhibition and could only have experienced part of what was on offer in the capital. London was the focus of half of the exhibitions, of which some but not all were at the South Bank. The Lansbury Estate in the borough of Poplar demonstrated how new housing could replace overcrowded dwellings, mixing housing and industry,

Festival of Britain magazine advert
Retro AdArchives / Alamy Stock Photo



Fairway and Transport Pavilion at Festival of Britain



The Dome of Discovery at Festival of Britain



Visitors to the Festival of Britain in front of the Dome of Discovery, 1951



Royal Festival Hall lounge chair, 1951



together with traffic control and space. The Pleasure Gardens at Battersea were devoted to pleasure and enjoyment, a contrast with other aspects of the Festival which were relentlessly educational. They were laid out as a terraced walk, restaurants and a funfair, together with a pagoda, floodlighting and a water splash ride. Its features were both exotic and eccentric. Two of the major attractions were the Guinness Clock and the 'Far Tottering Creek Railway' – a complete miniature railway which ran for about 500 yards and included fantasy features such as a wicker birdcage with a depressed seagull.

The Festival was a national affair with events taking part throughout the country with funded exhibitions, in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The intention was to reflect Britain's unity through its diversity. Indeed the emblem of the Festival which featured widely in its memorabilia showed Britannia above a four-point star, a compass representing the four nations in the United Kingdom. The exhibitions in different parts of the country included the Industrial Power Exhibition in Glasgow, a farm and factory exhibition in Belfast and the Dolhendre Hillside Farming Scheme in Wales. A travelling land exhibition visited Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester while a travelling sea exhibition on board the *Campania*, a former aircraft carrier, went to Southampton, Dundee, Newcastle, Hull, Plymouth, Cardiff, Belfast and Glasgow. The Festival included 23 arts festivals and over 2,000 locally organised and sponsored activities in cities, towns and villages. Local activities were expected to focus on creativity, civic pride and the future, and responded in a range of ways including tree planting, improving public buildings, concerts, pageants and sporting events.

What was the Festival's message to visitors like David?

Although the Festival was conceived as an event to commemorate the Great Exhibition of 1851 this only played a small part, accounting for small model replica at the foot of the shot tower at South Bank – an afterthought of the planners. David was visiting a very different exhibition to what visitors would have seen in 1851 – a time when Britain was the leading industrial power in the world. The 1951 Festival organisers wanted to celebrate Britain's contribution to civilisation in the past, present and future through the arts, science and technology. Its organisers wanted to promote a democratic and well educated nation. However, its focus was inward looking with Land and People exhibitions focusing on the country's natural resources, the people who came here from earliest times – hunter gatherers, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, up to the Norman Conquest, together with the traditions associated with democracy, justice and fair play.

The Festival had a strong educational focus bringing together ideas from science, technology and art, for everyone looking towards a progressive future. The exhibition spaces were characterised by primary colours and modern furnishing which came to be called the 'contemporary style' – typically featuring pale wood chairs with splayed legs, associated with designers such as Robin Day and Terence Conran. Although such designs contrasted with what was available for ordinary people in 1951 they pointed towards what people would be purchasing in the later 1950s and 1960s. By including the whole of the United Kingdom the organisers were saying that Britain reflected the diverse peoples of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as part of a unified kingdom.



A photograph taken in 1981 of a stained-glass window produced in 1951 as Brighton Secondary Technical School's contribution to the Festival of Britain

What was missing?

The most obvious gap was that it did not directly mention the British Empire or people who had come to Britain since 1066. World War II, Europe and contentious aspects of the country's past including Victorian industrialisation were not emphasised. As much as the Festival wanted to bring people together and looked towards a better future for everyone, its vision was both 'white' and introspective. It is worth noting that this was only four years after the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*.

How did people react to it?

