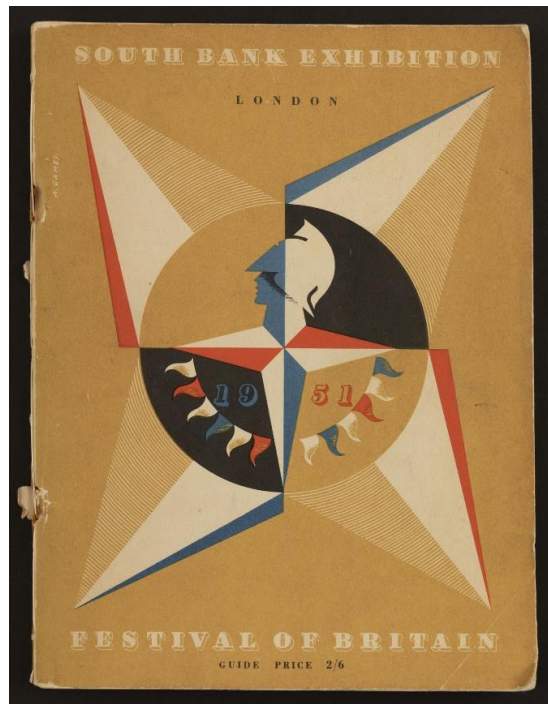


## 8. Festival Guide

*Dr Harriet Atkinson is a leading historian of design and culture based at the University of Brighton. She is one of the foremost experts on the Festival of Britain. In this response she brings her extraordinary knowledge of this event to bear on a commonplace piece of Festival ephemera. In doing so she reveals powerful themes of patriotism, land, refugees, and a whole series of intersections between design and identity that feel as relevant today as they did seven decades ago.*

### **Ian Cox, *The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide to the Story It Tells* (London: HMSO, 1951)**

As memories of a day out at the Festival of Britain's South Bank Exhibition faded, the guidebook was often the only thing that remained. A substantial, handsome book printed on luxuriously thick paper, it bore designer Abram Games's Festival of Britain emblem, Britannia in profile, on the front cover. She was festooned with bunting and mounted on the four points of the compass indicating the nationwide reach of the events, all in the patriotic colours of the Union Jack.



Cover of the Exhibition Guide featuring the Abram Games festival logo (MERL Library 1770-COX)

What was this 'magical city', as one designer described the Festival's London centrepiece, the South Bank Exhibition held from May to September 1951, this temporary world that so enchanted and amazed its visitors? And what kind of Britain do we encounter as we turn the Guide's mustard cover seventy years on?

While advertising was banned at the South Bank Exhibition itself, here, in the Guide, was the chance to sell things to the Festival's many visitors. Immediately inside the cover we find an advert for Benedict Processed Peas, with saturated greens, reds and yellows. A cartoon-strip wife serves up peas to her besuited husband. Turning further, we find Ovaltine dairy maids, aproned housewives Hoovering, women (always women) washing laundry using whizzy new gadgets beneath the dubious slogan 'Progress in the Home'. We find a smartly dressed couple at Ascot smoking Number Sevens, scantily clad women in Wolsey nylons, adverts for British Petroleum. Here, in these many pages of technicolour ads is deference and stereotype of every kind. Here is a nation dependent on petrochemicals and addicted to smoking, a country fiercely proud of its structural innovations and technological advances, attached to its past, home-loving, self-satisfied.

