

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

