

HENLEY AGRICULTURAL ASSOCIATION

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HENLEY SHOW 1891 – 2012

Towards the end of the 19th Century it was the fashion for landowners and their tenants to create their own Agricultural Societies. Henley farmers supported both field and show-day classes at the Royal East Berks, Wokingham Agricultural Association, Chiltern Hills, South Bucks and the Royal South Bucks Show. Henley was however conspicuous in not having its own Agricultural Association.

Richard Ovey of Badgemore was considered to be “a visionary and courageous landowner” and, despite intense competition from other established agricultural societies, decided to “go-it-alone” and founded an Association in Henley.

In 1891, acting on an idea which had been on his mind for a long time, he decided to hold a ploughing match at Hernes, his estate in the autumn of the following year. His close friend, William Anker Simmons, who was later knighted for services to agriculture, gave him encouragement.

As well as ploughing classes, there were classes for rick building, thatching, shepherding, butter, poultry, eggs and collections of vegetables at the event.

The Reading Mercury recorded on September 10th 1892: “Mr Ovey of Badgemore has set a fine example by offering prizes for good ploughing and rick building in this neighbourhood and it is hoped that his ploughing match at Hernes Farm next Thursday will be as successful as it deserves to be. There is too little inducement in these days for farm labourers to become proficient in their work and any steps in this direction must be a considerable benefit”.

In 1898 Richard Ovey instigated a public meeting to discuss a broadening of the Association’s events. September 1899 saw the first expanded Henley Show, which was held at Hernes. William Anker Simmons was the Association’s first honorary secretary, thus started the long association between the Henley & District Agricultural Association and Simmons and Sons.

The Show, which is now traditionally held on the second Saturday in September, has been held annually since then, with the exceptions of cancellation for the duration of both World Wars. The only other time that the Show could not be held was in 1952; this being due a very widespread outbreak of Foot & Mouth Disease. Lady Brunner, President in 1952, was invited to be President again in 1954.

As can be seen from the Roll of Past Presidents, the Henley Show has been held at a variety of venues in the area: in earlier days quite often on that year’s President’s land. For the past thirteen years however the Show has been held at Greenlands Farm, Hambleden, which is much admired for its beautiful setting and where you are today.

Unlike many other traditional Agricultural Shows the Henley Show continues to go from strength to strength and has, in recent years, most flatteringly been described as ‘the best one-day Agricultural Show in the country’. Indeed the gate at the Show has grown by almost 45% in the past five years; with 12,000 coming to the 2010 Show.

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