



A SHORT HISTORY OF

**THE ROYAL
BATH AND WEST**

and

Southern Counties Society

INSTITUTED IN 1777
FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF

Agriculture - Arts - Manufactures - Commerce

*(Distilled from "The Bath and West" - a bi-centenary history by
Kenneth Hudson, published by Moonraker Press)*

**The Royal Bath & West & Southern Counties Society,
The Showground, Shepton Mallet, BA4 6QN.**

1982



The magnificent Showering Pavilion in full swing at the South Western Dairy Show. This is just one of many uses to which this versatile building can be put.

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PREFACE

This short history of the Royal Bath & West & Southern Counties Society was distilled from Kenneth Hudson's book "The Bath & West" published in 1976 by the Moonraker Press in readiness for the Society's Bi-Centenary in 1977.

The last six years have been eventful ones for the Show Society, starting with the immensely successful Bi-Centenary celebrations. The Show President that year was His Royal Highness, The Prince of Wales, K.G., K.T., G.C.B. The Society's links with the Royal Family were further strengthened in 1980/81, when His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh, K.G., K.T., took the Presidency. He chaired a Council meeting in March 1981 - the first time a member of the Royal Family has done so - and followed this with two days at the Show. This coincided with his Presidency of the Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth, which held its biennial conference at Bath Guildhall the week after the Show. Over 70 Commonwealth delegates attended the conference and, as part of their programme, paid a visit to the Show, where the President hosted an evening reception for them.

Nineteen eighty one was a very special year for the Society, seeing the culmination of a three year building plan which would earn for it the title of The Agricultural Centre of the South and West. The Shepton Mallet Showground now has over 71,000 sq. ft. of undercover exhibition space, available for year round use. Much of this is both heated and air conditioned; there is ample room for car and lorry parking on all weather surfaces; there are allied catering services available for any number of people from under a hundred to many thousands; the Showground has good approach roads and, most importantly, visitors do not have to contend with city traffic and car parking problems.

Many companies, organisations and individuals, have made the building of this new complex possible, with generous financial assistance.

The programme of "out-of-show" events is growing steadily each year, from a mere 15 in 1979 to 81 in 1981. The bookings for 1982 were already at 180 in May of that year. Events can range from agricultural shows, trade shows and exhibitions, new product launches, antique fairs, caravan club rallies, dog shows and gatherings of young people, to riding events, sheepdog trials, dances, formal dinners, balls and social events. As Kenneth Hudson envisaged, the Society is putting much more emphasis on outside events — as it must do to survive in today's harsh economic climate.

The Royal Bath & West & Southern Counties Society itself organises two other Shows during the course of the year. The first Sunday in August sees the Summer Show, which is an inexpensive day out for the family with show jumping, private driving, a dog show, sheep dog trials, and trade stands. The first Thursday in October sees the South Western Dairy Show, which was launched in 1981. This major, all breeds dairy show is aimed at all dairy farmers in the South and West of England and South Wales and, in its first year, attracted some 4,300 interested visitors. The Show performs a vital role in this the major milk producing area of the country.

The Society owns an excellent collection of historical material in the care and custody of the Honorary Archivist and Honorary Librarian. Anyone interested in learning more about its history, should write first to The Secretary.



The Main Square with its elegant Bandstand, pictured at the 1981 Royal Bath & West Show.



The Unigate Demonstration Theatre and the Cheddar Cheese Restaurant and Exhibition Hall, which form part of over 71,000 sq. ft. of undercover exhibition and conference facilities on the Royal Bath & West Showground.

THE SOCIETY FROM 1777

'In the Autumn season of the year 1777, several gentlemen met at the City of Bath, and formed a Society for the encouragement of Agriculture, Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, in the Counties of Somerset, Wilts, Gloucester, and Dorset, and in the City and County of Bristol.'

The meeting, at York House, was attended by twenty-two people. Among them were Edmund Rack, the Society's first Secretary, William Matthews, who succeeded him, and Dr. Falconer, Fellow of the Royal Society, and Physician to the General (now the Royal United) Hospital in Bath. None of the twenty-two had any direct connexion with farming.

