It was nice, wasn’t it, Festival year? It was the nicest thing that happened in England in the whole of my life.’ So wrote novelist Marghanita Laski, capturing the feelings of many thousands who, like her, had visited the Festival of Britain in 1951. Around Britain record players reverberated to the sound of the popular Festival song ‘All the world is coming to London’. Meanwhile, from May to September, people travelled from all over the country and beyond to visit the spectacular centrepiece of this nationwide celebration, set beside the River Thames at London’s South Bank.

The idea of holding a Festival to celebrate the centenary of the Great Exhibition held at London’s Hyde Park in 1851 had been mooted for years. Gerald Barry (1898-1968), editor of left-leaning broadsheet News Chronicle, pursued a campaign through the pages of his newspaper. Barry later recalled being inspired by designer Misha Black (1910-1977) who had come to his offices as the Second World War ended with a blueprint for an international exhibition at the South Bank, a kind of ‘interplanetary edifice more or less suspended in the sky’. The idea of holding an exhibition in 1951 was taken up by Clement Attlee’s government who saw in it an opportunity to give the nation a boost after war and a chance to celebrate ‘the arts of peace’. Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison was put in charge of the Festival, appointing Gerald Barry as Director-General. Britain would be shown as a model democracy at a time when international relations were becoming increasingly strained, with divisions opening up between East and West.

The South Bank Exhibition was one of eight major government funded events arranged across the nation. Upstream at Battersea were the Festival Pleasure Gardens, which visitors could travel to by boat, giving light relief after the earnest pleasures of the South Bank. Elsewhere, an exhibition of ‘Live Architecture’ at Lansbury in London’s East End showed the possibilities for an area under reconstruction and a science exhibition held in a new wing of the Science Museum showed the potential of future technology. Beyond London, an Exhibition of Farm and Factory was held in Belfast, Glasgow was the site of an Exhibition of Heavy Industry, and two travelling exhibitions carried the Festival...
Further afield, one aboard a decommissioned aircraft carrier, the other on a series of lorries. Many hundreds of smaller events were held up and down the country.

In late 1948 Barry ran a competition for a Festival symbol that could draw together celebrations small and large, in all their chaotic diversity. The winning symbol, designed by graphic designer Abram Games (1914-1996), was a master-stroke of economy in keeping with Games’ own maxim ‘maximum meaning, minimum means’, expressing much through seemingly little. The symbol, which beat eleven other entries showed Britannia in profile, mounted on the point of a compass. Games’ emblem was an immediately recognisable means of branding a myriad of Festival activities and, with Robin Day, created signage for the South Bank site.

Across all the Festival exhibitions, the focus was on showing the relationship between ‘the land and people of Britain’. At the South Bank this focus allowed designers to make a virtue of the newly built Thames-side site divided, as it was, halfway through by a railway embankment. Upstream was the ‘Land of Britain’, overseen by designer Misha Black. Downstream was the ‘People of Britain’, overseen by architect Hugh Casson (1910-1999). It richly referenced the land of Britain, with hard and soft landscaping, using plant species and geological samples transported from other parts of the country.

In amongst Westmoreland dry stonewalls, streams and wild gardens, architects built pavilions of glass, steel and aluminium. The most celebrated of these was Ralph Tübb’s (1912-1996) iconic Dome of Discovery. The largest aluminium structure ever erected by 1951, and indeed the largest dome with a span of 365 feet, it stood as he explained ‘to contrast the visual solidarity of a series of sweeping horizontal galleries of reinforced concrete with the extraordinary lightness of the vast aluminium saucer dome which spans out and beyond all the galleries and which is supported on very light tubular steel struts’. The towering Skylon was to become the other great Festival symbol, designed by young architects Hidalgo Moya (1921-1994) and Philip Powell (1921-2003) with help from structural engineer Felix Samuely (1902-1959). Designed through a competition for a vertical feature, Powell later told me that it was Moya who had conceived of the idea. He, meanwhile, had dreamt up an alternative scheme for a tall tower with Mondrianesque coloured panels floating over it. Moya’s idea was clearly the stronger, so they entered that. The futurism of the Dome and Skylon captured the imagination of visitors who saw them as symbols of hope, portents of a vibrant future. For a generation of children, they were associated with the world of Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, a cartoon published in the Eagle from 1950. The Dome was shown in contemporary photographs underlit at night, as if both were about to take off.

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