

## Chapter 17

### FOOD, DRINK & FLOWERS

The 1881 Birmingham Dairy Show, the earliest event concerned with food and drink that is mentioned amongst the surviving Bingley Hall records in the city's Central Library, was held over four days in the first week of June. It had been resolved at a meeting in the Town Hall in the previous October that the show would be held in the following September, but in the event the date was brought forward. Included would be "*an exhibition of Dairy Stock, dairy produce, and dairy apparatus, Goats, Bee Hives, Honey, Dressed poultry, Eggs, Apples, Pears, etc*". (1)

If a catalogue was published, which it may not have been, no copies have found their way into the library's collection. Reports in the press describe an interesting exhibition, well supported by producers, but, alas, not by the general public. Attendance was very disappointing which was a pity for, according to a report in the *Birmingham Daily Post*; an excellent effort had been made by the industry to mount an attractive show.

*The Committee and prominent promoters of the show have offered a liberal list of prizes, the announcement of which has led to a large entry in all departments . . . The rows of cattle are arranged similarly to those at the Christmas show . . . [there is]*

*an exhibition of apparatus connected with agriculture . . . [and] near the Gymnasium and under the galleries, is a profuse display of all kinds of appliances connected with dairy farming. In the galleries are the pens for live poultry, and trays of dead poultry and eggs . . . the travelling educational dairy of the Royal Agricultural Society of Ireland . . . will show how the making of butter should be conducted . . . The air of the Gymnasium will be kept cool by means of several hundred-weight of ice. (2)*

There is also a pamphlet on file at the library that was published afterwards concerning one of the prize-winning exhibits. In fact it won first prize in its class. The publication is entitled “*Descriptive Pamphlet of Henry Tomlinson’s Incubators and Appliances for Hatching, rearing and feeding farmyard poultry*”. Similar shows were held annually for a number of years. (3)

The next show devoted to food and drink, the International Food & Brewery Exhibition, opened in the run-up to Christmas in the same year, 1881. Once again it was well supported by exhibitors, some 150 stands being occupied. It is noticeable from the entries in the catalogue that, remarkably, more than thirty exhibitors were Italian or Swiss, some justification for the rather grandiose title that had been adopted. Luxury items such as chocolate, honey and pasta were on offer together with some foreign products not commonly available in Britain then, like truffles and salami. Enrici Zanotti of Gropello had on display a

pecially made sausage “2 metres, 40 centimetres in length, and of the circumference of 55 centimetres, made from the entire carcasses of two pigs”. Not to be outdone, David Carulli from Cremona displayed one slightly longer, “nearly 2 metres, 60 centimetres”. (4)

Turning to local suppliers, Southall’s of Bull Street, “*Pharmaceutical Chemists*”, were offering “*soluble meat – this contains the whole of the meat*”. Presumably this was produced for invalids or people who had lost their teeth! In the field of drinks, local dealers Martineau & Smith were selling not only wines and spirits but also beer taps, valves and gauges. William Barnes of Chapel Street offered not only those appliances but glass bottles too. Whitfield & Co of Oxford Street, Birmingham, went the whole hog with “*beer machines and bar fittings*”. Trade news was dispensed by Denton’s of London, who were the publishers of the *Country Brewers Gazette*. From just outside Birmingham, King’s Heath Brewery, owned by Isaac Bate & Co, were offering both mild and bitter ales.

In those days temperance evangelism was at its peak and several stalls had been hired by firms whose wares reflected this concern. Pierpoint & Co, Constitution Hill, was one of the local firms offering soft drinks, “*eight exhibits of non-alcoholic beverages, including lemon and raspberry beers*” and Geyelin’s were selling their own make of “*Temperance Fruit Elixir*”.

A few years later, in 1895, brewers returned to the hall in much greater force, the catalogue for their show listing over 200 stands. Birmingham

was well represented. Davenport's of Bath Row led the field with their "*Ales and Stouts, draught or bottled*". Nock & Sons of High Street were selling Whitbread's beers, and, from Charlotte Street, Woolway, Coleridge & Co had cider and perry on offer. Swan & Co of Fazeley Street announced themselves as "*Agents for Holbrook's American Sweet Cider*". Oddly named drink came from Icknield Port Road, where Turnor's were factors for "*Ally Sloper's Unsweetened London Gin*". (Ally Sloper was a cartoon character with a long nose, popular in the late nineteenth century). (5)

Once again, despite the show's title, the temperance point of view had several representatives. Cox & Co advertised their products as "*Non-intoxicant Anti-Burton Ales and Stouts*", whilst from just outside Birmingham, Aston Lower Grounds Co offered "*Rhinoceros Brand Hop Ale, fermented but non-alcoholic*". Non-alcoholic? Could this be true of a fermented drink? A London firm, Kops' Brewery, lauded their beer as "*Kops' Ale, pronounced to be the only perfect non-alcoholic substitute for Bass's: guaranteed brewed from the finest Hops*". Strangely, regarding Bass, although the catalogue carries a full-page portrait captioned "*The Right Hon Lord Burton, the head of the firm of Bass*", the company neither participated in the exhibition nor even took out an advertisement – of which there were a great many – in the catalogue.

