

Journal and Proceedings of The Royal Society of New South Wales

Volume 118 Parts 3 and 4 [*Issued March, 1986*]

pp.195-208

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The Agricultural Society of New South Wales and its Shows in Colonial Sydney

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[Paper given at the “Scientific Sydney” Seminar on 18 May, 1985, at History House, Macquarie St., Sydney.]

Agricultural shows were a feature of life in New South Wales from early days. The first was held at Parramatta in October 1822 when settlement was confined mainly within the Cumberland Plain and the colony was a mere thirty four years old. Organised by the recently established Agricultural Society of New South Wales the show became an annual event during the 1830s. Unfortunately the Society failed to retain support and by the time it became defunct in 1836 the show had already ceased to exist.[1] By the time this occurred settlement had spread far into the interior and along the coastal plain. Over the next twenty years a number of regional agricultural societies were founded. Some, like the Hunter River Vineyard Association, the later New South Wales Vineyard Association and the Australian Floral and Horticultural Association had a specialised function.[2] But most were more wide ranging and were designed to serve the needs of all farmers and graziers in a particular district, regardless of what they produced. Each of these societies held annual exhibitions of livestock and farm produce, perpetuating the tradition that had grown up earlier in Britain. Similar events were also organised in the other Australian colonies. Interestingly, the first Agricultural Society was formed not in New South Wales but in Van Dieman’s Land. Everywhere, however, in all of the colonies shows were regularly held and were featured in the press.[3]

For the most part, the shows of the 1830s were designed to serve purely regional interests and needs. They were usually held on a vacant piece of land and lasted for one or two days. They provided a focal point for the local community and a forum for the exchange of ideas. By competing for prizes farmers and graziers could be encouraged to raise standards. All could benefit from the opportunity to be brought into contact with the latest innovations in the fields of husbandry and stockraising. Not everyone, however, was satisfied with necessarily fragmented approach that was alone possible in the absence of a central body spanning the whole of New South Wales. As far back as 1838 the *Sydney Gazette* had put forward proposals for a ‘general society’ which would ‘embrace the whole community’ and link the activities of local bodies. The editor returned to this theme three years later and in a series of editorials developed the idea more fully.[4] The times were scarcely propitious for drought and depression struck hard in the early 1840s and settlers were interested more in surviving than in forming a colonywide agricultural society. Not until late in the following decade when further expansion had occurred and the initial disruptive effects of the gold rushes had been overcome were fresh moves made.

On 9 March 1857, following a meeting at the Terminus Hotel, Liverpool, the decision was made to establish the Cumberland Agricultural Society.^[5] The impetus behind this meeting came from leading settlers and members of the Legislative Council who sought in part to improve the level of farming in the county where rural enterprise originated in New South Wales. Attempts had earlier been made to found a Society here but, partly owing to the lack of homogeneity among the settlers of the region, these attempts had failed. By 1857 this particular county lagged behind others in possessing no formal organisation devoted to the interests of the man on the land and the new society was partly intended to overcome this problem. Yet, its founders soon came to see their responsibilities as extending over the whole colony. They spoke of their objectives as being 'national' and on 14 March 1859 council agreed that the society should 'henceforth be designated the Agricultural Society of New South Wales'. It was also decided that the president should be chosen each year from a different part of the colony 'so that effect could be given to its national aims'.^[6] A twenty acre site for a showground was obtained on the west side of Parramatta Park adjacent to what became Westmead railway station.^[7] This enabled produce and stock to be brought from other regions and exhibited at the annual show which formed the centrepiece of the Society's activities. Some writers have seen this Society as a direct descendant of earlier Agricultural Society of New South Wales that had existed between 1822 and 1836. Whether this was so is a matter of some dispute, but at least the two bodies shared a common desire to promote rural interests throughout the whole colony rather than those of just one part. It was this which distinguished them from the numerous other agricultural societies that existed by the middle of the nineteenth century.

Between 1860 and 1867, the Agricultural Society of New South Wales continued to make its headquarters at Parramatta. Each year, with the exception of 1863 when there was a severe drought, a show was held at the Westmead ground, and at first aroused substantial interest.^[8] In scope and range it was a considerable advance on the shows that had been held under the auspices of the 1822 Society. The earlier body had no ground and its shows consisted of little more than a display of livestock and produce, arranged in a corner of the market-place at Parramatta, to coincide with the periodical government sponsored Fair. The show at Westmead, in contrast, was held over two days on a large ground that contained permanent buildings in the shape of cattle yards, cereal and poultry sheds and pens for sheep and pigs. Visitors came from many parts to see the wide range of exhibits, to enjoy the entertainments and witness the ploughing matches that were a regular feature. While lacking 'that intensely exciting character' possessed by other forms of competition, these matches strongly appealed to those who enjoyed demonstrations of skill. It was, observed the Sydney Morning Herald, 'the regularity of the furrow, and not speed, that was the chief care of the ploughman'.^[9]

