

**SOUTHBANK
CENTRE**

The Festival of Britain

An introduction for schools

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Welcome to the Southbank Centre

The Southbank Centre is the largest arts centre in the UK, situated on the South Bank of the River Thames in London. Showcasing some of the world's most exciting artists, it presents inspiring cultural experiences spanning visual arts, literature and music. Its 11-acre site incorporates the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, Hayward Gallery, and National Poetry Library.

The Southbank Centre's history began with the Festival of Britain. This was a national exhibition and fair inspired by the Great Exhibition of 1851. It reached millions of visitors throughout the UK in the summer of 1951 and was billed as 'a tonic for the nation'. A huge celebration of art, science, industry and design, it brought the public together to imagine a fresh start for post-war Britain.

This resource for KS2 and KS3 classes explores the social history of Britain and its connections to design, art, history and geography

– demonstrating how public spaces reflect culture and bring communities together. Through the history of the Southbank Centre and the Festival of Britain, this resource explores life after the Second World War and traces connections between this time period and our world today.

It includes group and whole-class activities and discussions that you can tailor to your learning environment. If you wish to develop these activities further, the resource includes links to films and books about the Festival of Britain, art and design from the post-war period, and life after WW2.

2026 marks Southbank Centre's 75th anniversary and, in celebration, we're excited to be launching a number of projects for schools.



1951



1951



2017

Introduction: About the Festival of Britain

Following the Second World War, Britain was badly damaged and economic recovery was slow. The national debt had risen from £760 million to £3,500 million, and Britain had suffered 264,433 military and 60,595 civilian deaths during the war. Homes had been destroyed and food was still being rationed. In 1945 the British Labour government set out to create a better, fairer society that established the right to housing, education, health and access to the arts for all. In 1948 the National Health Service (NHS) was founded and the country slowly began to repair itself.



As the government began to rebuild Britain, they believed that the arts helped people look to the future with excitement and hope. Public art projects and festivals were seen as a crucial way to strengthen social bonds and boost morale, and so a new festival was proposed to aid the nation's recovery.

Initially, this festival was proposed to mark the 100-year anniversary of The Great Exhibition, which was a 19th-century showcase of materials, machinery, manufacturing and art from across the world that promoted Britain as an industrial and imperial power. The Labour government decided that this new festival would celebrate Britain's achievements and look towards the future. It would be 'the people's festival', exhibiting the latest in science, manufacturing, technology, textiles, arts and industrial design. Visitors would be able to admire innovations in household design, architecture, furniture and farming.

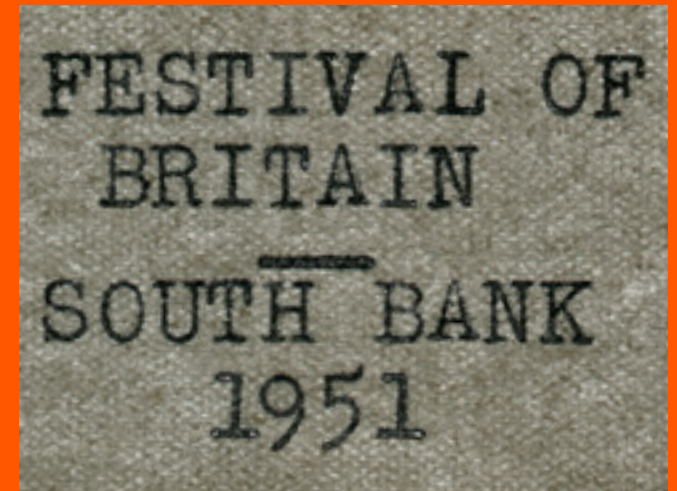
Over the next few years, plans were put in place, a new concert hall was built, and, in 1951, the Festival of Britain was launched.



The festival featured events and exhibitions in 1,700 towns and villages across the country. They included the largest transportable exhibition ever produced, The Land Travelling Exhibition, which went to Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham and Nottingham. Other attractions included The Festival Ship Campania, which was a decommissioned aircraft carrier that was converted into a floating exhibition that toured coastal cities and ports around the UK. There was also The Festival Pleasure Gardens at Battersea Park, which featured a fun fair and miniature railway.

At the heart of the festival was the South Bank Exhibition, featuring the newly built Royal Festival Hall, designed to present a broad artistic programme and over 10,000 exhibits. On site, the Dome of Discovery, which at the time was the largest domed structure in the world, was filled with scientific wonders, and artists such as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Eduardo Paolozzi were commissioned to create sculptures and murals. Over a five-month period, the Festival of Britain was visited by over 8.5 million people.

