

The first Show, 190 years ago



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What was the first Show like, 190 years ago, in colonial times? No fairy floss or rides, but all the important aspects we value today were established from the outset.

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Above: View of Parramatta New South Wales 1824 by J. Lycett. National Library of Australia
Right: Artist impression of the 1823 Show

The Agricultural Society of New South Wales held its first Show on 3 October 1823, at Parramatta Park. The Society, formed the previous year by the colony's leading citizens, enshrined this 'Annual Shew of livestock' in its prospectus, as a practical way of encouraging improvement in local animals and agricultural methods.

Early in 1823 notices in the newspaper listed categories in which generous prizes of silver plate and cash would be awarded at the gathering, allowing plenty of time, and incentive, for entrants to prepare well. Importantly, competitions were open to all settlers and their servants, whether members of the Society or not.

Fourteen prizes were to be given for stock: ten for Merino sheep, three for cattle and one for the best colonial-bred stallion; four prizes were allocated to servants for animal husbandry skills, and for good conduct and long service. Dingos were such a menace to stock that further prizes were to be awarded to the three individuals who culled the greatest number, with tails required as proof.

Show day, a term not in use until the following year, was the day of the

Society's quarterly general meeting, and planned to coincide with the half-yearly Parramatta Fair, where colonists customarily brought stock to sell and stud animals for appraisal.

The Show was held on the site of the present day Parramatta Town Hall and was well attended by visitors and Agricultural Society members alike. Judges assessed the exhibits and retired to Walker's Inn where the prizes (or premiums, as they were known) were given out at the Society's noon meeting. The President, Barron Field, personally handed out cash totalling \$92.00 to winners in the servant section.

During other business conducted at the meeting, Edward Wollstonecraft presented a model of a new type of cultivator and explained its workings, and ever since, the Show has operated as a platform for sharing knowledge and innovative ideas.

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The *Sydney Gazette*, praising the Show in respectful tones, noted that 'the public spirit of breeding and grazing appeared this day to be practically influenced by the encouragement and example of the Agricultural Society,' but the Show's success is perhaps best gauged by events the following year. Advertisements appeared advising that the prize winning stallion of 1823, 'Young Model', was standing at stud – the first example of a Show win being used for endorsement.

As Show Day approached excitement built and not carriage or conveyance could be had in Sydney as everyone who was able scrambled to get to Parramatta. Proof of developing interest in the Show was the expanded prize list, which included premiums for pigs, bullocks, beer, cheese and locally grown tobacco.

The first Show, rudimentary as it was, had encouraged quality and rewarded effort, and the idea had taken hold. A display of agricultural excellence and an opportunity to learn from peers, the Show was also importantly more than this. It was also, from the very beginning, a coming together; a much anticipated and enjoyed social occasion. ■