Despite the initial enthusiasm which greeted its foundation the Society failed for long to fulfil its promise. Membership remained small and attendance of council members at committee meetings gradually declined. Once the novelty of the early shows had gone crowds fell off and although exhibits were sent from the Hunter region and from Port Macquarie, other districts proved unwilling to co-operate. Increasingly it became evident that the Society's original name of 'Cumberland' fitted reality rather more than did that of 'New South Wales'. Part of the trouble was that during the 1860s the Society faced increased competition from the growing number of local bodies that were formed. Their presence diverted attention away from the New South Wales Society and reduced the prospects of exhibits being sent to Parramatta. The show at Westmead was no better than those in other regions and its awards carried no particular significance. Far from developing in the way that had been anticipated, the Society lost ground and by the late 1860s was merely one of a number of bodies that possessed little more than local importance.

It was in response to this situation that there ensued a series of moves which culminated in the reform and reconstitution of the Agricultural Society. According to a later account the initiative was taken by the entrepreneur and adventurer, Jules Joubert, whose family played a major role in the history of Hunters Hill. In an autobiographical work, appropriately entitled *Shavings and Scrapes from Many Parts* Joubert described how he had attended a meeting of the Agricultural Society in February 1867 called to find means of overcoming a serious financial deficit. A member, whose name Joubert did not reveal, moved that the Society be wound up, but Joubert recommended its reconstitution on a broader basis. He urged that it be given a new council and be moved to Sydney where a more elaborate show could be organised. Although taken aback by the audacity of these proposals, those present, he claimed, accepted them.^[10] The reality was rather different. No meeting was recorded on the date he gave and his name was not among the committee members for 1867. Nor was the financial plight of the Society as grave as he made out. The impetus for reform came not from Joubert, a mere outsider, but from longstanding members of the Society who saw the need to overcome its failings.^[11] Particularly important were leading settlers from the Hunter River, like J.R. Nowlan, and from the Mudgee area, like G.H. Cox member of an important pioneering family.^[12] Such men were enlightened farmers and graziers who believed in the necessity for a central society to raise standards throughout the colony. To succeed, such a society had to be based in the metropolis which was a focal point for the transport system and which possessed port facilities. Early in 1868 steps were taken to move the Society from Parramatta to Sydney.

This move marked the beginning of an association between Sydney and the Agricultural Society that has lasted until the present day. The relationship between City and Society, however, was initially somewhat different to what it later became. Some time was to elapse before a permanent ground could be found and in the meantime the Society lacked a base. Office accommodation was obtained in Lyons Buildings, George Street and for exhibition purposes a lease was secured from the City Corporation allowing the use of the Cleveland Paddocks, or Prince Alfred Park as it is better known, for two months of the year. At first the ground, although close to the railway terminus at Redfern, had little to recommend it. Joubert described it as ‘a quagmire with a filthy drain running across it – a plague spot’. In 1869, however, the City Council erected a permanent exhibition building which the Society was allowed to rent for the duration of the show. Here, over the next twelve years the Society’s exhibitions were held, temporary pens, marquees and other structures being erected to supplement the main building.^[13]

The move to Sydney formed only part of attempts to breathe fresh life into the activities of the Society. A revised set of rules, issued early in 1868 opened with the statement that it was,

An association of persons desirous of disseminating such information amongst those who derive their sustenance directly from the land, as may enable them to obtain the highest results from the application of skills, energy and capital to farming and pastoral pursuits.^[14]

The overriding objective was to promote husbandry, ‘including improvements in the breeding and treatment of livestock, by the enlightened combination of Practice with Science’. This last phrase became the motto of the Society and echoed that of the Royal Agricultural Society of England which had been founded in 1842.^[15] Members of the New South Wales body were to be encouraged to develop,

A friendly and parental relation towards the kindred societies of the colony, to increase their number, and to use their best endeavours to unite and strengthen these local bodies for harmonious and progressive action.[\[16\]](#)

To secure these ends there was to be established at Sydney a centre for meetings, lectures, a library and a collection of specimens. A close association with local and overseas societies was to be fostered, transactions were to be published, district reports were to be issued and members were entitled, on payment of a moderate fee, to obtain scientific advice. Gratuitous information was to be made available on 'the geological distribution and character of soils, the secrets of insect life and atmospheric phenomena. Experiments were to be conducted into the growth of plants and prizes were to be offered to young people so as to develop particular skills.[\[17\]](#)

It was recognised that if these objectives were to be attained, an improved administrative structure and enlarged membership were necessary. 700 copies of the rules were distributed and recipients were invited either to become ordinary members at one guinea a year, or to become governors on payment of three guineas a year. The society was to be run by a president and ten vice presidents elected from among the governors, and council of fifty members, twenty five of whom were to be elected annually. The council was empowered to appoint from within its ranks a number of subcommittees. These included: finance, exhibitions, publications, lectures and scientific matters.

