

## Take Me To The River: A Walk Along the Thames Path

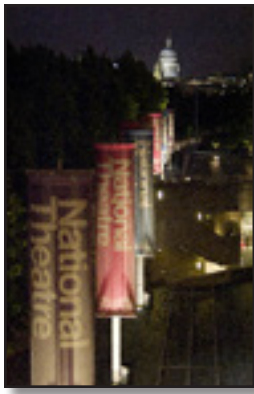
# SOUTHBANK

Words & Photos by Nigel French

**T**he South Bank: Away from the frenetic bustle of Leicester Square, Piccadilly Circus and the tourist throng at Covent Garden, is one of London's most attractive and stimulating districts. A calming walk along the tree-lined South Bank meanders past concert halls, restaurants, theatres and galleries. Groups of friends relax on benches and lovers embrace on the jetties suspended over the Thames. The views are stunning and must be relished at night time, too. There is an abundance of literary and artistic stimulation en route from secondhand book stalls to numerous public sculptures. Above all, there is an ever present passing stream of people moving at different paces yet united by the mellow atmosphere and great sense of pride that permeates this area. The South Bank is a glorious phoenix that has emerged from the ravages of bomb damage during the Second World War, which left its waterfront depressed and largely inaccessible. The transformation began in 1951 when the South Bank was chosen as the site for the Festival of Britain. Within the last decade the area's profile has been raised by the addition of such attractions as the London Eye, the Millennium Bridge, The Tate Modern and Shakespeare's Globe. The distance from Waterloo station, where we begin our journey, to the new Globe Theatre is less than a mile, but it's crowded with culture. Here are some of the highlights:



to **BANKSIDE**



## 1 The London Eye

**Marks Barfield, 2000**

Standing 135 metres high, the London Eye is the world's largest Ferris wheel, and was recently voted London's favorite tourist attraction. Built as the centerpiece for the city's Millennium celebrations, all the different parts that make up the London Eye were brought down the Thames before being assembled by a massive floating crane. The Eye's popularity was so instantaneous, and today it's hard to imagine the London skyline without it and easy to forget that it wasn't always there. On a clear day, from one of its thirty-two glass observation pods you can see 25 miles over the city.

## 2 Royal Festival Hall

**Robert Matthew, Leslie Martin, 1948-51**

The Royal Festival Hall is the only permanent legacy of the 1951 Festival Of Britain. Designed in a 'Modernist' style with glazed screens and Portland Stone facings, with a green roof of weather-exposed copper, it is the first post-war building to receive a Grade 1 listing. Inside, the auditorium is built high on the upper floors, insulated from the sounds of nearby Waterloo station, while beneath there are galleries, restaurants, shops, cafés and performance areas.

## 3 National Film Theatre

**Leslie Martin, Hubert Bennett, 1956-58**

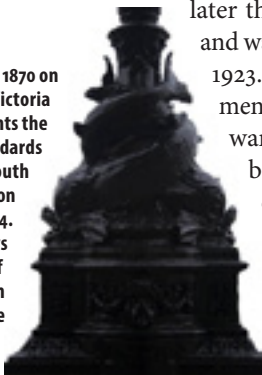
Tucked beneath the arches of Waterloo Bridge, the NFT owes its origins to the 1951 Festival of Britain and the 'Télekinema,' a purpose-built cinema designed to celebrate British film-making and technology. The Télekinema was never intended to be a permanent exhibition, but its popularity led to the National Film Theatre opening in 1957. Initially containing only one cinema, a second was added in 1970. The London Film Festival is held in November each year.

## 4 Waterloo Bridge

**Giles Gilbert Scott, 1937-45**

Originally called the Strand Bridge, in 1817 it was re-named 'Waterloo Bridge' to commemorate Wellington's victory over Napoleon. A century later the bridge was suffering from neglect and was deemed beyond repair and closed in 1923. Work eventually began on a replacement in 1939 and continued throughout the war with mostly female labour. The new bridge was even built with demolition chambers, in case of enemy invasion, though it was nearly demolished in a more direct fashion, several times being damaged by German V2 rockets.

First erected in 1870 on the Albert and Victoria Embankments the sturgeon lampstandards were added to the South Bank by the London County Council in 1964. Each base displays either the date of construction or an inscription to the Queen.



## 5 Hayward Gallery

**Hubert Bennet, Jack Whittle, 1963-68**

Named after Sir Isaac Hayward (leader of the London County Council), the Gallery is one of London's main venues for large art exhibitions. It is considered a classic example of sixties 'brutalist' architecture: reinforced concrete following strong horizontal lines with the top two of its three levels accessible from the pedestrian walkways that traverse the area. The little pyramids that crown the building are skylights for the upper gallery. The Hayward Gallery has the largest and most versatile public art exhibition space in Britain allowing it to present work of international stature from modern masters to the latest names in contemporary art. This diversity is also seen outside the building, whose concrete slopes have for decades been a Mecca for skateboarders.



