

Responding to the drums of war 1914-1918



As the world remembers the hundredth anniversary of the First World War, it's timely to consider its impact on the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) and the Society's contribution to the national effort.

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When Prime Minister Andrew Fisher pledged Australia's support to Britain at the outbreak of war in August 1914, the Australian people responded enthusiastically. But in the offices of the RAS, where planning was beginning for next year's Sydney Royal Easter Show, no one quite knew what lay ahead. Would the Show continue? What role – if any – would the RAS play in helping the nation? Fortunately, the RAS could not have been in better shape to face the challenges. A decade of strong leadership had seen a doubling in revenue and membership, and Showground facilities had recently been upgraded with the building of new pavilions, grandstands, the Agricultural Hall and the Royal Hall of Industries. Further, the agricultural economy of New South Wales was correspondingly healthy with most sectors reporting big increases in production – all due in no small part to the encouragement and educative efforts of the RAS.

Keen to be of practical assistance, the RAS Council immediately offered full use of the Showground to the Defence Department, while

maintaining annual access for the period needed to hold the Show. All around Australia, country showgrounds were useful as recruitment points and camps, but the location, size and sophistication of the infrastructure of the Moore Park Showground made it a genuine military asset, ready for instant occupation.

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were to pass through the Showground during the four years of the war. Cavalry, artillery and transport units occupied different areas at different times and large numbers of army horses were stabled and broken in there. Men came from around the country for special courses or officer training. The vast majority of servicemen, however, were in transit, departing to or returning from battlefields. First to leave was an expeditionary force of 1,500 men who sailed from Sydney on 18 August, 1914, for Rabaul in German New Guinea. Their mission, to destroy German wireless stations, was Australia's first overseas operation of the war.

By 1915, large bodies of troops were regularly coming through the Showground from Queensland and the main NSW training camp at

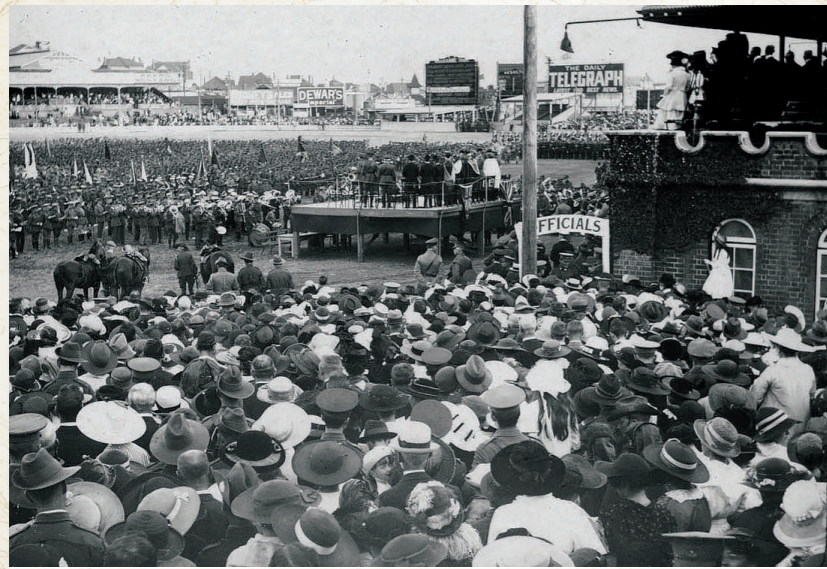
Liverpool. The Liverpool men often arrived the evening before embarkation whereupon the Showground would be opened up to relatives so they could picnic together in the grounds. Troops slept in the pavilions on clay floors with a waterproof sheet and a couple of blankets – luxurious conditions compared to those they were soon to encounter. From the Showground and another nearby barracks, the soldiers marched down Randwick Road to ships at Circular Quay. In March 1917, to honour that route and the permanent departure of so many, the name of the road was changed to Anzac Parade.

