

The Highland Shows at Dundee

by Roderick Stewart

The Royal Highland Show is now so closely associated with Edinburgh that it is not often remembered that it started as a travelling show which visited Dundee no less than five times.

The Highland & Agricultural Society of Scotland was formed in 1784 and the first of the now-famous Highland Shows was staged in 1822 in Edinburgh on the site of the present Parliament. There were two more shows in Edinburgh, and thereafter the Highland Show precessed around Scotland's agricultural cities and towns, not finally coming to rest in Ingliston until 1960.

1843: Dudhope Park

The Highland Show first visited Dundee in August 1843, when, despite poor weather, the number of visitors was "very considerable" and the gate receipts totaled £900 14s 0d. This, in a pattern which was to be repeated over the years, was more than double the amount of any previous show except Glasgow or Edinburgh and was second only to Edinburgh the previous year.

A Pavilion was built "opposite Dr Russell's Church" (now the Ward Congregational Chapel, Constitution Road) and the "Exhibits of Implements and Machines, Dairy Produce, Roots, Seeds & Plants, ... "took place on the Show Ground, which was that part of Dudhope Park immediately behind the Infantry Barracks. "...with a gently sloping aspect to the South." This was reported as being fitted up "in a style which has never been surpassed," including water tanks for the 778 animals on show.

Arrival by Steamer

Getting to the Show was not easy. The railway network was still very limited. There was a line to Arbroath which carried 14,000 passengers during the three Show days and the pioneering Newtyle line had a link to Glamis, but visitors from elsewhere were dependent on stage coach and steamer.

The Dundee to Perth railway was still four years into the future and Perth was served by the steamers 'Lass o' Gowrie' and 'Tay'. The owners of the 'Lass o' Gowrie' were ridiculed for announcing three sailings daily each way, which was said to be impossible, but they managed. The 'Lass' left Willowgate, Perth at 2.30 am, 9 am and 2.30 pm, returning from Dundee at 4.30, noon, and 4.30. The 'Tay' also sailed at a surprisingly early 2.30 am, and it was "presumed that the hundreds of Fair Citizens using these nocturnal services roamed the streets of Dundee from 4.30 until the showyard opened at seven."

Visitors from Edinburgh also had an early start, with the steamers 'Modern Athens' and 'Benledi' sailing on alternate mornings from Leith and Dundee at 4 am. It cost 4/- cabin and 2s 6d steerage for the five hour run, which also served the East Neuk ports - Elie, Anstruther and Crail - where passengers were ferried out in small boats. The steamer 'St George' was chartered to bring livestock from Leith, while visitors from Aberdeen arrived in 'Bonnie Dundee' and from Montrose in 'Tarbert Castle'.



The Lass o' Gowrie

By modern standards, security was high-handed, though effective: "During the excitement last week occasioned by the Highland Show in Dundee, a number of visitors of the light-fingered tribe were present but so far as we have learned little trade in their way was done. ... mainly owing to the activity of the Police Officers ... succeeded in apprehending 17 notorious characters, who were all kept till Saturday, and then sent off from the town."

1890: Carolina Port

The 'Highland' returned to Dundee in July 1890, to a controversial site at Carolina Port. Despite the fact that there had been an earlier campaign of disparagement which cast a shadow over the show the attendance and the takings were high. In the event, the weather was good and the attendance was "far above the most sanguinous expectations of the most hopeful." The total for the four days beat everything in the history of the society with the exception of Glasgow in 1882 and Aberdeen in 1885.

"A Top Dressing of Cinders"

Three sites had been offered. Magdalen Green (too small), some ground at

Cleington (not sufficiently central) and Carolina Port where 23 acres reclaimed under the direction of harbour engineer George Cunningham were being allowed to settle in readiness for industrial building.

