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Treasures of the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales Heritage Centre

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Most of us are aware of the fact that an important and rewarding facet of numismatics is research. But for research to take place there must exist good facilities such as libraries and archives that are open to the public. In Sydney we are very fortunate in having many such facilities.

Among these is the Powerhouse Museum, which this year (2005) celebrates its 125th year. The Museum has for many years fostered numismatics by readily making available the services of its capable staff to collectors, in order for them to access its extensive numismatic collection. The collection, at present under the guidance of Paul Donnelly and the long time honorary numismatist, Pat Boland, has now been catalogued and digitised, making it more accessible for research.

The State Library of New South Wales, incorporating the Mitchell and Dixson collections, likewise, has its research material and staff at the disposal of the student of numismatics. Here, Mark Hildebrand of the Dixson Librarian Reader Services has helped me personally to answer questions and solve many puzzles.

Another source, the State Archives of NSW in Kingswood, Western Sydney, now has much information on its holdings available on-line. It is possible to locate references and arrange for material to be put aside before calling in, thereby saving

time.

A number of organisations have their own archives. Two of the oldest active establishments are Westpac (formerly Bank of NSW, founded in 1817) and the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales (RAS), founded in 1822 as the Agricultural Society of NSW.

I would like to share with you the history and show you some of the treasures held in the archives of one of these establishments, the RAS, located at Homebush in Sydney. Established 183 years ago, this icon of Australian agriculture and animal breeding sciences was founded in the then country area of Parramatta, which is now an integral part of greater Sydney. The Society gradually introduced show-like entertainment as well as agricultural pursuits and was able to bring the 'Country to the City' with interests and entertainment for everybody.

Formative meetings of the Society were held in June and July of 1822 in George Street, Sydney, by a group of leading citizens, on the premises of the watchmaker and silversmith, James Robertson. Sir John Jamison was elected President, with Vice-Presidents, the Reverend Samuel Marsden, William Cox and Dr Townson. The Patron was Governor Brisbane. Although this first meeting elected Sir John Jamison as President he resigned almost immediately,



Fig 3. Silver medal, 38mm, presented in 1827 to Sir John Jamison for 'Bennelong' Blood Stallion. Horse breeding and racing had become very popular and 'Bennelong' won many races for his owner. The medal was awarded by the Agricultural Society of NSW, and possibly made by Samuel Clayton. Further Annual Shows were continued until about 1836.

Photograph RAS Heritage Centre.



Fig 4. This silver medal, 45mm in diameter, was presented in 1832 by the Society to Thomas Higgins for: 'Best Sample of Colonial Manufactured Tobacco'. A similar medal in gold is held in the Art Gallery of South Australia collection.

Photograph Gullick MS, *Australian Medals & Badges*, 1915.

Dog'. Before this the reward had been 'half a crown for each tail produced.'

In 1825 Brisbane was replaced by Darling as Governor of NSW. Before his departure, Brisbane generously made a donation of one hundred pounds to the Society:

*as a small donation by me towards the Agricultural Society to be disposed of in any way most agreeable to the members of that Body.*²

He also wished to establish a Brisbane Medal to be presented annually for the best Colonial Production etc. The result of this donation is recorded in the Sydney Gazette of 31 October 1827:

*Mr Francis Stephen has just received from Sir Thomas Brisbane, in order that he may have the honour of presenting the same to the Society, the Brisbane Medal for the New South Wales Agricultural and Horticultural Society, 1826. We have had the pleasure of a glance, and it will not fail to inspire the influential Members with something like stimulation.*³

Unfortunately, a Brisbane Medal has

not been sighted as yet, although it is recorded in the Society Annual of 1906 that Richard Jones and Edward Riley both received Brisbane Medals at the 1828 Show for their introduction of the Saxon fleece.

There are three known examples of a 37mm round silver medal for a Hawkesbury River Agricultural Society Show held at the Clarendon showground, situated between Richmond and Windsor, west of Sydney. The medal illustrated identifies this Society only by the letters HRAS and was awarded for cheese (Fig 5). The medals are crudely engraved and each portrays an image of the particular category for which the prize was awarded, such as cheese (in this case), pig, or horse. It is rare to see a silver mark on agricultural prize medals but each of the known medals awarded by this society has the initials *R H* stamped in relief in an incuse indent—a mark I have been unable to attribute. An oval silver medal for a ploughing match from this show is also known.

There was the Hunter River Agricultural Society, whose first show was held in 1845



Fig 5. Hawkesbury River Agricultural Society (HRAS) silver medal 'presented to / Mess. Reynolds & Parnell / 1845 / for the best / cheese'.

Photograph private collection.