These reforms were the work of a group acting under the chairmanship of Sir William Macarthur, the youngest son of John Macarthur and a wealthy settler with interests in practically every branch of farming and grazing. He had been elected president of the Society in January 1868 and amongst those who assisted him were men of great talent and skill.[\[18\]](#) They included the former Colonial Secretary, Edward Dens Thomson, politicians and leading settlers such as John Hay, John Lackey, R.L. Jenkins and James Pye. There was also a sprinkling of businessmen and scientists. This last group counted amongst its number, Professor John Smith, who held the Chair of Chemistry and Experimental Physics at the University of Sydney, A.M. Thompson, Reader in Geology and Charles Watt who was an analytical chemist.[\[19\]](#) For such experts to be associated with the Society represented a new departure of considerable significance. Another member of key importance who joined later was Howard Reed, formerly agricultural editor of the Illustrated Tondon News and currently on the staff of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.[\[20\]](#) Overall, the composition of the office-holders and the council reflected the determination of the Society to broaden the basis of its activities and become a colony wide institution.

Over the next decade or so, the Society had remarkable success in fulfilling its objectives. Numerous scientific investigations were conducted, papers and lectures were regularly delivered and a substantial library was developed. Beginning in July 1868 a *Journal*, the first of its kind in Australia, was published and this soon came to occupy an important place in the annals of Australian agricultural literature.[\[21\]](#) It kept members informed about the activities of the Society and took up issues of importance to the man on the land. It contained both the reports of investigations carried out by the scientific committee and articles on practical subjects. Meteorological information obtained from stations set up all over the colony was also issued. In addition, the Society did much to assist local societies. Publicity was given to their activities in the *Journal*, prizes were offered at the metropolitan exhibition and medals were provided for award at local shows. From 1875 the Society administered an annual grant which the government made available for local bodies.

Central to the activities of the Society, however, was the annual Sydney show which generated the finance that made all else possible. It is important when considering the shows of the late 1860s and the 1870s to remember that they occurred during an age of exhibitions. London had set the scene in 1851 with the Great Exhibition which reflected Britain's position as the world's leading industrial power. A second such occasion was organised in 1862, by which time Paris had hosted the first of three exhibitions to be held in the capital between 1854 and 1878. Vienna provided the venue for an exhibition in 1873 and Philadelphia followed suit three years later to celebrate the centenary of American Independence. These occasions, as Professor Graeme Davison has recently noted, were the outgrowth of earlier and more modest provincial exhibitions. Their popularity derived in part from the fact that at a time of limited educational opportunities they enabled the masses to gain first-hand knowledge of technological change. 'Only if we appreciate the capacity of objects to stir the curiosity and imagination of nineteenth century people', observed Davison, 'will we understand the popular appeal of the international exhibition'.^[22] Each of these events aroused considerable interest in the Australian colonies. Press coverage was detailed and exhibits were sent from New South Wales and elsewhere. Reports of their reception attracted much attention and patriotic feelings were stirred.

All of this created an atmosphere highly favourable to the efforts of the Agricultural Society. Indicative of its desire to capitalise on the situation was the decision early in 1868 to appoint Jules Joubert as secretary. He was known to be a man of energy and enterprise with a flair for showmanship. His hand was discernible in all of the exhibitions that were held in Sydney over the next few years and he helped to lead the Society away from too exclusive an involvement in the interests of the man on the land.^[23] Backed by a council that contained a solid core of Sydney based manufacturers, retailers and merchants he developed the show into something more exciting and wide ranging than had ever before been seen in the colony.

The first clear revelation of Joubert's talents became evident at the second of the Society's Sydney shows in 1870. The first had been a relatively uneventful affair that occurred too soon after the move to the capital for the Society to have put its act in order. 1870, however, was the centenary of the discovery and naming of New South Wales by Captain Cook. It was universally agreed that major celebrations should be held, drawing on the resources of other colonies as well as New South Wales. The Society was at the forefront in promoting this idea and its plans found ready support. Preparations were conducted at several levels. First were the arrangements for the layout of the ground. These were undertaken principally by the Municipal Council. Plans for the construction of an exhibition building, 250 feet long, 140 feet wide and 70 feet high, were laid before the Society's own Exhibition Committee in October 1869 and subsequently approved. Delays occasioned by wet weather resulted in the building being completed only just in time, but the result was seen as justifying the effort and the money. The largest structure of its kind in the Australian colonies and equalling the best in Britain and Europe, the Hall was seen as a masterpiece of design. Impressive from the exterior, it was capable of housing large numbers of exhibits and a vast crowd of visitors, who could not only wander around the ground floor, but gain an overview from the galleries. The Municipal Council, which bore the cost of the building, also erected in the grounds a variety of other structures, including a 'commodious refreshment pavillion'. A thousand trees were planted and the ground was surrounded with a fence in which were set three 'ingenious' gates each with a mechanism for counting entrants. Amidst all this splendour and a range of marquees stood, somewhat incongruously, a 'mean-looking shed' from which the secretary of the Society was to conduct his business in a way that commanded widespread admiration.^[24]

