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Family Britain
1951-1957

David Kynaston

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Extract

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All Madly Educative

On Tuesday, 1 May 1951, three days after presenting the FA Cup at Wembley, King George VI was at Earl's Court for the British Industries Fair. 'On one Stand there was a large collection of printed rayon cloth with ultra-modern design,' noted the Cotton Board's Sir Raymond Streat, guiding the royal party round the textile section. 'The King glanced at them and said, "What are those for?" I replied that they were fabrics for ladies' afternoon or evening dresses. He gave another glance at them and muttered, "Thank God we don't have to wear those things." ' At the end of their statutory two hours, the King and Queen announced that they had been 'impressed by the great variety of British products and by the resilience of British industry'.

Two days later an ill-looking George was on public display again. 'Rushed off after breakfast to see the procession,' Gladys Langford wrote in her diary: 'Took my stand at Ludgate Hill where I saw the Royal Family very well. Just before they came along a fox terrier raced along the middle of the road. People yelled & cheered & the poor beast was frantic. About 20 yds behind came another terrier also with its tongue lolling out. After the procession had gone by, I saw the two poor beasts in Farringdon St. The first was lying as tho' dead on the pavement, the other stood over him . . .' The procession was on its way to St Paul's, where after a service the King stood on the steps and declared the Festival of Britain to be officially open. 'Let us pray,' he said, 'that by God's good grace the vast range of modern knowledge which is here shown may be turned from destructive to peaceful ends, so that all people, as the century goes on, may be lifted to greater happiness.' That Thursday evening the King was on the newly created South Bank

to open the Royal Festival Hall – an occasion marked by an all-British concert, with Handel an honorary Englishman. It was a proud moment, the Festival Hall being Britain's first new public building since the war (though involving the demolition of the magnificent Lion Brewery). But on that mild evening an observant reporter found something just as stirring in Friday Street at the back of St Paul's: 'A bombed site had been cleared and on it nearly 5,000 young people gathered to sing around a big camp fire. Nearly three tons of wood had been gathered from the East End and the flames lit up a wide area.'[1]

Next morning the King and the rest of the world (including Princess Margaret, her foot accidentally trodden on by an over-keen young reporter, Keith Waterhouse, just down from Leeds) were back on a now rainy South Bank. Over the next five months the Festival of Britain would take many forms – including pleasure gardens in Battersea Park, a science exhibition in South Kensington, a travelling exhibition in the Midlands and the north, a festival ship, an 'Exhibition of Industrial Power' in Glasgow, and a multitude of local events and celebrations. But the incontrovertible centrepiece was the South Bank. There, amidst twenty-two pavilions and much sculpture, three constructs took the eye: the Royal Festival Hall itself, the Dome of Discovery and the Skylon. Ralph Tubbs's impressively monumental Dome (briefly the largest in the world) featured an escalator, enabling the royal party and other VIPs to reach a gallery illustrating the solar system – a means of ascent that so captivated Winston Churchill, a taxi rather than a Tube man, that he kept going down and coming up again. As for the Skylon, designed by Philip Powell and Hidalgo Moya, it made the most instant of impacts: an elegant, 300-foot steel and aluminium 'toothpick' of a tower, especially spectacular at night. Yet transcending everything, in terms of first impressions, was the sheer unabashed pervasiveness of primary colours. 'Whole walls of decoration are made of squares of coloured canvas pulled taut in geometric shapes and triangles, to be lit with a variety of colours,' noted a largely benevolent Cecil Beaton. 'A screen is made by hanging Miró-like coloured balls against the distant chimney pots of the city. Arches underneath the railways are painted strawberry pink or bright blue . . .'[2] It was a style that, after a decade of almost unremitting black, brown and grey, could hardly have struck a brighter, more optimistic note.