Fig 6. Hunter River Agricultural Society (HRAS) 45mm silver medal presented to W(illiam) Geddes for 'best colonial butter, packed for exportation'.

Photograph RAS

Heritage Centre.

in Maitland, NSW, where a 45mm silver medal was presented to W Geddes of *Ravenfield* for 'best colonial butter, packed for exportation' (Fig 6).

The period between 1836 and 1857 heralded the foundation of other country show societies. Also founded during this time were societies at Penrith, Mudgee, Albury, Bathurst, Maitland, and Kiama—many made their debut with the usual ploughing matches.

There was also the Hawkesbury Agricultural Association, whose president was William Bowman. This Association issued a medal as a prize for a 'ploughing match' at Windsor in 1848 (Fig 7).

Although the Agricultural Society of NSW had had some interaction with the Cumberland (Parramatta) Agricultural Society from 1857 to 1859, it was not until 1867 that an exhibition was held by the Society at the Parramatta grounds (Fig 8).

The final Parramatta based show was held in 1867. At this show a novel alternative to medal prizes was 'Guano Fertiliser from Maldon Islands'. The show was poorly attended, bringing to a head a movement by country societies and local members to have the show moved to a Sydney based site and thereby attract more

visitors. So in 1869 the show was held in the Cleveland Paddocks, the area later to be

named Prince Alfred Park, near Sydney Central Railway Station.

The design of the Agricultural Society of NSW seal was presented to Parliament on 3 November 1869 and approved. It was designed and cut by Julius Hogarth for Thomas Stokes, who in turn supplied the finished seal and press to the Society via S. T. Leigh & Co. in Sydney, who delivered it on 23 March 1870. The press cost five pounds five shillings and the engraving of the seal two pounds ten (my enquiries in 1997, when the show was moving from Moore Park, for the whereabouts of the original 1869 seal only received the reply: 'We have not long ago thrown it out').

In 1869, after the Show was set up in its new location in the Cleveland Paddocks, a full-time secretary, Jules Joubert, was employed. Joubert was the Society's first full-time secretary and for the next ten years he promoted the shows as Intercolonial. Under his expertise and organisational skills the Society prospered and eventually was made an incorporated body. The show attracted many outstanding outside exhibits and displays which in turn boosted



Fig 7. This well crafted and engraved 45mm silver medal was given as a prize in a 'ploughing match' at Windsor in 1848; it was presented by William Bowman as president of the Hawkesbury Agricultural Association.

Photograph R.A.S. Heritage

Centre.

attendance numbers. Joubert was later to become a notable organiser of world-wide

international exhibitions, for which he was held in great esteem.

Sydney International Exhibition, 1879

Originally conceived by the Agricultural Society of NSW, this exhibition became more than the Society could handle and so a government committee took over what proved to be a very successful event. The Power House Museum owes its foundation to many of the exhibited pieces from the 1879 Exhibition. The RAS also holds a number of artifacts from this Exhibition (Fig 9).

The Show grew in size and eventually the site in Prince Alfred Park (owned by the Sydney City Council and leased to the Society) became inadequate. This problem, as well as a rental dispute with the Council, necessitated a search for a larger, more permanent home. In 1880 a promising new site was located at Moore Park, but to transform 'a desert of rocks and swamps' into a showground took until 1882, by which



Fig 8. This 52mm silver medal and another are very professionally executed. One of them is stamped *C.L. Qwist, Sydney*, while the other shows no mark. Each medal again portrays an image of the relevant event, oranges or wool. Both are suspended in the same fashion by dark blue ribbons and bars.

Photograph private collection.

time a tramline loop would enable patrons to be brought to the gates of the showground. By 1891 the Society was granted a Royal title and became the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (or RAS). The Moore Park site was gradually expanded and used each Easter until 1997, with a few interruptions.

During the influenza pandemic of 1919, when many thousands died, the Showground buildings were used as hospitals and morgues. During the Second World War the Show ceased operation and the grounds were again used for national needs, becoming an army training ground from 1942 until 1946.

The first Easter Show after the war was held in 1947 and was to have the largest attendance on record—one million, two hundred and forty thousand.

The latest move in 1998, from Moore Park to Homebush, again revived the Easter Show concept with larger areas and purpose built exhibition buildings encouraging more exhibitors and entertainment attractions.

