

July at Radio Warneford
Warwickshire Bids Farewell to the Royal Show
By Sarah Lewis

For 160 years it has championed the best in farming, food and rural life, but last month witnessed the final Royal Show at Stoneleigh Park, here in the heart of Warwickshire. On behalf of Radio Warneford I attended the closing day of The Royal Show and in doing so took part in an important slice of the county's history.

The History of the Royal Show

The Royal Show began life in 1839 in the neighbouring county of Oxfordshire and later took place in the industrial heartlands of Manchester and Liverpool. It was the brainchild of the recently founded Royal Agricultural Society of England with the purpose of promoting science in farming and by the late 1850s the show had become a popular attraction showcasing the latest industrial advances. The show first occupied the grounds of Stoneleigh Park in 1963 and has recently covered a sprawling 250 acres to accommodate the huge numbers of exhibitors and visitors.

This Year's Attractions

All the stops had been pulled out for this year's final Show and familiar sights such as livestock competitions, flower displays and food stalls were joined by new community and horticulture areas designed to create a more inclusive atmosphere for lay-visitors. The organisers had also put a great deal of effort into creating a show which would have appeal for all ages. On arrival I was swept away amidst a large group of school children all hurrying excitedly to embark on the Education Trail, where they would find themselves milking cows and planting vegetables among other things.

Nearby the British Beekeepers had set up a stall to talk about the art of beekeeping and they were doing a roaring trade in Kenilworth honey: a must-buy for hay fever sufferers, as regular consumption of locally produced honey has been proven to improve symptoms. Besides which, it tastes absolutely delicious! Foodies have always been well catered for by the Show and this year proved no exception. I sampled the delights of Gloucestershire cider, Hampshire biscuits and Southam buffalo burger but unfortunately I could not beat the crowds for the fresh herb sausages, the smell of which drifted tantalizingly across the food hall.

After a long walk around the vast shopping area I arrived at the Grand Ring in good time to witness the arrival of numerous horses and carts which then completed circuits of the ring. Many of the horses were rare breeds and I felt privileged to see such powerful and beautiful creatures exhibited before the crowded stands. For me the horses and the livestock are at the heart of the Royal Show and are the aspects of the show which I will miss the most. Rarely can one see the very best of British cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry in one place and have the benefit of being able to talk with the farmers about their livestock. It is a warming sight to watch children interact with the livestock and gain a better appreciation of the origins of their food, and it is an occurrence which is sadly quite uncommon in our times.

By late Friday afternoon I was still enjoying meandering around the livestock areas and I spoke to an exhausted farmer (plus one sleepy ram) who said that she was looking forward to getting back home after a long week at the show. Although she agreed it was worth the fatigue as the dozing ram in question had won a rosette.

Finally, I passed through pens of llamas and donkeys, and I arrived at a tent brimming with chicken and waterfowl. Amusingly the ducks waddled about happily in their pens while the geese were gagged in one corner, haughtily eyeing-up bemused passers-by. I will remember with fondness that my final sight at The Royal Show was these proud geese and their humble compatriots.

The Show's Legacy

Warwickshire will certainly be culturally poorer for losing this historic event as it had become such a large part of the agricultural calendar. However, the drastic decline in visiting numbers in recent years, exacerbated by difficult economic and agricultural restrictions, has sadly rendered the Show economically unviable. It was also clear that the Show was suffering from a lack of direction in recent years which gave the event a somewhat disjointed atmosphere.

Organisers state that they hope that in subsequent years a new show will evolve, which will provide the county with an exciting agricultural event, albeit in a different form to The Royal Show. Whatever happens in the future, the county can feel proud that for so many years such a distinctive and successful show operated in the heart of Warwickshire and has instilled happy memories in many generations across the country.