

PLOD ESSAY:

“The Highlight of the Rural Year”

137 Years of Agricultural Show History from Bass to Wonthaggi

When our two boys were old enough, they were given responsibility for our chooks. Instead of our giving the boys pocket money, we told them they could earn their own money by selling the eggs they collected. The better they looked after the chooks, the more eggs they got to sell and the more pocket money they had. When they were between the ages of, about seven to twelve, the boys would count their money every week to see if they had enough to go on the rides at the Warragul Agricultural Show in March and even more importantly, the Royal Melbourne Show in September where the Show Bags were still worth their weight in gold.

Except for Christmas and birthdays, the agricultural shows were (and still are) the highlight of the year for many rural kids. In fact, in Wonthaggi and District, Show



Day was a holiday. In the early years it was usually on the first Wednesday in February for the Dalyston Show while in Melbourne the holiday was always and still is on a Thursday in September for the Royal. The Dalyston Show Day meant there was no school for the kids and no work for the Coal Miners. In fact, a special train from Wonthaggi to Dalyston ran when the local Show was on.

Jenny Churchill, who comes from an established farm in the hills behind Kilcunda, remembers the excitement of the Dalyston Show. She was a kid in the 1960s. Her father would be off early to the show grounds, but then the rest of family would spruce up and put on their best clothes after baths in the copper. Jenny remembers she wore her Sunday best which included an itchy petticoat and a special straw hat with a chinstrap and ribbon tied under her chin. Each child, including Jenny, was given “two-bob” spending money to get into the show, which opened at 1:30, and spend as they would. The serious business of parading the beasts and having them judged happened throughout the day, but plenty more went on as well, including Jimmy Sharman’s Boxing Tent, which Jenny loved. It cost six pence to get in.

There was always at least one amazing thing to be seen at these shows: for instance, on show for people to gawk at just after WWII, there was a Volkswagon car. Everyone knew it was the car designed “by Hitler”. In 1957, at Dalyston’s 45th Show, the show goers were astonished to get their first look at a television set!

Once the arena events such as horse showing and contests like the wood chop, sheaf tossing, sheep shearing, working dogs and more were finished, and time had been spent on terrifying rides like flying swings, and dodgem cars or tamer rides like the merry-go-round followed by visits to the side shows and trade exhibits, plus a walk through the pavilion looking in wonder at the farm produce: dairy goods, meat, eggs, vegetables, bottled fruit and veg, jams and preserves, baked apple pies, cakes, scones, shortbreads, fancy knitting, patchwork, quilting, flower arrangements and so much more the mind boggled, it was late afternoon and time to take the beasts, pets, goods, and tired children home.

But, the show wasn’t over.

In the first years of the Dalyston Show, a formal dinner was held where speeches were made, all prizes were presented, and people were honoured for their good work. This was followed by a dance for parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and the children, who ran around until they dropped. What a day! Later, in Jenny’s time, the formal dinner became the official lunch, but the ball continued, and the Show Day band played on late into the night at the Dalyston Hall.

The Dalyston Show ran consistently every



year from 5 February 1913 until it was handed over to Wonthaggi, where its first official show was 11 January 1992.

Dalyston didn't have the first show in the district, however. It had inherited its beginnings from the Grantville Show which held its first event in March 1885 and ran year-after-year for 28 years. This long running Grantville Show grew out of the very first show in the District, which was the Bass Show, an event that was thought-up by a group of local men, who, in the early 1880s, met regularly at O'Meara's Bass Hotel.

These fellows were part of a rapidly growing group of settlers who were taking up land in the Bass District and who wanted to form an agricultural society to give each other support when it came to community development that would enhance their livelihoods. They contacted the *Dandenong Advertiser* which reported a meeting that had been held March 1883 to discuss the idea: "There were representatives from all parts of the surrounding district from Tarwin, Cranbourne, Jumbunna, Poowong, Griffiths Point. All had come on horseback and some took two days over the trip to attend the meeting."¹ At the meeting they elected a chair and decided to form the Bass District Agricultural, Pastoral & Horticultural Society and a committee was formed to plan an agricultural show.

After more than a year of discussion and planning the Bass Agricultural Show was held in April 1884 at O'Meara Hotel's cattle yards, with the surrounding paddocks and pre-existing pens temporarily converted into show yards where over, "100 head were exhibited and 400 entries in all classes were received."² Horses of all classes predominated.

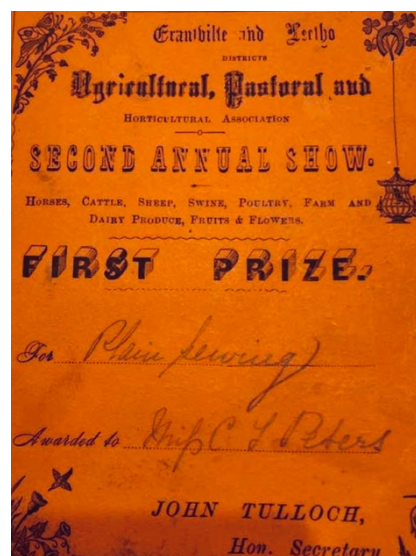
The show was such a success, that about fifty men turned up at the next annual meeting of the Bass District A.P.&H. Society. They all had differing opinions about who was in charge, who had the right to choose where permanent show grounds should be, on one side of the Bass River or the other side, and who had the most to gain. The meeting broke up in disorder when two-thirds of the men walked out and rode over to Lang's Hotel in Grantville.