Today, the 1951 Festival of Britain is still part of the DNA of the Southbank Centre. We pride ourselves on being an engine of creativity where culture is made, artists thrive and all are welcome. And since the introduction of the Greater London Council's 'Open Foyer' policy in 1983, we have been known as 'The People's Palace', a free and accessible space for all.



Activity 1: A festival for the people

In this activity, your students will learn about people's lives in post-war Britain.

Materials:

Colourful pens
Large pieces of paper
Sticky notes
Computer
Screen

Research material:

Watch the documentary film [Brave New World](#) (up to 00:01:32 for this activity), introducing the Festival of Britain.

Activity:

In small groups, share your immediate responses to what you have seen and heard.

- What kinds of words and phrases could you use to describe the Festival of Britain?
- How do the people who were at the Festival talk about it? Does anyone say anything you find particularly memorable?
- What kind of events and activities took place as part of the festival? Why? What do you think the organisers hoped to achieve?

Take a pack of coloured felt-tips and note down your group's thoughts and observations on a large sheet of paper.

Pause to reflect on these words, phrases and quotes.

If you had to summarise the Festival of Britain in just one word, what would it be? Do you all agree?

Each group should write their word on a sticky note – using a colour you think suits its meaning.

Place all the sticky notes on a display board or flipchart.

Now watch the part of the film that describes post-war Britain (from 00:01:32 to 00:06:46).

Again, share your initial responses together.

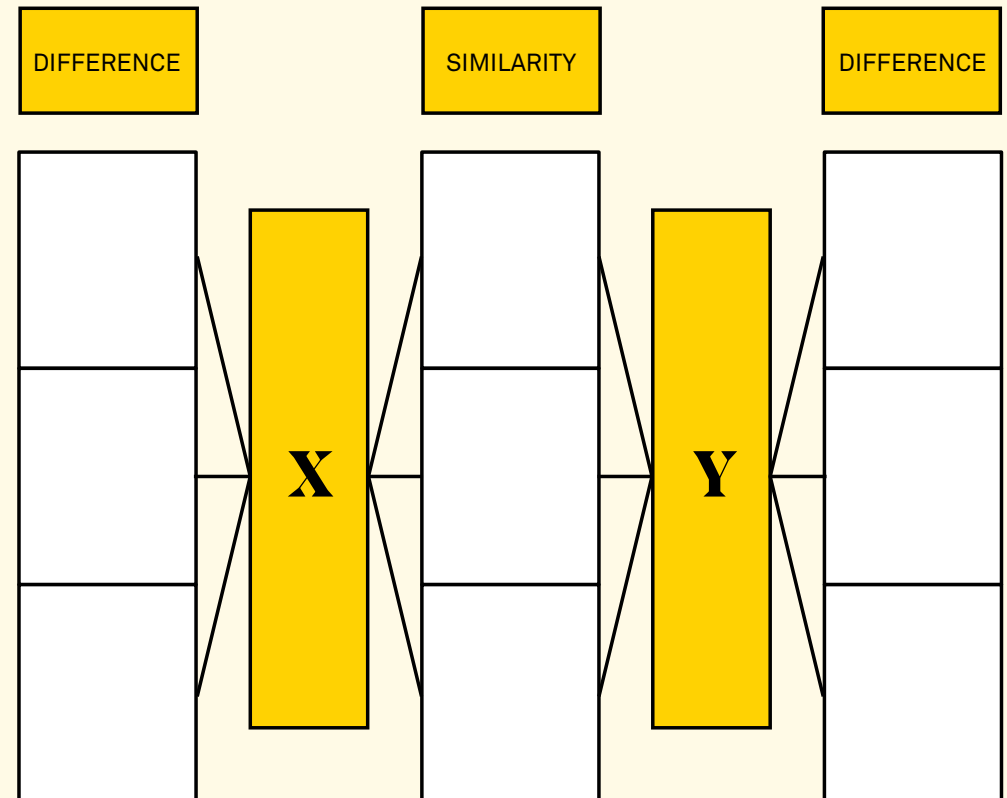
- What does this part of the film make you feel or think about? Why?
- What did people in post-war Britain see, hear and experience?
- What kinds of things did they remember?



Take another large sheet of paper and note down your impressions of post-war Britain using the felt-tips. Are there specific colours that feel appropriate?

