

# Chapter 18

## DOMESTIC EXHIBITIONS

### EVERYTHING FOR THE HOME

The first “*Everything for the Home Exhibition*” in 1909 was the earliest show in Bingley Hall completely devoted to the domestic side of life. At least 170 stands were manned when the doors opened on 6 October, a very good response. The show had royal patronage in the person of HRH Princess Christian. (That was not her name, of course, but her husband’s. Imagine in our own times having a royal sponsor named Princess William!) In their preface to the catalogue the organisers described the exhibition and its objectives.

*It has brought together not only everything that is essential to the equipment and decoration of the house, but it includes numbers of those articles of decoration and luxury that add so much to one’s comfort. Great interest will attach to the many appliances for saving time in cleaning and cooking. The ever-present lighting problems, too, should be solved for everyone . . . [and added] by visiting this Exhibition you benefit the Children’s Hospital. (1)*

In affluent homes the “*ever-present lighting problem*” was being tackled in those days by the introduction of electric lighting. Locally, from Clement Street, Thursfield & Co were ready and willing to provide the necessary fittings. Linolite, a London firm were offering “*Tubolite lamps*” which had “*straight filaments backed with a reflective aluminium surface*”. Was that an early form of striplight?

As for “*appliances for saving time in cleaning*”, Harvey Pneumatic Cleaner Co of Kidderminster, despite their title, included in their display a model with a ½hp electric motor. On the culinary side of domestic life several firms, including Coalbrookdale Ltd and Smith & Co, Beehive Foundry, Smethwick, displayed cooking ranges. Burman’s, from Birmingham’s Horsefair, offered “*Epicure cooking utensils*” made from “*copper and aluminium rolled together*”, and guaranteed to withstand “*being left on the fire when empty without injury.*” For how long they could be left was not stated!

Birmingham contributions to the “*articles of decoration and luxury*” mentioned in the preface were there in abundance, the most luxurious – and probably the most expensive – being Elkington’s table silver from their Newhall Street factory. Kean & Scott, still trading in Corporation Street to this day, displayed high quality carpets, curtains and quilts. Pianos and other musical instruments were on sale at both Priestley’s and Stockley’s stands. Both firms traded from Colmore Row premises. Luxury items for the man in the house were “*High class Havana cigars and Smoker’s fancy goods*”,

and for the dining table, jams, jellies and marmalade by Chivers & Sons, another firm still trading today.

Birmingham's Housing Department contributed models showing "*how the houses of the poor should be built and equipped*". What a pity the catalogue does not carry a photograph of that particular exhibit. It does, however, have an interesting illustration of a horse-drawn van that was being featured by Birmingham's General Institute for the Blind. (Following a visit by Edward VII in 1909 it would be elevated to Royal Institute.) Laden with wicker baskets, the whole side of the vehicle had been sign-written with their title and address, Carpenter Road, Edgbaston, the Institute's premises until 1954. The display of articles made by the blind included brushes, mats, boots, chair seats and machine-knitted garments. Blind workers also gave regular demonstrations on the stand of their skill at piano tuning and typewriting.

In the "Electric Theatre" set up in the hall's annexe "*animated pictures*" were shown. Given at half-hourly intervals, the programme consisted of travel items, events and comics. An odd description – "*animated pictures*" – were they films?

The organisers repeated their "*Everything for the Home*" exhibition in the following autumn. The royal patron this time was HRH Princess Henry of Battenberg. (This was a few years before the Great War gave reason for this royal name and others to be hastily anglicised, this one to Mountbatten, a simple translation from the German. Self-evidently, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was

impossible to anglicise, hence the invention of Windsor!) Fewer stands were listed this time – 130 – a reduction of 40, which hardly seems to justify the claim in the preface to the catalogue that this 1910 show “*would be found of far greater and more varied interest than its predecessor*”. (2)

A major innovation was the “*Hall of Fashion*” where famous Parisian fashion houses presented beautiful gowns. Another new feature was the “*Riviera Garden, where to the strains of music from perhaps the three finest bands in England, visitors may comfortably take refreshments*”. A model of a ward of the Children’s Hospital was on show and a “*working display by the Royal Institute for the Blind, space for which has been provided free of charge by the organisers . . . [who had] . . . set apart a proportion of the gross takings for admission for the benefit of the Children’s Hospital*”. The organisers were, as usual, the International Trade Exhibitions Ltd, London, in the person of their resident manager, Mr George Stanley.