This left only a few men sitting in O'Meara's after the others walked out. They were all that was left of the Bass Society, which did manage to hold another Bass Show on the 28th January 1885 where 350 people attended

and thereafter for the next three years before further disputes and irregularities caused the Bass Society to fall apart until it ceased to function entirely.

Meanwhile, the walk-out group at Lang's Hotel decided the next show would be in Grantville and that it would be held on the 20th March 1885, only a few months after the second Bass Show. They created an agricultural society made up of representatives from Fernhill, Jeetho, Jumbunna, Lang Lang, Poowong, Corinella and other smaller districts. They named themselves the Grantville & Jeetho Agricultural, Pastoral & Horticultural Association. The 1885 and 1886 Shows were so successful, the Crown granted a permanent showground to the Society in 1887 and the Grantville Show soon became the "gala event of the year" with visitors coming from all surrounding districts – including Phillip Island, Cranbourne and even Bass.

Succeeding shows were held successfully



each year until 1909 when the Society found itself in debt and it became clear that with the development of the Wonthaggi Mine and the railway being built at a rate of knots, showgrounds nearer to the railway would become essential. The Association began looking for a town willing to form an agricultural society and that town proved to be Dalyston. It took three years to make the transition from Grantville to Dalyston, but the first show conducted by the new Powlett River Agricultural Pastoral & Horticultural Society was held 5th February 1913. Even with the

¹ Joseph White, *One Hundred Years of History*, pg76.

² *Ibid.*

“difficult problem of the world-wide war overshadowing everything”³ the show continued to be held each year even though there was a problem securing good judges at that time. For the 5th of February show in 1915, a special train ran from Wonthaggi to Dalyston at 1:30pm and carried 120 people to the show. That special show train continued every year thereafter.

By 1961, after 49 years, the Dalyston Show looked as though it was beginning to fall into decline, partly because of the absence of side shows that year and the fact that, heaven forbid, “The Frocking was below the usual high standard, most women preferring hatless, beach frock styles.”⁴ In the previous year the showgrounds had been handed over to the Government, as a public reserve, thus enabling public grants to be available for improvements to the ground, but it was already obvious that the grounds were too small and in spite of the train coming through, the town never did manage to grow big enough to back a show. The thinking was that the Borough of Wonthaggi and the Shire of Bass should become one and the show should move to the vibrant mining town. However, even though change was afoot, government bureaucracy was not always easy to deal with and change was slow.

It took almost 15 years, but by 1976 a new generation of leaders was pushing the idea that the show should move to Wonthaggi, and that there should be a name change. In 1978, the Dalyston Show moved to the Wonthaggi recreation reserve, and it was called The Bass Valley Show.

It was after the show moved to Wonthaggi that Jenny Churchill remembers her parents and then her brother began showing their Limousin cattle. Of course, she helped, because, naturally, it was a family effort. She describes weeks and months getting the best beasts ready for the show: feeding them up, teaching them

to lead, brushing their coats until they shone, polishing their hooves, combing their tails. The cattle would be taken early to the show grounds where they were paraded and judged in the main arena. Everyone took pride in their animals: cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, goats, dogs chooks... That was the business side of agricultural shows

Finally, in 1991, Wonthaggi formed its own Agricultural, Pastoral & Horticultural Society and its first official show was held Saturday 11 January 1991.

“The show has followed the path of rural settlement and has finally come to rest at Wonthaggi,” said a proud Society President, Phyllis Carr during her speech at the first official Wonthaggi show.⁵

The present, 2022, President of the Society is Rosemary Loughnan. She and her sisters, Joan and Brenda, are the three daughters of E.F. Asquith, known as Ernie, who was a keen supporter of the local show at Dalyston and would have been proud of its new official position in Wonthaggi in 1991. It was his avid interest in ponies, going back to the days when he worked with the pit ponies in the mines, that inspired his daughters to carry on the family breeding of Shetlands. The three sisters began working for the Show when it moved from Dalyston to Wonthaggi in the seventies and were instrumental in campaigning for it to become the Wonthaggi Show. Now, it is called the **Bass Coast Summer Agricultural Show**.

Since she first offered her services to the show in Wonthaggi, Rosemary has continued to work unstintingly, along with her husband Wayne, who has for years been the supervisor of equestrian events in Wonthaggi as well as serving at the Royal Melbourne Show. Together with the Show Committee, they work to keep the show going, to make it the dynamic and exciting show that it is. The official Wonthaggi Show has run on the first Saturday and Sunday of January for 29 years. In the last two years, in spite of the pandemic raging around the country, the Show Committee has continued to plan and work towards presenting incredible shows, only to have their hopes and dreams dashed at the last possible moment for the second year in a row.