'The King has done his stuff at the opening ceremonies,' the rather curmudgeonly Anthony Heap (a local government officer living in St Pancras) recorded on the Friday evening, 'and the crowds are beginning to pour in, despite the damp, dismal and damnably unfestive prevailing weather, to gaze upon its wonders.' Among the 60,000 or so visitors on Sunday the 6th was Kenneth Williams, still a struggling young actor. 'It's all madly educative and very tiring,' was his characteristic reaction. 'Beautifully cooked!!' Ten days later it was the turn of another diarist, Vere Hodgson, to sample the pavilions:

> I wandered into the Schools, but I did not like them much – awful steel chairs, all modern, no grace and no beauty and no elegance. I avoided the Health and the Sport. But I searched for the 1851 Pavilion and found it. We climbed some stairs and there was a model of the Crystal Palace and Queen Victoria opening it . . . Then I found the Lion and the Unicorn. This is a MUST for everyone. It is the British character. Obstinacy and imagination or whatever you like to call the two best characteristics of the British race. There was Magna Carta and Habeas Corpus. I was very pleased about this.
>
> By this time it was dark and the lights were on. Now it is all lovely. The Skylon looks fine inside the Exhibition and also the beam of light from the Shot tower moving round . . .

'I did enjoy myself,' she concluded. 'I came away at 10.15. I got a cup of tea and roll and butter for 6½d. Good.'[3]

Whatever individual visitors felt about it, no one could deny that the Festival of Britain was a major national event, the most important yet since the war. For some, looking backwards, it marked the reward for six attritional years of gradually edging towards some sort of peacetime normality; for others, looking forward, it was the welcome harbinger not only of Britain's long-awaited revival as a major force after her early post-war difficulties but of a whole way of more contemporary living. Most people took from the Festival what they wanted to find, and to its creators' credit it was rich and various enough for that to be possible.

It was in a way a minor miracle that there was a festival for anyone to see. For years it had been dogged by a mixture of poor publicity (much of it whipped up by the Beaverbrook press, led by the *Daily Express*) and the pervasive sense that it was going to be not only an unaffordable

expense at a time of national belt-tightening but also worthy, bureaucratic and dull. 'He's got a lonely, miserable look, like the Festival of Britain on a Sunday,' was how Jimmy Edwards described a lovelorn Dick Bentley in the radio comedy *Take It From Here* in December 1950. There were also protracted on-site labour troubles – none from a seventeen-year-old electrician from Durham, Bobby Robson, who at his father's insistence was carrying on his daytime trade as a 'spark' while training three evenings a week at Fulham FC, but plenty from Brian Behan, Brendan's Communist brother, who had only recently arrived from Dublin as a labourer. The Labour government, above all Herbert Morrison, expended considerable political capital ensuring that, even after the Korean War had begun, the Festival went ahead; and it was fortunate that the Director of Architecture, Hugh Casson, responsible for a team of more than 40 architects and designers, was a well-connected figure who combined to a high degree the qualities of charm, ambition and determination.[4] Even so, it was still nip and tuck whether the Festival opened on time, and in the event the Battersea Pleasure Gardens were delayed until after Whitsun.

'Don't run away with the idea that the Festival of Britain is going to be solemn,' Gerald Barry had declared in *Picture Post* at the start of 1951:

> Not a bit of it. It will afford us all the opportunity, as occasion allows, for some harmless jollification. After more than a decade of voluntarily-imposed austerity we deserve it, and it will do us good. But the main purpose of the Festival is, all the same, strictly serious. It is intended as an act of national reassessment. The whole of Britain will be 'on show' – to herself, and to the world . . .
>
> It will put on record the fact that we are a nation not only with a great past, but also a great future . . . It will help to put us on our toes, to raise our morale at home and our prestige among other nations . . .

Barry himself, editor of the *News Chronicle* but also the Festival's originator and now its director-general, was one of the progressive, public-spirited, high-minded 'herbivores' (as opposed to 'carnivores', in Michael Frayn's classic coinage) running the show. The emphasis on the future, above all on the Festival's modernity, was at the very heart of what he and the others were trying to achieve. But crucially, it was

a restrained, Scandinavian-style, 'soft' Modernism – startlingly novel to most British eyes, but in fact familiar to the cognoscenti since the 1930s – and far removed from the 'hard' Modernist precepts of Le Corbusier and his followers. It was a future, in other words, that came with a warm, unthreatening, scientific yet somehow companionable aura – a future imbued with benevolent, rational and deeply paternalistic assumptions.[5]