Moving on from drink itself, "*Government-marked Cups and Jugs*" could be had from a local firm, Knight's of Hampton Street. Doulton's Lambeth Pottery, in addition to those same

authorised measures, would also supply “*Spirit Barrels in brown stoneware – special artistic designs prepared to order for Bar and counter decoration*”.

Exhibitors included firms displaying barrel tilters, barrel weighing machines, refrigerators, beer pumps, brass taps, and even brewers’ drays. Matthews & Sons, another London company, had a “*Patent Waste-not Beer Engine for the prevention of waste in the service of beers and ales. Sample engine can be seen at work*”.

To close the 1895 story on a homely note, Arthur Capper of Macclesfield had produced “*a special handkerchief for the Trade, named The Licensed Victualler’s Handkerchief*”. It was “*all silk*” as would have been expected from Macclesfield in that era.

Food returned to the hall in 1900 with the “*20th Century Food, Cooking & Domestic Exhibition*”. With only a daily programme to be found in the library’s collection, full details are not available, but it is evident from the programme notes that, in addition to food, there was much else on display. (6)

Amongst the non-food parts of the show were demonstrations of many kinds; straw-hat making, tweed weaving, ladies’ hairdressing, phrenology and palmistry, something for everyone’s interest. In addition there were cooking demonstrations and wine making. There was even a working bakery selling freshly baked bread and other products. Not only could those demonstrations be enjoyed but the most up-to-date entertainment technology was there too,

offering “*cinematography programmes, including the latest war pictures*”, of the Boer War, of course. (Boer simply means “farmer” in Dutch.)

It is, of course, extremely unlikely that these films would have included footage of the concentration camps the British military had set up in South Africa. At the very least 25,000 women and children perished in them, about ten per cent of the relatively small Dutch population there. These white civilian deaths considerably outnumbered military loss of life during the war, British and Boer combined. In addition a large number of black civilians, unrecorded but probably some 15,000, died in separate camps and under even worse conditions. (7)

After trying to take in all there was to be seen, visitors would undoubtedly have enjoyed relaxing to the music of the Grenadier Guards Band, especially in the evenings, when the Fairy Fountain, installed only the year before, was set in motion and illuminated during the concerts.

In February 1905 the Grocers & Bakers Association organised a show in Bingley Hall that turned out to be the first of a series of seventeen over the years, ending just before the start of World War Two. Entitled the Midland Counties Grocers & Bakers Exhibition, it was well supported by both those trades and their ancillaries. The 1905 catalogue listed more than 140 stalls, despite a restriction that was probably unique at Bingley Hall exhibitions. “*Hundreds of applications for stands not connected with the trade have been received and declined*”. (8)

There were quite a few participants in 1905 whose products are still on the market today. Amongst these are the refined sugars of Henry Tate & Sons, now, of course, Tate & Lyle, and Sharwood's "*genuine Indian chutneys and Madras curry powder*". Cerebos Ltd, still trading today from Newcastle-on-Tyne, were recommending their "*Cerebos salt, not only for seasoning the food but . . . it contains bran phosphates, the most nutritive part of the corn, absent from white bread*". (The Roman goddess of agriculture was Ceres, hence our word "cereals" and this product's brand name). Typhoo Tips tea, then the product of John Sumner, High Street, Birmingham, still retains a considerable popularity. Fry's and Cadbury's were there with cocoa and chocolate, whilst Quaker Oats Ltd were announcing that "*at this stall Quaker Oats will be prepared in the form of porridge and, with cream, will be served free to everyone*". Did they offer salt or sugar too, or both?