In the run up to the show, the Carolina Port site had been unhelpfully described as "a subsoil of old smacks and city refuse with a top dressing of cinders and sand" and ladies were advised "not to wear their summer dresses". Edinburgh writers "moaned that The Society is not compelled to go to Dundee. It is out of the usual circuit and the visit is only made after strong and repeated representations..." Furthermore, the 'Trades' Holidays were to be on, and Dundee would be "a deserted city." A report after the event stated, in complete contradiction, that, "It was the Holiday Week and Dundonians flocked to the show in their thousands."

Even the Courier & Argus was equivocal, reporting on the opening day that, "although the hard solum of the showground at Carolina Port might form an unpleasant contrast when compared to the green sward of the Borders, this drawback is more than compensated by the otherwise suitable situation and

admirable arrangements" adding that, "The street traffic was admirably regulated."

On the Friday "...at 10 o'clock 156 of the Mars boys, under Mr Flynn, chief officer, visited the yard. They were accompanied by the Mars Band, with Mr Davidson, bandmaster..." The Mars Band was, a few years later, to become an important recruiting aid for the RNVR when it formed in 1904, based in the Custom House before moving to HMS Unicorn in 1906. The RNVR account books record that band boys were rewarded with chocolate - perhaps 'Mars Bars' for Mars boys.

"A Brilliant Success"

The 1890 closing day headline reported "A Brilliant Financial Success" but even this was qualified: "the ill-advised spleen nurtured in the West created a certain amount of feeling at the outset, and spoiled to some extent the success of the Show." There followed a long gap of 43 years before the 'Highland' returned to Dundee, although it was three times in Perth and once in Cupar during this period.