Inevitably the Festival got a mixed reception. 'Don't Let's Make Fun of the Fair' was the title of Noël Coward's seemingly supportive but in fact condescending song, while the increasingly anti-Modernist John Betjeman was only relieved that he had not found 'gambolling functionalists trying to be funny'. The conductor John Barbirolli bit his lip so effectively that it was not until four years later, on a visit to Australia, that he unguardedly described the Royal Festival Hall as 'a black spot on the landscape if ever there was one'. The writer and broadcaster Marghanita Laski would for one have disagreed, hailing it as 'the most exciting conception and achievement in the whole exhibition'. So too Dylan Thomas, who in a broadcast in June on the Welsh Home Service extolled 'the shining Skylon, the skygoing nylon, the cylindrical leg-of-the-future jetting', discovered in the Telecinema 'a St Vitus's gala of abstract shapes and shades in a St Swithin's day of torrential dazzling darning needles', and evoked at night-time 'the lit pavilions, white, black, and silver in sweeps of stone and feathery steel'. Among architects, 'hard' Modernists like Ernö Goldfinger were of course underwhelmed, but the overall professional consensus was very positive, certainly among the 'softs'. 'The great thing is that in a single stride, though working under every possible handicap, our designers have unmistakeably taken the lead,' declared the young, idealistic Lionel Brett in the *Observer*. 'And they have put on a show so impossible not to enjoy that there is a real hope that it will mark the beginning of a modern style which will be generally accepted.' John Summerson, perhaps the most distinguished architectural critic of the day, was almost equally enthusiastic. The Skylon was admittedly 'a silly toy, a pretty toy and a dangerous one, whose merciless descending point is luckily just out of reach', but otherwise, the buildings were 'so good, so witty, so full of invention, so oddly and amusingly grouped' that he was able to reassure his *New Statesman* readers that the South Bank was 'an out-and-out winner'. For him, as for others, it was the optimistic start of a distinctive British Modernism.[6]

As for the public at large, the conventional wisdom is that the Festival was a resounding hit. The exhibits on the South Bank attracted almost eight and a half million visitors; a Gallup poll during the summer found that 58 per cent of people had a favourable impression of what they had seen and/or heard of the Festival; and 'Skylon' became an instant nickname for the long-limbed. Yet there are some debits to be entered. The American-style funfair rides at Battersea (such as the Skywheel, the Bubble-Bounce and the Flyo Plane) pulled in just as many daily visitors as the more worthy attractions on the South Bank; among those attractions, the less than educational 'Home of the Future' pavilion was the most popular exhibition; the overall figures for the South Bank would have been markedly less impressive without a 50-per-cent cut in evening ticket prices after early targets were not reached; those evening figures were further distorted by the South Bank's increasing reputation as an easy pick-up place; and, in the country as a whole, there seems to have been apathy at least as much as enthusiasm – an apathy typified by the Festival's lack of impact in Reading (notwithstanding the inevitable historical pageant), the flop of J. B. Priestley's carefully timed novel *Festival at Farbridge*, and the unremarkable listening figures for BBC Radio's almost saturation coverage (a trend that started when a repeat of *Mrs Dale's Diary* on the Light Programme topped the audience for the Home Service coverage of the opening ceremony on the South Bank). Three schoolboys had perhaps representative experiences. John Simpson (seven) 'saw the Skylon, and put on red and green plastic spectacles to watch a film in 3-D, and listened to a recording of the accents of England and someone saying in a Cockney accent, "Come on kettle, boil up" '; Robert Hewison (eight) was 'disappointed to discover that the soaring narrow pod of the Skylon was held up by wires'; and George MacBeth, about to go up to Oxford, won third prize in the North-East Regional Festival of Britain Competition with an unashamedly mocking poem in which the 'rather depressed look of the dome', the 'finicky skylon confessing its failure on legs' and the Festival Hall 'on its very best behaviour' induced between them no more than an adolescent 'yawn'.[7]

A headache for the organisers in the early weeks was litter, but the situation improved once the public-address system began to say loudly

and frequently, 'This is *your* exhibition; please help to keep it tidy.' The problem had been ironed out by the second Monday in June, when Henry St John, a misanthropic civil servant living on his own in Acton, paid 5s to take his father to 'the South Bank exhibition' on what seems to have been a particularly busy morning:

> We explored part of the Dome of Discovery, but a broadcast voice asked people to keep on the move, as others outside were waiting to get in. The Dome contained exhibits on synthetic dyes, electrical instruments, mutation of species, physiology of sex, a megatherium or ground sloth, a developing embryo, and many other things which require, but did not get, unhurried study . . .
>
> After a long wait in another queue, we had a fair lunch at 3/3 each in a cafeteria. D showed some desire to go in the shot tower into which however a long queue was winding, so we had a superficial look round the health pavilion, which dealt with blood, the nervous system, vaccination, training of nurses, surgical instruments, burns etc. The only noticeable foreigners I saw at the exhibition were 2 Asiatics, 2 American servicemen, 1 negro, and 1 woman talking French.

Another diarist, Anthony Heap, waited until a Tuesday evening in mid-July:

> From what I'd read and heard about the Exhibition, I'd surmised that there was very little in it likely to appeal to anyone of my unscientific, unmechanical and generally unprogressive turn of mind. And how right my surmise proved to be! 99 per cent of the exhibits on view in the various pavilions are devoted to different aspects of the 'Land' and the 'People' of Britain and the entire contents of the dimly-lit Dome of Discovery were of no interest to me whatsoever.
>
> Admittedly the whole thing is handsomely designed, laid out and, at nightfall, illuminated. And, unlike the Pleasure Gardens at Battersea Park, there are hundreds of comfortable chairs all over the place where one can rest one's weary limbs free of charge – as well as a continuous supply of good tuneful music relayed through amplifiers so that it can be heard where e'r one wanders – or sits.
>
> Even so, the evening scarcely seemed worth the 6/6 it cost me . . .

Next evening his wife Marjorie went. 'M thinks the South Bank Exhibition an absolutely wonderful show,' noted a fair-minded Heap, 'and, after dark, a really enchanting spot.'[8]

It was not just on the South Bank that a clear drift towards the modern was under way. July 1951 saw not only the publication of the first (*Cornwall*) of the *Buildings of England* series by the broadly pro-Modernist, anti-Victorian architectural critic Nikolaus Pevsner but also the gathering at High Leigh, a rather rundown Victorian mansion near Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire, of the delegates from CIAM 8 – the eighth meeting of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, a body which since the 1930s had in large part been devoted to the ideals of Le Corbusier, who was himself president. As usual, the application of the very latest technology to the problems of mass housing was CIAM's particular preoccupation; the Congress looked ahead in its familiar utopian way to 'an unlimited, inexhaustible, universal and completely flexible flow of atomic and molecular materials and energy ... the age-old dream, hope or demand for unlimited, universal, automatic, and almost magical abundance and leisure'. Nevertheless, there was on this occasion some criticism of the Modernist dream, to judge by the account of a dissenting home delegate, Frederic Osborn: 'I was amazed, and momentarily encouraged, by support from all the French housing planning people present, whose spokesman not only brilliantly exploded Le Corbusier's mad 14-storey glass-house at Marseilles [the renowned Unité d'Habitation, nearing completion], but expressed astonishment that England, the envied country of the family home with garden, should be increasingly piling houses on top of each other,' he reported soon afterwards to Lewis Mumford in America. 'The high officials of our own housing and planning ministry were undoubtedly impressed by these attacks, which were really unanswerable.'

Osborn, in charge of the Town and Country Planning Association, had for years been waging a doughty campaign in favour of dispersal from the unhealthy, overcrowded inner city to new towns and, if necessary, elsewhere, and against what he saw as the multi-storey, high-rise fallacy. His letter went on about 'high officials':

> But the drift of things is simply too much for them. I am more and more convinced that we must lose unless somehow we can bring the force of

> popular opinion to bear – and I just don't see how to do it. I can't get the money, and I can't get together even a dozen passionate enthusiasts to splutter along with me. I feel spent and futile, and can take no pleasure in dialectical triumphs that are just throwing the sand against the wind. Your way is the only way: to write books that build new foundations of thought. But that is a twenty-five year process, and therefore not for me at my age [66].

