

Putting on a show: the Royal Agricultural Society of England and the Victorian town, c.1840–1876*

by Louise Miskell

Abstract

This is a study of the annual shows of the Royal Agricultural Society of England from the perspective of the towns in which they were staged. Driven by the commercial and civic ambitions of the host towns, the shows escalated well beyond their original remit of knowledge dissemination to the farming population over the course of the study period. This both benefited and burdened the RASE, by delivering increased revenues but also escalating costs and provoking debate over the real purpose of the shows. It prompted the Society to reassess its approach to a number of aspects of show management by the mid-1870s.

We have always regarded these agricultural meetings as highly useful ... Landowners, farmers, scientific men, and amateurs come together, and compare their respective experience, as to agricultural implements, soils, manures, modes of cultivation, draining, kinds of stock, food of cattle, seeds, weeds, roots, grains, grasses, size and laying out of farms, plantations, roads, fences, etc. Great numbers and variety of animals are exhibited, of the best and most useful breeds ... Lectures and speeches are delivered, generally of a very practical kind. Prizes are given for the most perfect animals, the best cultivated farms, the most skilful ploughmen, and the most improved implements ... the obvious tendency of all this is to raise the intellectual, moral, and social condition of all the classes engaged in agriculture.¹

This description of agricultural meetings was written by the editors of the *Leeds Mercury* as their town was preparing to host the Yorkshire Agricultural Society's annual show in July 1849. As well as anticipating the forthcoming county event, the account was a reflection on another, more auspicious meeting, that of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, which was taking place in Norwich. The 'English Agricultural Society', to give it its original designation, was established in 1837 and quickly gained the prestige of royal patronage to become the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE). It came into being, in the words of one historian, 'to provide links between the manufacturers and scientists on the one hand and the farmers and

* The initial research for this article was undertaken with financial support from the British Academy Small Research Grants scheme, award number SG-43638. I am grateful to two anonymous referees who provided a number of useful comments and suggestions on an earlier version.

¹ *Leeds Mercury*, 21 July 1849.

landowners on the other'.² The creation of RASE as an over-arching national institution for better agricultural education and practice was an attempt to capitalize on the flowering of local farmers' clubs and agricultural societies in the first half of the nineteenth century. The annual shows, dinners and meetings held by these organizations in their localities were an important feature of community life in the Victorian countryside.³ From the outset, though, the annual shows of the Royal were of a different magnitude, being held over a week every summer. These were national agricultural celebrations, visited on a selected locality but attracting participants and generating press attention well beyond the immediate region.

The interest shown in industrial towns like Leeds in the annual gatherings of the major agricultural institutions of the day might, at first, seem incongruous. The mission of the Royal Agricultural Society was to disseminate knowledge and good practice to the farming population, yet during RASE show week agricultural life took centre stage in some of the largest towns and cities in England and Wales whose economies were developing along quite different trajectories. *The Times* commented on the paradox of staging the 1864 show in Newcastle upon Tyne, 'A land of coals – where vegetation above ground is of slight value compared with the vast geological forests fossilized in seams and mains beneath'.⁴ In a society in which rural and urban appeared to be becoming increasingly polarized, trade, retail and manufactures had been pulled in to the urban world, leaving rural areas with diminishing populations and increasingly dependent on agriculture as their sole economic activity.⁵ Yet urban and industrial growth also had the effect of stimulating interest in all aspects of the countryside.⁶ The 1871 Census General Report recognized that 'England is in this age still a great agricultural country, but its cities are extending beyond their ancient borders'.⁷ For the Society, the annual show was about taking its message of agricultural improvement to the widest possible audience: the largest centres of population were an obvious draw. But the shows were also highly prized by provincial towns. The sentiments expressed by members of Swansea Town Council in 1851, that 'no doubt could be entertained that great advantages would accrue to the town and district from the visit of so influential a body as the Royal Agricultural Society',⁸ typified the feelings of town leaders up and down the country who were prepared to compete tenaciously with rival towns for the right to host one of these events. A climate of inter-urban competition infused towns and cities in the Victorian period. Levels of urban rivalry had been on the rise since the middle of the eighteenth century, as many of the country's older county towns were being overtaken in population size and commercial importance by newer industrial and manufacturing centres.⁹ In this atmosphere of shifting urban hierarchies, the country's flagship

² K. Hudson, *Patriotism with profit. British agricultural societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries* (1972), p. xi.