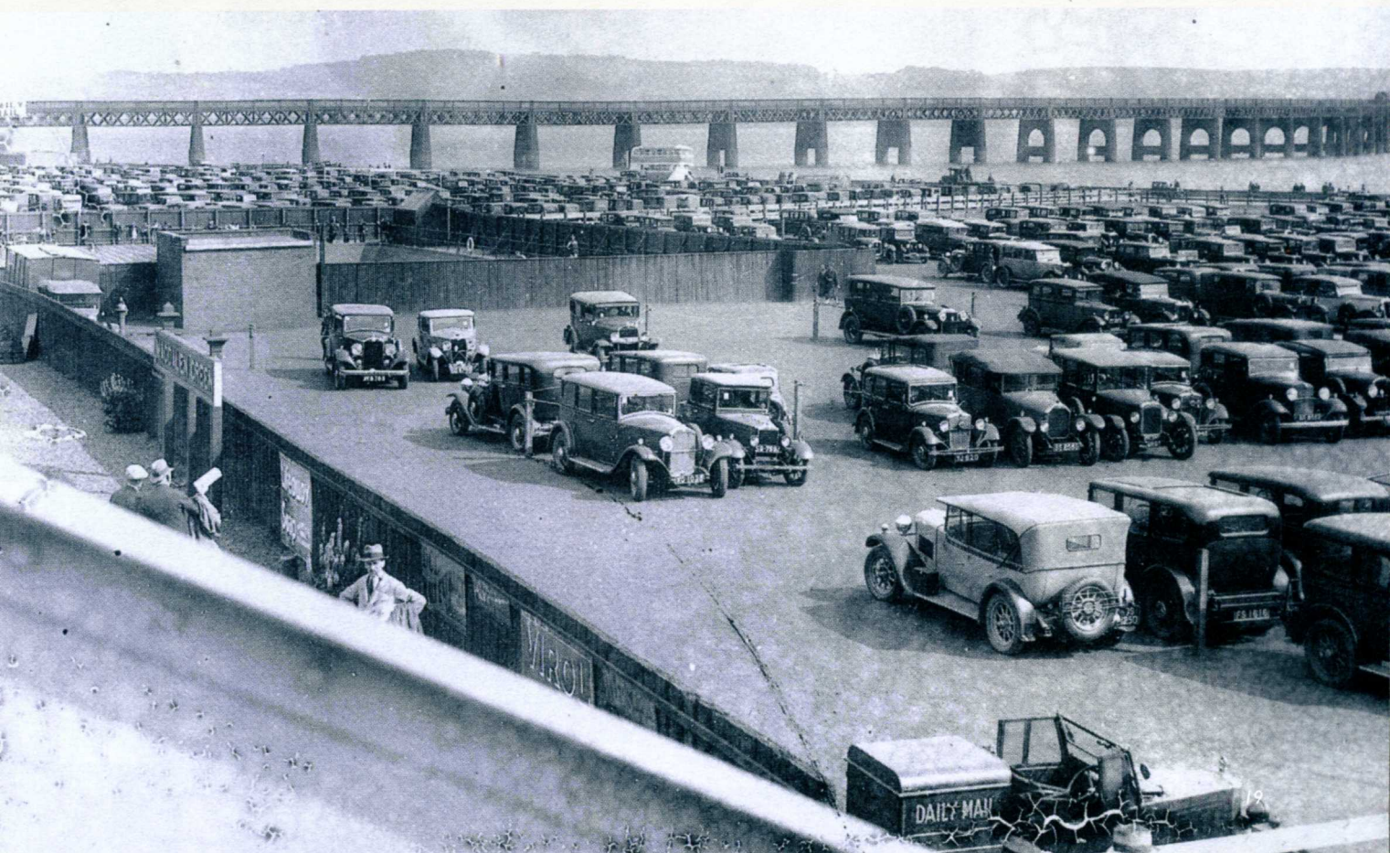
1933 The Western Esplanade

In a prophetic speech following the 1890 show, ex-Provost Ballingall had "regretted there had not been a better site, but ... seven, eight or nine years hence, they would be able to offer a piece of ground in the west reclaimed from the river and covered with beautiful grass." This forecast site materialised half a century later, then called Station Park, and was offered in 1931 as a site for the 1933 show. A smaller site at Caird Park was also offered, and there was a rival bid from Perth.

The 60 acres of reclaimed land, now called the Western Esplanade, was ideal and the Society Director declared in his 1933 opening speech, "The previous Dundee show had been given a site which did not satisfy directors or public but on this occasion they have made amends and given us probably one of the finest sites the 'Highland' has ever had. (Applause.)"

"Edinburgh and Aberdeen in Eclipse"

The freshly reclaimed, spacious and accessible grassy site combined with blazing sunshine to attract 96,340 admissions, the largest attendance in the



Show's history to that date, and in the recurring Dundee theme it was described by the Show Secretary as "one of the most successful shows the Highland Society have ever held." Local newspapers reported gleefully, "Edinburgh and Aberdeen in Eclipse."

The March of Progress

By 1933 visitors could arrive by motor car: "Just look at the lines of cars parked outside the walls at the Western Esplanade, shining as if their owners had given them an extra polish in compliment to the aristocrats inside," burred a reporter.

New technology was on display and there was great interest in "Farming Robots" with a report describing "many queer looking and noisy machines" and "...one with a cold. The asthma sound comes from the suction pipe of the mechanical milker." The "Robot that Harvests Potatoes" boasted the ability to "lift potatoes, clean them, sort stones and then convey them by elevator to the cart." - an evocative juxtaposition of new and old technologies. In a gentler foretaste of our modern crop of wind turbines, farms of the time abounded with small wind driven pumps and such "Windmill Pumps" were on



HMS Mars started out as a man-of-war launched at Chatham in 1848. She saw service in the Crimean War, was later converted into a steam screwship. Having become obsolete she was converted into a training ship. The Mars was moored in the River Tay from 1869 until 1929.

display, including the "self-oiling Hercules junior" with a tower 30ft high.

Royal Visitors

Much was made at each of Dundee's riverside shows of Royal Visitors, and of their Glamis connection. Meteorological "Weather Clerks" displayed weather records of local interest, and it was noted that, "the Duchess of York, when she visits, will be able to consult a complete history of the weather at Glamis Castle from 1909 until last year."

The Royal visit by the Duke and Duchess of York in 1933 was heralded by a downpour "which beat on the canvas

roofs of the tented city at the Western Esplanade like the tattoo of a giant drum" and it was reported deferentially that "there were many human little incidents at the luncheon".