Choose a word that summarises post-war Britain and write it on a sticky note. Display the notes on a display board and discuss them as a group.

Compare the ways you have described post-war Britain and the words you have used to describe the Festival of Britain. You might want to use a comparison grid to help you organise and summarise your discussion visually.



Activity 2: Life in Britain in 1951

In this activity, your students will learn about life in 1951, people's hopes for the future after the war and why the Festival of Britain was important to people in the UK.

Materials:

Computer
Screen
Paper
Pens

Research material:

- Continue to watch the [Brave New World](#) documentary. If you have time, we would recommend you watch the entire film. It lasts approximately one hour.
- Check out the [National Archives' Festival of Britain](#) webpage to see the printed marketing materials used to advertise the festival, including the official guide to the Festival of Britain.

Activity:

Discuss what you learned in the previous session about the Festival of Britain and this period of history.

Here is a quote from the guide produced for visitors to the Festival of Britain.

'One of the principal aims of the Festival is to bring the British ways of life some enrichment that will endure for long after the festival year is over.'

Reflect on what this means by relating it to your personal experiences.

- Have you ever been somewhere or seen something that changed how you think about the world?
- How is your life enriched by some of the following: art and design; architecture and engineering; science and technology; multiculturalism; food and farming; music, film and theatre?

What more can we learn from these images of people attending the Festival of Britain? What might it have felt like to be there?



Continue to watch more of [Brave New World](#).

- What kinds of visions of the future were offered by the Festival?
- If they had become a reality, how would they have affected people's lives?
- How do these visions compare with what life was actually like in post-war Britain?
- In what ways have these visions become reality today?

Extension activity:

In small groups, research one aspect of people's lives in 1951. You could look at homes and gardens; work and careers; school and education; people and relationships; transport and travel; the arts and entertainment; health, sport and leisure; communication and technology; natural resources; or power and production.

Record your ideas using a visual organiser, such as a mind map, so that you are ready to share your expertise with the other groups.

Activity 3: Life in Britain now and in the future

In this activity, your students will reflect on the legacy of the Festival of Britain, and consider what they would showcase in their own festival.

Materials:

Whiteboard
Markers
Large pieces of paper
Pens

Activity:

Reflect on what you have learned about the 1951 Festival of Britain. Did it improve the lives of British people? In particular, consider the legacy of the Festival. What impact do you think it had on visitors? What impact has it had on our lives today?

There was even a school built as part of the Festival of Britain. Lansbury Lawrence Primary School still stands today. It was built as part of the Lansbury Estate in Poplar, East London for the festival's 'Live Architecture' exhibition. It was designed by architect firm Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall (YRM) to demonstrate new approaches to town planning, architecture and building.

The team of international architects, designers and artists who were responsible for the Southbank Festival of 1951 were quite young when it took place, and many were living in Britain as war refugees. Their ideas and innovations, such as the futuristic architecture of the Skylon and the Dome of Discovery, were at the forefront of the festival, showing how valuable and important young people were to the future of Britain.



If you were creating a Festival of Britain now, what would you include? What would you showcase to capture what life is like in Britain in the present day? What dreams or visions of the future would you share?

As a class or in small groups, discuss:

- What would you include in your festival and why? What aspects of British life **today** would you want to showcase and celebrate? How would this compare to the aspects of British life explored by the Festival of Britain in 1951?
- What do you think is important to share with people about how we could live our lives in the future and what might be possible?
- How can you include your school and your local community in your vision for the future?

What do you want to showcase about Britain now?	What do you hope for the Britain of the Future?
Objects ... Music ... Art ... Food ... Community ...	Objects ... Music ... Art ... Food ... Community ...

Spend some time as a class discussing your ideas.



Activity 4: Plan your own Festival of Britain

In this activity, create a plan for your own Festival of Britain.

Materials:

Pens
Large pieces of paper

Activity:

The South Bank exhibition was a central element of the Festival of Britain. It showcased the latest innovations in 1950s Britain and explored questions about the future.

Working in groups, and using the original South Bank Exhibition map as inspiration (see page 13), make a plan for your own festival exhibition. How can you inspire a feeling of excitement or surprise in your visitors?

Join a group to explore an area such as urban design, people and relationships, technological advancements, environmental impact or the role of art and culture.

