

Contexts: the Festival of Britain, 1951

Sixty years on, our editor outlines the event and shares memories

A SINGULAR EVENT CAN COME TO REPRESENT an era in History. Woodstock, 'three days of peace and music', August 1969, is seen by many to epitomise the flowering of the 60s youth culture and the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age. A representation of an era is the way this writer views the Festival of Britain, an event created by the first majority Labour government 60 years ago.

Britain had endured half a century of war, production disruption and simultaneous challenging economic competition as well as political uncertainty as a two-party system morphed into a three-party pattern. All this had followed the seemingly glorious 'long nineteenth century'. British people were exhausted by the Second World War and adjustment to a peacetime economy took years. Clothes rationing continued until 1949 and some items of food were rationed until 1954. A world of shortages is so difficult to comprehend for a contemporary student because their whole experience is one of plenty. This writer remembers his school's damaged windows being replaced as late as 1950 and a fresh coat of paint to brighten the dowdy war-scarred buildings. The killer London smog that shifted opinion on coal-use pollution was in 1952. In memory, the 1940s was a world of grey and gloom, cranky cars, smokey and unreliable steam trains, and an absence of fresh bright colours.

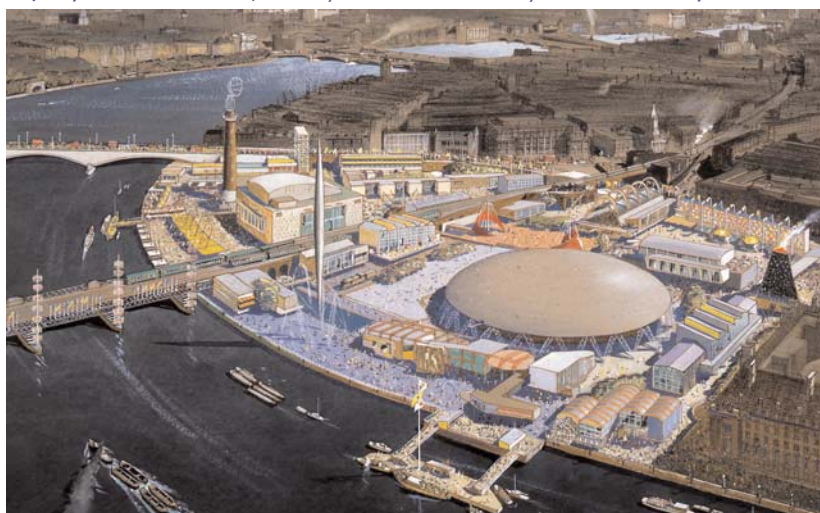
While these may be personal recollections, these years of the first majority Labour government led to the remarkable creation of the National Health Service, and universal unemployment pay consequent to the National Insurance Act, 1946, among other measures, in what is termed the Welfare State. At the end of these reforming governments 1945-51 and 100 years after the Great Exhibition, at its first site in Hyde Park (see the contexts article on Paxton and the Great Exhibition, *new perspective*, Vol 8, No 2, Dec 2002), the Festival of Britain



A rest area outside the Dome of Discovery



A Festival motif, above. Our local county council celebrated the Festival by replacing all village signs with the Festival motif added. Below, a recent diagram of the Festival with the Dome of Discovery, the Festival Hall and Skylon evident



was opened in May. The Festival pointed to a world-leading past, because 1851 can be seen as the apogee of Britain's industrial superiority, while 1951 was a recognition of recovery from two devastating world wars. It was also a pointer to a changing, inclusive, socially-constructed present. The Labour deputy leader, Herbert Morrison (grandfather of Lord Mandelson, Labour's 'master of spin' in 2008-10) described the Festival as [intended to be] 'a tonic for the nation'.

The main site of the Festival was on an area of old warehousing and working-class housing on the south side of the Thames. The Festival constructions, such as the Dome of Discovery and the forgettable Skylon, the numerous pavilions, such as the Lion and Unicorn and new school pavilions, were demolished in 1953 with the exception of the Royal Festival Hall. This building was substantially altered in 1964 and a new façade added. It remains as an important part of the Southbank Centre, the arts facility that is adjacent to the National Theatre.

This writer's memory of the event is limited to three features: the route on a raised walkway from Waterloo station high over the ground-level roads; the large enclosed space of the Dome of Discovery and a Triumph car sliced through the middle to show its construction, even the springs in the seats; and the number of Festival motifs publicising the event that seemed to be everywhere, in shops and in the newspapers, and they were in colour. It signified that Britain, its government and people, were confident they had found their way from the grey, dark years of war. In that respect the Festival was as significant as the predecessor 100 years before. This year, 60 years later, the Festival seems a 'byway' in the light of the huge shift in global power to the East and away from the US, a shift the consequences of which are not yet apparent.



Sempringham provide carefully pitched, student-friendly resources of outstanding quality, in print and online, for advanced History students. Full details at www.ehistory.org.uk Sempringham, serving students for a generation, 1987-2011.

Illustration acknowledgements, Vol 17, No 2, December 2011.

The Imperial War Museum, front cover (right); BBC, page 16; St Thomas' Hospital, page 13; Sempringham, pages 2 (map) and 22 (centre). Untraced images: cover (left), pages 1, 5, 6, 9, 11, 14, 15, 19, 22 (top and bottom). Sempringham always seek to ascertain and acknowledge ownership of images.