Practically all of the details concerning the exhibition itself were handled by the Society – a fact which distinguished it from similar celebratory events in other colonies. Elsewhere the practice

was for governments to appoint 'paid and responsible agents, acting under the guidance of a paid director'. Arrangements for the 1870 celebrations, however, were handled by voluntary assistants drawn mainly from the Society.[25] Immense effort went into the preparations and these were rewarded by the response to the Exhibition which opened on 31 August 1870.[26] Nothing like it had ever before been seen in Sydney. A division had been made between the agricultural side, in which there were thirteen sections, and the nonagricultural side in which there were seven sections. Every species of livestock was on display with the exception of merino sheep which could not be brought from the interior because of the quarantine regulations embodied in the Scab Act. On the other hand, an abundance of fleeces was exhibited. There was also every kind of farm produce and a strong horticultural section, which included articles from Queensland. There was machinery of all kinds, some horse-drawn but much steam-powered. In addition, there was an impressive array of articles ranging from precision made astronomical and surveying instruments to chemical and pharmaceutical products. For those with cultural interests there was a fine-arts gallery which was elegantly decorated and 'adorned with a superb collection of works of art'. Nor was the history of the colony neglected. Portraits of Captain Cook and a picture showing how he was killed, along with other mementoes, were arranged in such a way as to remind visitors of their past. For the most part, the display was static, but ploughing matches and demonstrations of machinery were arranged. In 1869 these had been held on the Society's land at Parramatta, but this was too far away from the main centre of attraction. Accordingly, matches were arranged in Victoria Park, after the University Senate had decided that the deed of grant prevented the use of the University paddocks. In addition to the normal horse-drawn contest there was an exhibition of a steam-driven road traction engine which had been brought from Brisbane. It had won a prize at Edinburgh and although driven by men unskilled in the art, showed a combination of 'great power with a fair amount of speed'.[27]

According to the *Herald* the exhibition 'has been to this colony what the Great Exhibition of 1851 was to England what the Exposition Universelle of Paris was to France in 1862'. [28] Besides commemorating the discovery of the colony it publicised its products and resulted in the placing of substantial numbers of orders. Visitors came from all over Australia and from other parts of the world and it was estimated that close to half the population of New South Wales attended. The Agricultural Society benefited greatly. Its cattle show alone attracted immense interest. 'Had there been nothing else... ', commented the *Herald*, the stock would have been sufficient to draw crowds of people interested in pure blood, symmetrical forms and high condition. Last year was good, but this year excelled'. The author of these remarks was convinced that here was proof that the Society, far from being 'merely a Sydney affair' had much to offer the colony:

It is plain now that nowhere could those who are interested in the breeding and grazing of livestock find so good a place of meeting or so good a market as at Sydney.[29.]

The sales which followed the exhibition were so successful that Sydney was bound to become 'the great exchange for cattle as well as ideas'.

Scarcely had the exhibition closed than preparations began for the next show, which was to be devoted exclusively to products of the land. This was a deviation from previous policy which possibly resulted from a belief that other branches of industry had received sufficient attention in 1870. The show of 1871 provided no space for non-agricultural exhibits. Even the fine-arts display was dropped, prompting the *Herald* cynically to remark that,

Those who retain pleasant visions of the pictures in the galleries will find instead the feathered realities of many paintings, together with a confusing medley of clarion and cackle, quite incapable of being transferred to canvas, but most musical to a fancier of poultry.[30]

The array of livestock, farm produce and machinery was impressive, exhibits were sent from all over the colony and from Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania, while specimens of timber arrived from as far away as California. Other attractions included a series of lectures on agricultural subjects delivered in Saint Paul's schoolroom adjoining the park. Perhaps because a reaction had set in since 1870, perhaps because the range of exhibits was limited, the show was not a success. The new council elected at the end of the year was confronted by a critical financial situation with prizes unpaid and heavy liabilities. Emergency measures were introduced to reduce expenditure.[31] These included the imposition of additional charges on exhibitors and the subletting of two of the rooms at present occupied in Sydney by the Society. The government was also asked for financial assistance and it was decided that future exhibitions 'be not exclusively agriculture but should combine a judicious selection from other industries, fine arts etc.' [32] The show of 1872 was marked by the presence of significant range of industrial goods. Novel attractions included workers demonstrating their crafts and displays of machinery in motion. The results were gratifying. Attendances rose and the increased receipts enabled the Society to cover expenses and repay the debts incurred during the preceding year.

