
On the Shelf: 200th Anniversary of the Royal Agricultural Society

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In 2022 the Royal Agricultural Society (RAS) celebrates its 200th anniversary. On 5 July 1822 the Agricultural Society of NSW was founded by a number of Sydney's leading citizens, including Sir John Jamison (the first president) and Edward Cox (the first Vice President).¹

The aim of the new Society was to further 'the quality of Australia's primary production by means of contests and competitions' and its first show was held at Parramatta in 1823.² However, although it was initially successful the Society disbanded in 1834 owing to poor economic conditions and lack of support.³ It re-formed in 1857 as the Cumberland Agricultural Society and in 1859 it was renamed the Agricultural Society of NSW.⁴

Exhibitions and shows have remained a key focus of the Society offering:

... an opportunity to educate and inform the people of the colony, and to come together to transact

business and exchange ideas. Competitions were held in order to 'excite in proprietors an ambition to excel each other', prizes were offered and judging took place in front of the public.

Two hundred years down the track and the RAS is still organising events and competitions and acting as a guardian for the state's agricultural heritage.⁵

The shows were held in the government grounds in Parramatta until 1868. Following the Society's move to Prince Alfred Park in Sydney in 1869 the show was held there until 1881. The 'high rent and empty coffers forced the Society to again relocate in 1882 – this time to the new site at Moore Park. At the time Moore Park was little more than scrubland but the Society 'built a showground which would be home to the Show for the next 116 years'.⁶

In 1891 Queen Victoria granted permission to use the prefix 'Royal' and the first 'Royal' Easter Show was held



Showground, Grand Easter Parade 1936 [RAHS Adastra Collection]



Exhibition Building, Prince Edward Park c1870 [RAHS Image Collection]

in the same year.⁷ Today the Royal Easter Show is Australia's largest annual ticketed event, despite the 1919 Flu Pandemic, World War II and COVID, attracting interest from wide sections of the community, including the RAHS. During the 1980s and 1990s, our Society occasionally took a stall, where its publications and merchandise were on display.

For further information about the RAS, visit the RAS Heritage Centre Virtual Museum with its unique collection of documents, photographs, and mementoes that records history over 200 years at <https://www.rasnsw.com.au/heritage/virtual-museum/our-history-the-early-years/>.

The RAHS library has a number of publications relating to the history of the RAS. They include:

Ian Black, *The Sydney Showgrounds: a case study of heritage issues*, RAHS Proceedings of the Annual Affiliated Societies Conference.

Anne Cooke, *Going to the Show? Images and Memories of Sydney's Royal Easter Show*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales & Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales, Sydney, 1996.

Brian Fletcher, *The Grand Parade: A History of the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales*, The Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales, Paddington, NSW, 1988.

Jake Lindsay, Jake and Murray Hartin, *Showtime! Photographs and memories of the Royal Easter Show*, Portseat Pty Ltd, Rosebery, NSW, 1996.

Marie McLeod, *A traveller's tale: The Sydney Cricket Ground and the RAS Showground*, *History: Magazine of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 50, 1996, 16-17.

Gilbert Mant, *The big show: 150th Anniversary Royal*

Agricultural Society of New South Wales, Horwitz Publications, 1972.

Royal Agricultural Society of NSW, *Proceedings of the Jubilee Conference of Primary Producers held in Assembly Room, Education Building, 19th to 22nd November 1918*

H.M. Somer, Short History of the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 9, Pt 6, 1923, 309-332.

Ian Black, *The Sydney Showgrounds: a case study of heritage issues*, Proceedings of the Annual Affiliated Societies Conference, 1990, 28-41.

Helen Wilson, *A conservation view of the architecture of Sydney Showground*, Proceedings of the Annual Affiliated Societies Conference, 1990, 42-53.

R.A.S. Annual: Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales / Compiled and edited by H M Somer (1906-1929, donated by RAS 2002).

References

¹ 'About the past 200 years', Royal Agricultural Society, <https://www.rasnsw.com.au/about/>

² 'About the past 200 years'.

³ 'The Sydney Royal Easter Show', State Library of NSW, <<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/sydney-royal-easter-show>> (accessed 22 April 2022).

⁴ 'Virtual Museum', Royal Agricultural Society of NSW Heritage Centre, <<https://directory.archivists.org.au/index.php/royal-agricultural-society-of-nsw-heritage-centre>> (accessed 22 April 2022).

⁵ 'About the past 200 years'.

⁶ 'Virtual Museum'.

⁷ 'The Sydney Royal Easter Show'.