The third and final show in the series took place in 1911. There was quite a strong Japanese element on this occasion. Demonstrations of their national sports and games were provided by those of Paro Miyakei, jujitsu champion of the world and his team. (3)

Oblivious to environmental issues, as most people were then, Stanley & Co, City Arcade, Birmingham’s leading fur traders, presented fur garments of all descriptions. Another clothing firm, Greta Patent Blouse Fasteners Co, proudly announced a new accessory.

*For the first time ladies will be able, by means of a practical contrivance, to fasten and undo their own blouses, bodices and such like, without the assistance of another person . . . [it is] made from rustproof steel.*

The illustration of the device, and its strappings, strongly suggests that in reality, even if the gadget functioned properly, some considerable discomfort would be inevitable for the wearer.

## BIRMINGHAM CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY

In 1925 the Birmingham Co-operative Society rented, for the first time, a large space at that year's Trades & Industries Exhibition. (4) It seems strange that they had not chosen to patronise this enormously popular advertising forum before, but it was evidently a successful venture for they participated for several years thereafter. However, in 1931, the Society's Jubilee year, they decided that something much larger was called for. Ned Williams, in his history of the Co-op, sets the scene.

*On the Society's fiftieth Anniversary one of the major events organised to celebrate the occasion was a two-week Co-operative Exhibition in Bingley Hall, which opened at the end of August, 1931. It is interesting to note that . . . five out of the original committee members of 1881 were still alive and over twenty of the original rank and*

*file members could still be assembled for a historic photograph. (5)*

The exhibition was formally opened by Alderman Saunders, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, in front of an invited audience, on Saturday, 29 August. (6) June 1933 found the Co-op there again, this time for an even greater occasion. The Co-operative Wholesale Society had chosen to hold their Annual Congress in Birmingham that year and, in conjunction with it, mounted a massive exhibition in Bingley Hall, as the *Birmingham Evening Despatch* reported on 3 June.

*The most varied and comprehensive exhibition of Co-operative products ever staged in this country was how Sir William Dudley, chairman of the Co-operative Wholesale Society described . . . the National Co-operative Congress Exhibition, opened today at Bingley Hall, where it will remain open until 17 June. (9)*

## BRIGHTER HOMES EXHIBITIONS

Several years after the Great War the *Birmingham Gazette* took up the ideas behind those “Everything for the Home” exhibitions and promoted a series of shows each entitled “Brighter Homes Exhibition”. A “*message to the visitor*” in the catalogue of the first in the series, held in February 1927, sums up the intentions of the organisers.

[The exhibition] *is designed to show how houses can be made both comfortable and artistic, and how the increasing number of labour-saving appliances can lighten the housewife's lot . . . the house, when labour-saving devices are applied, is not only scientifically cleaner . . . but by lightening the lot of the housewife and her assistants it ensures more health, more happiness, more leisure.* (11)

Lewis's, the city's leading department store at that time, now long gone, were there with furnishings of every description, even a full-scale model room, fully furnished. Boliston's offered "*Lingerin*" patent easy chairs and settees. Others were there with Triplex grates, cooking ranges and innovative tile and wood fireplaces. Quickway Ltd of London featured the "*Quick-fri*" [sic] *a steel and asbestos lined cooking pan*", many years, of course, before the lethal nature of asbestos was known.

Probably the greatest attraction was a fully furnished bungalow, complete with garden. For a small extra charge exhibition visitors were allowed to tour the bungalow. Valued at £250 – say £50,000 today – it could be won by entering a competition. Entrants had to estimate how many people paid for admission to the bungalow during the fortnight. The prize included all the furniture and fittings. The bungalow had been constructed by Harrison Smith Buildings Ltd of Dollman Street, and was a wooden building, presumably, being "*constructed at a low cost compared with brick building*".

Baker's of Codsall had laid out the model garden. For those who failed to win the competition and who wished to buy their own homes, Britannic Assurance Co was on hand to provide home purchase facilities.

Electrical equipment was now much more to the fore. Kelvinator Ltd and others were there with refrigerators, whilst Hoover, Vac-Tric and Electrolux competed for sales of vacuum cleaners. Fortunately for those whose homes had not yet been wired for electricity – the vast majority – there were several firms still offering non-electrical cleaners.

Leisure was catered for by firms such as Padmore's of Edmund Street, with billiard and bagatelle tables, Riley's of Constitution Hill with pianos, band instruments, drums and gramophone records. Boynton's, Bradford Street, wireless distributors, had "*everything for the wireless amateur*", speakers, coils, condensers, etcetera. No doubt their stall attracted avid interest.