Not everyone was happy – the *Daily Express* was particularly critical and there were complaints that the exhibition was unaffordable. Clearly David had fond memories of his visit to the Festival and a gallop poll showed that 58% of respondents were in favour of it. Some people have kindly provided me with recollections which endorse David's story. Jean Pitcher, a former primary teacher from St Albans visited the Festival three times and still remembers her perceptions today when she wrote:

The whole Festival was amazing, so many aspects of current life were brilliantly displayed. There was an exhilarating air of excitement about the whole place... I enjoyed going to the South Bank cinema to watch a 3D film for which we all wore special glasses. To get to our seat we had to pass a TV camera so that we could watch ourselves in the staircase. The festival funfair was great fun especially the fantastic Roland Emmet inventions.

A report in a secondary school magazine in Brighton from 1951 provides another positive response:

...everyone was thrilled with excitement as we had never had an outing quite like this before and in a few minutes we should be seeing Britain on show, something we would never see in our lives again... Perhaps the biggest and most interesting thing in the Festival was the Dome of Discovery which covered quite a number of things discovered in the past and modern times... The Dome is split up into a number of small exhibitions with the following subjects as titles: The Land, The Earth, Outer Space, The Living World and last but not least, The Physical World, which contained exhibits on great discoveries in physics, modern applications of physics, man-made chemical materials, chemical structure, the birth of chemistry, nuclear physics, rare glass, science in fine arts, and new physical research.

Dommen, J. (1951) The Festival Excursion, an account of the school outing on 23 May 1951, *The Scriber*, p. 8

In response to the visit, the school art teacher organised a project with the children to produce a stained-glass window of Brighton Pavilion to enhance the school environment following a town-wide Festival of Britain celebration.

The large number of people attending events in London and different parts of the country suggests that it was widely welcomed. It certainly provided a tonic for people dealing with the hardships of life in

Suggested activities

1. Compare the Festival of Britain and the Coronation as events in living memory.
2. A local history project which explores how your community related to the Festival of Britain through interviewing older members of the community (in their late 70s or older) and research with local resources such as newspapers.
3. As part of a post-1066 thematic study – through comparing events which reflect the nation at different times in the past. The obvious comparisons would be the Festival of Britain 1951 with the Great Exhibition of 1851. This compares a time when Britain was the leading industrial power in the world to one when its role in the world was much less certain. It is also possible to identify other events in which different images of the country were being presented. Danny Boyle's image of Britishness in the opening scene of the 2012 Olympics, providing an inclusive vision of early 21st century Britain, could provide an effective introduction to the topic. A very different spectacle is provided in a painting entitled 'The Field of the Cloth of Gold'. This relates to a meeting in 1520 between Henry VIII of England with Francis I of France. The event which took place near Calais has been called a Grand European Festival. The image of feasting, music and pageantry associated with this event demonstrated competition, power and diplomacy between the two kings. As such it provides a contrast with the Festival of Britain's democratic focus on the people of Britain. Each event could provide a focus for exploring the different times in which they took place and identifying similarities and differences between them.

The Field of the Cloth of Gold, oil painting of c.1545



Crystal Palace from the north-east during the Great Exhibition of 1851



The Gold State Coach on Coronation Day 1953



post-war Britain and launched the careers of notable British designers in furniture, textiles and graphic design. However, its vision of an egalitarian Britain was to be superseded two years later by the Coronation of Elizabeth II in June 1953, which focused on tradition and the status quo. The Coronation was supported by the new Conservative government which replaced the previous Labour government on 25 October 1951, together with the conservative press. The Coronation was also the first major event to be televised and in consequence was firmly established in public consciousness which had the effect of diminishing the Festival of Britain's legacy.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jean Pitcher for sharing her memory of the Festival, and Jane Larder and Julie Webster of the Yelvertoft History Group for making contact with Jean via Facebook to support my request for personal stories. I would also like to thank my good friend and former colleague Sorrell Kinley, who found a reference to the Festival in a 1951 magazine and photograph taken of the stained-glass window from the school where his father was the art teacher.

Paul Bracey is a member of the Primary Education Committee and Editorial Board, a Trustee of the Historical Association and Chair of Midlands History Forum. Before he retired he was Senior Lecturer/Curriculum Leader for History Education at Northampton University. He has maintained links with the university as an associate lecturer.



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