

Agricultural shows have been a central part of rural life for two centuries, and they are just as relevant today. While some have fallen by the wayside, others have evolved to reflect modern farming audiences – and this year’s Royal Bath & West Show has more on offer than ever before.

Like most shows it originated as an agricultural society, designed to educate farmers about new technology, equipment and breeds. The Royal Bath & West of England Society was formed in 1777, to encourage the spread of new ideas among its farming members.

The first show was held in Taunton in 1852, with the new railway network an essential part of enabling the show – and the livestock competing there - to travel the West Country for more than 100 years. In the 1890s the society introduced working dairies and equine competitions to get the general public interested in agricultural matters.

The show found a permanent home at Shepton Mallet in 1965, and it still caters to a diverse audience today, with technical farming developments and top breed competitions alongside general rural affairs, fun and education.

However, this year will see a year of transformation, with a revamped layout featuring the Great British Festival of Agriculture, Entertainment and Food and Drink. Hailing a new generation of Great British Festival, this year’s show promises more farming, more food and drink and more fun – the same show, but even better.

This year’s President is Glastonbury legend Michael Eavis, who will be sourcing a range of exciting acts to grace the new music area. “Music will take place throughout the day and into the early evening, bringing a festival feel to the showground,” says Head of Shows Alan Lyons. “There will also be over 100 food producers, ranging from artisan food to funky street food, with new lifestyle and gift halls as well.”

Although there are lots of changes taking place, the show remains true to its roots with an amazing array of livestock and equine competitions. For the first time ever livestock classes will be held on every day of the four-day show, with the Grand Parade now being held on Saturday as well as Thursday and Friday. “This offers an opportunity for our 130,000 visitors to be treated to a display of all the winners and for exhibitors to show off their prize winning animals,” says Mr Lyons.

The show has introduced more classes for exhibitors to enter, including commercial beef steers on the hoof, providing more chances to win as well as offering more prize money.

This year, the younger generation will be given a time to shine with Wednesday now dedicated to young exhibitors. A new team competition will be introduced, with three participants competing for each team; one preparing the show animal, one stock judging and one showing. “This team event will give the up and coming generation the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and help introduce them to friendly yet competitive world of livestock showing,” says Mr Lyons.

Livestock showing may provide a great attraction to the general public, but there is a serious side. In the past, farmers would bring breeding bulls to sell, whereas today it's more about exhibiting the best examples of a breed to generate sales of semen, embryos or youngstock. "Breeding livestock has come a long way in recent years, with cutting edge genetics and technology enabling farmers to draw on top bloodlines around the world to produce a top commercial animal," he explains.

"But it is also enormous fun, and requires considerable advance planning and dedication." For example, exhibitors at this year's event will have selected their show team many months ago. Dairy cows need to have calved between six weeks and six months before the show, so that they are producing enough milk to display their udders well.

Then come months of halter-breaking and careful management to ensure they are in peak condition for the event. All cattle must be pre-movement tested for TB before the event, adding another challenge for those seeking to compete for the prestigious interbreed prize.

Exhibitors start arriving at the showground on Tuesday to get the stalls and bedding ready, with the livestock washed, clipped and cared for to an incredibly high level. Of course, it's not just cattle – there will also be sheep, pigs and poultry competing for the Breed Champion title.

"Exhibitors often work in shift patterns so that they can stay up with their stock overnight," says Mr Lyons. "There is also tremendous camaraderie amongst competitors – the competition may be fierce but the friendships are lifelong."

This year the show will also host the Focus Texel Show, drawing in top sheep breeders from across the country. "This will produce some really strong classes – we've got almost 100 entries so there will be intense competition and likely some tough decisions for the judges," he adds.

Exhibitors staying at the show will be able to enjoy the evening entertainment with live music and new street food stands. "Showing livestock is a very sociable occasion, as well as a valuable way to show off your best bloodlines to the public and potential purchasers," says Mr Lyons. "Our bigger and better show format gives every exhibitor the opportunity to make the most of their time here – we are really looking forward to celebrating the best of British agriculture."

The heart of this year's event will be the celebration of the very best of rural life, with some brilliant crowd-pleasing entertainment. There will be over 2,000 livestock and 1,800 horses, alongside sheep shearing competitions and a display of new farm machinery. There will also be farrier competitions and blacksmith exhibits, while raising money for breast cancer charities will be a unique bale-wrapping display with a pink and musical twist.

"The idea behind pink silage wrap began in New Zealand with a distributor's request for support to raise money for breast cancer research," says Mr Lyons "Since then, pink bales have been spreading across the UK, and our unique display promises to be entertaining for farmers and non-farmers alike."