Libby's tinned meats were there, the London firm's display then bearing the name Libby, McNeill & Libby. Now the firm is part of Nestle Group. Hovis Bread Flour Ltd were selling flour, bread and biscuits, made in Macclesfield, where they continue to produce the same products today. Price's Patent Candles Ltd promoted not only candles, but soap and tapers too. Tapers, for the benefit of anyone who has not seen them displayed in heritage museums, were like extremely thin candles. When lit they were used to ignite gas mantles, gas stoves, etcetera. In lower-class homes they were rarely to be found, their place being taken by strips of tightly folded

newspaper called “spills”. Usually prepared and placed in a special container near the fire by children, they had the all-important advantage of costing nothing.

As was to be expected there were displays of specialist equipment and machinery. For example, Young’s Patent Hygiene Bin Co Ltd offered a variety of bins and mixing equipment for commodities such as sugar and flour. Baking ovens were in good supply, one of the manufacturers being a local man, Alex Anderson, from Ladywood Road. Delivery vans for the bakery trade, made in Buckingham’s Bradford Street workshops, were rather special. Their “*anti-tram rubber tyres*” were unusual in those days when the roadways were bedevilled by the ubiquitous tramlines and the clatter of iron-shod cart wheels on cobblestones. The slicing machines designed by Edwards’ Patent Slicer Syndicate Ltd, a London firm, “*cuts bacon in any condition . . . summer or winter . . . from a wafer to half-an-inch . . . the slices, when cut, remaining a perfect pile . . . do not require to be touched . . . by hand*”. This was unusually hygienic for the era.

Cox’s, yet another London firm – they seemed to predominate at this show – in addition to various designs of money till, displayed an automatic “*gold changer*”. Before their replacement by paper money during the Great War gold sovereigns and half-sovereigns were normal currency – normal, that is, if you were affluent enough to have any! Cox’s claimed that “*only the correct coin releases the drawer*”, i.e. the change drawer. This was a protection against both forgeries

and coins that had been trimmed of a small amount of gold from their rims. (Fig\*)

Before the introduction of stainless steel and chromium plating, a device marketed by a Sheffield firm, the “*Busibuff, for cleaning steel knives, forks and kitchen utensils*” would have saved a lot of time in a commercial kitchen. Griffiths from Stirchley, was just one of those displaying show cases and shop fittings, but he was also promoting his “*patent cheese cutter*” too. (So many products seemed to be “*patent*” in those days).

Health food stores, commonplace nowadays, were then extremely few. Lone pioneers then in Birmingham’s city centre, Pitman Health Foods, Corporation Street, were offering “*nut butter*” and “*cyclist’s outfits – a sixpenny three-course luncheon*” presumably consisting of health foods. What was their “*natural bread (uncooked wholemeal bread), which will keep fresh for weeks*”? If it was a dough mixture ready for home baking, how could it be kept fresh, especially for such a long time? Domestic refrigerators were almost unknown then.

When Heywood’s of London described their publication, “*The Confectionery Trade*”, as the “*organ of the Candy trade*”, they were clearly – and unusually in that era – using the term “*candy*” in a general sense, as it is used in the USA. Certainly, from the writer’s memory of the 1920s, in this country “*candy*” then meant only one particular kind of sweetmeat. One variety of this confection, “*Silken Candy*”, was being made and sold at the show by Myers of Snow Hill. “*Silken*”

referred to the prolonged stretching it received, so that it could be made into plaits. Some sweet shops had stretching machines operating in their window displays as a sales attraction but they were never referred to as “*candy stores*”.

The early years of the twentieth century were marked by high unemployment and, consequently, severe hardship. Even Lloyd George’s dole pittance was still a thing of the future. The poverty-stricken could only beg for charity. Happily, the charitable concept introduced at all Bingley Hall shows run by George Stanley was copied by other organisers, as was the case at this exhibition.

*Five percent of the Gate Money will be paid to the Lord Mayor’s Unemployment Fund. The bread in the competition (thousand of loaves) will also be given to the unemployed. The entry fees for the Hovis Competition (which already amount to £35) will be given by Hovis Bread Flour Co to the Lord Mayor’s Fund. (9)*

Encouraged, no doubt, by their 1905 success, the organisers staged a similar exhibition in 1906. Although they were yet again resolutely declining applications for stalls from firms outside the trade, even greater support was forthcoming, over 180 stands being taken up. (10)

Competitions had been announced in both 1905 and 1906 catalogues, but for their next show, in 1908, full details were printed. The grocery competition included classes for ham and bacon

slicing, window dressing and counter display. For the bakers there were no less than fourteen classes in the bread competition. One puzzle to a mere consumer is that, although there was a class for cottage loaves, which are obviously made in two parts, there was a separate class for “*crumby bread (or set bread) – a crumby loaf is one that has been moulded in two parts, properly joined and closely set*”. (12) Did the difference lie in the crumb texture, similar perhaps to that in a modern granary loaf?