In November 1777, a much larger group of people than had assembled at York House two months earlier elected the principal officers of the Society, including the Earl of Ilchester as President. The founding fathers were very local — Lord Ilchester was the only prominent county member — and this fact was emphasised by the original title of the Society. It was the Bath Society and it was thirteen years before it widened its horizons and became the Bath and West of England Society. The original group was gradually supplemented and strengthened by the addition of people of greater influence and expertise, men like Arthur Young, Dr. Priestley the chemist, and Thomas Curtis, the botanist. Lord Ilchester, incidentally, was not a particularly assiduous President. After two years he expressed a desire to resign. The offer was accepted and the Chairman wrote to the noble earl accordingly, at the same time 'requesting that his Lordship would pay his subscription'.

At the first General Meeting, the Society set out its aims:

'To promote the good of the community by the encouragement of industry and ingenuity — to excite a spirit of enquiry which may lead to improvements not yet known — and to bring speculation and theory to the test of accurate experiment, are the grand ends intended by the present laudable and honourable institution.

'A desire to introduce into the western counties those obvious advantages which the public have reaped in the several parts of this kingdom, where societies of a similar kind have been formed, first excited the idea of the present establishment, in support of which the spirit of *true patriotism* has distinguished itself with unexampled ardor.'

The annual subscription was to be, not less than One Guinea', with life membership at 12 guineas, and a system of premiums, or prizes, was to be instituted, 'directed to Improvements in Agriculture, Planting, and such Manufactures as are best adapted to these Counties.'

The Secretary was paid 50 guineas a year, together with £30 for the use of rooms in his house and for 'Furniture, Fire and Candles'. A library was started, with the purchase of sixteen books. Seven of them are still in the Society's library today.

The improvements and inventions for which premiums were offered ranged from 'destroying the fly on turnips' to 'making writing paper without rags', and from 'securing boots and shoes from imbibing wet' to growing rhubarb for medicinal purposes. There were also premiums awarded to farm workers for 'long and faithful servitude'.

In 1780 the Society began the publication of an annual volume of reports, essays, and correspondence, its *Letters and Papers*, in an attempt to bring farmers in the West of England into contact with the most up-to-date and most effective methods. One is struck again and again by the excellent balance of each volume. Technical and practical articles are judiciously mixed with others with a social or political emphasis, and the

refreshing eighteenth century habit of calling a spade a spade gives an attractive flavour to these old volumes and makes them very good reading even today. It is enjoyable to find Mordaunt Martin expressing a low opinion of the people he employed to hoe his mangolds, 'women who ran home for every shower, and staid there if they saw a cloud'; and Dr. Fothergill's belief that tea-drinking led women on to alcoholism is expressed in an equally forthright fashion.

Εἰσαγαφὴ καὶ ἐπιτομὴ τῶν ἀπομνημονεύσεων τοῦ ἑκτετατοῦ, William Matthews, ὁ ὁλοκλήρωσε τὰ καθήκοντά του μετὰ τὴν ἐπιτομὴν τῶν ἀπομνημονεύσεων, ὁλοκλήρωσε τὰ καθήκοντά του μετὰ τὴν ἐπιτομὴν τῶν ἀπομνημονεύσεων. He remained in office for ten years. During that time, stockbreeding and the improvement of rural housing conditions began to occupy an increasing amount of the Society's attention. The Society regarded the re-housing of farm workers as a matter which deserved a very high priority. This was emphasised by a new premium, offered for the first time in 1801. It was for the landowner who could show that he had built 'the greatest number of cheap durable and comfortable cottages, in proportion to the extent of his estate, for poor industrious Labourers to inhabit and who shall annex a portion of land not less than ¼ of an acre to each cottage.'

