

Chapter 26

BINGLEY HALL, STAFFORD

Staffordshire Agricultural Society was founded two hundred years ago. In the 1970s Mrs Brenda Greysmith was commissioned to research the Society's history. Helped by the County Archivist, Mr Fred Stott, she produced a book entitled *The History of Staffordshire Agricultural Society*. It was published in 1978 as part of the double celebration that year, their 21st year at the Weston Road showground and their 150th County Show. The book is a mine of information about the Society's activities since the inaugural meeting at the Swan Inn, Lichfield, in 1800. (1)

In her introduction to the book the author emphasised the difficulties that she had encountered, due to "*a great lack of records*". How fortunate it is that those records, meagre though they were, found a place in her book, because, sadly, only a few years later that "*great lack*" became total lack due to a devastating arson attack at the showground in 198*. The blaze destroyed the Society's office block and, with it, every single document and photograph in their possession. In consequence any attempt to update Mrs Greysmith's excellent account is forced to rely almost entirely upon such information as may be gleaned from the files of the local press, notably *Stafford Newsletter*.

In the early 1970s, as mentioned in a previous chapter, Birmingham Agricultural Exhibition Society (BAES) entered into negotiations with the Staffordshire society. The location of their large showground on the outskirts of Stafford could hardly be bettered. In the heart of England and easily accessible by road rail and air, it was ideal for national events. The negotiations were successful and the result was announced to the public in November 1973. *Stafford Newsletter* published some of the details.

Stafford is to become the site of the Midlands' biggest exhibition centre. The giant £150,000 indoor show site will replace Birmingham's Bingley Hall centre as the place for all major shows in the area . . . Details were revealed this week by John Ryman, president of the Birmingham Agricultural Exhibition Society, who are joining Staffordshire Agricultural Society in the project . . . The cost of the buildings will be met largely by the Birmingham group, with the Staffordshire society making a £30,000 contribution. (2)

The *Birmingham Post* gave further details, some of which suggest that the Staffordshire society, holding all the aces, rather than taking a gamble, as their chairman declared, actually drove a hard bargain.

The site of the hall is to be leased to the Birmingham Agricultural Exhibition

Society . . . for 50 years . . . Mr John Ryman, president of the Birmingham society, said there would be no question of the amalgamation of the two societies . . . Mr Rowley Barnes, chairman of the Staffordshire society, called it “a gamble worth taking”. The finances of the situation are that the Birmingham society will pay £120, 000 for the building, including the cost of lighting and heating installations, while the Staffordshire one will contribute £30,000 for car parking facilities and drainage. (3)

Over the years many events at the Weston Road open air venue had suffered badly due to adverse weather. A typical occasion in the very year of this announcement was the Steam Festival in July 1973.

Torrential rain and a hail storm turned Staffordshire County Showground into a quagmire at the weekend and deterred thousands of people from attending the Midland Festival of Steam. (4)

Whilst not completely overcoming the difficulties created by such atrocious conditions, the new development would at least allow many activities to take place indoors, rescuing most events from complete disaster. At £30,000, the wealthy Staffordshire society had surely struck a wonderful bargain. History shows that it certainly was exactly that.

Work started on the site in January 1974 and, despite delay due to late delivery of steel work, by the time Stafford's Annual County Show was held in late May, the partially built hall was able to put to good use, as the *Birmingham Post* reported.

Heavy and frequent showers on the first day of the Stafford Show yesterday served to emphasise the value of the new "Bingley Hall" . . . at Weston Road, Stafford. This impressive single-span structure is only partly complete, but it housed all the cattle in the show yesterday, a floral display, snack bars, trade stands and some auxiliary services . . . Although the weather worsened, the attendance by mid-afternoon was around 13,000, 2,000 up on last year.
(5)

Since no documentation describing the hall as it was at the time of construction survived the fire, it seems permissible to use extracts from today's publicity material, simply ignoring additions to the building made since 1974.

The main hall offers 5,057 square metres of gross exhibition space . . . upstairs are three balconies 7.25 metres wide . . . a side entrance with a purpose-built ramp is used for vehicular access to the highest level. (6)

As with most estimates the actual building costs rose steeply, from £150,000 to £230,000, half as much again, the extra amount falling on the

shoulders of BAES, a point that will be returned to later. The hall was brought into full use in October 1974 as the venue for the North-western Dairy Show, but the biggest triumph of the year for all concerned was to come in November.

The filthy weather that graced the opening of the 112th Birmingham Cattle & Poultry Show, held this year at the New Bingley Hall, did not deter the visitors. More than 5,000 came the first day compared with 600 during the two days of the show when it was held for the last time in Birmingham in 1973. (7)

Nevertheless the constant rain turned the showground into a mud-bath, creating very unpleasant conditions, especially for car drivers, many of whom found themselves bogged down.