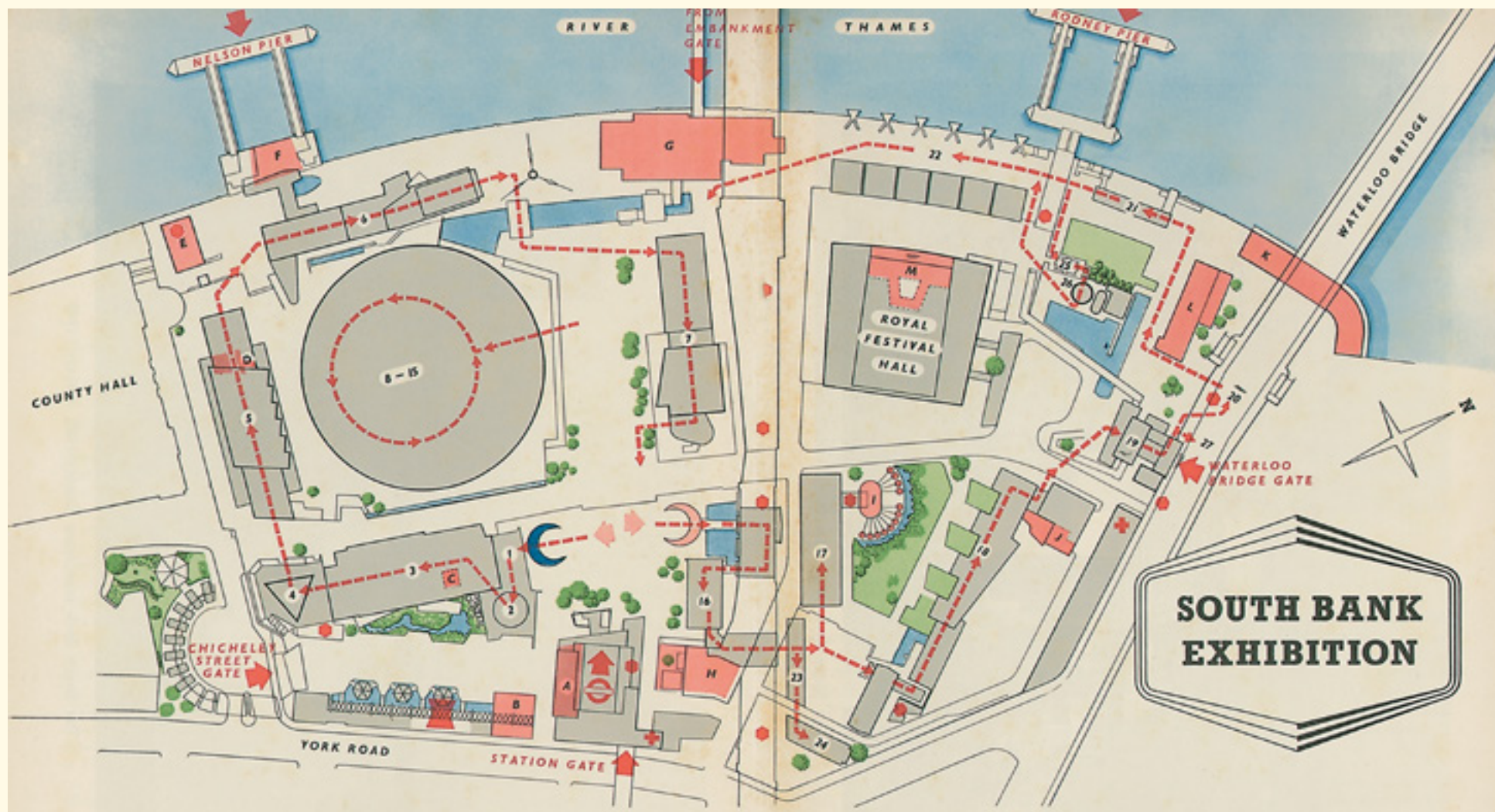
Talk about your ideas and sketch out designs on a large sheet of paper.

- What do you want to show people in the future about what life is like in Britain now?
- What would you like people to experience in the future?
- What can you learn about present-day innovations in your chosen area?
- Which present-day ideas could have a lasting effect on future generations?

Choose one idea that you would like to share with the other groups. Think about how you could share it with an audience in a physical space. Is it an exhibition? Is it a performance? How can you present it in an exciting way for your visitors? What would most appeal to them?