See on the next page what they planned.



³ *Express* 5 February 1915, pg 2.

⁴ *The Express*, Thursday March 16 1961, pg 6

⁵ Fiona Maud, *Gippsland Times*, 1992.

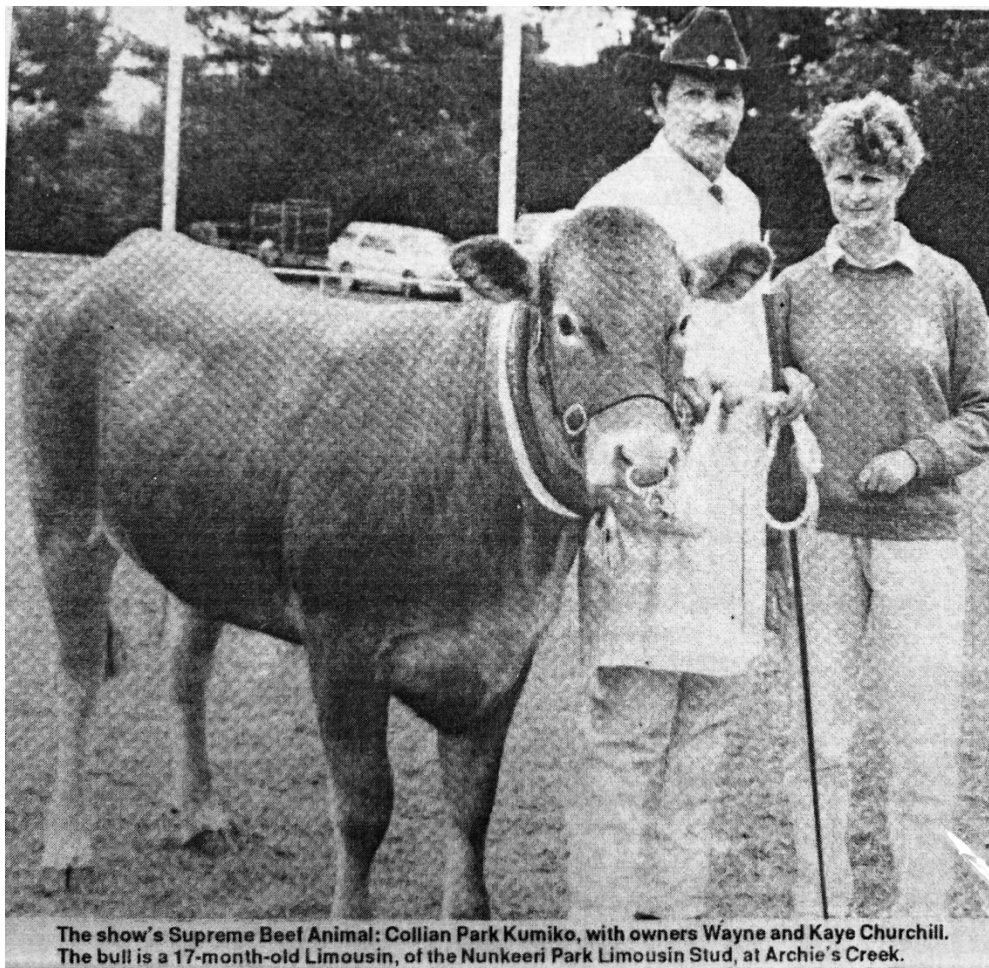
Bass Coast Summer Agricultural Show 2022 Dates & Tickets, Wonthaggi

- The Bass Coast Summer Agricultural Show will have a huge range of competitions including horses, garden, home produce, needlecraft, photography, as well as children's competitions.
- For entertainment, patrons can enjoy the strength and agility of those competing in the Wood Chop Arena, the skill of Chainsaw artists and tractor and vintage car displays.
- As for animals, there will be a poultry exhibition, snakes and reptiles, and dog flyball competitions. You will be able to enjoy equestrian events, alpacas and pigs. For the kids, there will be an animal nursery where they can get up close with sheep, goats and chickens.
- Make sure to head over to the exhibitions on display, as well as a fun carnival, sideshow games and heaps of rides for the kids. No show would be complete without show bags, and there are plenty of those on offer. You will also be entertained throughout the show with heaps of roaming entertainers including stilt walkers, circus workshop and clowns.
- There will be heaps of hot food and cold drinks available for purchase and there will be an ATM machine on site. So, make sure you bring your whole family to the Bass Coast Summer Agricultural Show in Wonthaggi.

CANCELLED DUE TO COVID

The Wonthaggi Committee will not let things rest.
In place of this year's show, there will be an elaborate **Equestrian Event**
held at Woolamai Race Ground 20 March.

THE SHOWS IN WONTHAGGI HAVEN'T ENDED. THERE WILL ALWAYS BE A SHOW!



The show's Supreme Beef Animal: Collian Park Kumiko, with owners Wayne and Kaye Churchill.
The bull is a 17-month-old Limousin, of the Nunkeeri Park Limousin Stud, at Archie's Creek.