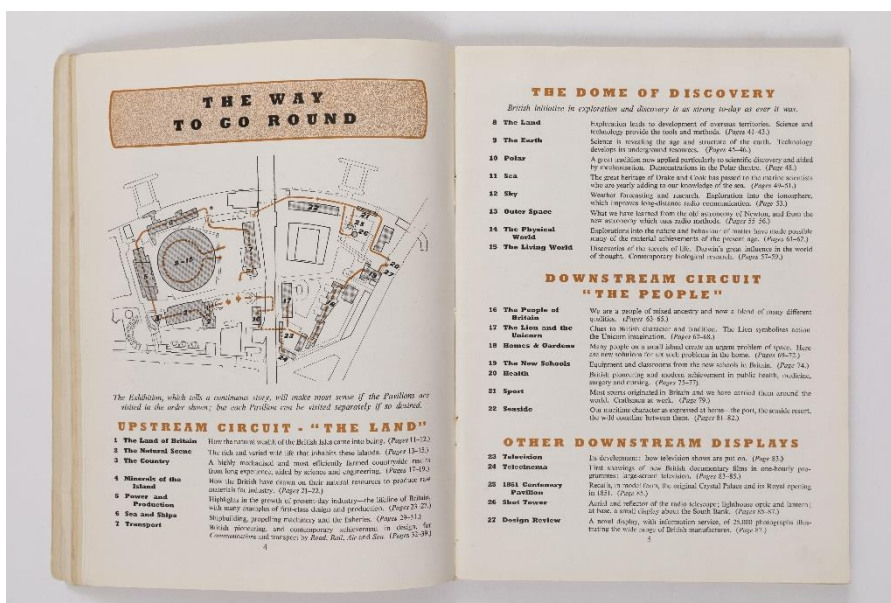


Advertisement for peas on the opening page of *The South Bank Exhibition Guide* (MERL Library 1770-COX)

Finally, after all the adverts, we get to the main meat: the Guide itself. With its focus on 'The Land and The People of Britain', we see how the South Bank Exhibition revealed, building by building, its organisers' deep love of the British landscape. Pavilions were dedicated to wildlife, farming, natural resources, and weather. At the heart of this celebration, as the Guide suggests, was a very serious intention to re-forging links between people and place that had been severed by war and – going deeper – by the impact of the Industrial Revolution. Many of the architects and designers listed in the Guide, while interested in rebuilding the war-damaged country using innovative new materials and novel forms they had seen in the contemporary architectural press were also deeply invested in

particularity of place. This was an attachment that poet W.H. Auden described as ‘topophilia’, a love of place shaped by the memory and history of that place.<sup>1</sup> At the South Bank this topophilia was manifest in the careful attention paid to landscaping and planting the site, reproducing dry stone walls and placing earth-strewn boulders, as well as in the subjects of the exhibits themselves. The *Natural Scene*, with its high ceilinged hall, echoed with the cries and whistles of birds and showed the wildlife of Britain through vignettes of specific places. The next door pavilion *The Country* traced ‘how we have shaped our landscape’ becoming ‘one of the most efficiently farmed countrysides in the world’.<sup>2</sup>

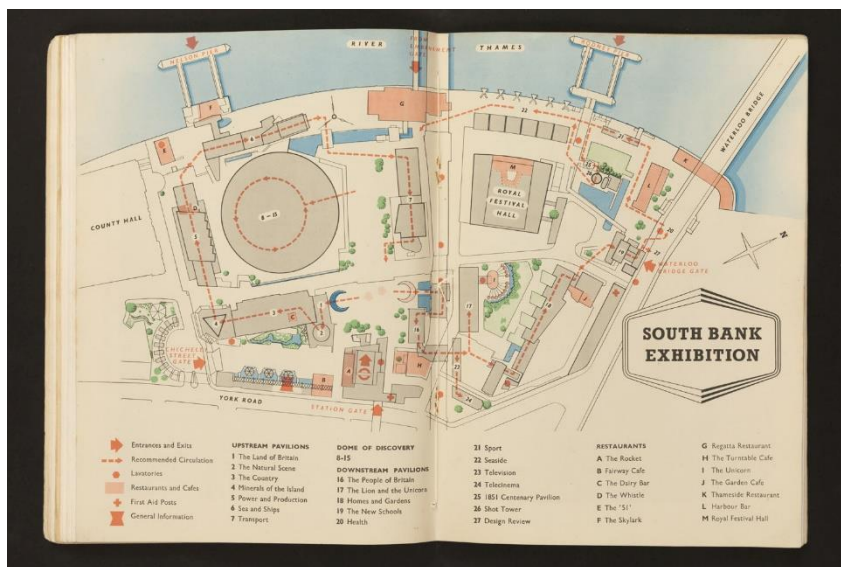
Looking at the Guide seventy years on, at descriptions of buildings devoted to minerals, the seaside and discovery, it is impossible to avoid feelings of retrospective regret, as the literary critic Raymond Williams once described it, at the simplicity and naivety of this world represented by the Festival. This was a place where polar icecaps were still acts of wonder, rather than portents of a world in the process of being undone. This was a world in which accounts of inter-continental exploration and tales of derring-do did not yet reek of plunder and appropriation. This was a world where the earth had not yet been denuded and still offered apparently infinite minerals, if only people could find them.