Extension activity: Create a Festival guidebook

Work together to create visitor materials for your festival, such as a guidebook or promotional posters. Think carefully about how you can make design choices that attract visitors, and convey your vision for the future



SOUTH BANK EXHIBITION

- Entrances and Exits
- Recommended Circulation
- Lavatories
- Restaurants and Cafes
- First Aid Posts
- General Information

- UPSTREAM PAVILIONS**
- 1 The Land of Britain
 - 2 The Natural Scene
 - 3 The Country
 - 4 Minerals of the Island
 - 5 Power and Production
 - 6 Sea and Ships
 - 7 Transport

- DOME OF DISCOVERY**
- 8-15
- DOWNSTREAM PAVILIONS**
- 16 The People of Britain
 - 17 The Lion and the Unicorn
 - 18 Homes and Gardens
 - 19 The New Schools
 - 20 Health

- 21 Sport
- 22 Seaside
- 23 Television
- 24 Telecinema
- 25 1851 Centenary Pavilion
- 26 Shot Tower
- 27 Design Review

- RESTAURANTS**
- A The Rocket
 - B Fairway Cafe
 - C The Dairy Bar
 - D The Whistle
 - E The '51'
 - F The Skylark

- G Regatta Restaurant
- H The Turntable Cafe
- I The Unicorn
- J The Garden Cafe
- K Thameside Restaurant
- L Harbour Bar
- M Royal Festival Hall

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4. Flying Bomb: V1 Bomb Damage in London, England, UK, 1944 by the Ministry of Information Photo Division Photographer. Image via the Imperial War Museums and Wikimedia Commons. Public domain, p.4
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12. The Skylon at the Festival of Britain, 1951 by Bernard William Lee. This file is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license via Wikimedia Commons, p.10
13. Courtesy of Southbank Centre Archive, p.11
14. Courtesy of Southbank Centre Archive, p.13

Further links and reading

This page includes other sources of information to support your class's knowledge and understanding of the Festival of Britain and its impact on British society, design and culture.

1. *A Festival on the River: The Story of the Southbank Centre*. Charlotte Mullins (Penguin Books, 2007)
2. *Beacon for Change: How the 1951 Festival of Britain Shaped the Modern Age*. Barry Turner (Quarto Publishing PLC, 2011)
3. *The Festival of Britain. A Land and Its People*. Harriet Atkinson (I.B Tauris, 2012)
4. *DESIGN: Festival of Britain 1951*. Paul Rennie. (Antique Collectors' Club, 2008)
5. *Festival of Britain*. Alan Powers and Elain Harwood. (The Twentieth Century Society, 2001)
6. *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951*. Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier. (Thames and Hudson, 1976)
7. [5 Designers of the Festival of Britain \(Historic England\)](#)
8. [The Festival of Britain, \(V&A Articles\)](#)
9. [Festival of Britain and Listed Modernist Buildings, \(Architecture Today\)](#)
10. [Festival of Britain, \(National Archives\)](#)
11. [Festival of Britain 1951, \(London Museum\)](#)

Video links:

1. [Festival of Britain South Bank Exhibition 1951](#)
2. [Festival of Britain opening](#)
3. [Festival of Britain in Battersea Park](#)
4. [All set for the Festival of Britain, British Pathé](#)

About the Southbank Centre

The Southbank Centre is the UK's largest arts centre and one of the nation's top visitor attractions, showcasing the world's most exciting artists at our venues in the heart of London. We present great cultural experiences that bring people together, and open up the arts to everyone.

The Southbank Centre is made up of the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, Hayward Gallery, National Poetry Library and the Arts Council Collection. We're one of London's favourite meeting spots, with lots of free events and places to relax, eat and shop next to the Thames.

Creative Engagement at the Southbank Centre

The Southbank Centre runs a year-round music, literature, visual art and performance programme of participatory learning experiences for children, families, young people and adults, with more than 36,000 people taking part each year. Our activities range from in-depth project work and resources for schools and teachers, to inspire a love of the arts and support creative learning, to programmes and initiatives that develop and nurture diverse emerging artists, providing them with the skills and knowledge to thrive.

Find out more about the Southbank Centre's Creative Engagement programmes at www.southbankcentre.co.uk/creative-engagement

This resource was written in partnership with the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education



About CLPE

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education is a UK-based children's literacy charity and Primary English Association. Their work raises the attainment of children's reading and writing by helping schools to teach literacy creatively and effectively, putting quality children's books at the heart of all learning. We provide well-evidenced and creative literacy training and support for primary school teachers and others who work in primary schools.

SOUTHBANK CENTRE