³ N. Goddard, 'Agricultural Societies', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian countryside* (2 vols, 1981), II, p. 246.

⁴ *The Times*, 18 July 1864.

⁵ B. A. Holderness, 'Agriculture and industrialization in the Victorian economy', in Mingay (ed.), *Victorian Countryside*, I, pp. 179–99.

⁶ G. E. Cherry, 'The urban impact on the

countryside', in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VII, 1850–1914 (2 vols, 2000) (ii), p. 1515.

⁷ Census of England and Wales 1871. General Report, IV (1873), p. xxxi.

⁸ *The Cambrian*, 20 June 1851.

⁹ See, for example, J. Ellis, "For the honour of the town": comparison, competition and civic identity in eighteenth-century England', *Urban Hist.* 30 (2003), pp. 325–37.

agricultural show, along with annual mass gatherings of other national organizations, became an important marker by which towns could assert their status.

This article explores the phenomenon of the Royal's show from the point of view of the towns that hosted them in the mid-Victorian period. The evidence deployed is drawn from two main sources. The first is the archive of RASE, whose members debated and deliberated on the structure and operation of the shows in their monthly councils and the meetings of their finance and country meetings committees. The second, and arguably more important source for the purposes of the town-based perspective adopted in this study, is the contemporary press, which carried detailed reports of the local planning and running of the shows in their various locations around the country. Many provincial weekly papers sent a correspondent to provide on-location reports during show week. The more specialized agricultural newspapers went even further. The *Agricultural Gazette*, for example, claimed to have 'six gentlemen engaged in the daily trudge ... in the endeavour to describe the show to readers, every one of whom is recognised as an authority in the department of his work'.¹⁰ The volume of information generated by these press reports was extensive, especially with the expansion of newspaper titles and circulation from the 1840s,¹¹ and thanks to recent digitization projects, much of this can now be rigorously scrutinized and searched in a manner not possible for previous generations of researchers. As with all historical evidence, some caution is needed in the use of this material. The town-based newspapers of the period represented the urban settings in which they were produced as communities based on common knowledge and shared identity.¹² There was great potential for partiality as editors and correspondents flaunted their own political prejudices, but also for exaggeration and 'boosterism' as major public events were conveyed as expressions of civic identity.¹³ But the level of detail furnished in their regular columns and special supplements makes the newspapers an indispensable fund of material for any serious examination of the subject.

The town-focused perspective adopted here is, naturally, quite different from the way in which scholars of agriculture and rural life have examined the phenomenon of the RASE's show. Some historians of RASE have emphasized the importance of the show as the Society's main tool for promoting and disseminating agricultural improvement.¹⁴ Others have debated its significance compared to other RASE activities. Kenneth Hudson suggested that it occupied 'a comparatively lowly place in the list of objects of the society' and was only one of many means employed by the RASE to spread its message of agricultural improvement.¹⁵ The

¹⁰ *Agricultural Gazette*, 7 July 1879.

¹¹ J. Raven, 'The promotion and constraints of knowledge: the changing structure of publishing in Victorian Britain', in M. Daunton (ed.), *The organisation of knowledge in Victorian Britain* (2005), pp. 282–3.

¹² P. Joyce, *The rule of freedom: Liberalism and the modern city* (2003), p. 125; R. J. Morris, 'Structure, culture and society in British towns', in M. Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge urban history of Britain*, III, 1840–1950 (2001), p. 423.

¹³ J. Stobart, 'Building an urban identity. Cultural space and civic boosterism in a new industrial town:

Burslem, 1761–1911, *Social Hist.*, 29 (2004), pp. 485–98.