## 6 Royal National Theatre

**Denys Lasdun, 1969-76**

Despite its weathered concrete, car-park like appearance, and the labyrinthine confusion of its interior, you have to love the National Theatre. Not least because you can see fantastic theater with world-class actors for little more than the price of a movie. The building is a controversial 'Modernist' design of reinforced concrete and brutal horizontal lines. The National Theatre opened in 1976, after more than a century of planning and preparation. Having spent fourteen years residing in the Old Vic, the National Theatre company moved into the unfinished building to open up the three theatres: Lyttelton, Olivier, and Cottesloe.

## 7 Oxo Tower Wharf

**Oxo Tower: A W Moore, 1928**

**Oxo Tower Wharf: Liftschutz Davidson, 1995**

Built as a power station, the Wharf was acquired in the 1920s by the Liebig Extract of Meat Company, manufacturers of Oxo beef stock cubes. The building was largely rebuilt to an Art Deco design by company architect Albert Moore. Liebig wanted to include a tower featuring illuminated signs advertising their product. When permission for the advertising was refused the tower was built with four sets of three vertically-aligned windows, "coincidentally" happened to be in the shapes of a circle, a cross and a circle spelling 'OXO'.

By the 1970s the building was an empty shell. Over the next two decades proposals to demolish the building were met with strong local opposition. Ultimately the tower and adjoining land were sold to the GLC in 1984 for £2.7 million — who controversially sold the entire 13 acre (53,000 m<sup>2</sup>)



site to the not-for-profit Coin Street Community Builders for just £750,000. In the 1990s the tower was refurbished to a design by Liftschutz Davidson to include housing, a restaurant, shops and exhibition space. The tower won the Royal Fine Art Commission/BSkyB Building of the Year Award for Urban Regeneration in 1997.

### **Blackfriars Bridge**

**J. Cubitt, 1860-69**

Originally the William Pitt Bridge (after the Tory Prime Minister), the name proved so unpopular that it was renamed for the Dominican Monks that had settled in London in 1279. The bridge had nine elliptical arches of Portland Stone (you can see the designs on the walls of the southern underpass) and was rebuilt with five cast-iron arches on granite piers. All that now remains of the Blackfriars Rail Bridge are the red columns in the river and the brightly colored cast-iron insignia of the company: London, Chatham and Dover Railway.