For the younger visitors there is an educational trail and Farming for the Family, where members of the public can see chicks hatching, cows being milked, and cookery demonstrations to link farming with food production. “People like to speak to farmers and learn more about farming and the countryside,” says Mr Lyons. “Year after year, the cattle parade is the highlight of the show for many of our visitors; it’s a wonderful shop front for the farming community.”

As specialist one-day shows like the Dairy Show and Grassland UK have taken on a large part of knowledge transfer within the farming community, the flagship show has become more about livestock competition and educating the general public, says Mr Lyons.

“If you come to the Dairy Show, you can compare new equipment, sort your milk contract, buy feed and semen, and attend seminars on topical subjects. At the main show farmers come to compete, network and do business, as well as to have an enjoyable day out.”

It’s also important to recognise the sometimes unsung heroes of farming and rural communities – which is exactly what the Farm Woman of the Year Award is designed to do. “Women play an important role in agriculture – whether it’s behind the scenes or at the forefront of the business, and it’s vital that we celebrate that,” says Mr Lyons.

Of course, tasting some of the wonderful food that West Country farmers produce is one of the great delights of attending the show, and this year there is a brand new dedicated food and drink area showcasing some of the UK’s finest producers. “We have a new huge food marquee, with gourmet and artisan food stalls, coupled with tastings and demonstrations to bring the story of food from farm to table to life,” says Mr Lyons.

Visitors can see just what goes into making a champion cheese, with live judging of the British Cheese Awards. In addition, top cheesemongers will be demonstrating their skills and expertise in front of a live audience to claim the Cheesemonger of the Year Award.

“Cider has long been part of the Somerset heritage, and has enjoyed a real resurgence in recent years,” says Mr Lyons. “We have some of the best producers from across the nation joining us to compete in the British Cider Championships, so there will be plenty of this traditional nectar on offer.”

But country shows are not all about farming and food. There are so many other rural crafts and displays on offer – there really is something for everyone. Equine competitors will now have more opportunities to qualify for the Horse of the Year Show (HOYS) and the Cuddy championship, with a host of new and exciting competitions.

“Showing is an important opportunity for the best horses to compete against one another and the Royal Bath & West Show brings together some of the top horses and competitors in the country,” says Chief Horse Steward Jane Cooper.

The Friday of the show will now host miniature Shetland classes, which will delight children and adults alike. For the first time, the winner will be eligible for the Cuddy supreme in-hand championship, giving them the chance to compete against the best examples of breed and type for this coveted award.

The crowds will be impressed by a new private driving class, which will show off both tradition and elegance. And there is also a new class for ridden purebred Arabs, which will be a HOYS qualifier. “This year’s show should not be missed; it has something for everyone and promises to be bigger than ever.”

As always, there will be top-class show jumping, featuring some of the biggest names on the circuit. And as the show will be held during half term, there will be plenty on offer to keep the children entertained.

“As a registered charity, education is an important part of our remit,” says Chief Executive Rupert Cox. “We recently held our very first Field to Food Learning Day, when we invited over 1000 primary school children to learn more about where their food comes from.” Local farmers were extremely supportive, bringing animals, machinery and food along for features like sheep shearing displays and cookery demonstrations.

“It is vital that as the world population increases and food production methods change, the next generation needs to understand not just how important good food is to their own health, but to the health of the planet,” explains Mr Cox. “I believe our range of shows and events go some way to achieving that.”

Panel – Rupert Cox on the role of agricultural shows

The role of agricultural societies, through their shows, is to be the showcase for the industry, as well as a networking opportunity for farmers. There is both a social and a business side, but it’s really important not to underestimate the relationship with the paying public. Without them, you can’t show off the best of agricultural and rural activities.

For me, as a charity, there’s a very clear aim to bring the consumer closer to the producer, and for them both to understand the other better. The show is a catalyst for that. But it’s also about education of the farming and rural community: We offer grants and bursaries for young people, and work with other organisations to avoid duplication.

My vision is to place the society at the hub of rural influence in our area. It’s important that societies take strong leadership in rural affairs – we’re already doing that in the form of our help with the Somerset Levels Development Fund, which has switched from helping farmers affected by flooding in 2013 to longer term water management planning. But there’s always more that we can do.

The Royal Bath and West Show takes place from 1-4 June, 2016, at the Bath and West Showground, Shepton Mallet, Somerset. Advance saver tickets are available until 31 May 2016 at £19 for an adult including two children admitted free, £5 for additional child. Gate prices are £22 adult, £7 child and £49 family. Visit www.bathandwest.com to order.