



OPPOSITE: MOUNTED POLICE PARADE AT THE MOORE PARK SHOWGROUND. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: 'SEE YOU AT HOME BUSH'; STREET ENTERTAINERS; ARTHUR BRAGG COLLECTS SOIL TO BE PLANTED IN THE NEW MAIN ARENA.

The last blast

Twenty years ago the gates closed on the last Show at the Moore Park Showground. An exciting new era was about to begin, but the farewell to the old stomping ground was emotional, with over a million visitors turning up to say a fond goodbye.

At the makeshift mini-city of the Moore Park Showground in 1997, nostalgia reigned. 'Thanks for the memories', said the sign on the iconic Members' Stand clock tower. And in Sideshow Alley, the Headless Girl made a return, a symbol of all the old time scams, once so irresistible to the young and gullible. Show organisers, determined to hold a party and not a wake, encouraged everyone to attend.

'We're moving to greener pastures next year,' said the public invitations, illustrated with the pretty face of a cow. 'Come and help us farewell the Moore Park Showground.' The people of New South Wales responded in droves, arriving in numbers unprecedented in modern times, challenging the all-time attendance record of 1.232 million, set in 1947. With an extra two days added to the schedule to make a sixteen day

Show, there was plenty of room for all. The patch of ground they came to celebrate was originally regarded as unpromising. Leased by the Agricultural Society of NSW in 1881, it was ten hectares of sand and rock covered in low scrub, a twenty minute ride from the city by steam tram at best. Previously the Show had been held at Prince Alfred Park (1869-1881), and before that Parramatta (1823-1867), but tangled finances and lack of control over

the Prince Alfred site pushed the Society to look for a year-round home where activities could be expanded.

Society committee members pitched in to supervise works, building livestock sheds and a large ring in time for the inaugural Moore Park Show in 1882. This was the first in the Society's history to be held over the Easter break.

Bit by bit the new place came into its character, evolving over 115 years from scrubby vacant lot to magical hub as it changed to suit the social, economic and agricultural needs of each decade.

The Show has always been about the latest thing as much as the ritual playing out of traditions, and for all its focus on nostalgia, the 1997 Show was no exception. Sushi was available at food outlets (which helpfully displayed signs explaining what it was); and the Show went live on the internet for the first time. (A camera at the Showground could be remotely controlled by anyone at home with dial-up internet who knew enough to negotiate their way through a Microsoft hosted website.) And to help explain the future of the Show, a big

The Show has always been about the latest thing as much as the ritual playing out of traditions, and for all its focus on nostalgia, the 1997 Show was no exception.

display mounted in the Government Pavilion told people what to expect at the new location at Homebush Bay in terms of transport, facilities and how venues would be used during the upcoming Olympic Games.

THE BIG GIG

A theme of joyous, razzle-dazzle ran through the last Moore Park Show, and for the admission price of \$14 for adults

and \$7 for children, visitors were treated to non-stop entertainment throughout the day, all around the ground. Bootscoters doing the Macarena vied for attention with Humphrey B. Bear, the Snake Man, the Android Sisters and countless bands. In the evening in the Main Arena, the *Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth* featured some of the Show's all-time favourite acts, while the fireworks display popped and glittered on double the usual scale.



CANDLES FLICKER ON THE LAST NIGHT OF THE 1997 SHOW. LEFT: THE MOORE PARK CARNIVAL FROM ABOVE.

A simple ceremony started official proceedings, with the President of the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW, Arthur Bragg, kneeling to the turf to collect up soil from the arena.

The last night of all was an absolutely unforgettable occasion, not least because the Aussie rock band Silverchair played, drawing people into the arena from all over the ground. To accommodate the crush, gates to the Member's Stand were opened to the public for the first and only time in the Show's history.

A simple ceremony started official proceedings, with the President of the Royal Agriculture Society of NSW (RAS), Arthur Bragg, kneeling to the turf to collect up soil from the arena. To RAS Members, long-time competitors and Show-tragics alike, this symbolic act meant so much. A little piece of the hallowed ground would go to Homebush

to mix with the dirt there, every grain a memory of the many who had strived, won and lost, broken bones, thrilled and entertained whatever the weather – sun, wind or rain. Mounted Police riding with Army Light Horsemen then performed a specially choreographed Musical Ride, with Commander Don Eyb giving a salute under spotlight, before turning his horse to exit the ring for the very last time.

Fireworks signalled the arrival of a silver Rolls Royce and out stepped super-sized singer, Su Cruickshank, a vision of purple sequins. The much loved and respected personality moved the whole arena to tears with her

rendition of 'The Carnival is Over'. Stadium lights went out and 10,000 candles distributed to the audience flickered in the dark. A lone piper took his place and began to play, his climbing lament the final goodbye.

HEAD AND HEART

The decision to move from Moore Park had been controversial, and for some people the practical issues were understandably hard to separate from the personal. For those with long and clannish associations with the place, the wrench was highly emotional. It meant leaving a part of themselves or their family's history behind – sometimes literally. More than one urn-full of cremated ashes had lovingly been scattered, unofficially, over that ground.

The case to move was, however, compelling, and in the end all but the most rusted-on came to concede change was necessary. Adaptable as Moore Park had been, it had run out of incarnations.

Ironically many of the things people loved about the place became its inconveniences and contributed to its downfall. The Show's proximity to the city caused traffic chaos and disruptions to residents; and its countless higgledy-piggledy buildings, all with different maintenance issues, had fallen into disrepair. Few of them functioned efficiently. Even the beloved Main Arena needed an upgrade to replace rustic and uncomfortable stands. The site was a rabbit warren, in parts unsafe. There was no space to expand. To turn the Showground into a thoroughly modern facility might cost anything up to a quarter of a billion dollars.

The opportunity to piggyback onto the Olympic Games build, securing government assistance for a purpose-designed showground, was too good to turn down. The deal guaranteed the future of the RAS and the Sydney Royal Easter Show for another century, but importantly it also safeguarded the Society's past. All the significant historic

The opportunity to piggyback onto the Olympic Games build, securing government assistance for a purpose-designed showground, was too good to turn down.

features of the old ground would be preserved by new occupant, Fox Studios.

THAT'S A WRAP

The longest running Show in our history had been physically and mentally exhausting for exhibitors and organisers, and no one would have been surprised if parties behind closed gates on the final night turned rowdy. But show people did what show people do – they packed up and moved on. It was habit, but there was also some urgency. Souvenir hunters were a major concern. Extra security had been put on, but it was hard to stop the sentimental or opportunistic swiping of mementoes. RAS staff in each section

worked especially hard that night, securing everything of importance. And it helped to make a start. After more than a century at Moore Park, the RAS had only two weeks to vacate the premises.

Visitors to the 1997 Show were invited to sign a commemorative register, now held in the Heritage Centre at the RAS. Thousands put their names to it, recording their presence and their memories... so many good old memories. But it was time to move on and make new ones.

Once again the people of New South Wales rose to the occasion. Curiosity called them out and the following year they poured into the new Showground at Sydney Olympic Park.

A new party had begun. ■