The next Secretary, Nehemiah Bartley, a Bristol nurseryman, was not a success and was soon asked to resign. His offence was muddled administration, referred to by one critic as 'Indolence and Incapability'. Publication of the *Letters and Papers* had languished, its finances were in disorder and membership had fallen away. The next two Secretaries, Robert Ricards, a print-seller and stationer, and Benjamin Leigh Lye, a retired Army officer, had to deal with a difficult situation, caused partly by mismanagement and partly by a serious agricultural depression, but a number of useful innovations were established, including the setting up of a chemical laboratory and an annual show, in King's Mead Square, Bath. The Society's income steadily declined, however, and by the middle of the 19th century, with the fading away of interest and support, there was a real possibility that the venture which had begun in such a promising fashion seventy years earlier would have to be brought to an end.

The situation was saved by a number of administrative changes introduced at the Annual Meeting of 1849. There was a new committee system and a big effort to secure new members, especially from industry and commerce. Within two years, a very marked improvement had taken place in the Society's affairs. In 1851 a merger with the Devon County Agricultural Society was arranged and in 1853 the fact that the Society had taken on a new lease of life was emphasised by the publication of the first of a new series of *Journals*.

A network of 24 Correspondents was set up, 12 in the Eastern District and 12 in the Western. These had promised 'to use their influence in extending a knowledge of the Society and increasing its income. They have been authorized to receive subscriptions. It is much to be desired that a local correspondent should be found in or near every market-town, as the punctual collection of subscriptions is one of the most urgent necessities, and, unhappily, one of the greatest difficulties of Agricultural Societies.'

Most important of all, the decision was taken to take the Annual Meeting away from Bath and to hold it each year in a different town within the Society's area, combined with a Show of machinery and livestock. The first of these peripatetic Shows was at Taunton, which contributed £200 towards the expenses. This would have been impossible before the construction of a railway network, to bring people, stock and machinery to the Show. Railways changed the basis of the Society's operation.

The Society's revival was due to a large extent to the energy and ideas of a member of one of the largest landowning families in Devon, Sir Thomas Dyke Acland. Acland lost his seat in Parliament in 1846, by voting against the repeal of the Corn Laws. He was out of Parliament for eighteen years and during that time he took a very active part

in the affairs of the Society, including editing the *Journal* for seven years. He was tireless in insisting that a farmer with no scientific knowledge was working half-blind and with one arm tied behind his back. He took a keen and discriminatory interest in contemporary art and artists. It is not surprising, therefore, that technology was strongly featured at the Annual Show and that there should have been an Arts and Manufactures section; which gave visitors to the Show an opportunity to see, quite possibly for the first time in their lives, a collection of good paintings and sculpture, together with examples of the best contemporary industrial designs.

Another of Acland's achievements was to secure the appointment of a very remarkable man, Dr. Augustus Voelcker, as the Society's Consultant Chemist. Voelcker was Professor of Chemistry at the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester. He carried out his work for the Society with great devotion, analyzing samples of soil and fertiliser, writing long articles for the *Journal* — those on cheese-making were particularly valuable — and giving many popular lectures each year throughout the Society's area.

In 1866 there was a new Secretary, Josiah Goodwin, who held the post until 1882, and edited its *Journal* for a further seven years, until his death in 1889. Under Goodwin's expert and not ill-rewarded guidance — by 1863 he was being paid £105 a year, £5 more than the Secretary — the *Journal* became a publication of real importance, which reflected the full range of activities in the agricultural field. For those with the time to spare, these volumes of the 1860's and 1870's make excellent reading. One can dip into any one of them and discover a great deal of interesting information, well written-up and presented. It devoted a great deal of attention to the dairying industry, which was developing rapidly, mainly in order to supply the profitable London market.