The popularity of the new exhibition venue was quickly established. On 5 January 1975 some 4,000 people visited the Midlands Antiques Dealers' New Year's Fair and three weeks later major dog show was staged in the hall.

Nearly 2,000 dogs took over Staffordshire County Showground on Saturday . . . Show secretary Olive Grindey said; "This has been a wonderful show and it seems that nobody has been worried by the move from Birmingham to Stafford. (8)

April and May were busy months too. During the last weekend in April motor cars were on show there.

The glitter and glamour of Earls Court Motor Show made a quick journey north at the weekend . . . Bingley Hall became the centre of activity for dreamers, drivers and dealers as the first big motor show in the area was staged. (9)

The filthy weather that marred the 1974 County Show was not repeated in 1975. In fact the sun shone continuously, attracting the public in very large numbers. Almost 39,000 people passed through the turnstiles during the two days of the show, 28/29 May. Unfortunately this splendid success revealed considerable inadequacies in both catering and toilet facilities. Life is never simple for organizers! (10) Packed with animals at the show, not to mention all those untidy visitors, the hall became very much the worse for wear. The clean-up, always a massive task, had on this occasion to be completed very quickly indeed. The hall was required only a few days later for the vote-counting operation entailed by the Common Market referendum. (11)

Increased attendances at Stafford shows forced the BAES to split their annual show into two parts. Livestock and farm machinery were assigned to mid-November, with poultry and pigeons being held over until the first week in December. This would allow more space for trade stands at both shows. (12)

The next Car & Leisure Show, in April 1976, was not the success that had been expected, but not for a reason that could have been foreseen when the hall WAS booked for the event.

Attendance at the four-day event at New Bingley Hall dropped 4,000 from last year's figures . . . Organisers think a lot of people who would have attended the show on Saturday were lured to Wembley to watch Stafford Rangers in the FA Trophy final. (13)

It must have been a great relief for the organisers that events in May were more successful than that. Charolais breeders' first ever national show and sale, a Rolling Stones concert, a Diocesan Family Day and, finally, the Annual County Show, could hardly have passed off with greater credit to all concerned. (14) Autumn events, just as successful, included an antique fair and an invasion of cats.

Tomorrow at Bingley Hall, more than 1,000 cats will be vying for the attention of judges. One of the show's committee members, Shirley Bullock, said; "The Midland Counties Cat Club Show is one of the largest in the country". (15)

In the following year 1977, yet more top rock bands and pop stars played to capacity crowds in the hall. David Essex and Status Quo came in January, Frank Zappa in February, Black Sabbath and Pink Floyd in March, Queen in May and, later in the year the US rock band, The Eagles.

On March 6, Sabbath provided the main course at New Bingley Hall. The "new" Sabbath is more lyrical and more musical

. . . but that doesn't mean that Bingley Hall won't be shaking on its foundations. (16)

During the last weekend in May, its usual spot, Staffordshire County Show, an extra special event in 1977 because of Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee, was a great success.

Nearly 30,000 visitors passed through the turnstiles last week – the largest gate since the move to the permanent site at Weston Road, Stafford, 20 years ago. Despite the set-back of having to bar the display of bacon carcasses and other open food in Bingley Hall, the non-appearance of the Kenyan dancers and the second-day cancellation of the free-fall parachutists because of wind safety limits, show directors Lord Stafford and Tom Cartmail managed to keep the organisation running smoothly and the crowds entertained. (17)

There were plenty of other bookings during the year, culminating with an excellent BAES cattle show in November. However, problems still existed due to the duplication of the name of the hall and even that of the BAES itself.

Bingley Hall is still associated with Birmingham in many people's minds, and having the city name on the show title just adds to the muddle . . . Even this year three entry forms were still posted to Bingley Hall, Birmingham, and at the last show several visitors turned up to find a derelict city hall with all the action miles away . . .

BAES chairman George Peach said; "I am pressing very strongly to call it the Midland Smithfield". (18)

The fourth Car & Leisure Show in mid-April 1978 was the best yet and very well attended. It was followed by an unusual event staged by the Boys' Brigade.

Hundreds of Boys' Brigade members from all over Britain will be visiting Stafford's Bingley Hall tomorrow. The Boys' Brigade national band contest is being staged at the hall and altogether 46 bands and 1,500 competitors will be taking part. (19)

Towards the end of May came the big event for the Staffordshire Agricultural Society, as mentioned above, their 21st year on the Weston Road showground and also their 150th County Show. A mid-week show, this double celebration went off in fine style, Red Rum, the winner of no less than five Grand Nationals, leading out the grand parade on the first day. The president of the Society for the year was Sir Henry Plumb, the leader of the National Farmer's Union of England and Wales. (20) Unfortunately, record breaking attendances again brought a serious problem, one that the management dealt with in the following spring, ready for future shows, as the *Newsletter* reported in 1979, just before the next County Show.

