

Movable Beasts

The Grand Parade is more than a tradition – it's a metaphor for the collective memory of the RAS. With its intricate choreography, it's a dance to the music of time.



It had to be filmed. No one quite knew how it worked: it just did. Everyone knew their order, movements and positions; old stewards told new stewards what to do, where to be; inexperienced exhibitors followed the example of their more experienced peers. And it worked.

Since 1907, in the spectacle known as the Grand Parade, upwards of 900 animals and their handlers wove their serpentine way around the arena at the old Moore Park Showground on the majority of days at each Show. When the time came for the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) to move to Sydney Olympic Park, the mechanics of the Parade had to be understood before it could be successfully transferred. What exactly were the patterns that needed replication? On the new, smaller arena, old markers would be gone and ancient routines would be useless. Behind the scenes the marshalling spaces would be vastly different. Livestock and their handlers would need to enter from new directions and still be in order. Would everyone fit?

Ringmaster Lorange Angus oversaw the transition, and filming the Parade was a first step in his forensic analysis of

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the complex pageant, which had otherwise simply evolved.

If the Grand Parade was a mystery to people who'd grown up with it, it's not surprising that modern audiences have plenty of questions.

HOW DID IT BEGIN?

Before 1907 animals were paraded separately on different days, but in 1906 the Society appointed a new secretary, H. M. Somer, and it was probably his idea to combine the parades into one big affair. Somer was a brilliant organiser with an eye for the modern. Arena crowds immediately took to the new spectacle, thirty to forty thousand people crammed in to view it. Newspapers described it as a 'noble' scene of animation and beauty, with not only fine stock but 'up-to-date vehicles and appliances' to be seen. The vintage horse-drawn vehicles in the Grand Parade is a novelty today, but back then

this was a chance to admire current transport options and all types of city horses. 'In a small compass,' it was said, the new parade 'depicted the wonderful resources of the State from a general standpoint.' And it was this that gave it its great appeal. With Federation only just achieved, this was a time of nation building and pride. There, in the main arena, our natural wealth, with its promise of further prosperity, was on full display. It was also a sign of the RAS coming of age. Now thoroughly settled into the Moore Park site and confident of its important social and economic role, it visibly flexed its muscle.

A PARADE OF CHAMPIONS?

The Grand Parade is often called a Parade of Champions, yet visitors can be puzzled to see that not every beast wears a ribbon. While the event has always been framed as a special celebration of winners, the Parade aims to include as many of the animals



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present at the Showground as possible. Over the years, goats, pigs, dogs, sheep, alpacas and others have appeared, but horses and cattle are the mainstays, and for competitors in those sections especially, attendance is compulsory. Some human competitors, like the Rural Achievers and Showgirls, are also expected to join in.

Originally all judging was completed on the first day of the Show, so every winner could be seen in the first Grand Parade and all Parades thereafter. Now judging takes place throughout the Show, with some competitions occurring in different weeks, as is the case with beef and dairy cattle. As a consequence, animals are constantly coming and going from the Showground.

Some of the participants in Parades may not even have exhibited yet.

This can make people reluctant to attend because competition gear might get dirtied before judging, or animals may get kicked or injured in the milling

around. It's an old grumble – first recorded in 1908 when a large number of exhibitors failed to bring their charges into the ring, because it was 'too much trouble'. Hence the tough stance of Councillors and stewards ever since.

In the past, plenty of bellowing went on to maintain strict standards of behaviour and dress, and out in the ring, stragglers would be smartly chipped. In recent decades, kindly Greencoats with pockets full of Minties found bribery a more effective approach with the kids. These days a relaxed approach is taken, but organisers still strive for pride in appearance and precision in movement.

"A major part of what we do at the Show is to link the country to the city, and the Grand Parade is a very big way we do that," says the current ringmaster, John Bennett.

It's got to look good. That's why participation is a condition of entry into competitions.

"If you're someone who thinks you don't want to go in the Grand Parade, then our Show is not for you. That's how we see it. And that's the fairest way for it to be. But I can tell you, when I'm there in the arena, by far the majority of the faces I see out there have got the widest smiles ever."

The mounted Greencoats are highly experienced and quick to look after any unsettled animals, but as John points out, injuries are extremely rare. "The majority of our animals, being herd animals, they're actually far more relaxed in a large environment amongst lots of their own kind than they are in a stable or tied up on their own."

DO THE PATTERNS EVER CHANGE?

By 1915, complex patterning was already established, with the scene described as a 'colour-splashed Catherine wheel, a quarter of a mile in diameter.' Over ensuing decades the circles within circles became entrenched and rarely changed, with the notable exception of the 1932 Show. That year, cattle in the Parade took on the shape of the Sydney Harbour Bridge to mark its opening.

It was a bigger gesture than most would



realise. The Parade is a huge jigsaw that fits just so. Even the smallest change can have unforeseen knock-on effects that are widespread. John Bennett consults his predecessors Bill Picken and Lorange Angus before making any adjustment.

"I've learnt never to think, oh, if I change this or that, that would make things easier. Quite often it absolutely does not."

John also relies on the two men to critique the execution of each Parade. Up in the stands, they have an overview not available to John, who rides in the middle of the throng.

Only once during the whole production does the movement come to a stop, and even this pause has a long tradition. At a certain point, the Ringmaster blows a whistle for all to halt – it's a photo opportunity for the crowd, and goes back to the days of box Brownie cameras when moving subjects would not be in focus.

Ironically one of the main reasons why a little untidiness is creeping into the Parade is that participants are distracted, taking and posting snaps of themselves on their mobile phone while the animals they're riding or leading wander off line. John says he's constantly being asked to pick up dropped phones, a request that

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would have had ringmasters of yore roaring. But the more adventurous horsey kids of every generation have always liked to see how much disruption they could get away with, making mischief with the patterns by cutting in and out of circles is almost a rite of passage.

HOW MANY ARE THERE?

The Parade is intricate enough by itself, but it operates within a broader context, fitting in with other activities around the Showground. Streets inside the ground must be closed off so the Parade can assemble then disperse; crowds must be turned away from large areas. This causes heavy flows in other zones, which also has consequences, not just for visitors, but for other competitions.

For these scheduling reasons, and to make sure there are enough participants in a Parade to keep it looking magnificent,

only three Parades are held during each Show. The first Grand Parade takes place straight after the official opening; the second occurs just prior to the Easter weekend, while the third happens during it. It can be held at lunchtime, or in the afternoon or at night, but the timing is contingent on many things, not least the comfort of the animals.

IS IT UNIQUE?

The Grand Parade at the Show was the first in Australia, but the idea soon spread. People overseas have also tried to reproduce the spectacle, but without that ingrained tradition of participation, they fail to muster the sheer number of exhibits Sydney boasts.

The Grand Parade is a vision splendid, symbolising everything the RAS stands for. In its beautiful clockwork is a timeless coming together. ■