

Chapter 15

NATIONAL TRADES & INDUSTRIAL EXHIBITIONS

It is now time to turn our attention to the most consistent of all the exhibitions held in Bingley Hall, excepting, of course, the annual cattle shows. These were the Trade & Industrial Exhibitions. Always held in Bingley Hall, they were, confusingly at times, often referred to locally as the “*Stanley Shows*” after George Stanley, who managed them all until his retirement in 1922. From 1892 onwards their catalogues, and those of many of the other shows too, specifically record his involvement. This is not surprising for he was the local manager for a London firm, the International Trades Exhibition Company.

When he eventually retired, after the 1922 show, one of his sons, Charles, who was already in exhibition management at the British Industries Fair at Castle Bromwich, stepped into his father’s shoes at Bingley Hall. George Stanley’s death, in 1929, was marked by a glowing obituary in the *Birmingham Mail*.

The death took place this morning of Mr George Stanley, in his 79th year . . . [he was] for a long period associated with the Trades Exhibition in Bingley Hall . . . the success which attended the Bingley Hall

Exhibitions was a tribute to his organising ability . . . These exhibitions, held periodically, occupy a definite place in the social life of Birmingham and the West Midlands area. As a result of them the funds of the Queen's Hospital have benefited materially, and in recognition of his public spirit Mr George Stanley was appointed a life member of that institution . . . It was Mr George Stanley who first introduced into Birmingham exhibitions famous military and other bands, which have for many years been a distinguishing feature of public entertainment in the city. (1)

The significance of that last sentence is probably lost on younger readers, accustomed as they are to hearing music constantly on radio, television, CDs and audio-tapes. Opportunities to hear music of any kind were very limited for most people before broadcasting began, so those top-class bands in Bingley Hall were hugely appreciated.

In the Scrooge-like days before the inauguration of Britain's much-maligned National Health Service, for the vast majority such hospital treatment as they did receive was funded either by charity or contributory schemes like Birmingham's Hospital Saturday Fund. Founded in 1873, and still going strong to this day, the BHSF acquired its name from a fund-raising suggestion made by an eminent surgeon of the day, Sampson Gamgee. Factory workers were to be asked to work overtime on a designated Saturday afternoon, "Hospital

Saturday”, and to donate their pay for that day to the hospitals. (2) The *Mail*’s tribute to George Stanley’s public spirit, fulsome though it was, did not give all the details of his part in those hospital charities. In fact, over the years, five per cent of gross takings at the door of the exhibitions he ran were allocated to quite a few other institutions besides the Queen’s Hospital.

In 1903 for example, the donation went to the BHSF for the extension of their convalescent home for women, Marle Hall near Llandudno. The Children’s Hospital benefited in 1910, whilst in 1914 it was the turn of Romsley Convalescent Home. In 1922, his last year in office, the fund for re-establishing a children’s convalescent home received a boost.

The organiser of this Exhibition is following the long-established custom of using the Exhibition to help forward some of the hospitals of the City. In the past the Queen’s Hospital has benefited in this way to the extent of upwards of £3,500. This year the Exhibition is being held on behalf of the fund that is being inaugurated to re-establish the Hospital Saturday Fund’s Convalescent Home for Children which has been in suspense during the past year, owing to the expiration of the lease of the Red House [Great Barr]. (3)

In addition to these cash contributions there were other ways in which worthy causes were given a helping hand by George Stanley. For

example, in 1910 space was set apart at the Trades Exhibition, free of charge, for Birmingham's Royal Institute for the Blind. They were thus enabled to display the handiwork of their students to the public and to promote sales of goods that had been made at the institute. Again, at the 1921 exhibition, space was allocated for the Villages Centre Council to mount a very large display.