The Society entered its second century with 1,033 members and £10,000 invested in Government stock, a very different situation from twenty-five years earlier. A merger with the Southern Counties Association had been arranged in 1868 and, after a hundred years of fluctuating fortunes, the Bath and West was now unquestionably the strongest local society in Britain. At the Centenary Meeting in Bath, the Secretary, Josiah Goodwin, said, 'The founders of the Society were among the first, if not the very first, to promote the welfare of the English people by a systematic co-operation between the tillers of the soil and the cultivators of literature, art and science. They recognised the intimate connection between agriculture, manufactures, and commerce. They took the trouble to inquire into facts in various parts of the British dominions; they recorded the experience of practical farmers; they endeavoured, according to the knowledge of those days, to dive into the principles of nature, and illustrate facts and experience by science.'

The retirement of Josiah Goodwin from the Secretaryship in 1882, because of ill-health, led the Society to advertise for a successor. They had, as a result, 1,073 applications, of which they eventually examined the testimonials of 340, and from the 340 they chose Thomas Plowman, who had been Secretary of the Oxford Society for the past fifteen years.

Plowman took a very active part in the life of Bath. He was a member of the Council for many years, graduating eventually to Alderman and Mayor. He was a magistrate, and a member of the Bath School Board. He was a hardworking and popular member of the Bath Literary and Philosophical Society.

He saw clearly that the old concept of the Show as something primarily intended for country people would have to go. The number of people earning a living from the land was getting smaller each year, and, as a result, shows had to be attractive to townspeople if they were to pay their way. Plowman understood very well that the best

way to get the general public interested in agricultural matters was to provide an opportunity to see farming operations in action. One of the Society's most successful developments of this kind was the Working Dairy. This had been pioneered in 1880 by the Royal Agricultural Society at their Carlisle Show and in the following year, at their Show in Tunbridge Wells, the Bath and West Society embarked on a similar but larger venture, using the most up-to-date equipment then on the market.

After the success of these demonstrations at the Annual Show, the Society developed a system of butter and cheese-making schools, during the summer months. The farms were very carefully selected and pupils lived in during the course.

The fundamental problem which the Society has had to face for a hundred years and more is: how does a provincial society do useful and necessary work without duplicating the programme of a national society? And how does it stay solvent in the process?

By the end of the nineteenth century, the answers to both these questions had become fairly plain. The Bath and West would continue to make sense by specialising on those branches of agriculture and horticulture which were of particular importance to the region, by digesting the results of nationally-based research and passing these on to Members, by crusading on behalf of both popular and unpopular causes, and by nursing promising local experiments until they were big enough to support themselves and to find sufficient finance and encouragement from other sources.

On the whole, the Bath and West has done all these things rather well. A glance through the file of the *Journal*, which came to an end, alas, with the outbreak of war in 1939, will show authoritative articles on, for example, silage-making, incubators, the need for uniform quality in bacon, cheese and butter, all when these developments were still in the pioneering stage. During the 1914—18 and 1939—45 wars it produced a series of cheap, easy-to-understand pamphlets which were the forerunners of those published by the Ministry of Agriculture during the 1920's and 1930's. It supported the National Fruit and Cider Institute at Ashton Court during its early stages and helped it to grow into the Research Station of the University of Bristol. It did everything possible to help the agricultural community to survive the depressed conditions of the inter-war period.

By 1951, however, it had become evident that membership was declining rather than increasing, and that steadily rising costs made it essential to re-plan the way the Society was running its affairs. In 1964 the public learnt that the days of the peripatetic show were over and that from 1965 onwards there was to be a permanent showground of 200 acres of flat ground near Shepton Mallet. With the move to Shepton Mallet, and the considerable investment involved, the Society was compelled to face the fact that it was running a large business and that its traditional form of organisation and management was no longer adequate. A Board of Management, elected by the Council, was set up to manage the overall affairs of the Society and a Capital Fund established to provide the money for more profitable operations. In 1966 the Board's Chairman, Sir Gerald Beadle, pointed out that it would be 'bad business and bad public policy to occupy these magnificent two hundred acres permanently with nothing in mind but a four-day annual Show. We can't farm it in the proper sense because we need it for the Show at the height of the farming year. To use it merely as a sheep ranch would be wasteful. We must devise and encourage suitable and profitable uses for the Showground all the year round.'

The future of the Society points unmistakably that way.

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