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Signposts: The Festival of Britain 1951

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Signposts, Festival of Britain: Original pre-edited version.

In 1943, the Royal Society of Arts suggested that the 1851 Great Exhibition of All Nations should be commemorated. Initially proposed by Labour in 1948 as an international exhibition, the 1951 Festival celebrated the past, contemporary and future of Britain. Each of the four nations held government sanctioned exhibitions, Arts Festivals and played host to HMS Campania and its Seaborne Exhibition. The Land Travelling Exhibition carried on over 100 lorries, called at four cities in England between May and October.

The 1951 Festival of Britain had to be more successful than the 1946 Britain Can Make It Exhibition, which was not received well by press or public, having been nicknamed 'Britain Can't Have It'. So, with this in mind *all* cities, towns and villages across Britain were encouraged to participate in 1951 with their own celebrations and to focus on the Festival being a potential catalyst for a lasting legacy in their communities. Civic pride was promoted via the restoration of buildings, such as St. George's Hall in Liverpool, or the Free Trade Hall in Manchester. New builds were constructed, like the two sets of Festival Flats in York and bomb damaged sites were tidied up. Sometimes plaques laid by Corporations still attest to this, like the two bold brass ones that adorn the entrance to *Festival House* in the now, pedestrianised shopping precinct in Hull. A nationwide celebration, rather than a repetition of the scope of the 1851 Exhibition, means that Council Archives and Libraries are jam packed with, as yet, unopened files of material from this period, ripe for the picking.

Post 1951, there were primarily two recognisable sources. The first, Michael Frayn's much quoted 1963 essay *Festival*, concentrated on whom the Festival was for. Bevis Hillier and Mary Banham's *A Tonic To The Nation* (Thames & Hudson, 1976) which complimented a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, was, until recently, *the* seminal account of the Festival. The local was highly marginalised here, which perhaps prompted Hillier to write in 1986 that there were 'errors of commission rather than omission' in this retrospective of the Festival.

Even now it isn't uncommon for people to be surprised that 'something happened outside London'? Such a reductionist view should have been remedied by Becky Conekin's book, *The Autobiography of a Nation* (Manchester University Press, 2003), because she really put scholarship of the Festival back on the radar more than a quarter of a century after Tonic was published. Conekin looked at how government sanctioned exhibitions *and* localised events created narratives of Britain's past and represented how it saw its future. And highlighted how the Festival, unlike for example, the British Empire Exhibitions, sought to understand and revel in Britain's regional differences in all of its four nations like never before.

More recently, Paul Rennie's *Festival of Britain Design, 1951* was published by the Antique Collectors Club (2007), but it is no Millers Guide, it is much, much, more. Placing the Festival in its populist context allowed him to showcase some of his vast collection of commemorative memorabilia. What I loved about this contribution to our understanding of the Festival, was the acceptance that the study of souvenirs (and perhaps, kitsch) has a place in any event or exhibitions' narrative. Cultural commentators and design historians such as Pat Kirkham, Judy Atfield and Penny Sparke all helped to legitimise such artefacts, by suggesting that the material culture of *consumption* as well as production, was worthy of study. Importantly, Rennie pointed out that we shouldn't forget that 'the past is reconstructed through its objects'.

The DVD *'London in Festival Year'* (Panamint Cinema, 2009) comprises of four films created in 1951 in response to the Festival. *Brief City*, commissioned by the Observer newspaper, walks the viewer around the Southbank and the Battersea Funfair, which it describes as a 'gigantic toyshop for adults'. With post-war reconstruction on the political agenda, links were made between the exhibition and city planning. Litter bins, the lettering for signposts and the contemporary architecture of the Southbank were given equal status with the objects on display in the exhibition halls. The importance of educating the public in good taste, echoed the expectations that design reformer Henry Cole had had for the 1851 Exhibition. Housed in Joseph Paxton's bold 'Crystal Palace' he hoped to encourage an appreciation for better design by manufacturers, craftsmen and consumers. Unfortunately for Cole, what was on display turned out to be more historicist than cutting edge.

The celebrations that took place in 1951 encouraged national and community pride while encouraging empathy across the classes and nations as part of post war optimism. Less fun than the Observer's representation, *A Family Portrait* (also on the DVD above) by the prolific documentary maker Humphrey Jennings privileged the idea that Britain had 'avoided invasion' and as such should be grateful for still being 'a family' with a legacy of invention, artistry and industry to live up to. Similarly dour, *David*, Directed by Paul Dickinson and sponsored by the Welsh Committee for the Festival of Britain (1951) included on *Shadows of Progress, Documentary Film in Post-War Britain 1951-1977* (BFI, 2010) , presents the emotive fable of Mr Dafydd Rhys, a school caretaker, ex miner and would-be- poet who lives in a place where the people are 'more a family, than a town'.

Not all of the material generated in the festival year is as illuminating or interesting. J B Priestley's novel, *Festival at Fairbridge* is a hard slog at just under 600 pages and if anything, turns you off, rather than on to the Festival of Britain. Thankfully, to save you from Priestly, there are three new perspectives out later, in this 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year.

Naomi Game's *A Symbol For The Festival, Abram Games and the Festival of Britain* (Capital History ,2011 ) will build on the deliciously visual and informative *Abram Games, Graphic Designer: Maximum Meaning, Minimum Means* (Design Council, 2004) where Game's

winning Festival logo was discussed in the context of his prolific outputs. Harriet Atkinson's *The Festival of Britain: A Land and its People* (I B Tauris, 2011) will look at how the Festival 'designers' vision of a modern, reconstructed country 'had a 'deep engagement with the British land and its history'. Finally, *Beacon for Change. How the 1951 Festival of Britain Shaped the Modern Age* (Aurum, 2011) by Barry Turner takes the festival's legacies as its primary subject matter.

The great thing about having an interest in the 1951 Festival of Britain is that there is still so much left to discover. So many cities, towns and villages have yet to have their contribution told. But with the potential closure of local libraries, I wonder how much of the potential material will become inaccessible?

Caterina Benincasa-Sharman