

Chapter 23

CATTLE SHOWS END IN BIRMINGHAM

By the early 1970s Birmingham Agricultural Exhibition Society (BAES) was finding it more and more unrealistic to stage their annual fatstock show, which was essentially a rural event, right in the centre of Birmingham. Traffic congestion and horrendous parking problems made potential exhibitors ever more reluctant to participate. The situation is described very well by Brenda Greysmith, the historian of Staffordshire Agricultural Society.

This Society of national repute and renown and with an enormous history behind it, was the organiser of the largest indoor fatstock show out of London and the largest poultry show in Europe and had been a tenant of Bingley Hall in Birmingham, with the City of Birmingham as their landlord At one time the show ran for four or five days and had an attendance of 40,000 to 50,000 farmers. But then Birmingham was a much more rural area and not the city it is today. The growth of the city and the advent of the overpasses and underpasses and complicated junctions made farmers wary of facing the city traffic, to say

nothing of parking by the hall. So the attendances tended to fall off although the entries of livestock and poultry continued to prosper – the glory of winning at Birmingham was still strong in the farming community. (1)

At this time the society also became involved in a dispute with the City Council about liability for repairs to the hall, which had now become very dilapidated. It was estimated that the work required would cost some £100,000 – at least £1 million in today's money – a sum which, BAES claimed, would bankrupt them. Additionally, the very future of the building as an exhibition venue looked bleak. Construction of Birmingham's new National Exhibition Centre, a massive state of the art complex on a green-field site, already going ahead, was due to be completed by 1976. (2) It seemed extremely doubtful whether the Council would wish to retain a decrepit old exhibition centre which, despite its poor condition, would nevertheless be competing for business with their new one. The legal position at the time was that, although BAES still held a lease valid until September 1977, the Council could terminate the tenancy at any time by simply giving 18 months' notice. (3)

In reality BAES officials were already discussing their problems with Staffordshire Agricultural Society, who owned a sizeable showground on the outskirts of Stafford but lacked an exhibition hall. Successful negotiations in Stafford eventually led BAES to sever a connection

with Birmingham that had lasted for almost 130 years. What followed this decision has been so momentous that a full account belongs to a later chapter. Suffice to say that in 1974 the BAES did move to Stafford.

On Wednesday 21 November 1973 Bingley Hall's doors opened for the last cattle and poultry show to be held in Birmingham. Except for the years affected by the two world wars these shows, for which the building had been erected in the first place, had been held every year since the first exhibition in 1850. Maureen Messent painted the scene for the *Birmingham Evening Mail*.

Bingley Hall is pulling itself together for the last Christmas Fatstock Show. Downright decrepit against the geometry set lines of the Repertory Theatre but welcoming to the animals and owners who make up the 111th exhibition of cattle, sheep, poultry and pigeons . . . There's regret that, owing to restricted movement of pigs in some areas of the Midlands- [due to an outbreak of swine vesicular disease] – your breakfast rashers will not make an on-the-hoof appearance this year . . . Steers fattened for slaughter plunging unknowing muzzles into haynets, flicking ears like velvet, touchingly trusting because you know their fate and they don't . . . Show secretary Mr Vernon Prestwood, who farms near Stoke-on Trent, points out that "Since I'm a vegetarian, I wasn't the ideal choice for this assignment. There's little point in

becoming neurotic at the prospect of slaughter for the steers”, he says firmly, “That’s how we make a living.” . . . The owners slept on shake-downs in the balcony at Bingley Hall last night. Today they rose at 5 am to start grooming. (4)

In a move to promote trade with Europe BAES had obtained the services of a top French Show judge in addition to the usual British team. Flown over from Paris specially for the judging, M Robert Dugenest was an expert on Charolais cattle, a breed much in evidence at the 1973 exhibition.

After the judging M Dugenest said he was highly impressed with the quality of cattle on show . . . A special feature of the show is a competition in which visitors are invited to assess the weight of a cow . . . Money raised from this is to go to the Birmingham Mail Christmas Tree Fund (5)

The pithy title of “Miss Birmingham Agricultural Exhibition Society” was won by Miss Jane Frank, an eighteen-year-old from Great Witley, with Miss Gillian Jones, 22, from Craven Arms in second spot. (6) Was M Dugenest’s expert eye for quality engaged in this selection too, one wonders?

Although a loss of the large open space apposite the hall, now taken up the splendid new Repertory Theatre, added to the difficulties, Bingley Hall’s last cattle show was certainly not lacking in support. Both cattle and sheep entries

were substantially higher than they were in the previous year. But when the doors were closed on the Thursday evening it marked the end of a remarkable and lengthy chapter in Birmingham's history and on the site of the ancient farm of Binges. Millions of animals and birds had passed through those Christmastide doors over the years, together with hundreds of thousands of people, many who had brought them to the hall and even more who had come to appreciate the finest livestock and other produce that British farming could offer.