Confectioners could compete by entering wedding and birthday cakes, Genoa and Madeira cakes, buns, pastries and pork pies. There were cooking competitions too, held in a model kitchen erected in the hall by the city’s Gas Department. Class 1 was open to girls attending cookery classes in elementary schools. They were to cook a simple meal, provisions being provided. These girls could also enter Class 2, together with housewives and cooks. The requirement in this class was to cook and serve a breakfast consisting of porridge and milk, a pint of coffee, four rounds of toast, together with a pint of boiling water for washing up. The coffee – obviously ground coffee – would have provided a problem for housewives and children from lower-class households, where such a commodity was almost unheard of then. Judging boiling water must have been a problem too! Perhaps it was the dishwashing technique that was judged.

Class 4, open to housewives and cooks, was to prepare “*a suburban villa dinner*”. The meal required was roast beef with vegetables with a fruit

start to follow. Strangely, whilst most of the provisions were supplied in all the other classes, in this one the meat, the most expensive item of all, had to be supplied by the competitors. Who got to eat the meal, one wonders, after that cash outlay?

Similar shows were held in 1910, 1911 and 1913. (13) The organiser's foreword in the 1913 catalogue included the following comment.

*Birmingham is the third largest city in the British Empire . . . [Not only London but Liverpool too was larger then] . . . It is natural, therefore, that the exhibition held in Birmingham, when properly organised, should attract a great deal of interest . . . Five Bakers & Grocers & Allied Trades Exhibitions have been held in Birmingham up to this time, and all of these have been phenomenally successful, so much so that the exhibition in this city is held to be second in importance to the London exhibition only. (14)*

The final show in this long-running series took place in October 1938. (16) A reduced price voucher has survived in the library's collection of ephemera. Apparently local retailers would hand these out to their regular customers, allowing them entry to the show for sixpence instead of nine pence, a worthwhile saving then. The voucher mentions the attractions of "tasting and sampling stalls", Herman Darewski's band, "Musaire, the modern miracle museum" and "Act Superb, a wonderful display of living statuary". (Strip-tease

in Bingley Hall!?! Surely not!) (17)

Much later in the life of the old exhibition hall several more shows were dedicated to food and drink. For example, in February 1950 there was a one-day show entitled “The Mothercraft Exhibition”. The show’s main attraction was the stand of Cow & Gate, baby food manufacturers and sponsors of the exhibition. Their display featured the St Neot’s quads, three girls and a boy, truly remarkable in those days, long before IVF treatment made multiple births fairly commonplace. The firm claimed that the babies were being “*reared on Cow & Gate Milk Food*”. (18)

For a week in November 1979 a Food & Wine Festival held sway in the hall and two years after that, in June 1981 came a Food, Wine & Kitchen Exhibition. (19) The 1981 show was repeated in June 1983. A poster that has survived claims that “*you may sample, taste, sip, test, purchase a wide variety of drinks, food and kitchenware to suit every taste and pocket*”. (It was a sign of the times that the exhibition ran from Sunday to Sunday, an unthinkable arrangement only a few years earlier.) *A wide variety of different foods are available . . . exotic oriental dishes . . . fine wines from France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and South Africa . . . beers, lagers, and ciders . . . coffee from Kenya and tea from India and Ceylon . . . come and choose the kitchen of your dreams . . . meet Diana Dors*, (20)

Fruit and vegetables came to Bingley Hall by the truckload several times between the wars. The first occasion was in the autumn of 1924, in

the form of an exhibition advertised as the Imperial Fruit Show. In addition to fruit, displays ranged from honey to grading machines, from fruit trees to refrigeration machinery. Trade lectures were arranged covering such subjects as cold storage of fruit. (21)

Apples of many varieties vied for awards in their separate categories. In the dessert class Russets jostled with Cox's Orange Pippins and others, whilst in the cooking variety Newton Wonders vied with Bramley's Seedlings. Greenhouse products, grapes, cucumbers and tomatoes, competed for their own awards. Growers hailed from more than a dozen countries, all of them, as the show's title indicated, still in the British Empire then. As was usual at Bingley Hall, musical entertainment was provided twice daily. The band of the Royal Marines played a well-chosen selection of light classics, melodies by such composers as Ketelbey, Rossini, Borodin and Sullivan.

