

A Brief History of Fireworks in Britain

Britain has a long and proud fireworks tradition. Although many of us associate fireworks with 'Guy Fawkes' night on 5th November, historically they have been used for all manner of celebrations.

The earliest record of a major fireworks display in England was that presented to Queen Elizabeth I at Warwick Castle in 1572. The Monarch was evidently impressed by what she saw and more displays resulted, including two shows at Kenilworth Castle to celebrate her visit in 1575. These displays were a far cry from the kind of fireworks we see today and much less spectacular than the display staged for our present Queen to celebrate the Golden Jubilee.

The infamous 'gunpowder plot' took place in 1605, by which time fireworks were in general use, although relatively primitive. Gold and silver were the predominant effects and the introduction of colour into fireworks did not take place until many years later. The first display on the River Thames was in 1613 to celebrate the marriage of King James' daughter. The Thames is still a popular location for grand displays in the capital city and in recent years we have enjoyed wonderful shows to celebrate VJ Day and the dawn of the new Millennium.

In 1749 a grand fireworks display was planned for London's Green Park. It cost £14,500 (an enormous sum of money at the time) and took six months to plan. In those days, the fireworks show was presented as a theatrical performance, complete with a huge mock building called a 'Temple' as a backdrop. Handel's 'Music for the Royal Fireworks' was composed especially for the occasion. Half-way through the display the north wing of the 'Temple' caught fire and the entire show did not really live up to expectations. It was the last big display in London for many years.

The Brock family established themselves as leading firework makers in the early part of the nineteenth century. 'Brock's' are still remembered today as one of the great British Fireworks companies. The company gave regular shows at a number of 'pleasure gardens' and are perhaps most well known for their grand displays at the Crystal Palace, which began on July 12th, 1865, with a competition between British Firework makers. The event was a great success, attracting 20,000 spectators, and regular shows were staged there up to 1936, when the Crystal Palace was destroyed by fire. It is estimated that 2,000 displays were held at the site over a period of seventy years – attracting over 30 million visitors from all parts of the world.

Fireworks displays have also been used to celebrate the end of hostilities. The Great Peace Display in Hyde Park was one such show – it took place on July 19th 1919 after the end of World War I. In order that Their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary could see the fireworks, a special platform was erected on the highest part of the roof of Buckingham Palace. It was thought that this display attracted the largest crowd ever to be gathered for a single event.

A similar show was designed as a finale to the London Victory Celebrations on June 8th, 1946 – one of the greatest aerial displays ever seen in the Capital. Many hundreds of shells, from 5 inches to 20 inches in diameter lit up the sky, along with hundreds of rockets, roman candles and mines.

In the period immediately following World War II, grand displays were few and far between, although memorable shows were staged for Coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 and various Independence Celebrations around the Commonwealth. It was not until 1981 that another major display was staged for the wedding of Charles and Diana in Hyde Park.

One of the largest displays in recent years was that staged for the VJ Day Celebrations on The Thames in 1995; the display was a complex one involving several barges situated at strategic points along the river. The whole show was set to music and involved many months of planning prior to the final performance.

The Thames was again used to provide the backdrop for Britain's Millennium Celebrations on December 31st 1999. On this occasion, sixteen barges were involved with a vast quantity of aerial fireworks used to create a 'river of fire'. The project was so large that it involved collaboration between several well-known British fireworks companies.

2002 was also a 'vintage year' for fireworks, with many displays taking place to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee – the most memorable of which was staged at Buckingham Palace itself and witnessed by millions of people worldwide via television.

Fireworks have, for centuries, provided a spectacular medium for entertaining people of all ages. The combination of sound, colour and movement never fails to excite and thrill audiences and the promise of a good fireworks show will continue to attract people in their thousands. Long may this tradition continue.

Chris Pearce