The first of a series of maps showing routes through the Festival site (MERL Library 1770-COX)

This Guide was, thus, much more than a list of the South Bank’s exhibits, it was ‘a story’ with an author, Ian Cox, the Festival’s Director of Science and Technology. Cox, along with the Festival’s Director Gerald Barry, had decided all the Festival’s nationwide activities should be understood as elements in an ‘interwoven serial story’ unfolding across the nations, ‘a story of the British people and the land they live in and by’. This was a story told with many maps, dictating ‘The Way to Go Round’, directing visitors along circulation routes marked by dotted lines. At the South Bank these routes forced perambulating visitors to knit together the vast ‘continuous story’ told by all the

pavilions, from the ‘Upstream’ ones about ‘The Land of Britain’ to the ‘Downstream’ ones about ‘The People of Britain’. After visiting the South Bank, poet Dylan Thomas noted with amusement that people who wanted to make sense of the South Bank exhibition started off following the course indicated in the Guide and then came a cropper, ‘a series of conflicting arrows...lead many visitors who cannot understand these things slap-splash into the Thames’. ‘Other, less obedient visitors’, Thomas observed, ‘begin, of course, at the end’.<sup>3</sup> Maps also directed visitors through each pavilion, brown snaking lines and arrows dictating where they must go in and come out.



The main centrefold South Bank site map from the *Exhibition Guide* (MERL Library 1770-COX)

Each of the eight major Festival exhibitions held across the four nations from May to September 1951 – from Belfast, to Glasgow, to London – had its own version of this guide. Each was in a different colourway: light or dark blue, pink, green and mustard. Around 3.5 million guides were bought by the almost 13 million visitors to the nationwide events. None of the Guides showed the look of the finished Festival buildings and landscapes and The South Bank’s was no exception. There were no images of the structures that have become synonymous with the Festival – Philip Powell & Hidalgo Moya’s Skylon or Ralph Tubb’s Dome of Discovery, for example -because they had not yet been finished. Instead its many photographs were bought from picture libraries, much like the popular weekly illustrated magazines of the time. For some contemporaries who could not visit the Festival, the Guide still allowed an evocative experience of the events. ‘Thick, high quality paper and filled with exotic designs and optimism, which, in a slum street in Halifax, seemed magical’ wrote architect Michael Hales many years later. The catalogue ‘was one of the things that gave me the notion that I might be an architect when I grew up; and that the world “out there” might be as hopeful and imaginative as the catalogue was a delight to have and to hold’<sup>4</sup>.



Exhibition Guide covers from different sites (Figs. 13-16, Atkinson, H. *The Festival of Britain: A Land and its People*).

