

*What do showbags and Victa lawnmowers have in common?
Both are great Australian inventions.*

Left: Volunteers enjoy the anniversary BBQ in Sydney Showgrounds Main Arena

The Show's in the bag

WORDS: VICKI HASTRICH
PHOTOGRAPHY: ASHLEY MACKEVICIUS



Last year, Show patrons walked out of the Showbag Pavilion at Sydney Showground clutching over 1.6 million showbags, proving the allure of the showbag is undiminished. With numbers like that you'd be forgiven for presuming the concept would have long ago gone global but, despite recent export initiatives, the showbag has largely remained an Aussie phenomenon.

Every year they get bigger and better but our modern-day bags have humble origins, stretching back a century to a time when local manufacturing industries were almost a novelty in themselves. The goods they made promised the dawning of a confident and glamorous new era – the age of modernity.

Picture the new Royal Hall of Industries when it opened for the 1913 Show. It replaced the old Industrial pavilion and was the most imposing building on the previous Easter Show site at Moore Park. Built in red brick in Edwardian style, it was bigger than anything of its kind in the state and boasted domed towers, cathedral windows, classical pilasters and a vaulted ceiling. Flags and bunting festooned the interior and a mad symphony of competing sounds greeted the visitor: exhibitors spruiked the virtues of their products, gramophone music warbled, the shuffling crowd marvelled and buzzed.

In this Mecca of merchandising products like pianolas and car tyres, the Pathe Home cinematograph and vacuum cleaners and typewriters showed the direction the new century was heading. The mass produced and the more prosaic competed alongside: paints and floor polish, soaps and oils, biscuits and sweets and sauces. For many businesses the Show was the biggest advertising splash of the year and converting lookers into buyers was imperative. Attractive – even elaborate – stands and smartly uniformed sales attendants helped grab attention but nothing worked so well as the free giveaway.

The first free samples were probably homely, like the sugar cane sticks which were given to children at the Brisbane Ekka from 1876 until the 1960s. By 1900 a sophisticated, sales-orientated approach was already in place in Sydney. It was

Remember these Showbag favourites?

| 1930-50s | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s |
|----------|-------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Example | Giant Licorice | Allen's | Samboy |
| Example | Nock and Kirby's | Twisties | Pac-Man |
| Example | Life Savers | Pepsi Cola | Scooby Doo |
| Example | Bank of New South Wales | Pez International | Jaffa |



reported that 'confirmed bachelors listened patiently to a discourse on washing machines in order to earn a reward in the shape of a packet of somebody's lightning soap powder.' At stands where no freebies were offered, business was noticeably slack.

Food companies were the first to offer specially labelled paper bags filled with samples, possibly as early as 1909. Certainly the custom was so widespread by the end of the 1920s that some manufacturers started to charge a small amount to help defray costs, especially when small toys or trinkets began to be included.

During the Depression sample bags became more popular than ever and those that weren't free still represented excellent value for money. The "Pick-Me-Up" sample bag cost sixpence and contained bottles of tomato sauce and black sauce and mini tins of baked beans and spaghetti.

Times may have been austere but the showgoers of 1932 were tantalised with glitz and excess to encourage them to forget their troubles. In a central spot in the Royal Hall of Industries, the Minties display took the form of a giant tin on which a 'white-clad operative works a machine through which an apparently endless roll of sweetmeat passes and emerges wrapped in tiny morsels.' A canopy made entirely of peanuts covered a model of the just-opened Sydney Harbour Bridge at Nut Foods Ltd, and over at the Lifesavers' stand the bridge featured again, this time with miniature trains chugging across it. One can only imagine the mesmeric affect all this would have had on youngsters.

Biscuits, boot polish, fairy floss, tea tastings, scones made with a particular flour; the list of free samples, bagged or



Above: Louise Sauvage with the plaque dedicated to her.



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Below: Volunteers enjoy the anniversary BBQ in Sydney Showgrounds Main Arena

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In the post-war baby boom years, sample bags evolved and some based on toys and then TV programs began to appear. Thus, the term “showbag” gradually replaced “sample bag”. Fewer and fewer bags were free. The bags themselves changed from paper to plastic to laminated pearl polypropylene and now eco-friendly carry-alls are common.