Construction of simple wireless receivers – the term "radio" was yet to be coined – was a popular hobby in the early years of broadcasting. Children were well catered for with indoor games and toys from Hull's in the North-Western Arcade, Barnby's in the Great Western Arcade and, of course, Chad Valley Ltd, Harborne. (The firm derived its name from that of the local stream.) Fillery's of Greet made toffees on the stand, "*not touched by human hand, as they will be sized, cut and wrapped on a newly designed machine*". Competitors Harry Vincent Ltd were promoting their popular and delicious Blue Bird toffees. And so to bed with a

soothing cup of Ovaltine, supplied then by a London firm, Wander Ltd, and still popular today, but the firm itself long since taken over. The *Gazette* newspaper proprietors, in addition to promoting the show, participated directly by demonstrating their state of the art linotype printing machines, now largely relegated to Third World usage and industrial museums.

The series continued annually until 1939, the general content being rather similar but always with some additional attractions. In 1930, for example, "*The Golden Arrow*" was on show, the car in which Major Sir Henry Segrave snatched the world mile record at 231mph on Daytona Beech, USA, in March 1929. Another attraction was the BBC display. They had built two model studios, "*one the old type with draped walls and the other the latest type with panelled walls . . . and a gallery to accommodate studio audiences*". (12)

In 1931 the show was opened by film star Madeleine Carroll and there were demonstrations of ballroom dancing by championship winners. The following year the special attraction was the "*wonderful miniature house which the people of Wales are presenting to Princess Elizabeth on her coming birthday*". (13) After the exhibition closed, but before it was dispersed, the Prince of Wales paid a private visit to the hall in order to examine this gift, as the *Post* reported.

*For half an hour he made a close inspection of the unique little building . . . the Prince was particularly interested in the little bookcase which was made to his order*

*by the Midland Centre Disabled Ex-servicemen's Handicraft Association. (14)*

The outdoor life was well to the fore with exhibits of tents and caravans. In "*Caravan Town*", a special section of the show, Midland Cruiser Caravans Ltd, from Coventry Road, that "*cars of 7hp upwards may easily tow a cruiser caravan*". Romford's Adaptable Trailer Co displayed a "*Car Tent – the Pocket Caravan*" and the Camping Club of Great Britain & Ireland sought to recruit new members.

A television centre was set up in 1933 and there was also a silver model on display of Sir Malcolm Campbell's record-breaking "*Blue Bird*" car and another one of the Schneider Trophy aeroplane in which Flight-Lieutenant Staniforth had flown at a speed of 407 mph, another record. (15)

Anna Neagle starred at the opening of the 1934 show and the Women's League of Health & Beauty rented a stall: "*racial health*" was their slogan! (16) (Were they competing with Hitler in the racism stakes?) In 1935 from Aston Cross came the Hercules Cycle & Motor Co – did they ever produce motors? – displaying the "*record breaking cycle that Frank Southall rode to smash seven road racing records*" in 1934. There were cycle races "*each evening on the Grand Stage of the Exhibition*". Even the "*Grand Stage*" must have been somewhat inadequate for racing cyclists to perform on. However, while you watched you could relish the Bovril Company's offering – "*Bovril chocolate with added Bovril, plain or*

*milk*". Surprise, surprise! That tasty little snack sank without trace! (16)

By 1937 Bristol Street Motors were selling 30hp Ford 4-door saloon cars for £250, taxed at £22 10s 0d per annum and, for less affluent mortals, the 8hp Popular at £100, taxed at £6, (Do remember, when you look at those apparently low prices, that a workman would consider himself fortunate to be earning £150 per annum then). (17)

In February 1939 the organisers' own display consisted of a large "*model depicting a smoky slum district which slowly changes before the eyes of the visitor to a bright garden suburb*". (12) They were not to know it but that idyllic vision would have to remain on the back burner for many a long day, thanks to World War Two. Before the year was out Warner's Holiday Camp at Dovercourt, near Harwich – "*prices from 55/- per week* – would find itself filled with non-paying guests, the troops.

Opened by stage and radio star of the time, Evelyn Dall, within the exhibition were harbingers of the conflict that lay ahead, indicated even in the sponsors' foreword to the catalogue.