Many of the Theme Convenors and Display Designers given credit for the South Bank's exhibits in the Guide were fledgling architects and designers. Their professional networks and friendships were widened and deepened through the experience of working on the Festival. What is also striking and, perhaps, surprising is just how many of those shaping these hyper-patriotic events were recent arrivals in Britain. Given that memories of the Festival of Britain have, once again, become used by the current government to argue for a new Festival next year to mark Britain's separation from Europe, popularly dubbed 'The Festival of Brexit', it is worth recalling the role played by refugees in the events of 1951. Overseeing the design of the upstream half of the South Bank was Misha Black, whose family had arrived in Britain from Russia in 1912. The Festival's great symbol, the towering Skylon, was designed by young architects, Hidalgo Moya and Philip Powell, with Vienna-born structural engineer Felix Samuely. The Royal Festival Hall, the only South Bank building made to remain on site after 1951 was designed by German-born Peter Moro with Robert Matthew and Leslie Martin. Meanwhile, German-born architect H.J. Reifenberg, who had arrived in Britain immediately prior to the outbreak of World War Two, designed the imposing Power and Production Pavilion with his partner George Grenfell-Baines, incorporating industrial stands by Hungarian architect George Fejer. Polish architect Broniek Katz with his partner Reginald Vaughan designed a stone-clad building for the Homes and Gardens Pavilion, outside which Jacob Epstein's sculpture *Youth Advancing* paced the lawns. New York-born Epstein, of Polish-Jewish parentage, had moved to Britain in 1905 from

Paris, becoming a British citizen in 1907. German-born F.H.K. Henrion, who had spent the first part of the war in internment as an ‘Enemy Alien’ on the Isle of Man designed the South Bank’s *Country and Natural World* sections. Sculptures were contributed by many including Austrian refugee Siegfried Charoux in the form of a massive relief called *The Islanders* and Hungarian refugee Peter Laszlo Peri with his playful *The Sunbathers*, mounted vertically on the wall of the South Bank’s Waterloo Station Gate entrance. These are only some of the numerous contributions made to the Festival by recent arrivals in Britain<sup>5</sup>. For all its evident jingoism, the Festival of Britain provided a platform for the formation of relationships between refugee artists, designers and architects from multiple locations, who came together in a massive, collaborative, creative effort. Richard Littler’s brilliant 2018 satire entitled ‘The Festival of Brexit Britain’ riffs off the mustard-coloured cover of the 1951 South Bank Exhibition Guide. In Littler’s version, however, proud Britannia becomes hopeless Brexit Britannia shooting herself through the head, the bullet ricocheting through her helmet and beyond. It remains to be seen whether 2022 will have the popular appeal of 1951 or whether it will become mired in the kind of criticism that beset the British government’s other recent mega event, the Millennium Dome of the year 2000.



Richard Littler unveiled his ‘Festival of Brexit Britain’ design on social media. Echoing Abram Games, it is now available in poster form ([https://twitter.com/richard\\_littler/status/1046322039114674176](https://twitter.com/richard_littler/status/1046322039114674176)).

## About the author

Harriet Atkinson’s book *The Festival of Britain: A Land and its People* was published by I.B. Tauris in 2012. Her new book *Modernist Exhibitions in Britain for Propaganda and Resistance, 1933 to 1953* is

forthcoming from Manchester University Press. You can [find out more about her publications, research interests, and teaching here](#). You can also [follow her on Twitter](#).

## Further Information (online):

**Details and reference numbers of various copies of *The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide to the Story it Tells, as held by the University of Reading* – [Great Exhibition Collection, MERL Library Collection, and Main University Library](#)**

## Further Reading (not available online):

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

Atkinson, Harriet. 'Artists, Refugees and the Festival of Britain', in Monica Bohm-Duchen (ed.) *Insiders Outsiders: Refugees from Nazi Europe and their Contribution to British Visual Culture* (Lund Humphries, 2019)

Thomas, Dylan. 'The Festival Exhibition', *On the Air with Dylan Thomas: The Broadcasts* (New York: New Directions, 1992)

Various. *Official Book of the Festival of Britain* (London: HMSO, 1951)

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<sup>1</sup> Atkinson, *The Festival of Britain*, p.5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Official Book of the Festival of Britain* (London: HMSO, 1951), p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Dylan Thomas 'The Festival Exhibition', *On the Air with Dylan Thomas: The Broadcasts* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p.246.

<sup>4</sup> Atkinson, *Festival of Britain*, p.139.

<sup>5</sup> For many other examples see Harriet Atkinson's essay 'Artists, Refugees and the Festival of Britain' published in *Insiders Outsiders: Refugees from Nazi Europe and their Contribution to British Visual Culture* edited by Monica Bohm-Duchen (Lund Humphries, 2019).