OCKENDEN - WOKING'S FESTIVAL OF BRITISHNESS
Iain Wakeford 2017

After the Second World War, in an effort to divert attention away from austerity and the woes of the war-years, and as a way of focusing on promoting the country, it was decided to celebrate the centenary of the 'Great Exhibition' of 1851 with a 'Festival of Britain' in 1951.

This was not to be some extravagant 'World Fair' (nor even a Commonwealth one), but was to totally focus on Great Britain, with the main site on the South Bank in London celebrating and promoting British science, technology, industry, arts and architecture -including the 'Dome of Discovery', the 'Skylon' and the ultra-modern Royal Festival Hall.

Hundreds of thousands of people flocked to London to see the main festival events, with no doubt many from Woking taking advantage of the fact that the exhibition was right on the doorstep of Waterloo - just over half-an-hours train-journey away from their comfortable little suburban homes.

I have in my archive the official programme, with the 'festival star' on the cover, kept by one local visitor to the South Bank that summer, but the exhibition was not the only event. Up and down the country other exhibitions and events instilled the much emphasized 'civic pride' that the festival was supposed engender.

The 'Industrial Power' exhibition in Glasgow, the 'Farm and Factory' display in Belfast, and the 'Pageant of Wales' in Cardiff were just some of the other events around the country, with a 'Festival Ship' visiting ports and a 'land travelling exhibition' touring to places like Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham.

But whilst most places stuck to the theme of an inward-looking 'Festival of Britain', there always has to be someone who bucks the trend and thinks 'outside the box'!

In Woking the council was persuaded to back a more outward-looking, humanitarian, 'event' showing that Woking was not just some parochial, conservative, little commuter-town, but a thriving liberal-minded community.

After visiting a displaced persons camp in Germany, a young Woking teacher, Joyce Pearce, and her friend Margaret Dixon (headmistress of Greenfields School), decided to try to give some of the teenage children a brief 'holiday' in Britain. With another teacher friend, Ruth Hicks (Joyce's cousin) they asked the parents of five Polish and Latvian girls for permission to bring them back to the Pearce family home at Ockenden in White Rose Lane.

Others soon followed, staying for longer than just a simple 'holiday', and with more local fundraising and support from the council and other influential people, the informal (almost family-run) initiative grew to become a
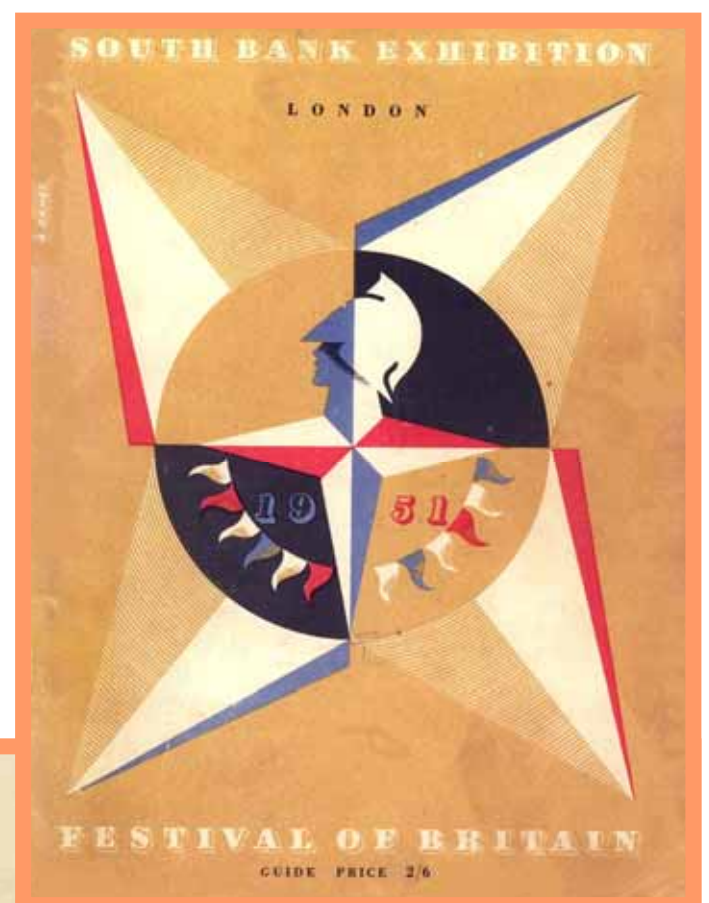
The Pearce family home in White Rose Lane gave its name to the International organisation that would give hope to thousands of people around the world.

registered charity eventually looking after refugee children from all over the world.

As well as housing and educating refugees in Woking (and elsewhere in this country) the Ockenden Venture (as it became known) was soon setting up schools for Tibetan refugees in India, sponsoring education for black children in apartheid South Africa; establishing vocational centres in the Sudan, Pakistan, Thailand and Cambodia; and providing shelter, training - but above all HOPE - for hundreds of thousands of displaced people around the world.

Bringing Biafran refugees to Britain and helping the Vietnamese boat people in the 1970's and 80's may have been some of the more high-profile humanitarian aid that they provided, but Ockenden International (as it eventually became known) did much more than that.

The Festival of Britain was designed to make people proud of our country – to emphasize what makes us 'Great Britain' – but surely there can be nothing greater than supporting others less fortunate than oneself, and from that point of view Woking's should be proud of the example it set in 1951.

Incidentally, supporting Ockenden was not the only thing Woking Council did for the Festival of Britain – they also made up the road by the Memorial Hall on St Johns Lye, naming it 'Festival Path' in recognition.

Local fundraising started the venture and helped it grow