A Dundee coal-cart horse won a Silver Medal. Rob Roy had been hauling coal for Messrs Thos Muir Son & Patton Ltd and an insight into the life of these horses is given by the report that he had coal dust ingrained in his coat, and had been taken off coal-hauling duties a month earlier in order to get him into show condition.

James Laurie & Sons

Messrs James Laurie & Sons, for many years Dundee's pre-eminent nurserymen, had a gold medal exhibit in 1933 with a "little stream, gaily making its way down a cunningly devised series of waterfalls to the pool below." In the next Show, 1949, they displayed a rock garden with rocks "from the lower slopes of the Sidlaws". Many Dundee gardens have been laid out by Lauries in their distinctive style and their former nursery at Ninewells has magnificent plantings and landscaping work. It is presently derelict. Gardens are famously ephemeral and this site is surely worthy of preservation.





THE HIGHLAND SHOW, ESPLANADE, DUNDEE. 20TH to 23RD JUNE 1933.

1949 Riverside Park

"The Greatest Show of All"

The Highland Show was in abeyance during the Second World War, and the post-war shortage of timber delayed a restart until the Inverness Show of 1948, when the "Royal" title was bestowed by King George VI. Thus when the Show returned to Dundee in June 1949 it came

Devastating Gale

Weeks of preparation were wrecked just days beforehand by a gale so severe that two yachts sank at their Royal Tay Yacht Club moorings and river sandboats dragged their anchors. The Riverside showground was a scene of devastation, with tattered canvas "like a Monday morning's wash blowing from the line" - a description which might not mean

The show attracted 5,000 cars and 400 motor coaches daily and the Corporation Transport Department broke its records. Twenty five buses provided an impressive "bus every 30 seconds" and carried 60,000 visitors, while a further 12,000 visitors alighted at Esplanade Station. Some 2,000 of these had left their cars in an allocated



as the "Royal Highland Show" to the same reclaimed land, now named Riverside Park.

The 1949 Show took place in blazing weather with record attendance and has gone down in the RHASS annals as "the greatest show of all" and the final attendance count of 163,917 has never been beaten. A decision in 1980 to include members and guests in the totals has added some 40-50,000 to the published totals since that date, so recent Ingliston figures look a little higher than Dundee's record but should be discounted by that amount for a true comparison.

much to modern readers with tumble driers. Almost all of the 350 stands suffered damage and 50% of the six miles of canvas was in tatters. The Master of Works, Mr Raeside, described it as "the worst setback in his five years planning the 'Highland'" but indomitably added that it was "It is not a disaster. It is an unfortunate setback."

Stands were rebuilt, the weather changed and by the eve of the Show the news had changed to "Non Stop Spraying Against 'Highland' Dust." The Show opened to blazing sunshine, with headlines reporting "Royal Highland Breaks First Day Record" and "Sun-Drenched Dundee Showground", The weather and site again combined to give record attendances, with each day new records being broken.

W. & A. ROBERTSON'S
Aberfeldy Sheep Dip
 BY TEST — THE BEST.

ESTABLISHED 1868.

We are exhibiting as usual at the Highland. Our Principal will be pleased to renew the acquaintance of our ever-widening circle of friends on

Stand No. 201

field at Wormit in Fife and there was more overflow parking in Riverside Drive east of the Rail Bridge.