The pattern established at the show of 1872 was followed during the next six years. The emphasis was on attracting a wide range of livestock, farm produce and farm machinery and there were regular ploughing matches as well as demonstrations of equipment. Combined with this were sections devoted to the retail trade and secondary industry. Each year an attempt was made to have some special feature that might appeal to a larger audience. In 1872 it was decided to focus triennially on intercolonial exhibits.[33] In 1875 an array of articles was sent from the United States.[34] A year later Canada was added to the list of overseas contributors.[35] Particular attention was paid to improving the layout and arrangement of exhibits. In 1875, for example, a large annexe was added to the main building which in itself was laid out in a novel manner. Intercolonial agricultural produce was arranged side by side with that from New South Wales so that comparisons could be made. The normal display of local stained glass was situated so as to heighten the effects of other exhibits and a balcony was constructed featuring an apartment containing costly furniture. A re-designed display of botanical decorations gave added lustre to the customary 'flowers and foliage and sparkling jets of water'. A further change, this time in organisation, was reflected in the decision to exhibit livestock during the second week, thus providing an additional attraction at a time when attendance might otherwise have fallen off and easing the burden on organisers during the opening week. Attention was also paid to entertainment.[36] There were two rings, one for judging horses and the other for judging cattle. The space for a large ring was lacking, but the horse ring was used for jumping and other events. Side shows were not as yet in evidence; on the other hand, there were musical events, including a band, evening concerts, balloon ascents and floral shows.

The Society's exhibitions were, therefore, well planned, varied, innovative and of considerable importance. They added a new dimension to the life of Sydney and attracted the attention of other colonies and countries. 'The enterprise of the Agricultural Society and its value to the colony will hardly be questioned', observed the *Herald* after witnessing the ninth Sydney show. It has,

Rendered most valuable service to the colony by stimulating enterprise, by affording opportunities for comparison, by creating a wholesome rivalry, and by bringing into bold relief

the advantages to be derived from improving the breed of horses and cattle, and farming on scientific principles. from the use of labour-saving appliances, and generally from teaching how mind can best operate upon matter, and turn the beneficence of nature to the most profitable account.[37]

Paradoxically, the very achievements of the Society were to prove its undoing. Success had bred a spirit of optimism which gave rise to the belief that there were no limits to what might be undertaken. When, in April 1877 Jacob Levi Montefiore and Samuel Aaron Joseph, two Jewish business partners, proposed that the Society stage an international exhibition in Sydney during 1879, the opportunity was eagerly grasped.[38] Approaches were made to the government by a section of the Executive Committee which assured the Premier that all costs would be borne by the Society. Unfortunately, no attempt had been made to determine whether the resources of the Society were adequate and the Executive Committee had acted in the absence of some members and without informing Council. When news leaked out concern rapidly spread among councillors and fears were expressed that the Society would be ruined. There ensued a series of angry meetings and approaches to the government which was in the embarrassing situation of having committed itself to the exhibition. Reluctantly it was eventually forced to assume full responsibility in order to save face after proposed compromises had failed.[39]

The International Exhibition which lasted for eight months from September 1879 until April 1880 was the most impressive event of its kind to be held in colonial Sydney.[40] A grandiose Garden Palace, covering eight and a half acres and designed by the Colonial Architect, James Barnet, was erected in the Domain. It was surrounded by subsidiary buildings and ornamental gardens and became a showpiece until destroyed by fire in 1882. Exhibits were sent from all over the world as well as from other Australian colonies and they covered practically every aspect of life. Some 1,117,536 visitors, including many from overseas, came to gaze in admiration at the spectacle and enjoy the amusements. Financially, the Exhibition was considered more successful than any other except that of 1851 in England. 'The verdict of the great majority of the country seemed to be', observed the Executive Commissioner, 'that it was a substantial gain, and a huge stride in the path of progress, and that the success of the experiment justified what was undoubtedly a bold step.[41]

For the Agricultural Society, however, the Exhibition was a disaster. The Society lost face as a result of the bitter wrangling on Council that received widespread publicity in the press. The fact that some members of the Executive had misled the government as to the capacity of the Society to shoulder costs, soured relations with ministers and cast doubt on the competence of office bearers. Stockowners were angered by the initial decision to become involved in an International Exhibition which they thought favoured city at the expense of country interests. For a time it looked as though pastoralists might break away from the Society and form an organisation of their own.[42] This step was averted but tension still remained and in country circles there were suspicions that took some time to die down. Added to all this, the Society was unable to hold a show of its own in 1880 because of competition from the International Exhibition and as a result the financial situation deteriorated.[43] Much of the blame for these setbacks was placed on Joubert who was forced out of office. Some of the responsibility for the fiasco of 1879 must be placed on his shoulders. Yet at the same time he had helped to ensure that earlier shows were such a success and the advances made by the Society during the 1870s owed much to initiative and enterprise.

