



All the fun of the Royal Winter Fair



Bob Elliott reports from Canada's prestigious and historic agricultural show as it celebrates its centenary.

The Canadians' Agricultural Winter Fair was founded by a group of farmers after the first world war with the aim of setting national standards for the judging of domestic animals. In 1920 they received permission to use the prefix 'Royal' from King George V. A livestock centre was built at Exhibition Place in Toronto with the aim of an initial event in 1921, but building delays meant that the first show was in November 1922. It drew 17,000 entries to the livestock competitions.

Since then, it has consistently provided a forum for farmers display their stock and their produce.

This made 2022 the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair's centenary year and they were very proud to celebrate it. It is advertised as the world's largest indoor agricultural show,

recording 320,000 visits including exhibitors and international guests and 6,000 animals attending during the week. A visit there easily confirms this.

A 'White Tie' coaching class with carriage lamps lit has taken place there for many years, held during the evening performance over the final four days of the show. The driving force behind the coaching classes there was the late Mr Jack Pemberton, and his presence is sadly missed, but Mr David Freedman, the well-known maker of fine harness had been shadowing him for a long time and is now carrying the baton to guarantee a faultless spectacle for the packed audience in the arena.

For the centenary classes Mr Mark Broadbent, the President of the Coaching Club here in England was invited to judge.

There were four coaches forward. Dr Rae Fischer brought his green drag by Kimball of Chicago with his team of black warmbloods, Misdee Wrigley Miller showed her bay team to a blue Holland and Holland drag, the Steenbeek family showed their home bred Friesians to their Holland and Holland drag and Mr John White brought his grey horses and his Cowlard and Selby 'Excelsior' London to Sevenoaks road coach.

The classes vary slightly each evening with prizes for performance, pleasure and appointments. The teams of grooms, horn players, and carriage cleaners get little rest because during the afternoons because there is also a pairs class, a unicorn class, an appointments inspection on the coach without the horses and a four in hand class to be squeezed in and that also means a second big sporting vehicle and its harness to be prepared and put to.

The horses are stabled adjacent to the arena in an art deco two story block with 900 stables and its own pub/restaurant. A great many heavy horses are there for the Percheron, Clydesdale and Belgian hitch classes. Some are stabled up the ramps on the second floor and the sound downstairs as they walk about is constant. The sound of a heavy horse six horse hitch on the concrete walkway under the low ceiling is overwhelming. In the evening when we were lining up the coaches to enter the collecting ring prior to the 'duck your head' descent into the arena several of these big hitches would be coming out with their rosettes fluttering

Above: The four coaches forward at the Royal Show.

and pulling up beside us, shaking the floor and sounding like thunder. The horse show arena is for the remainder of the year an ice hockey stadium, so a bit like the old Empire Pool at Wembley when the Horse of the Year was held there, there is not an excess of space. It feels quite full with four coaches circling and crossing the centre, but on the final night they get ten of these six horse big hitch teams in there.

But back to the coaching! The turnout is very different to an English coaching class. Evening dress, for the whip and the passengers means flowing long dresses on the ladder, long gloves and bare arms for the ladies and shock horror, no hats, just the occasional tiara. The gentleman are in white tie with the occasional scarlet tail coat for extra colour. With the lamps lit and the brass sparkling under the arena spotlights it does make for a very glittering occasion.

The judging too is different. The judge is also in white tie evening dress but in this case sported a coaching club blue tailcoat. He waits to watch the coaches enter, sees a circuit, a rein change and another circuit or two. He then walks down the line for the briefest of inspections before giving his result to the announcer and leaving the arena. (I wonder if this is some sort of North American health and safety plan to avoid him being shot by an unhappy loser?) The announcer calls forward the prize-winners, show dignitaries present the awards, and it's all over.

This year prizes were customarily distributed fairly evenly among the competitors. The Excelsior team that I was associated with won the pairs class and the appointments class.

The highlight of the week for me however was the evening when the Steenbeek family placed their coach in the hands of the Governor General's Horse Guards and it was turned out and shown as their Regimental Coach, something not previously seen in Canada. The regiment is an armoured reconnaissance unit, part of 4th Canadian Division, dates from 1822, fielded a Victoria Cross in the Boer War, and another at Passchendale in 1917 and, originally formed as dragoons, it echoes our Household Cavalry.

Not only did they turn out perfectly and win their class that evening, but the sergeant major of their regimental band, Victoria Wickett, took on the coach horn role. It was immediately obvious that she is a very accomplished professional trumpet player, but I felt it was such a compliment to the occasion that she had gone to the trouble to learn several traditional calls and tunes, (along with one military *Officers Fall In* bugle call as they pulled up,) and played them so outstandingly well.



Dr Rae Fischer's drag by Kimball of Chicago



The Canadian Governor General's Horse Guards unit presented a regimental coach on one evening at the Toronto winter fair



Misdee Wrigley Miller's team to a Holland and Holland drag



John White's Cowlard and Selby 'Excelsior' road coach

Photos: Royal Agricultural Winter Fair/Ben Radvani Photography