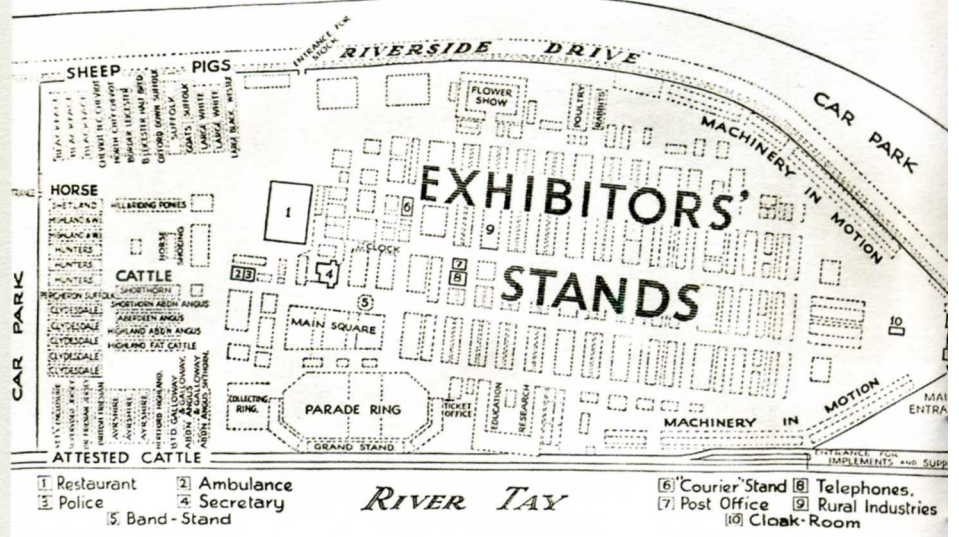
Royal Visit

The Royal visit was by the Queen without King George VI and the headline proclaimed "All Records Smashed in Third Day Rush." The Queen's observation on arrival that the Police were "all so tall... ..and so courteous" may have been prompted by the then Dundee Police height requirement of 6 feet, whereas the London "Met", to which she would have become accustomed, accepted shorter recruits in a reversal of the usual stereotype of urban Scots as stunted.

The Downfield Nursery of Storrie Thynne & Co had the same cherry tree in their miniature orchard which had been on display at the 1933 show, and from which the Duke & Duchess of York had sampled some fruit. It was reported with much anticipation that "the special tree will be pointed out to the Queen if she visits the orchard." Fortunately she did, and the reporter gushed, "The Queen here showed how retentive is her memory. Pointing to the cherry tree, Lord Airlie said, 'Perhaps your Majesty will remember...' The Queen broke in 'Yes, I remember, at this very show. I must tell the King.' "

The Courier Flag

The same Courier flag which had flown at Dundee's 1890 Highland Show was unfurled on the first morning by Lord Provost Fenton from the mast on the Thomson-Leng Publications stand, where people could have their names cast into metal Linotype 'slugs' as a memento. Some visitors had kept their slugs from the 1933 show, so it is likely that some present-day readers may still have one of the slugs from either date.



1957 Riverside Park

A Permanent Site?

At the end of the 1949 show there had been talk of a permanent showground and Lord Provost Fenton pressed Dundee's case, with the prospect of a road bridge across the Tay as a further inducement and Camperdown Park as a possible alternative. By the time the Show returned to Riverside in June 1957 the RHASS was convinced of the need for a

permanent site and hopes were again high the Dundee's Riverside might be that site.

A new £26,000 all-metal Grandstand was erected two months beforehand as it was difficult to store. It had been first used at Edinburgh in 1955 but had remained at Corstorphine until needed for Inverness the following year. The previous Dundee grandstand had its back to the river and faced north; this time it faced south to give a better outlook, while the covered sides and overhanging roof offered more





▲ The 1949 Pavilion



▲ After the 1957 whirlwind

protection from the wind, a real problem at the exposed Riverside site.

Cars and Telephones

There were fears that petrol rationing as a result of the Suez Crisis would affect attendance but it was noted that rationing had also been in force during Dundee's record 1949 show yet motorists had still arrived in great numbers. In 1949 the