The 1879 Exhibition brought to a close an era in the history both of the Agricultural Society and of its shows in Sydney. For some time there had been doubts as to the desirability of the present

arrangements under which the Society leased Prince Alfred Park for a mere two months of the year. Increasingly councillors had come to appreciate the need for a permanent base on which facilities could be constructed for use throughout the year. The lease to Prince Alfred Park was due to expire on 30 June 1880 and there was no guarantee of renewal on the same terms as before. Matters were brought to a head by the setbacks of 1879 which left the Society with inadequate funds to cover rental in the coming year. In July 1879 a deputation approached the Mayor of Sydney seeking immediate cancellation of the lease and exemption from half the rental for which the Society was liable. The City Corporation agreed to these terms thus relieving the immediate financial situation. On the other hand, the Society was now without a ground and urgent steps had to be taken to find one. After searching for some months a site was located at Moore Park adjacent to the Cricket Ground on land that had been vested in the City Corporation. In May 1881 a lease was signed giving the Society control of a block some twenty five acres in extent. Additional portions were later added and the form of tenure was changed to give the Society greater security. For the first time since moving to Sydney it had a permanent base on which capital works could be constructed.[44]

The immediate advantages of the move to Moore Park, however, were only slight. Prince Alfred Park had occupied a central position within reach of the railway terminus at Redfern. The new ground was located on the outskirts of Sydney in an area which, although serviced by trams had no train line. Livestock had to be driven on foot along Cleveland Street and produce had to be freighted by road transport. The ground itself was in a primitive state. One observer referred to it as a 'lumpy stretch of sand covered with undergrowth and low bush', while another dismissed it as 'a scrub-covered unprofitable sandy patch.'^[45] Inevitably much time and money had to be spent before the ground could be put to effective use and this necessarily meant that fewer funds were available for other purposes. During the 1880s, although the objectives of the Society remained unchanged, it was in no position to pursue so many of them as before. The *Journal* was dropped as were other services including climatic reports and scientific investigations. Nor were lecture programmes held any more. Indeed, almost the only activity in which the Society engaged was that of holding an annual show.

The fact that the Society, for the first time since moving to Sydney, had its own ground was a considerable advantage. At Prince Alfred Park it had been given the use for part of the year of a large building which the City Council had constructed and at show time temporary structures and pens were erected to house exhibits. At Moore Park, however, the Society had access to the ground for the whole year and was able to embark on a programme of planned development involving the construction of a number of permanent buildings. Within months of taking possession of the land construction work had begun and by April 1882 a substantial number of structures had been completed. These included stalls for 150 horses, a three roomed cottage for the grooms, two large sheds for cattle and one for poultry, a dog pavilion and pens for pigs. In addition there was a 'simple yet graceful' pavilion over one hundred feet long and forty feet high, to provide cover for exhibits. These buildings were arranged around the main ring which was surrounded by a fenced and railed trotting track, 689 yards in circumference and thirty six yards wide, 'well ballasted, top-dressed, watered and rolled'. Within this oval were judging rings for cattle and horses and stout fences for horse jumping events.^[46] Over the next few years other improvements were made, culminating in the ambitious undertakings begun in 1887 in preparation for celebrating the centenary of white settlement in Australia. By 1888 the ground contained two grandstands capable of seating nearly 5000 visitors, a number of substantial pavilions and a range of well-constructed sheds, pens and other necessary buildings. A loop had been constructed from the Randwick tram line, enabling visitors to be brought to the main entrance where gates and turnstiles had been constructed. Provision had also been made within the ground for a press room and a post and telegraph office.^[47]