¹⁴ J. A. Scott Watson, *The history of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, 1839–1939* (1939); N. Goddard, *Harvests of change. The Royal Agricultural Society of England, 1838–1988* (1981); N. Goddard, 'The Royal Agricultural Society of England and agricultural progress, 1838–80' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent, 1981), ch. 4; N. Goddard, 'Agricultural institutions: societies, associations and the press', in Collins (ed.), *Agrarian History*, VII (i), pp. 650–90.

¹⁵ Hudson, *Patriotism with profit*, p. 59.

adoption of the motto, 'Practice with Science', and the establishment of a journal which published prize essays and many of the scientific lectures delivered at the Society's meetings were also important signals of the Society's scientific intent.¹⁶ Nevertheless the annual show was the event that brought RASE the most publicity and raised awareness of its activities most effectively among the public at large.¹⁷ This was the case not just in Britain. Elsewhere in the Empire, agricultural shows with their displays of cattle, implements and the finest produce symbolized the march of modernity and the triumph of man over nature.¹⁸ In this study, Royal shows are viewed as part of a calendar of high profile events, which towns used as tools of place promotion and urban status enhancement. By the 1850s, the annual Royal Agricultural Society show arguably ranked alongside a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science or a royal visit as an event which had the potential to place a town in the spotlight and give it an elevated sense of importance over its neighbours.¹⁹ This had a number of consequences for the way the shows developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Host towns, eager to maximize the advantages presented by the influx of visitors and the press attention generated by the shows, shaped the events according to their own commercial motives and status-enhancing agendas. This helped increase attendance and boost income from the events, both developments that were welcomed by RASE, but in other respects the Society was less comfortable. In the view of some members, their message of agricultural improvement risked being diluted by the peripheral activities grafted onto the show. Moreover, the urban rivalries that fuelled competition to host the shows also drove them to become ever larger and more commercialized spectacles, beyond the means of all but the largest urban centres to undertake. For some towns, the RASE show became a less attractive prize as the likely burdens of hosting such an event became more apparent than the possible benefits. The costs incurred by the Society in staging the shows were also driven upwards to a level that some within RASE began to view as unsustainable. In response, in the mid-1870s RASE took a number of decisions designed to counter these problems. It looked for ways to cut the costs associated with staging the shows without reducing their appeal to the general public. It revised its venue selection methods to try to ensure that urban advancement and commercial opportunity did not always have the upper hand over the educational benefit to the farming population. At the same time it took measures to ensure that the incentives to towns to put themselves forward as hosts were not diminished, and thereby underlined its own reliance on the main population centres of urban Britain as partners in the process of agricultural improvement.

¹⁶ Scott Watson, *History*, p. 162.

¹⁷ Goddard, *Harvests of change*, p. 27.

¹⁸ K. Anderson, 'White natures: Sydney's Royal Agricultural Show in post-humanist perspective', *Trans. Institute of British Geographers*, new ser., 28, (2003), pp. 422–41; K. Darian-Smith, 'Histories of agricultural shows and rural festivals in Australia', in C. Gibson and J. Connell (eds), *Festival Places. Revitalising rural*

Australia (2011), pp. 25–43.

¹⁹ For an analysis of the effect of British Association meetings on towns see P. Lowe, 'The British Association and the provincial public', in R. MacLeod and P. Collins (eds), *Parliament of Science. The British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1831–1981* (1981), pp. 118–44.

I

By any measure, peripatetic annual agricultural shows were not easy events to stage. The more traditional fixed shows of livestock used by local and some regional agricultural societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were both less costly and simpler to organize, with a regular site adapted for the purpose. With moving shows, the expense and time involved in identifying and equipping a temporary showground was on a different scale. In 1841 the RASE Council drew up a list of requirements, or 'queries' which had to be satisfied by any town aspiring to stage an annual show. Prime among these was proximity to the centre of a town and the accessibility of that town by rail. The ability of associations like the RASE to gather their members together in one place was increasingly facilitated by the spread of railway communication which reduced journey times and improved communication between urban centres and between town and country.²⁰ Other requirements included a supply of water, proximity to neighbouring market towns, facilities to cater for and accommodate the attendees and, perhaps most crucially of all, sufficient space for an outdoor showground. This last demand presented aspiring host towns with a significant challenge. In many rapidly growing urban centres, open space was at a premium by the middle of the nineteenth century as population pressure and urban expansion led to the building over of common or waste lands.²¹ It was a tall order to find a site sufficiently large and level for use as a showground, which was also in close proximity to the centre of town and the railway station. But such were the ambitions of Victorian towns to host these kinds of events as part of a repertoire of status-enhancing cultural and civic activities, that there was no shortage of prospective urban venues for the RASE to choose from.