Wear and tear on Showground facilities was inevitable but the Defence Department and the RAS were on amicable terms and the only compensation requested was for wanton damage. Indeed, the RAS was proud of its patriotic contribution to the war effort and RAS President Samuel Hordern believed the RAS rendered greater service to the Defence Department than any other public institution in Australia.



Left: Private Leslie Cormick from the 4th Infantry Battalion of Ashfield, NSW, picnics with family members at Sydney Showground, 1914. Pte Cormick embarked on 2 October 1914 on HMAT Euripides. He was killed in action on 6 August 1915 at Lone Pine, Gallipoli, aged 30 (Australian War Memorial)
Right: A soldier standing on the carriage of an 18 pounder artillery piece, on a recruiting appeal at Sydney Showground (Australian War Memorial)

Below: Anzac Day service at Sydney Showground in 1917 (NSW State Archives)
 Right: Group portrait at Sydney Showground in 1917 of members of the 1st and 2nd Field Troops (engineers) prior to embarkation (Australian War Memorial)



IT IS SOBERING TO NOTE THAT JUST TWELVE DAYS AFTER THE GATES OF THE 1915 SHOW CLOSED, THE REALITY OF WAR SET IN FOR AUSTRALIA WITH THE LANDING OF TROOPS AT GALLIPOLI. SO MANY YOUNG MEN, WHO HAD SPENT THEIR LAST NIGHT IN AUSTRALIA SLEEPING UNDER THE CREAKING IRON ROOFS OF THE SHOWGROUND'S PAVILIONS, WOULD SLEEP FOREVER IN FOREIGN SOIL.



Hordern had taken over from Sir Francis Suttor who died suddenly during the 1915 Show. Suttor, an incisive and widely respected leader of the RAS, had expected financial losses and taken pre-emptive action, forming a committee to prune staff and other expenditure. Entries, attendances and receipts did fall at the 1915 Show but as it transpired this had more to do with the weather – a drought prior to the Show and the rain which broke it when the Show opened. Despite all this, the Show still made a good profit. Council eased belt tightening measures and finances remained healthy with each of the wartime Shows proving highly successful. The 1917 Show was even a record breaker. Electric lighting had been installed so the Show was able to open at night for the first time. This, and other improvements made by Council, demonstrates the continued autonomy of the RAS over the ground and the strength of its working relationship with authorities.

The effect of the war on the Show's staging was barely visible according to some visitors in 1915. 'You would never imagine after a good walk around that we are facing the biggest war in history. Here are all the signs of peace, progress and prosperity. There is no big shadow of war,' said the *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*. 'We are a great people. This great Show proves it. Calm, confident,

determined, we fight a big drought and help fight in the biggest war; in the midst of it all we hold our great Easter Show.'

But there were indicators. A huge model displayed by the Red Cross was particularly graphic – and popular. It showed the progress of a wounded man all the way from the trenches in France to a British military hospital in England. Many other stands for fundraising and other patriotic purposes dotted the grounds – all made available free of charge. Of course, the RAS was itself a generous donor and a big whack of each Show's proceeds went to patriotic funds. Office resources and the time of staff were also generously lent to war charities as required.

There was no denying one very visible sign of war – the men in uniform themselves, the 'tall, tanned lads from Liverpool and Holsworthy' whose leave permitted them to visit the Show. 'Some of these,' said one newspaper, 'turned with eager eyes and the loving familiarity of long usage to the displays of crops and cattle and home things. They were boys from the land. Many found things of absorbing interest in the Government agricultural display, for Hawkesbury College has sent, and is still sending, an enormous number of students to the front... As samples of men that the land can produce, the lads in khaki were the finest part of the whole Easter display and splendid models for the emulation of their countrymen.'

It is sobering to note that just twelve days after the gates of the 1915 Show closed, the reality of war set in for Australia with the landing of troops at Gallipoli. So many young men, who had spent their last night in Australia sleeping under the creaking iron roofs of the Showground's pavilions, would sleep forever in foreign soil.

