



# Shows fight back

The appalling weather of summer 2012 caused havoc for agricultural shows across the country – but many are fighting back and promise to be stronger than ever this year. **Olivia Cooper** reports

**T**orrential rain and high winds last summer cost country shows tens of millions of pounds in poor visitor numbers and show closures.

At least 20 shows were cancelled, with others abandoned part-way through, leaving show organisers out of pocket, exhibitors at a loss, and visitors wet and disgruntled.

But far from letting the circumstances get the better of them, many shows have drawn a line under their losses, and are enjoying renewed support this year.

And, although the target audience has altered over the decades, the show societies claim they have a valuable role to play.

Originally established as agricultural societies to educate farmers about new technology, equipment and breeds, the shows typically travelled around the country to reach a broad spectrum of producers. However, as costs became prohibitive, most settled at a single showground, and opened their doors to the general public in a

bid to boost revenues.

Some would argue that many shows have lost their true agricultural roots, and are simply large outdoor shopping centres with a bit of farming entertainment thrown in. But Paul Hooper, secretary of the Association of Show and Agricultural Organisations, begs to differ.

“Agricultural shows are entertaining more than six million of the great British public throughout the year, and are now well recognised by government departments and statutory bodies for the important role that they play in education and helping to bridge the urban-rural divide,” he says.

“Most agricultural societies are registered charities, and as such their education remit is very important.” However, with the

**\* Country shows have become a shop window for agriculture**

advent of more specialist, one-day shows such as Cereals, Livestock and Lamma, country shows have become more of a shop window for agriculture, helping to educate the public about farming, rather than farmers themselves.

“The industry is working a lot more closely with schools and at all levels of education like farming scholarships,” says Mr Hooper. “As agriculture has moved forward with the times, so agricultural societies have had to look outward. The flagship shows are now more aimed at educating the public about the importance of farming, the countryside, and eating fresh produce, and they’re doing a great job.”

So given the huge losses that many shows made last year, what can we expect of them this season? The Great Yorkshire Show, England’s largest agricultural show, had to cancel the final two days of its event in July last year after torrential rain on the first day. “We have about 15,000 cars each day, and after the first day the car parks were in a dreadful state,” says chief

executive Nigel Pulling. “It was very disappointing, and we had to refund two-thirds of the exhibitors’ fees.”

The deluge cost the society £2m – but instead of trying to recoup that, it has delved into reserves and spent an extra £500,000 on improving car parking, drainage and access roads. “We’ve had a 92% rebook rate and a waiting list for trade stands, which is a real show of confidence,” says Mr Pulling. “They are as keen as we are to see business as usual.”

Ticket sales, including those rolled forward from last year, have increased, with visitors as interested as ever in purchasing local food, seeing the livestock parade and discovering more about the countryside. “We’ll have 5,000-6,000 schoolchildren this year, as well as families – it’s a really hands-on event.”

Gale-force winds in May last year meant the Suffolk Show had to cancel its second day of events at 8am that morning, says executive director Christopher Bushby. “We

## 150 SHOWS LATER: HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED?

\* This year the Royal Bath & West of England Society is celebrating its 150th show, and like many agricultural shows, it has had to adapt over the years. The society was formed in 1777 to encourage the spread of new ideas among its farming members. This included the first two-furrowed plough, which was exhibited at ploughing trials near Bath in 1788.

The first show was held in 1852, gradually opening up to the public, and in the 1890s the society introduced working dairies and equine competitions to get the general public interested in agricultural matters. However, new technology has always been an important part of the show, ranging over the years from mobile milking bails and the modern herringbone parlour to today’s cutting-edge robotic milking machines.

“The breed entries have also changed a lot,” says show manager Alan Lyons. “Farmers used to bring and sell a lot of dairy bulls. We still have some of the best livestock in the country but it’s more about performance recording and showing off the best female dairy lines. Of course, we still have a lot of beef bulls on display, which people love to see.”

already had people on site, and gazebos were just flying everywhere – it was too dangerous to continue. We had to take a £500,000 loss on the chin; but we had some reserves – there is no question of us trying to claw that back by making cut-backs for the future.”

Perhaps surprisingly, the reaction by exhibitors and the media was tremendously positive, he adds. “Thankfully, we’d invested in online ticketing last year for the first time, so we could refund visitors very quickly. We offered our trade stands and exhibitors 30% refunds, but because many of them had had such a good first day a lot

of them turned the refunds down.”

And the groundswell of support has continued into this year’s show. “I think people have looked on us more benevolently – entries have gone through the roof in certain areas, sponsorship is up more than 10% to its highest ever level, and online ticket sales are 50% up on the same time last year.”

Each year the show promotes a different aspect of farming in its Farm in Anglia marquee. This year it is sheep, which will link into wool, cookery demonstrations and the family trail. “As a charity, education is our remit, first and fore-

most,” says Mr Bushby. “We hold education programmes and competitions with a number of schools, and bring that all together at the main show. We also hold conferences throughout the year for farmers, but they still like to come along to the show to renew their contacts and have a good day out.”

For the second time in five years, the CLA Game Fair had to be cancelled due to wet weather in 2012, but director Andrew Crawford is expecting bumper attendance figures this year as a result. “In 2008 we had record attendance following the cancellation in 2007,” he says. “So we are hoping that the same will happen this year.”

The show, which costs £4m to put on, was insured against cancellation, so the association was not directly out of profit. “But ticket sales had been well ahead of

our budgets, so we were predicting nice profits, which of course we didn’t get.”

This year, the show will be held at Ragley Hall, and solid trackway is already being installed to reduce the risk of ground damage. “We’ve also got more tracking on standby,” says Mr Crawford.

“Everyone comes to the show for slightly different reasons; people get a chance to find out about hunting, shooting and fishing, and it’s an opportunity to get positive messages across. Some exhibitors don’t go anywhere else – they rely on the Game Fair to create an excellent client base on which to draw throughout the year.”