The Centennial Intercolonial Agricultural Exhibition, which opened on 25 January 1888, catered for ‘almost everything connected with ... pastoral and agricultural industries, manufactures and mineral wealth’. Governors from every colony attended the opening ceremony and visitors poured in from all over New South Wales. There were numerous livestock entries, an impressive array of farm machinery including some from Victoria, South Australia and New Zealand, and a working dairy. One novel feature arose from the decision to offer ‘valuable trophies, for the best collection of vegetables, farm produce, fruits and flowers from each of four districts into which the colony was divided – western, southern, northern and metropolitan. Here was the forerunner of the later and justly renowned district exhibits competition that has continued to the present day. Interesting too was an advertisement which the Society placed in the *Herald* inviting applications to run side-shows at the exhibition. What response was received is not known, but this was the first reference to what in later years became an important feature of the Easter show. Other attractions, this time dating from earlier in the decade were also in evidence. The existence of a ring had enabled the Society, from the time of the move to Moore Park, to expand equestrian events. Jumping contests were held in the ring and so too were horse parades. On the track that surrounded it there were the ever-popular trotting and bicycle races.[48] Impressive though the Centennial Exhibition was, it failed to reach the heights attained by the best of the Society’s Exhibitions during the 1870s. The *Town and Country Journal* criticised the arrangement of exhibits and claimed that the impression left by the festivities was ‘mostly those of headache and indigestion’.[49] Similar comments could have been made of some of the other shows held since 1882. Admittedly, considerable efforts were devoted to making them attractive. The agricultural and livestock side were developed and so too were the ever-popular equestrian events. Advances in the dairying industry were brought before the public and attention was drawn to improvements in methods of transport. The *Herald* commented favourably on the firm of Sage, Glencross and Company of Macdonaldtown for demonstrating,

A new style of brougham hansom, fitted with such novelties as sliding doors, an electric bell, and a carriage clock. They also display “the lady’s Parisian phaeton”, a handsome vehicle with extended hood, and excellently arranged springs; and the Carrington dogcart, a very neat turn out.[50]

Yet, in general the shows of the 1880s failed to attract as many entries from the business, commercial and manufacturing world as had been the case earlier. They were also more provincial in character and lacked the inter-colonial dimension. All this reflected the failure of the Society to overcome problems that had their roots in the debacle of 1879. It took some time for the disillusion generated by the events preceding the exhibition of that year to dissipate. Meantime, Council remained weak and divided. The departure of Joubert also left a gap which was filled only after there had been a succession of three nondescript secretaries. Moreover, local societies had strengthened themselves and by 1890, thanks partly to the provision of a government subsidy, their number totalled 103.[51] Their presence, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted, diminished the ‘interest taken in the metropolitan association’ and its shows.[52] Finally, the 1888 show, which might have been expected to give the Society a fresh start in fact created new difficulties. In addition to a financial deficit, doubts were cast by the *Evening News* on the legality of charges to the public for entry to the ground. An article published on 26 January 1888 claimed that the land occupied by the Society formed part of a common and that the Municipal Council lacked the power to lease any part of it under conditions that impeded free access. On 28 January a crowd of spectators forced their way through the gates without paying and when brought before a magistrate the case was dismissed as being beyond his jurisdiction.[53]

Some six years of complicated negotiations were necessary before the government passed an act resolving the problems associated with the Society's tenure of its ground. Meantime, it had passed through a difficult time, made worse by the economic depression of the early 1890s and by public opposition arising from a decision to allow the regular use of the trotting track by the Driving Park Trotting Club. This move was prompted partly by the need to secure additional revenue, but it angered other clubs, prompted the racing fraternity to use its influence in parliament to create trouble for the Society and angered those sections of community opinion which saw gambling as a moral evil.[54] Uncertainties associated with the tenure of the ground deterred the Society from making further improvements, while the criticism to which it was exposed meant that it lost face with the public. All this had a bearing on the show which continued to be held annually. According to one parliamentary critic, however, the metropolitan society was

... not in any way equal to some of the country societies in regard to the exhibition of stock and agricultural produce. it is more in the nature of a show of trotting and things of that kind – an endeavour to attract the public by a kind of show business instead of fulfilling the real purpose of an agricultural or pastoral association.[55]

Another observer remarked that,

On the occasion of the last show there were about four or five bags of wheat, half a dozen bags of maize, two or three kegs of butter, a cheese or two and half a dozen hams. It was the most wretched exhibition of the kind I ever saw.[56]

That these descriptions were unduly one-sided clearly emerges when they are compared with newspaper accounts of the shows of these years. Nevertheless, the Society's exhibitions still lagged behind those of the 1870s both in terms of their scope and level of attainment.

