

Shopping up big at the Show



Left: Commercial exhibit displays, including Hoover and Kelvinator, at the 1957 Show

Right: A farm machinery commercial exhibit at the 1959 Show

Right below: Easter Monday crowds at the 1939 Show



By the 1860s, when the Show had moved to the city, shops and shopping were undergoing a radical change, thanks to gold rush prosperity and the innovations of gas lighting and plate-glass. Passersby might now pause on the street to admire goods attractively arrayed; window shopping had arrived. The notion of shopping as a pastime or entertainment, once an indulgence of the wealthy only, became open to all, as was the temptation to impulse buy.

Nowhere were goods more invitingly presented and on such a grand scale, than in the

Agricultural Society's elegant new exhibition hall at Prince Alfred Park. Country and city people alike flocked to the annual Metropolitan Intercolonial Exhibition, as the Show was then named, where products of all kinds from around the country could be seen. Here was visible proof of our resourcefulness, inventiveness and self-sufficiency, and it engendered feelings of national pride.

Demand for commercial space became an annual clamour as the Society, now the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales (RAS),

moved again and set about developing the Moore Park Showground. A forest of windmills and shanties rose up around Machinery Avenue where the hardware of farm equipment, building supplies and vehicles was mostly located.

As the 1906 RAS Annual pointed out, those that benefited most commercially by the Show were the manufacturers and agents of the hundred and one articles in daily use by the man on the land. It was the salesman's harvest time, and immense business was done. Said the Annual:

Think what it would cost the 'machinery man' to secure and retain the attention of, say, 50,000 men directly interested in the lines he is showing, and each many the 'very individual' he is most concerned in reaching. What would it spell in expenditure of hard cash to send his representative to wait on each one of these singly, or even in groups...?

Not only was the target market concentrated, there was another advantage. At Showtime the attention of each potential customer is 'freshened and sharpened by contact at the Show with his fellows...when he is realising most keenly that success in the race and in his fight with nature means of necessity being equipped with the most modern and up-to-date weapons in the shape of machinery and appliances.'

But it wasn't only the farmer who was in the mood to shop – so was his wife. The annual trip to the city was a good opportunity to choose furnishings or freshen up the wardrobe. It was a chance to buy up big and make decisions in person, instead of from catalogues.

Sydney retailers advertised heavily in



We came, we saw, we bought. How could we not take advantage of the great annual marketplace which was, and always will be, an intrinsic part of the Show?

WORDS: **VICKI HASTRICH**

The Beatson cultivator looks a rickety thing. Hard to believe it was ever the latest in technology. But so it was, one hundred and ninety years ago, when Edward Wollstonecraft presented a model of it to the fledgling Agricultural Society of New South Wales on the day of its first Show at Parramatta Park. The cultivator, invented by an ex-British governor of Malta, was newly in use in America and mentioned in the most up-to-date overseas publications about agriculture. Wollstonecraft explained its workings: lightness was its great advantage, producing savings in horse power, but on the downside, this meant repeat application was necessary. Not such a problem, perhaps, for those with convict servants. How the assembled must have hummed and hawed

over that implement, wondering whether to invest. Showgoers have been doing the same ever since, marvelling over the million and one products and ideas on display – and for sale.

This year, commercial exhibitors will occupy nearly 150,000sqm of exhibition space, accounting for a mighty chunk of the half a billion dollars that the Show contributes to the economy of New South Wales annually. One in four visitors to the Show will arrive with the intention of shopping. It may be surprising, but there's actually nothing new in these figures; proportionally they're almost the same as those estimated over a century ago when the Society first tried to quantify direct and indirect commercial benefits. The Show hasn't gone commercial; it has always had close commercial ties.

From the outset, in its prospectus, the Agricultural Society of New South Wales recognised the need to encourage the development of innovative and locally made tools and 'any other Articles tending to the improvement of Agriculture', setting aside space for demonstrations and soon after awarding the best with prizes. Displays of farm machinery and practical products grew, for wherever people gather, merchants follow.