The effort involved in preparing and retailing bags has always been enormous. When Coles first brought their “Monster” bag to the Show in 1958, every department of the company was involved in a military style operation. It was too much for most organisations and specialist showbag distributors took over the job. They started off as family concerns and 50 and 60 years on, a few of today's dozen or so distributors are still family run.

Like the carnival showies, operators did serious miles travelling across the country from show to show, setting up, selling, then breaking their stalls down again. When Stephen Verzar and his wife Susan retired in 2003 after 38 years in the game, they estimated they'd driven the equivalent of 15 times around the world based on their annual 10,000 mile circuit to 43 different shows.

The itinerant lifestyle wasn't the only challenge. Bags had to be packed and operators were also responsible for design and development. From the 1970s onwards this often required complex contractual and licensing negotiations, especially where agreements involved US cartoon characters, pop stars or film concepts.





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Ensuring value for money and the safety of novelties has long been a priority for the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW and operators alike. Since the 1960s inspections have taken place prior to the Show with contents carefully priced and checked over by business and consumer affairs and health officials. Police officers also cast an eye over toy weapons to make sure they’re not dangerous, or too real looking.

In 1966 thirty-five different bags were on offer. Last year, there were over 250. Deciding which bags to buy has become a major dilemma. These days kids do their research and budgeting via the Sydney Royal Easter Show website as well as using the more traditional newspaper guide. While there’s always a new fashion or craze to consider, the Show wouldn’t be the Show without taking home a few old family favourites like Cadbury, Sunny Boy, or Bertie Beetle.

A long-standing bargain, the Blue Bertie Beetle bag has a proud history. The little chocolate bug was first manufactured by Hoadley (now Nestle) in the early sixties to use up surplus coconut as well as honeycomb pieces left over from the production of Violet Crumbles. For much of its life it was only available at shows. So well loved was the Bertie bag that when it was withdrawn from the show circuit for a while, community pressure ensured its return.

Although there are showbags now for all tastes and ages, they will surely always be best loved by children and so retain their powerful associations with the fun and excitement of childhood. Older Australians, remembering sample bags, recall their youth, but also a more innocent age of consumerism. And it’s true. The twentieth century, in which the showbag was born, was in many ways a golden age: for the first time in history, materials-a-plenty made consumerism possible and common men and women enjoyed the privilege of choice. How marvellous it was, to be almost showered with goods.

If showbags do eventually take off in the US and beyond, it’s doubtful they’ll ever have the same mythic power for buyers unaware of their origins. Never mind. At least those folks will finally enjoy an experience long denied them – that of entering the crush and roar of a showbag hall, watching, as children and parents turn hunter-gatherers for the nibbles, the gadgets, the toys, the glitter and tat, the funny glasses and the funny hats all contained in their once-a-year treat – the showbag.



Showbag memories...

Back in the 1970’s my parents would take us to the Show and at the end of the night dad would buy heaps of showbags on the way home. The following day he would tip the contents of all the bags onto the lounge room floor and my brother and sisters and I would take turns to choose until all the contents were distributed.

EVE WEBB, 46, RAS MEMBER, PYMBLE

My brother and I were given a one pound note which we had to earn by doing jobs for our Mum leading up to the Show. We used to buy around 12 showbags such as Lifesavers, Minties, Jafas, Liquorice and Fantales, and also buy our Nan the Rosella showbag. These are good memories.

JANET BYRNES, RAS MEMBER, NSW

After eating our packed picnic lunch in the Main Arena, our parents would take us to the Showbag Pavilion, where my sisters and I were allowed to buy two showbags each. We would shuffle around the crowded, noisy Pavilion for hours, checking out all the contents on the boards to see what was included, what was the best value and weigh up which were our two favourites. I loved Hoadley’s Violet Crumble bag and Kewpie Dolls on a stick.

JANNE MALFROY, 59, SYDNEY

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PERSON ONE, AGE, PLACE

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PERSON TWO, AGE, PLACE

Above: Louise Sauvage with the plaque dedicated to her
Opposite: Volunteers enjoy the anniversary BBQ in Sydney Showgrounds Main Arena