Matters greatly improved during the second half of the 1890s. The Act of 1894 removed doubts as to the Society's tenure of the ground and forbade trotting outside showtime. Economic conditions improved as the depression came to an end and the Society's council was strengthened by the acquisition of leading figures who acted in a united way. With an outstanding President, Sir John See, Colonial Treasurer and later Premier, and an able, dedicated secretary, Frederick Webster, the Society was well placed to progress. Symptomatic of the desire to improve its standing was the decision to apply to Queen Victoria for the right to become 'Royal' – a request that was granted in 1892. The real medium of advance, however, was the show which promised to bring funds and kudos. During the closing years of the decade a concerted effort was made to improve its organisation and widen, its scope. A capital works programme designed to improve the ground, extend facilities to exhibitors and cater more effectively for visitors, was begun. Fresh innovations were introduced into the show itself and existing features were extended. The district exhibits competition was given a new form at the turn of the century.[57] Earlier, a wine kiosk had been erected to cater more fully for the needs of the wine industry.[58] Additional classes were added to the cattle competitions and exhibits drawn from the state run experimental farms were put on display under the aegis of the recently established Department of Agriculture.[59] To capitalise on developments in the field of transport a special prize was offered for the best motor cars and cycles. In 1901 part of the ground was set aside for their use, prompting the Herald to comment that,

The advent for the first time in the history of the Society, of an imposing array of automobiles on the asphalt track was a most interesting event. Eight or nine automobile carriages, buggies and a post-office delivery van appeared on the track, around which they were driven a great many times. The carriages and buggies, besides the drivers contained passengers who were treated to an exhilarating ride at a rapid rate. Two of the carriages were sent around at a 30 miles an hour speed and the display was warmly cheered.[60]

Nor were the needs of other secondary industries neglected. The number and range of exhibits in this category increased and, in addition, the products of the mining industry were displayed. The entertainment side of the show was also promoted. Equestrian events continued to prove popular as did trotting which was permitted during show time. Woodchopping contests which had originated in the forests of Tasmania during the 1870s, were introduced at Moore Park in 1899.[61] Side shows, which had a somewhat mixed reputation, became permanently established giving the show the character of a fair as well as an exhibition of practical import.[62] By the turn of the century the show had acquired most of its modern features and was regaining the position it had lost at the end of the 1870s.

Since first being held in Sydney some three decades earlier, therefore, the show had experienced a somewhat chequered history. Yet, despite intermittent setbacks it had survived and established firm traditions. Held over the Easter break it had become one of a number of attractions, including the A.J.C. Races, that drew country visitors in large numbers to Sydney. In some circles Easter had come to be more closely associated with the show than with religious ceremonies – a fact deeply disturbing to the Protestant churches and especially the Church of England which regularly, but unsuccessfully, sought to prevent the holding of the show on Good Friday. ‘Easter in Sydney without its agricultural show’, commented the *Sydney Mail* in somewhat sacriligious terms, ‘would be the play with the chief scene left out’. After overcoming its problems, the show had during the closing years of the century established a premier position in New South Wales. Its prizes were highly valued and their award conferred recognised distinction on the recipient. In terms of its size and scope it also outweighed that of the metropolitan societies in other colonies – a fact which reflected the greater wealth and diversity of New South Wales.

How important the show had been in promoting the objectives of the Society is more difficult to evaluate. Contemporaries, however, believed that the spirit of competition which it generated did produce improvements in the breeds of livestock and the scope and quality of farm products. Every branch of rural production was represented, if not in every year then in most. The distribution of prizes for livestock favoured the larger landholders, but this was not so true of other sections and, in any event, all elements in the rural community benefited from the opportunity to see what could be done by the best farmers and breeders. Not until December 1889 when agriculture was added to the responsibilities of the Minister for Mines did the government do much to promote scientific methods. Meantime the Society, particularly through its show had played a leading role in keeping the man on the land abreast of new developments. It continued to do so in co-operation with the new sub department of Agriculture after 1889. Given that the rural sector of the economy contributed most to export earnings the Society’s efforts to increase productivity must have brought benefit to the whole community.

The show was important in other ways too. Although rural exhibits were its main feature the products of other branches of industry were on display in most years. Indeed, no industry lacked representation at some time. The show thus became a focal point for producers of all kinds. Commentators during the later nineteenth century in particular, frequently drew attention to the

importance of the show in bridging gaps and in establishing points of contact between town and city. This extended to all levels of society for, by 1900, the show had become a major source of attraction to spectators as well as participants. Attendance receipts varied but rose considerably from £454.0s.6d in 1882 to £4712.2s.0d in 1900 by which stage close to 200,000 people were coming to the ground.^[63] This falls well short of the present-day figure but it does represent a higher proportion of the total population than comes nowadays. Country people rubbed shoulders at Moore Park with city folk and all age groups from young to old were represented. The show had already become a central feature of life in New South Wales and helped to provide a bond which linked town and bush. During the next century it was to build still further on the foundations that had thus far been laid.

NOTES

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34. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April, 1875. [\[Return\]](#)
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44. For the move to Moore Park see Council Minutes, 23 February, 6 April, 1881; also 'Printed Letters, Correspondence, etc. that have passed between the Agricultural Society of New South Wales and the City Corporation respecting the ground occupied by the Society at Moore Park', Agricultural Society Archives. [\[Return\]](#)
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