In the emerging colonial economy, all branches of industry were so closely allied to agriculture that the health of one was dependent on the other. Recognising this, the Society supported an ever broadening range of manufacturers, retailers and service providers who wished to exhibit.

Right: Commercial exhibits at the 1957 Show
 Below: A commercial car exhibit at the 1959 Show
 Far right: Easy Washing Machines exhibit at the 1957 Show



newspapers prior to Show week and many cannily set up outlets on the Showground, hoping to capture sales before patrons took their holiday money to stores in town. Businesses even built their own permanent premises, and early on it was noted that the Show resembled a tiny town. That aesthetic of a jumbled, energetic world in miniature remained a key factor in the appeal of Moore Park.

All the biggest companies had a presence at the Show at various times, but none was more committed than Anthony Hordern & Sons. Beginning with a substantial tent in the 1890s, the retailer progressed to its own large and

stylish building, constructed in 1924 at a cost of £15,000. On top was a tower, 117 feet high, which acted like a beacon. Inside, stock valued at over £30,000 was arranged around a central dome supported by corinthian columns. The store opened at 8.30 am so customers could get their shopping done before Show activities started, thus making the most of the day. Many practical articles were on sale like saddlery, paints and work clothes, but the impressive range included such diverse items as electrical goods, modern office furniture and pet toys. Luxury was conspicuous. One year a camping scene was prominent, with grass and trees, a



tent, a beautifully adorned picnic table and a five seater car. At Anthony Hordern & Sons it was well understood that the best way to sell anything was to first sell a dream.

This building was not to be confused with the Hordern Pavilion, which opened the same year but was erected by the RAS to provide much needed additional exhibition space. Electric lights, wireless broadcasting and the latest motor cars were among the first exhibits, all celebrating the progress of industry and technology.

Elaborately decorated stands continued to fill the Royal Hall of Industries, through which crowds had surged since 1913, though now people paid a small premium for some of the bags of free products collected along the way. Sample bags, or show bags as they became known, were an Easter Show retailing invention; a sure-fire way of attracting the attention of patrons.

Two new pavilions, the Manufacturers Hall and the Commemorative Pavilion were constructed in 1938 to celebrate the sesquicentenary of Australian settlement. The structures themselves demonstrated advances in technology, with huge truss arches providing a vast open interior, and a wealth of art-deco detail in keeping with the fashion. Australian made products featured in one, while the other housed Empire-wide products. For the first time a million people came through the gates – a figure reached and surpassed at every post-war Show until 1972. Modern Australia was burgeoning and consumers were confident a comfortable life, filled with ease and plenty, was within everyone's reach. "See it at the Show!" screamed advertisements for everything from dishwashers to elbow length evening gloves to television sets. Agricultural lines continued to feature,

but across the nation, field days emerged as an alternative marketplace, and the big gear like tractors and harvesters gradually disappeared from the Show.

At Sydney Olympic Park, the effort to keep the commercial side of the Show entertaining and educational continued. The drive now is to make the pavilions into distinct destinations where the visitor can enjoy a mix of themed experiences. For instance, the Woolworths Fresh Food Dome is all about food: the visual treat of the District Exhibits, cooking lessons in the demonstration kitchen, the oyster farming display, the chance to see honey being extracted from a hive – and yes, the opportunity to try and buy quality gourmet produce.

Internet shopping may have affected traditional retailing, but it hasn't dented retail interest at the Show. Quite the opposite. Turns out we're just

like our catalogue shopping grandparents; we still enjoy seeing the real thing – and the latest thing – in the collective and festive atmosphere of the Show. For vendors it's a chance to have a shopfront without a 365 day commitment, and meet customers personally. With 900,000 potential customers filing by, it's as good an opportunity as it ever was to be highly visible to a lot of people in a short space of time. And with effective data collection, business continues in indirect sales long after the Show is over.

The contract between agriculture and commerce at the Show may have been updated over the years, but it hasn't changed all that much in its underlying fundamentals. Just like those very first Showgoers standing around the Beatson cultivator, it's still about seeing the new – seeing better ways of doing things – and seeing it in company together. ■

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