The next Imperial Fruit Show to be held in Birmingham – like the Gas Exhibition they were normally staged in London – in 1929, was honoured by royalty, HRH Prince George, the future King George VI, officiating at the opening. (22) This show followed much the same pattern as its predecessor, but with special sections for “*Overseas Apples, Citrus Fruit and Pineapples*”. Potatoes were listed in the catalogue for the first time, a minor departure from the world of fruit, and there was even a special competition for potato growers. There was yet another departure from previous protocol, rather more significant than that,

for seed potatoes were on display from the Irish Free State, a country no longer part of the British Empire. There were awards and cash prizes to be won in a variety of categories; cold stored fruit, dried fruit, large fruit, potatoes and canned fruit, to mention but a few. (23) By all accounts the displays were quite splendid. They certainly evoked a glowing report from the *Birmingham Gazette*.

*Birmingham sees many exhibitions in the course of the year, but none more remarkable or interesting than the Imperial Fruit Show . . . so far as quantities are concerned it resembles a huge wholesale market – there are something like 100 tons of apples alone – but it is a market made beautiful . . . Even the cans in the canned fruit section have a specially tempting appearance, and the potatoes which are included in a display from Ireland look toothsome enough to be eaten raw. (24)*

Music was provided by the “*world-famous Savoy Orpheans*”, the resident dance band at the prestigious Savoy Hotel, London. The band’s popularity rested largely upon their frequent “wireless” broadcasts and many gramophone records. At the hall, in addition to popular foxtrots and other dance tunes of the day, they played a wide selection from ballet, opera and the classics. (25)

On its return to Birmingham once more in 1932 the exhibition’s title was lengthened to

recognize the importance of the expanding canning industry. It was now the Imperial Fruit Show & Canning Exhibition. The industry had its own area in the hall and was even catalogued separately. It is surprising to find in the catalogue that on “*Retailers Day*” lectures on shop fittings and display methods were illustrated by “*lantern slides*”. After all, film had superseded slide shows some years earlier. (26)

On this occasion several elements of interest were introduced beyond the mere display of produce and equipment. For example, the National farmers’ Union had constructed an attractive scenic display of an English fruit farm. From the Far East the Malayan Information Agency’s exhibit was a touch more exotic.

*A Malay girl seated in a jungle glade distributing leaflets drawing attention to the merits of Malayan pineapples. Additional local colour is provided by the presence in the background of various Malayan animals. (27)*

At these fruit shows there were always all kinds of equipment on display. In 1932 the range of such goods had expanded quite dramatically, particularly with automatic methods of grading, labelling and packaging. There were, for example, machines for picking and pulping blackcurrants and gooseberries. Fibreboard and corrugated cardboard cases and containers for produce, particularly canned goods, were much in evidence, advertised as “*half the weight of wooden boxes*”.

Traditionally, fruit, vegetables and flowers have been – and still are – exhibited in public, annually, all in their various seasons, some of the produce grown by professionals, but much by dedicated amateurs. Venues for such shows are many, some indoors, and others in the open. A classic example is the chrysanthemum show in late autumn. Bingley Hall hosted displays of these glorious blooms on many occasions from 1896 onwards. Unfortunately, until 1948 none of the relevant catalogues found their way into the Reference Library's collection. There is, however, an item dating from 1932, a daily programme for that year's *Birmingham Great Chrysanthemum & Fruit Exhibition*, held in November, but this tells us only that the Dunlop Works Band was providing a wide selection of popular music there three times daily. (28)

In November 1948, resuming after the war, the show's title was extended to include vegetables. This was the Birmingham Chrysanthemum Society's 77th Annual Show, and, as they always were, was held from Wednesday to Friday. Participants were allowed into the hall on Tuesday up to 10pm to set out their exhibits. Admission for the public was priced at 2/6d on Wednesday, 1/6d on the other days. (29)

Although the emphasis, quite naturally, was on chrysanthemums, there were classes for other flowers, notably begonias and cyclamens. Displays could be arranged as a table decoration or in baskets and vases. In addition to the flowers there were classes for apples, pears, grapes and all kinds of vegetables.

Entries at the 1948 show topped 130 but by 1950 the figure had climbed to 176. Fluctuating at a slightly lower level during the fifties, by 1962, at the 91<sup>st</sup> annual show, there were over 180 exhibits. (30)

In July 1932 the Birmingham & District Carnation Society's Exhibition beautified the hall with those delicate and usually fragrant blooms. It was that Society's first and only show held there and all that has survived is a schedule of prizes. (31) Roses appeared in the hall only once too and that was way back in July 1879. (32)