'I shudder at what will happen in the meantime,' he ended bleakly. 'And so I pursue the short cut route which isn't open.'[9]

A month later, on 15 August, the winner was announced of the competition to design a new cathedral for Coventry, to be built next to the ruins of the blitzed old one. Three assessors – all of them architects, selected by the Royal Institute of British Architects – chose an up-and-coming Scottish architect, Basil Spence, who had been responsible for the Sea and Ships pavilion on the South Bank and whose design for Coventry was very much in approved 'Festival' style. 'It is the one I should have chosen myself,' declared the Bishop of Coventry. 'It is imaginative, modern and magnificently sensitive to the site.' One of his clergymen, however, begged to differ. 'So far I have only seen the reproduction of the original rough sketch,' the Rev. H.N.M. Artus of Arley Rectory wrote immediately to the local paper. 'It appeared to be yet one more super-cinema, mammoth insurance company's offices, or even a block of flats. I was just wondering why there was a bit of a church attached to it when I saw, to my amazement, that this was the prize-winning design for Coventry Cathedral.' In short, 'I think this thing is a horror'. N. B. Waddell of 384 Radford Road, Coventry, agreed: 'A lot of people, with great affectation, will make much of it because it is the winning design, but for me it is no more satisfying than the paintings in a modern style which deface some of our art exhibitions.'

Over the next few weeks – as the architectural journals sang an almost unanimous chorus of praise, interrupted only by some Modernists wondering whether Spence had gone far enough – a flurry of other letters appeared in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*. Not all were negative, but D. Kaye, chairman of the Coventry Society of Architects, was clearly on the defensive when he insisted that the new cathedral would 'aesthetically be a jewel in the heart of Coventry'. His assertion earned a memorable riposte from F. Bliss Burbidge of Belvedere Road,

Coventry: 'I should like to repudiate the idea that only architects can estimate the beauty of a cathedral; it may be flattering to their own conceit but it will not hold water.' The controversy rumbled on through the autumn, with Spence at one point reassuring a sceptical Coventry Diocesan Conference that 'modern science can produce as beautiful work in cement as our predecessors did with stone'. But by early 1952, once he had amended his design so that the large glass screen dividing the porch from the nave no longer needed to be lowered below the level of the floor (a feature that had prompted the phrase 'push-button Cathedral'), it was clear that the people of Coventry were eventually going to get a new, signature place of worship. 'What I feel absolutely certain of is that it is honest and that it is original,' Pevsner pronounced on radio's Third Programme. 'What it may lack in monumentality, it will gain in life.'[10]

The battle in 1951 between the old and the new was played out perhaps most piquantly on two summer evenings at the Royal Festival Hall. On the first, 14 July, Princess Elizabeth was present at an explicitly 'traditional' concert put on by the National Federation of Jazz Organizations. Humphrey Lyttelton, Monty Sunshine and Wally Fawkes (the cartoonist 'Trog') were among the musicians, with Deryck Guyler as compère. A performance of 'Rock Island Line' by Mick Mulligan and his Magnolia Jazz Band introduced the night's first vocalist, George Melly. 'He began the song cleverly but failed to hold on to his advantage,' noted *Melody Maker*'s rather sniffy reviewer, Max Jones. 'I began to fidget before it was through.' Indeed, Jones's verdict on the concert as a whole was pretty disparaging: 'For the experienced listener I believe it became something of a bore before the evening was out. Certainly there were moments when I wished I was on the North Bank.' Two evenings later there was no royal presence at an equally explicitly 'modernist' concert, this time with Steve Race the compère, the Johnny Dankworth Seven (Cleo Laine on vocals) the undoubted star turn, and the American critic Leonard Feather as *MM*'s reviewer. 'British jazz came of age last Monday night,' began his piece, and he declared that the concert had gone far to 'helping to prove that modern music in Britain need not consider itself a mere Cinderella sister of the American family'. Perhaps, though, the Princess did not unduly mind missing 'the very cool groove of "Seven Not Out" '.[11]

