

# Chapter 21

## FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN

One hundred years after Prince Albert's hugely successful extravaganza in Hyde Park, the Labour government of the day decided that the 1851 event was worthy of a centenary commemoration on a national scale. They hoped at the same time to put a sparkle back into public life, very necessary after six weary years of war and the post-war hardship that the country had endured and was still enduring to a considerable extent. So 1951 was to be Festival of Britain year.

Many ways of celebrating the centenary were adopted throughout the land. In Birmingham the City Council drew up a programme that ranged from pure entertainment to civic projects, such as, for example, a drastic re-modelling of Chamberlain Square. Two official guides were published, one for May and June, the other for July to September. Each carried a plan of the city centre on which some fifty relevant locations were highlighted and code-numbered. Oddly enough, whilst important events due to take place in Bingley Hall were listed in the diary section with full details, the hall itself was not shown on the plan. As a consequence the events there were not indexed in the accompanying key, an omission that could not have been helpful to attendances. (1)

The first Festival event in Bingley Hall was a full-scale exhibition staged by Birmingham Co-

operative Society. By coincidence 1951 being the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the BCS, the event performed a dual purpose, serving as their own celebration too. Opened on 5 May by the Rt. Hon. Harold Wilson MP, President of the Board of Trade, the show ran for a fortnight. The catalogue required 64 pages to list everything on show.

Open from 2pm to 10pm daily, except Sundays, the hall was filled with over a hundred large displays of the Co-op's wares, ranging from biscuits to a bungalow, the latter complete with garden! There were cooking demonstrations and fashion shows too. Musical entertainment was provided by Co-op brass bands brought down especially for the event from Manchester and Scotland. The theatre was a particular centre of attraction for many people, anxious to see for themselves the very latest domestic entertainment apparatus in operation. "*In the theatre behind stand 65, television shows will be given whenever the BBC is transmitting*", the guide advised the visitors. (2)

Towards the end of May the Birmingham & District Industrial Safety Group mounted a four-day exhibition on that important subject. Admission was free. (3)

The next event there, early in June, was the Women's Festival Exhibition, designed to illustrate "*the civic, social and domestic work of the women of Birmingham.*"

On 9 June HRH Princess Elizabeth, after inspecting a Festival parade of veteran cars, was taken to Bingley Hall to tour the show. (5)

August was devoted to the most impressive event ever staged in the hall's long history, an exhibition funded from the public purse. A 65-page guide and catalogue, price 2/-, was published by the Stationary Office (HMSO). Entitled '*FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN: THE LAND TRAVELLING EXHIBITION, BIRMINGHAM, LEEDS, MANCHESTER AND NOTTINGHAM*', its preface set out the government's objectives.

*In 1947 HM Government decided that the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851 should be marked by means of national displays in the Arts, Architecture, Science, Technology and Industrial Design . . . It was decided to create special versions of this exhibition which would bring the story to the main centres of population. (8)*

Bingley Hall was decorated both inside and out for the event. An ornamental façade was added to the frontage that also advertised the exhibition. Inside, an artistic roof mosaic, commissioned by the Council of Industrial Design, was created by Eleanor White. (9)

Although this mobile version had some features in common with the main show in London, it was a complete entity. As was reported in "*The Times*" Festival of Britain Supplement, "*Although the Festival of Britain land travelling exhibition will draw on the theme of the South bank Exhibition, it will be distinct and individual in its character.*" (10) Requiring more than a hundred lorries to carry everything from the capital, it was the largest transportable covered exhibition ever to

be mounted. The 3,000 exhibits ranged from aircraft engines to ladies' brooches. The central themes of the show were "*Britain's industrial contribution to civilisation*" and "*the skill of her people through the ages*".

Page after page of the guide described the exhibits. It was explained that separate units of the show were devoted to materials, design, play, work and travel. There were model railways and aeroplanes, compasses for yachts and plastic sandwich boxes, spectacles and gas turbines, a dazzling range of items of all shapes and sizes. Industry in Birmingham and the Midlands contributed immensely to these exhibits, as they had done to the main show in London. An appraisal of their contribution on the South Bank has been provided by Martin Packer of the Festival of Britain Society.

*The midlands motor industry in particular was well represented with the latest cars from Birmingham's Austin Motor Company and Singer Motors. The world's first experimental gas turbine car was displayed by the Rover Company, Solihull. Various other Birmingham-based manufacturers contributed exhibits, including the BSA guns, the Bulpitt hot-water bottle, Chad Valley chess set, dolls, toy tractor, watering can, the Creda "Comet" electric cooker and Valor oil convector heater . . . Dunlop tyres, bicycles from Dawes, Parkes and Sunbeam, cricket bats by Quaipe and Lilly, motor cycles from Ariel, BSA and James . . . IMI sporting ammunition. (11)*

Unfortunately, interest in the exhibition was not aroused in Birmingham to anything like the extent the organisers had hoped and expected. A few days before the show closed, one despondent official was quoted in the local press as saying that *“the exhibition was a great success in Leeds and Manchester. We can think of no more new ways of attracting the public”*. (12)

Attendances in both those cities were in fact more than double the numbers attracted to Bingley Hall. Even the regrettable omission in the city’s official guides referred to above cannot possibly account for such a disappointing lack of support, and the admission charge of two shillings, with children half-price, although fairly expensive, was not exactly prohibitive. The fiasco remains a mystery. (13)

There was to be one last small but welcome happening in Bingley Hall that was dedicated to the Festival. Announced by the organisers of that autumn’s Ideal Home Exhibition in their foreword to the catalogue, it would undoubtedly have been appreciated by many of the visitors.

*In order to meet the many demands we have had for a fountain, we have this year erected a Festival Fountain in the centre of the Exhibition. This, we feel sure, will appeal to many and bring back distant memories.* (14)