At this stand are to be seen the products made by disabled ex-Service men at Enham, Andover, the Council's first Village Centre . . . [they are] housed, clothed, fed . . . [and are] undergoing medical treatment and vocational training . . . 100 men who gave of their best during the war . . . The Villages Centre Council is the pioneer of this method for remedying the disabilities of those broken in the war. (4)

It is heartening to note from catalogues subsequent to 1922 that George Stanley's son continued his father's charitable work and that this valuable five per cent of the takings at the door continued to help Birmingham's hard-pressed hospitals and convalescent homes. It must be acknowledged, of course, that all this charitable work could not have taken place without the full agreement of the London firm for which both of them worked, the International Trades Exhibition Company.

Mention is made here and there of a Trades Exhibition being held in 1891, but no catalogue or other details have been located by the present

writer, the earliest catalogue on file in the Reference Library being for 1892. Opened on 11 April for a five-week run, the 1892 show, entitled the Midland Counties Trades & Industrial Exhibition, attracted substantial support from exhibitors, 185 stands being detailed in the 152-page catalogue. The industries whose products were on display ranged far and wide, from sandblasting to shipping, from boilers to bicycles and bamboo furniture. Gas engines were there in abundance, often in association with dynamos in order to produce electricity, now growing in popularity in all spheres of life. (5)

Shrewsbury & Talbot Cab and Noiseless Tyre Co, London, were exhibiting "*wheels fitted with Carmont's Patent Noiseless Tyres, which prevent vibration and noise, and enable the occupants of carriages fitted with them to converse with ease . . . and prevent slipping on tramlines*". (Steel-shod wheels rattling over cobbles certainly did make a shocking racket). Among his other inventions Mr Harvey from Coventry Road offered a contribution to road transport of a humbler kind. On his "*patent chainless gear bicycle . . . two bevel wheels take the place of the chain wheels with a driving shaft with a bevel wheel at each end*". What happened to that idea, one wonders? Shaft drive was eventually engineered on some motorcycles, notably by BMW, but that was several decades later.

From Coventry's Hinds & Co came soft drinks of a dozen varieties, including "Peeping Tom Ginger Ale"! Less traditional by far than ginger ale were the chutney and curry powders of Begum

Curry Co, London, many years before the widespread modern taste for such spicy seasonings was developed. Also from Coventry the firm of Harrington, Lathorn & Co offered "*patent tubular bells for churches, higher in tone and decidedly more musical than ordinary bells. Can be chimed . . . by one person*". Fortunately for the bell-ringing fraternity this idea does not seem to have caught on very widely!

Love of animal life was just about the last thing in the minds of some of the exhibitors. Roberts of Wednesfield, for example, was the manufacturer of steel-jawed traps. His products catered for the entrapment of an extraordinary selection of creatures: dogs, cats, otters, stoats, foxes, rabbits, herons, owls, wolves, even lions, tigers and kangaroos. Captain Tunnard's pheasant rearing contraptions seemed to be caring enough, with a hurricane lamp providing warmth for the chicks. But no doubt Lincoln Jeffries from Whittall Street in Birmingham's traditional gun-making quarter would have been able and willing to supply weapons with which to shoot them down when they matured. He advertised guns specifically designed for waging war on garden birds and a particular speciality were his "*rook and rabbit rifles*".

For those who fancied a better life elsewhere, Thomas Cook & Son, Hill Street, the "*largest shipping and emigration agency in the world*", they claimed, could provide passages to a number of suitable destinations: Buenos Ayres for £7 10s, Australia £12 12s. South Africa – "*to the gold fields*" – also cost £12 12s, although a very much shorter voyage. Presumably the vision of

striking it rich there exercised an inflationary influence on the ticket price!

There were eighty extra exhibits in a special section entitled Artisans' and Women's Industries, space for which was allocated free of charge. Many entries were models, such as that of a "*canal cabin-boat*" by John Adamson of All Saints Street. Women's entries, inevitably, were mostly of needlework. Mary Ann Moss, for example, had made a "*crewel-worked bed quilt*", while Mrs Emily Booker, from Hockley, less ambitious, offered "*one plush tea cosy*".

