



An Alresford champion (Photograph: Hampshire Chronicle)

ON SHOW — THE VERY BEST OF RURAL LIFE

By Lesley Drew

AUGUST is the month the big marquees go up in Tichborne Park. It is countdown time to the Alresford Show and the intricate planning detail of fitting a few thousand people, several hundred animals and umpteen small tents and stands, into a few acres has begun.

It is worth getting out of bed early on the first Saturday in September. That is, if you want to catch the real, nitty gritty agricultural atmosphere. Despite pressures on country shows to provide commercial attractions for visitors, the organisers of this one, the members of the Alresford & District Agricultural Society Ltd, steadfastly stick to the presentation of traditional farming and rural practices.

Animals are the number one stars of the Alresford Show which proudly claims to be the most popular one-day event of its type in the south of England. Last year at least 13,000 people proved that claim.

For me, the magic is early morning, just as the judging is beginning. The atmosphere is fresh, the morning dew still on the grass, and the air is rent with the sounds of moo's and baa's. Buckets clank, fresh straw smells sweet, and farmers and farm workers spruce their animals with amazing zeal. Many have been on the show ground since the very early hours, and some goat owners have spent the night in the pens

with their four legged friends.

Sheep are brushed and combed, pigs shampooed and cattle almost polished into sparkling cleanliness for the judges. In the pre-judging stage there is an intensity of atmosphere which is hard to describe, but which dissolves, whatever the results, once the winning rosettes have been pinned onto stalls and harnesses. Whether bedecked in glory or not, the subjects can at last get on with the business of chewing and munching, muddying snouts or simply ignoring the people leaning over their pens, and going to sleep in the straw. It is, when a large Holstein Friesian gives you a look of sheer boredom, that, as a human being, one feels decidedly inferior.

On September 2nd this year, there will be more reason than usual for a little nostalgia. The year 2000 sees the 40th Anniversary of the Show being held at the beautiful and historical Tichborne Park, by kind permission of the Tichborne Estate and Mr Robert Young. Tichborne is in fact the show's sixth venue. The first held at The Dean, Alresford, took place in December 1909, just one year after a group of people had formed the Agricultural Society. There were entries of cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, butter, eggs, dead poultry, pulled corn and roots. The Society's first president for the years 1908-1910 was the Lord Ashburton. This year's "President 2000" is his grandson, the Lord Ashburton KG., KCVO., DL who has attended every show since 1948. The lists of presidents and chairmen illustrate sons who have followed fathers and grandfathers, and, less obviously, daughters who have followed fathers. Most of those on the committee of the Agricultural Society have long serving records. Two young men joined in 1928, a farmer, J. A. Bevan and a vet, G. W. Searles. Each remained on the committee for 40 years, and each took a year as president. One was succeeded by a son and the other by a daughter, both of whom have given and still give, great service to the society. For some families, it is a way of life. The membership and assistant show secretary, Jan White, cannot remember a time when Show Day was not in her calendar.



— and another fine 1999 winner (Photograph: Hampshire Chronicle)

The daughter of a farmer, she began working for the show in 1978. The surnames Mills, Padwick, Corbett, Harkness, Young, are synonymous with the Alresford Show. It is farmer Charlie Corbett who this year heads the show as chairman.

As with every organisation, much relies on the efficiency of the Show Secretary. In the role, since 1994 is John Holliday, retired farm manager. He took over from a retired teacher. The Society has been fortunate with its secretaries over the years, though the role has changed greatly as a result of automation and computers. The once vast mounds of paperwork are reducing as facts are recorded on disk, and on the vital day “runners” for messages are no longer required as there is radio control. This year sees total modernisation with the availability of a Web Site.

Although the Alresford Show is regarded as an annual event there have in fact been gaps in its 92 year old history. There were no shows between 1914-19 or 1940-44 due to World Wars. The shows of 1925, 1939 and 1952 had to be cancelled because of outbreaks of foot and mouth disease. This year therefore is the 78th Show to be staged.

The event was a winter affair until after the First World War, when it was brought forward firstly to October and then September, in order to remove the cost of providing shelter. Ironically, today, shelter costs are the biggest expenditure; required for shade! In 1920 the venue moved from The Dean to Arlebury Park where it remained until the Second World War and where, for the first time, admission charges were introduced. When the show resumed in 1945 it was held at Manor Farm, Bishop's Sutton for the next five years. The years 1951-58 saw Church Glebe Land off Sun Lane (now Nursery Road) being used. Then in 1959 nearby Langtons Farm was the site. The late Sir Anthony Tichborne and his then tenant, Bob Foot, offered the use of the Park for the 1960 show, since when it has become “home”.

The show has gone from strength to strength. Three show rings are in operation for those with equestrian interests. Many of the competitions have been forerunners for

national events, and have drawn well known personalities to the showground. Main arena attractions are the parade of beagles, the HH Hounds, displays of carriages, vintage tractors and modern agricultural machinery. Most colourful and impressive, without doubt, is the Grand Parade of Champions and presentation of trophies.

At the ground are some 120 trade stands which have an agricultural, rural, local, charitable or handcraft connection. A vast Rural Craft Tent houses a range of arts and crafts, with the majority of exhibitors demonstrating their work. A Produce Tent introduced in recent years has proved popular if only for the aroma it gives! A dog exemption show is extremely well supported.

The Alresford and District Horticultural Society has long held its own splendid annual display on this day, providing visitors with a show within a show. The Alresford Chamber of Trade has a tent inhabited by local retailers demonstrating their best wares including fine china ornaments of pigs, cows and horses! All the local W.I.'s work together to have a WI tent, the Alresford Deanery Mothers' Union run a day long creche for young children, local scouts and cub scouts work selling programmes and undertaking ring work, The Alresford Pigs Association (a charitable body) undertake the mammoth work of car parking. Young Farmers have assisted for many years and the local St. John Ambulance is an ever comforting presence. The local veterinary practice is always on hand as are the local firemen and police. A free bus service runs from Alresford town centre to the show ground.

Today it costs £80,000 to stage the show and the Agricultural Society, a registered charity, covers its costs. What is more it has a habit of making a profit and the result is that each year, more than £5,000 is given to local charities.

It is a show which would not be possible without its vast army of volunteers. The most impressive aspect of the event is the fact it is run and supported by local people. It is “the” event of the year for the district and demonstrates not only the life of southern rural England, but also its spirit.