As overseas news worsened it was only natural that not everyone approved of the Show continuing, but the vital role of the Show in promoting industry and agriculture was widely recognised. The RAS believed the Show was part of the national life of the country and for that reason alone should be defended. But further, the economics were clear – the bill for the war would have to be paid with wealth produced from the land, making the encouragement of every additional ounce of produce a matter of utmost importance.

As well as providing for our own needs, the British people 'at large' depended on rural Australia for supplies of food and clothing. Prices and yields for wheat and wool boomed, though labour shortages caused some problems. Demand for horses was huge. The government ordered a census of horse owners in 1914 in case horses had to be compulsorily acquired and the RAS urged breeders to improve the quality and quantity of stock, noting that the average life of a horse on the front in France was

three weeks. In all 136,000 'walers' (the general name given to Australian war horses, as in 'New South Walers') were sent overseas. Only one returned.

Light horsemen on recruiting drives were regular visitors at wartime Shows. They paraded as part of the ring program, each leading a spare horse with an empty saddle for someone out of the crowd to fill. At a special stand recruiting officers gave stirring speeches, and on a good day, thirty or more showgoers may have been persuaded. Country boys were assured they could finish their holiday in town before going off to camp. Items with a military flavour were added to ring programs to further boost patriotic pride.

Out of Showtime, the RAS made the Showground available for fundraising events and, significantly, it was the focus of Sydney's 1917 commemoration of Anzac Day. A crowd of 25,000 attended this truly sombre occasion. A military procession including returned soldiers passed through city streets to the Showground, however, the cheering which accompanied them dropped away as they marched through the gates of the Main Arena. 'The great stands encircling the ring, built to contain cheering gay-clad throngs, pulsating with the excitement of stirring ring events, were yesterday filled with throngs just as great, but now silent with the emotion of deep

and common grief,' wrote *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 'It struck one, with heart-rendering force, to observe how the customary colour had departed from within the frames of the wide stands, to be replaced by serried and almost unbroken lines of black, relieved by the white of men's shirts and trembling handkerchiefs in the hands of quietly sobbing women.'

By now, so many Australians had been personally touched by war. 'The combined commemorative service was a scene such as few cities witness in their history,' said the paper, 'certainly few cities in a land so young.'

In their allotted areas of the grandstand and on the lawn that day, how many RAS members and staff mourned themselves for sons and brothers lost or maimed on the battlefield? To have stood there in the midst of that raw outpouring of massed grief must have been extraordinary. April 25, 1917, must surely stand as the saddest day ever in the history of the RAS.

We may never know how many members of the RAS and its personnel served in the war, though efforts are being made to try and find out. What is certain is that the RAS was deprived of many future members – young country lads who for one reason or another would never return to a life on the land.

By 1918, the nation was war-worn. RAS President Samuel Hordern was not optimistic as the Show approached. It seemed inevitable that revenue

would go backwards, but amazingly, business turned out to be brisk – a tribute, he said, to the stability and popularity of the RAS. The Show was obviously a much-needed distraction.

When the war finally ended, the RAS assessed its position to find the news was good. Membership had not only recovered but reached new levels, and finances were better than ever. It seemed nothing would hamper the growth of the Show and planning began for a bonanza Jubilee Show in 1919. It was not to be. Three weeks before the Show opened, it was cancelled. The Spanish influenza had been brought back with returning soldiers causing a deadly epidemic. Not war, but war's aftermath had stopped the Show.

In retrospect, the years of the First World War were bitter sweet for the RAS. On so many levels the organisation had been successful, indeed, never more so. Strong and proactive, it had provided a key military asset in the Showground and vigorously supported the home effort, whilst remaining true to its traditional role of pursuing agricultural improvement. The RAS had served well. But the memory of Anzac Day 1917 must have been hard to erase. So many broken hearts in the ring, where daring feats of horsemanship and friendly competition should rightly play. For some, the ring would be forever haunted.

Let us forget. ■