By 1894 the show's title had been amended to that which would be retained for many years to come, the "*National Trades and Industrial Exhibition*". Trade support had shot up to 215 stands, the catalogue reveals. The "*Artisans' and Women's Industries*" section again attracted an additional eighty entries. (7)

By 1899 there was something of a reduction in interest by potential exhibitors, only 189 stands being occupied. However the absentees would surely have come to regret their abstention, for it turned out to be an extremely successful show, very well attended.

Without doubt the greatest attraction there in that year was the illuminated fairy fountain – a wonderful innovation in that era – set into motion every evening to the delight of the crowds. (A "fairy fountain" of sorts was in action several years earlier – it is mentioned in the next chapter – but it was neither electrically powered nor illuminated.) The 1899 catalogue, describing a preview for VIPs, waxed eloquent on the beauty of the display.

Never before in Bingley Hall has anything so wonderfully beautiful of its kind been seen. Upon the floor a great basin 18 feet in diameter has been fixed, and in this are many concentric circles of jets . . . In the roof above are nine electric lamps, projecting powerful beams into the basin . . . The ordinary lights of the hall having been extinguished . . . the attendant turned a little wheel and the water . . . rushed through the central nozzle of the fountain, throwing a jet high into the air; as it rose it was like a spear of polished silver, and the falling drops glistened like myriad's of lustrous diamonds. (12)

A whole page was devoted to this description, detailing all the ingenious variations of jets and colour changes in the lighting and their effect on the water droplets. Then came the climax of the display.

When the full pressure was put on all the jets, the fountain was like a great waterfall descending from the roof with a spectrum more brilliant than the loveliest rainbow. (13)

Turning to the stalls, the range of products on display was all-embracing and there were enough demonstrations to satisfy the most energetic of visitors: baking, cooking, sweet making, wine making, woodworking, lace making, typewriting by the blind, portrait sketching and much else. Anglo-

American Novelty Co, Aston Street, were selling their “*magazine pipe – a cigar-shaped pipe having eight advantages over ordinary pipes*”. Oddly enough, in the catalogue they failed to explain what these advantages were. Perhaps it was just a joke pipe!

Hudson’s, Barr Street, described themselves as “*whistle manufacturers for police, railways, tramways, guards, conductors, boatswains, cyclists, referees . . . in all metals, bone, horn and ivory*”. Patent Borax Co, Ladywood, recommended their crystals “*for voice and throat . . . for public speakers, teachers and singers*”.

The section devoted to Artisans’ and Women’s Work had become very popular indeed, with 180 entries, most of the articles on display being offered for sale. The goods ranged from an “*Embossed door plate*” exhibited by P Dutton of Sparkbrook to a “*Repoussé Silver Salver*” from A J Drew of Moseley.

Walsall Electrical Co let it be known that “*the Electric Lighting of this Exhibition is entirely by us*”. For the opposition, Bateman’s of Steelhouse Lane countered with “*Gas Arc Lamps for indoor and outdoor lighting, a quarter the cost of electric ones*”. Staying with electricity, Birmingham Motoscope Co, Broad Street, explained that their “*Motoscopes . . . [are] automatic machines showing the latest development of animated photography . . . the views are automatically lit by electric light, self-controlled*”. (Motoscopes were similar to those old seaside amusement arcade machines like “*What the butler saw*”).

The “*International Photographic Exhibition*” attracted over two hundred entrants. Much interest was shown in the neighbouring exhibit too, a “*Display of specimen and rare fish*” laid on by the Midland Piscatorial Angling Society.

The show ran for eight weeks, from 20 March to 13 May, and music was provided throughout by famous military bands: Royal Engineers, Grenadier Guards, Royal Marines, etcetera. Refreshments included delicacies supplied by David Hurd, a Market Hall trader: oysters, lobsters and dressed crab, served with wholemeal bread. Butler’s of Wolverhampton offered ales on draught in the bar. What better could you want for lunch?