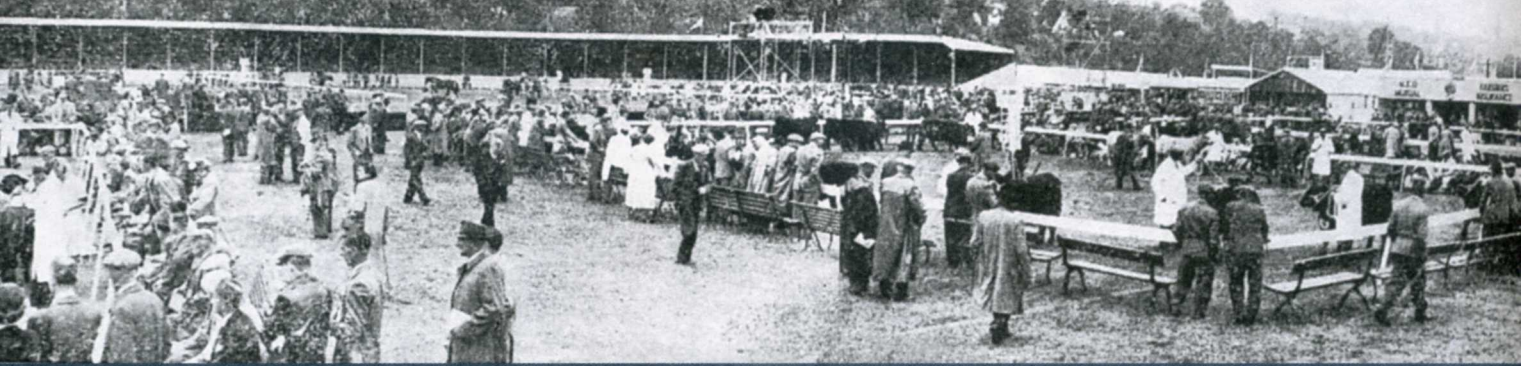
allowance for pleasure motorists had been just 90 miles a month, while the 1957 ration was for a much more generous 200 miles.

The Telephone took the headlines with the report that Riverside Park was connected to the rest of the world by 100 telephone lines. A cable connected these to Park Exchange and a special directory

containing the numbers in the showground (they all began with '69') was issued. In addition to official telephones, there were thirty red telephone boxes in the showground.

The 1957 weather was dry, the turnout was excellent and the Queen Mother missed a day at Ascot to attend the show. She arrived under a flawless blue sky, but





▲ Judging rings in 1947

it was noted that the front seat of her Daimler held raincoats and umbrellas. Crolls of Dundee showed her a new variety of lupin named Glamis Castle, and there was a panic when the Scottish Women's Rural Institute found they had forgotten the sweets intended for presentation. A taxi had to be hastily despatched to Freuchie for their collection.

The stars of the Show were the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the "Mounties", who staged their musical ride and added a splash of colour with their scarlet uniforms. A Map of Scotland was made in, of all things, tomatoes, and the Courier stand featured a topical Tay Road Bridge diorama.

Dust and a Freak Storm

Dust was again an issue, with the Cleansing Department providing water carts for spraying the ground. The dust transformed exhibits to a dull, reddish brown and some ladies at Rural Industries had a brainwave. They 'requisitioned' vacuum cleaners which were on display and were cheered as the dust was removed from exhibits as diverse as knitted garments and farm implements.

Then, during the dismantling of the show, a freak whirlwind struck, cutting "a diagonal swathe of havoc." The Show secretary Mr Lemmon said "it was a freak storm which seemed to play leapfrog over the ground. It first struck at a point in the stockyard, jumped to the BBC stand, jumped to the restaurant then jumped out over the river."

"The Greatest Show of All..."

Even with an attendance of 131,561, well above average, Dundee's 1957 show made a surprise loss of £6,700 because of the high set up costs. Set up costs for Dundee's 1949 show had been £30,000 and by 1958 at Ayr these had risen to £66,000 (that show featured a "Rabbit Gassing Demonstration"). In the same year the Ingliston site was bought for £55,000 and the way ahead was clear. Permanent roads and buildings could be constructed and set up costs eliminated, so Ingliston became the permanent site from 1960.

The Dundee "Highland Shows" live on in the record books and to this day Ingliston has never beaten the attendance at "the Greatest Show of All" - Dundee in 1949.



▲ The Royal Canadian Mounted Police
▼ The Queen Mother's motorcade