### **Tate Modern**

**Giles Gilbert Scott, 1947-63**

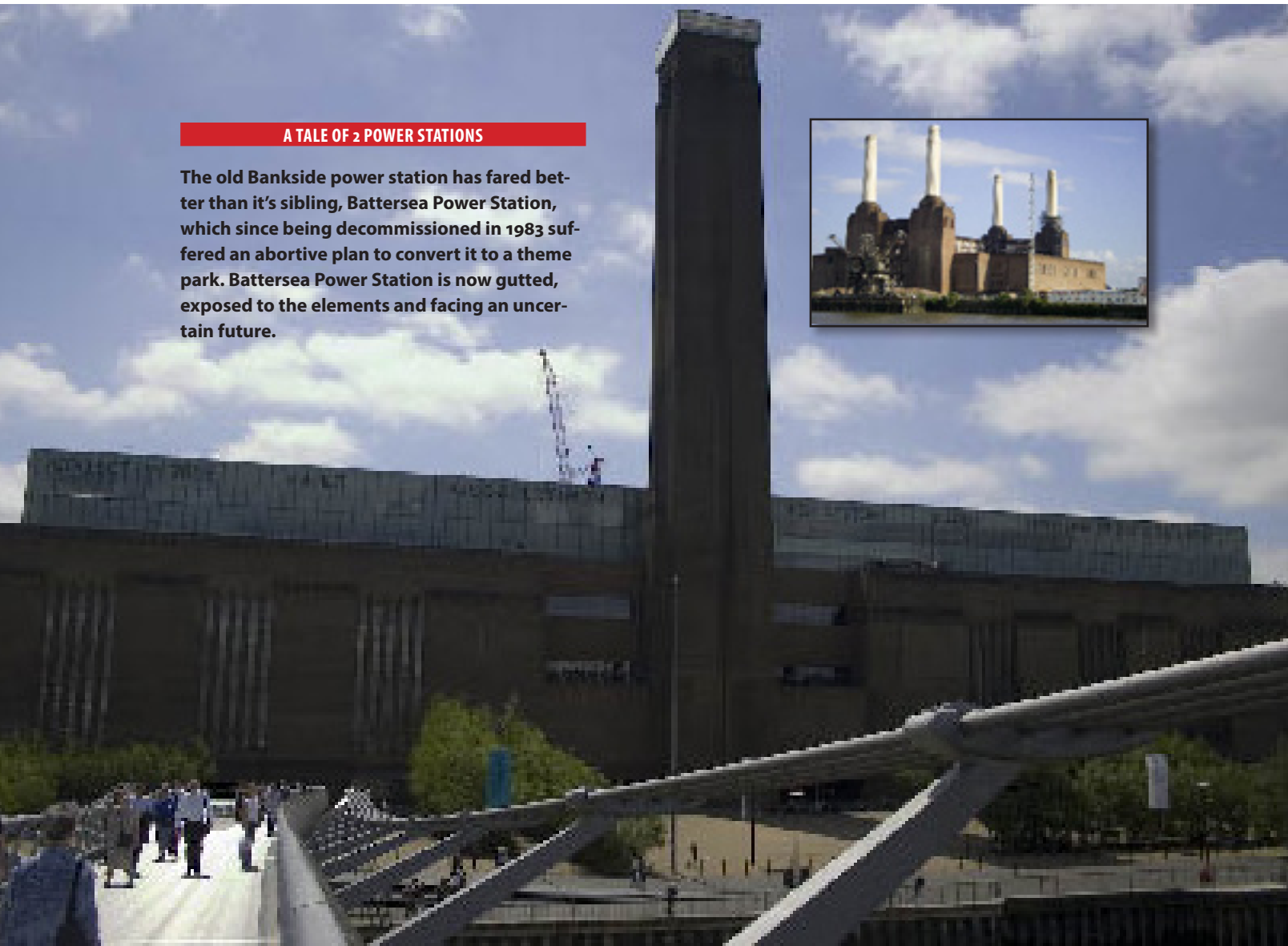
**Jacques Herzog and**

**Pierre de Meuron, 1995-2000**

The Tate Modern is now one of the most successful and popular art galleries in the world and London's most popular free tourist attraction. The building was originally Bankside Power Station, a monolithic steel construction of four million bricks and a 325ft chimney, which operated from 1952 until rising oil prices caused its closure in 1981. Bankside Power Station was originally designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, who also designed Battersea Power Station (and the red telephone box), and built in two stages between 1947 and 1963. The Tate Gallery acquired the site and, in 1995, began a process of demolition, preparation and conversion to transform the building into the new home for its modern art collection. The building was converted by architects Herzog & de Meuron. For illumination, the 'lightbeam' roof was added: a two-storey glass structure placed on top of the power station, flooding the upper floors with natural light and housing a café with spectacular views across the river.

#### **A TALE OF 2 POWER STATIONS**

The old Bankside power station has fared better than its sibling, Battersea Power Station, which since being decommissioned in 1983 suffered an abortive plan to convert it to a theme park. Battersea Power Station is now gutted, exposed to the elements and facing an uncertain future.





## **10 Shakespeare's Globe**

**Jon Greenfield, 1997**

This is a working reconstruction of the original playhouse used by Shakespeare four centuries ago and where, in the summer, you can see world class, open-air Shakespeare for as little as £5. The original Tudor playhouse was built in 1598, financed by a consortium that included William Shakespeare and was the venue of many of his theatrical works. The globe burnt down in 1613, and after its replacement was demolished by the Puritans in 1642 the site remained empty for the next three centuries. American director Sam Wanamaker began the project to re-create an accurate, functioning reconstruction of the Globe. The new Globe was built using contemporary craftsmen's techniques and features the first thatched roof London has seen since the Great Fire of 1666. In fact, the only concessions to the twenty-first century are the sprinkler system and the optional cushions you can buy to sit on during a performance.

## **11 Millennium Bridge**

**Foster And Partners, Anthony Caro, Arup, 2000-01**

The first completely new pedestrian bridge to be built over the Thames for a hundred years, the Millennium Bridge is a combination of art, design

and technology. The three main contributors: engineer, architect and sculptor, designed the bridge to be streamlined, using an innovative and complex structure to achieve a simple form: a shallow suspension bridge that spans the river as an 'elegant blade.' The bridge was opened on June 10, 2000 (2 months late) and became the butt of many a joke when it closed two days later due to unexpected lateral vibrations. The movements were produced by the sheer numbers of pedestrians (90,000 users in the first day, with up to 2,000 on the bridge at any one time). The initial small vibrations encouraged the users to walk in synchronisation with the sway, increasing the effect. This swaying motion earned it the nickname the Wobbly Bridge. After the installation of a 'passive dampening solution' and a period of testing the bridge was successfully re-opened on February 22, 2002. If you still have the energy you can cross the Millennium Bridge to St.Paul's and explore a whole different part of the city. But that's another story.