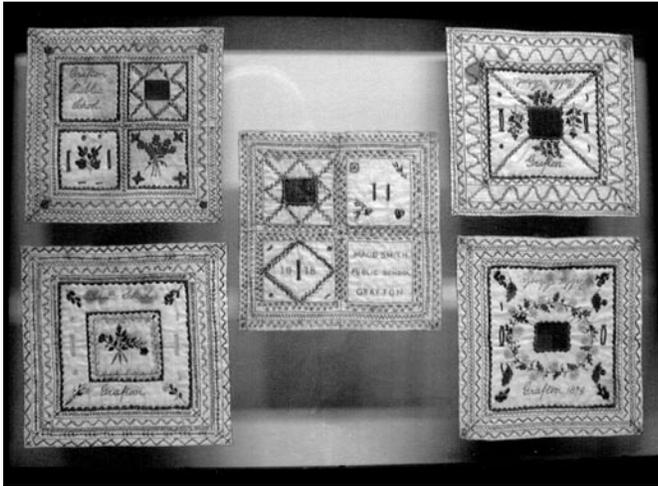


Fig 9. A set of five samplers entered by a 12 year old girl, Maud Smith, of Grafton Public School. In the student section she was awarded a bronze medal.



Fig 10. Presidential gold badge (by W Kerr) presented March 1896 to Sir John See (1891–1907) by the Society. Photograph RAS Heritage Centre.

Photograph RAS

Heritage Centre.

The RAS Archives were founded in 1978 by wives of the Show Committee executives. The group, chaired by Virginia Howie, was responsible for establishing the nucleus of the Archives. They discovered in an old storage space under the clock above the old Members Stand at Moore Park, covered in dust, carpenter's rubble and spare timber, the neglected artefacts and records that constituted the early history of the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales.

After the initial clean-up they employed an archivist who helped guide their progress in developing the archives as they are today. In 1980 Joanne Birkl became Archival Manager and is still in charge. Today the Archives are known as the Heritage Centre.

The Archives contain records beginning with Minutes of 1867 and encompass a wide variety of items such as catalogues, with prize winners noted, photographs, paintings of past presidents as well as prize animals, posters, show bags, cups, trophies, badges

and of course medals dating back to 1827 (Fig 10).

One of the most significant medal groups is part of the Ramsay collection of fifty-one silver and bronze medals inherited and divided between the four children of James Ramsay, the son of Dr David Ramsay. Dr David had won the beginning of this collection in 1842 at the Australian Floral and Horticultural Society Show in the Sydney Botanical Gardens. He was at that time conducting a nursery/garden at Haberfield, a suburb of Sydney.

James collected his portion of the medals while owning the property 'Nanama' at Yass, NSW, with about equal quantities won at the Sydney Royal and Yass Pastoral and Agricultural societies. The RAS Heritage Centre has been fortunate to acquire three quarters of the whole collection to date. Two 1842 medals of the Horticultural Society are stamped with J.J.C., the mark of J.J. Cohen, a Sydney silversmith of the era.



Fig 11. Woodchop, 1899. The first woodchop event recorded at the Sydney Show of 1899.

Photograph RAS Heritage Centre.

Other records held in the Archives are those from many breed societies, cattle, sheep, cat, dog and horse etc. as well as extensive holdings covering records of some outside exhibitions and organisations using the Showground facilities over many years. The missing parts of early printed history found at other repositories, (Mitchell & Dixon collections) have been copied and incorporated into the RAS Archives (Fig 11).

The RAS operates as a non-profit organisation, trying to keep in front of expenses such as wages and maintenance. As well as this the RAS Archives, for its twenty-six plus years of existence, has continued to purchase historic and important items whenever possible. Donations constitute a large part of the additions to the holdings. There are now just on 3,000 medals/badges catalogued and electronically recorded.

My own association with the RAS Archives began with a personal enquiry about a medal in 1979. This led to a reciprocal request for me to make up a small display of medals and badges to be exhibited in the Archives over the Easter Show period



Fig 12. Massed trophy display of the RAS of NSW, 2005. During the last two Easter Shows these trophies have been on a massed display in a special area. The designated perpetual trophy for the given day is taken from the display to be at the relevant arena for presentation and then returned to the display each night.

Photograph RAS Heritage Centre.

(Fig. 12). Since that time I have continued this association in an honorary capacity, advising on purchases, and card indexing the medal collection as it grew. The RAS Archives or Heritage Centre, as it is now known, is staffed by enthusiasts who are involved in a number of roles: as conservators to ensure the safe, long-term storage of precious historical objects and documents, as cataloguers and retrievers of information and, in recent times, as computer operators in making the collection available on-line and as public relations officers in handling diverse requests for information by the general public and by the serious scholar.

Notes

1. RAS Archives.
2. Sydney Gazette, 31 October 1827, p2, col 3.
3. *Ibid.*

Les Carlisle has had a life-long interest in Australian medals, especially agricultural prize medals. His association with the RAS goes back to 1947. Les is the author of a