Queues of cars stretching back to Stafford and Weston spoiled the start and finish of a great day out at the County Show for many of last year's visitors. This year the Show

organisers hope to have solved the problem by creating an entrance and exit nearly four times the width of last year's "mousehole" . . . on a properly laid tarmac driveway.(21)

Getting back to 1978, considerable dislocation overtook the dog show in progress at the hall on Monday, 29 May.

There was added drama for the hundreds of dog lovers attending a show at Stafford's Bingley Hall on Bank Holiday Monday, when fire destroyed a block of stables. The blaze, which engulfed 52 horse boxes and caused £6,000 worth of damage, interrupted judging in the Midland Afghan Hound Show, (22)

Pop fans were well served during May and June and all the concerts were sold out. The Stranglers came to the hall at the end of May, followed by the Electric Light Orchestra a few days later. For some of the latter's fans the evening was less than happy, but not on account of the music.

Fans at an Electric Light Orchestra concert . . . who had paid £4-50 each . . . found their seats occupied by those who had paid only £3 . . . More than 8,000 people packed into Bingley Hall. (23) [Don't forget, £4.50 was a stiff price – at least £50 in today's values].

Later in the month Bob Marley and the Wailers gave their only concert in Britain that year, and David Bowie was on stage for three evenings

towards the end of June.

More than 20,000 David Bowie fans from all over Britain flocked to see their idol at Stafford's Bingley Hall during the weekend and on Monday . . . in the end it was nostalgia which took the night – with Ziggy Stardust taking top honours. (24)

By 1979 the public had come to fully appreciate the capacious and attractive facilities of the new hall at the showground. Consequently, under the headline “*COUNTY SHOW IS BIG SUCCESS DESPITE THE RAIN*”, the *Newsletter* was able to caption their photograph of the scene, “*Bingley Hall swarms with visitors on the first day.*” No longer did adverse weather keep the crowds away. (25)

July's events passed off successfully, glorious sunshine allowing more attendance records to be smashed. Crowds of visitors another annual county-event, the County Festival, enjoyed attractions ranging from demonstration of horse riding to fly fishing, rare breeds to vintage cars. Music was provided for people viewing the stalls or enjoying refreshments inside the hall by RAF ATC bands. (26)

Autumn entertainment for pop fans appeared in the shape of Rush & Guests, Don Williams, the Blue Oyster Club and for a two-night visit, both evenings sold out, The Moody Blues.

Heavy fog throughout country badly affected attendance at the annual Birmingham cattle show in November 1979, which was particularly disappointing because big

improvements had been made to the accommodation.

With the new 11,000 square foot extension to Bingley Hall in use for the first time, all trade stands will now be set up for the first time in the main exhibition area. (27)

In fact it was touch and go whether the new extension would be ready in time. Construction had been delayed by a national strike of engineering workers. The roof of the new section only went on as the first of the cattle were arriving prior to the show. Attendance figures were down by fifteen per cent on 1978's exhibition. (28)

Bingley Hall was rapidly becoming one of the most popular venues in the country outside London for pop concerts. The calendar of events for 1980 reflects this. The year began with top rock group, Rainbow, in January. May was a bumper month with Eric Clapton, Thin Lizzie, Mike Oldfield plus Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. Kiss and Fleetwood Mac followed in June – at a price!

Fleetwood Mac are to play at Bingley Hall in Stafford on June 16. The Stafford venue for this top group is the only one they will play outside London's Wembley Arena. Tickets £7.50, £6.50, and £5.50. (29)

Despite Mr Ryman's denial in 1973, at the time agreement had been reached about the building of a hall at Weston Road, in reality there were discussions over the years on the possibility

of the two societies amalgamating. Of those discussions that have reached the public domain an early example was reported in the *Newsletter* in November 1977.

It was revealed recently that there could be moves in the future to link the Birmingham and Staffordshire Agricultural Societies. Staffordshire chairman, Dennis Stubbs, said this would depend on the Birmingham society getting out of the red . . . it would only be fair for the two societies to get together on an equal financial footing before there was any amalgamation. Birmingham was hit by escalating costs when it built the new Bingley Hall, when the price rose from £120,000 to £200,000.
(33)

Amalgamation finally happened in 1999, the new title being Staffordshire & Birmingham Agricultural Society. (36)