*In these extraordinary times it is perhaps almost as important that the man-of-the-house should know as much about making a room gas-proof as the woman-of-the-house knows about her gas stove. A gas-proof room, it is true, hardly comes under the description of a "brighter home". But knowledge of how to make a room gas-proof is, or may prove, a useful piece of information to the holder. (18)*

At the Air Raid Precautions stand they were demonstrating this technique and also recruiting personnel. The Royal Air Force was there too and was also trying to attract recruits. Whether the National Fitness Council had the possibility of war in mind is not known but they organised no less than sixty events in a comprehensive sports programme conducted in a specially prepared arena.

*Visitors will see basket ball played by experts, boxing, quarterstaff fighting by army experts, fencing, spectacular displays by the Women's League of Health & Beauty, physical training, games, and general athletics by Birmingham schoolchildren's teams, gymnastics, acrobatics, and wrestling by the Birmingham Athletic Institute.*

The Brighter Homes series has been summed up in Donald Pigott's memoirs in an affectionate style that many of the older generation can empathise with.

*We never missed the Brighter Homes Exhibition at Bingley Hall, when the entry fee was soon recouped by the exhibition's free samples of food and drink, badges and booklets. There were miniature Hovis loaves to take home, slugs of linotype set with your name while you waited and presented by the linotype operators on the "Birmingham mail" stand. Thoughtful*

*exhibitors provided you with a carrier bag to transport the loot. All this for sixpence . . . against a colourful display by the “Dancing Fountain” to the accompaniment of the “Skaters’ Waltz” or the “Poet and Peasant” overture. (19)*

Brighter Homes shows were not resumed after the war, their place being taken by the annual Midlands Ideal Home Exhibition. This series, to which the next chapter is devoted, became enormously popular and remain so, although now at the NEC, to this very day.

Another popular post-war feature in the hall was the annual Homes & Gardens Exhibition organised by the Birmingham Post & Mail Group by Mr Herbert Daniel. The first of these was held in 194\* but, once again, no catalogues or other ephemera are available at Birmingham Library.

In fact the library has only one catalogue from the whole series, that of 1960, when more than 100 exhibitors displayed their wares. As the organisers’ foreword informed the visitors, some very interesting gardens were on show.

*The Garden Section has been completely replanned and this year includes a replica of the famous Santa Fe garden in California, a massed floral display, a contemporary patio garden, as well as two fine examples of rock gardens. In addition, five leading Midland authorities have planned layouts suitable for a typical small front garden plot. (22)*

There was a specially constructed theatre on the balcony where Doreen Davies, a cookery expert, popular on television at that time, demonstrated her methods. Visitors could enter cookery competitions and, most unusually, there was one for men. They were required to cook bacon and eggs. The winner was promised a year's supply of these comestibles.

Jackson's Bathrooms, from Heath Street, were encouraging owner-occupiers to install modern bathrooms. Under the 1949 Housing Act half the cost would be met by a Government grant.

Electrical appliances of all kinds were at last in good supply and variety. Kenwood was selling refrigerators and their Chef food mixers and Hoover offered not only vacuum cleaners but their Hoovermatic washing machines, a model that was to become very popular. Amongst those selling TV sets, Hadley Bros were offering rental sets with slot payment, a useful facility for those with a limited budget. An early sign of the developing passion for DIY was the Scandinavian self-assembly kitchen units on the stand of Browne-Clements from Surrey.

The Fashion Carnival was set against a background of Ancient Rome and featured fashion model parades four times daily. In the Little Theatre entertainment and music were provided by the likes of Nat Temple, George Mitchell and other well-known characters. An enticing paragraph in the catalogue ensured that throughout the show the circulation of the sponsors' evening newspaper was boosted considerably.

*Above all, be sure to carry your copy of the exhibition edition of the Birmingham Mail. Each day a Password will be printed on the front page. If you know this when challenged by the Password Man you will receive one of the many hundred prizes which are being given away.*

In February 1950 Messrs Cow & Gate, leading baby food specialists of the time, hosted a one-day show in the hall, the Mothercraft Exhibition. A surviving leaflet sets the scene.

*Come and see the St Neots Quads at our stand at the Mothercraft Exhibition, Bingley Hall, Birmingham, on Saturday, February 25<sup>th</sup> at 2pm. These children were reared on Cow & gate Milk Food, the Food for Royal Babies. (23)*

The housing problem seems always to be with us and there are always people offering solutions. In 1959 one such was a magazine, *The Midlands Homefinder*, the journal of the Premium Property Co. (24)