

# Celebrating 70 years: Battersea Park Festival Gardens

This year marks the Festival of Britain's 70th anniversary, but did you know Battersea Festival Gardens played a huge part in the celebrations when it originally opened in 1951?

In the years after World War II, the government wanted to focus on a brighter future by creating a tonic for the nation. The Festival of Britain opened on the South Bank on 4 May 1951 to celebrate all that was great about British science, industry and design with Battersea Park chosen for the light-hearted part of the celebration.



Festival Director-General Gerald Barry declared: "1951 should be a year of fun, fantasy and colour." The Festival Gardens in Battersea Park provided all three. Echoing earlier English Pleasure Gardens, they featured a riverside theatre, dance pavilion, gardens, lakes, fountains, a children's zoo, bars and restaurants as well as a popular funfair and mini-railway.

Despite opposition to the cost, the Festival committee won £30,000 (close to £1 million in today's money) from the Treasury to purchase spectacular new rides from the USA. The Sky Wheel, Moon Rocket, Big Dipper, Flying Cars, Boomerang and many more rides provided thrills and excitement that ensured that the crowds flocked in from Nine Elms, Battersea and further afield.



The mini-railway adopted the style of Punch cartoonist Rowland Ematt, bringing to mind the British characteristics of whimsy and silliness which had raised spirits during the war. Passengers could travel the 500 yds from one side of the gardens to the other for a shilling (5p). Three quaint engines, Nellie, Neptune and Wild Goose hauled carriages between the grandiose Far Tottering Station and Oyster Creek. The mini-railway proved so popular that it covered its costs in just three weeks.

After six months, parliament held a debate to consider the future of the gardens. It was reported that over eight million people had visited, more than 70 per cent of whom were Londoners. It was agreed that the gardens should remain open after the Festival of Britain ended, with the funfair surviving until 1974. Some of the original features can still be seen in Battersea Park today, see if you can spot them!



**About Battersea Society** [www.batterseasociety.org.uk](http://www.batterseasociety.org.uk)

The aims of the Society are to strengthen Battersea's sense of identity and community, stimulate interest in its geography, history, and architecture, and to promote excellence in new developments whilst conserving the best of the past. We run a varied programme of online talks and virtual walks and hope to resume our 'real time' programme later this year; in the meantime, do check our website, Facebook page, Instagram and Twitter @batterseasoc for up to date news and features.