There were a few last diarist-visitors to the Festival. 'I arrived early and joined a queue, a vast, orderly line of people,' recorded the 25-year-old John Fowles on 29 August. 'The Festival I saw in a morning, skimming through it. All the cleverness and the practicality and the didacticism I found rather repellent.' About the same time, on a rainy evening, the slightly older Lawrence Daly, increasingly prominent as a Communist activist on the Fife coalfield, 'splashed around for two hours, visiting the Dome of Discovery, the People of Britain, Land of Britain, Power & Production, & souvenir stalls' – all of which he found 'a magnificent show, of great educational value'. The final diarist was perhaps the best qualified to offer an insightful view:

> *12 September*. At last to S. Bank Festival. Arrive 12 – go straight in – first impression good – smaller exhibits – schools, sports, '1951' – seaside – enjoyable while not too tired. Larger – engines – boats – begins to crowd – Dome of Discovery – gloom – unorganized wandering – symbolic of muddled mind – addled with too much knowledge . . . Did not see all – too tired & hot – Polar Expedition exhibit informative. 'Lion & Unicorn' quite charming – quite obvious. Designs in pottery & silks delightful. Stayed 2½ hrs – enough for one day.
>
> *16 September*. To Festival 12.45 – fine day, stayed till nearly 5 . . . Homes & Gardens delightful – especially bedsitter for elderly lady – obviously having seen better days. All well designed & colour – avoidance of 'suites' – chairs in different colours but same pattern . . . 'The Country' good large picture mounted on central rod for each month – amusing material (padded) picture of Womans Institutes. Certainly humour + invention allowed. Sad to see livestock there, especially Dartmoor pony . . .

The writer was Grace Golden, a talented but in many ways frustrated commercial artist. She returned on Friday the 28th for a concert at the Royal Festival Hall, whose interior she examined with an acerbic eye. The setting for the orchestra was 'like the crude models of cardboard I make for my own use – different colours stuck together with sticky paper & drawing pins which must surely be at the back of three walls which don't join the ceiling!' The sounding board was 'like parts of a model not yet stuck together'. And the boxes 'only remind one of the balconies outside the flats in Camden Town – needed only washing

hanging to be complete'. All of which made her ask herself whether the human race had 'developed sufficiently for it to be exposed against such nakedness as modern architecture'.[12]

'It will be remembered as a moderately successful venture,' reckoned the *Manchester Guardian* next day at the start of the Festival's final weekend – exactly a week after a record 158,365 had flocked to the South Bank, many of them lured by the spectacle of Charles Elleano crossing the Thames on a tightrope. The mood to the last was determinedly cheerful. Saturday the 29th was Gala Night (with Gracie Fields, at her insistence paid in dollars, topping the bill in the open-air cabaret), while on Sunday there was a Thanksgiving service at the Festival Hall. That evening the Archbishop of Canterbury, in lieu of the ailing King, addressed the nation on the radio, declaring that the Festival had been 'a good thing for all of us' and had 'brought encouragement just when it was needed' – that in fact it had been 'a real family party'. On the South Bank itself, there were almost 65,000 visitors during this final day, with well-nigh half still there by 10.00 p.m., when there began on the Fairway (the open space between the Dome of Discovery and the Transport pavilion) community singing to the accompaniment of the massed bands of the Brigade of Guards. The favourites followed one after another: 'Land of Hope and Glory', 'John Peel', 'Danny Boy', 'Loch Lomond', 'Rule Britannia', 'Jerusalem', 'The Old Hundredth'. Then at about 10.17 came the announcement over the loudspeakers, 'Stand by for general black-out', and all the lights duly went out as the three Festival flags were lowered. Then at 10.20 the lights were on again, as the still unsated crowd lustily sang 'God Save the King', 'Abide With Me' and, with hands linked, 'Auld Lang Syne'.

Now it really was over. 'Good night, for the last time, good night,' said the voice over the loudspeakers, efficient and brisk as ever. According to the report in the by now reconciled *Daily Express*, it was not only the paying visitors who left in good order and good humour. As the site emptied, 'the Men in Grey – the attendants – smiled as they dispersed with, they said, only one in ten having a job to go to'.[13] A generation earlier, the Festival's somewhat smug herbivores might have legitimately reflected, there would have been no such relaxed confidence about what their future held.