The locations of the first four shows were selected by the RASE without a formal contest. Oxford, as the venue for the inaugural show in 1839, was chosen because of its centrality. An invitation by Cambridgeshire farmers led to the choice of Cambridge for the following show and the selection of Liverpool a year later was prompted by the desire to try a larger urban centre.²² Although the comparative advantages of various locations for 1842 were 'maturely considered' by the Council at its June meeting in 1841, the choice of Bristol was also reached without any apparent contest between rival claimants.²³ All of this changed from 1842 onwards, when the Royal put into operation a system of geographical rotation whereby England and Wales were divided up into nine districts, each of which would take a turn at staging the annual show by providing the host town.²⁴ The aim was to ensure that the Society achieved wide geographical coverage, but the effect of making known in advance the region which would host the show each year was to encourage competition between different towns in that region. Thus in its May meeting in 1842, RASE found itself considering rival invitations from Leicester, Nottingham and Derby for the 1843 meeting.²⁵ All three towns sent in plans and replies to the 'queries', which were considered by the RASE council. No town wanted to be judged inferior to its

²⁰ J. Armstrong, 'Transport and the urban environment', in Daunt (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, III, pp. 232–35.

²¹ See for example, N. MacMaster, 'The battle for Mousehold Heath, 1857–84: "Popular Politics" and the Victorian public park', *Past and Present* 127 (1990),

pp. 117–54.

²² Goddard, *Harvests of change*, p. 31.

²³ *North Wales Chronicle*, 1 June 1841.

²⁴ An explanation of this system can be found in Goddard, *Harvests of change*, pp. 31–2.

²⁵ *Derby Mercury*, 18 May 1842.

near neighbour, but during deliberations council members made direct comparisons between the public rooms, railway facilities and the availability of showground space in each venue, before coming down in favour of Derby on account of its superior railway connections.²⁶ The precedent was thus set for a competitive and intensely fought annual selection process.

By the mid-1840s the RASE council meeting in early May had become established as the occasion when representations would be heard and decisions made about the venue for the following year's annual show. Moreover, from 1843, when the mayor of Southampton attended in person to read a memorial of invitation to RASE members, the practice of sending a delegation of representatives to make their case in person to the council became the norm for any town with serious aspirations to play host.²⁷ Representations from three or four delegations were typically heard each year before a decision was made. It was a bruising experience, during which the relative merits of accommodation, railway facilities and indoor and outdoor venues were held up for comparison. A 'statement of remuneration' was also required to assure the Society that there was sufficient financial support from the locality and especially from the municipal authorities, who were expected to co-operate and put some of their resources at its disposal.²⁸ Competing towns tried to send the most powerful delegation they could muster and to offer the most generous terms possible in order to present the Society with a more enticing package of support than their rivals. On behalf of Lincoln's claim to host the 1854 show, a delegation including 'the Right Worshipful the Mayor and the Town-clerk ... the Hon. A. Leslie Melville, and Mr Torr, the well-known agriculturalist of that district' represented, respectively, 'the city, the gentry and the farmers of the district'. Their claims were supported by the Earl of Yarborough as president of the North Lincolnshire Agricultural Society.²⁹ Their bid was successful and the extent of the Society's Lincoln showground can be seen in Figure 1. In 1860, meanwhile, when the RASE was considering rival bids from the Yorkshire district, council members found themselves facing delegations from York, Doncaster, Harrogate, Hull, Wakefield and Leeds. At its monthly council meeting that year, 'great interest was excited by the numerous and influential body of noblemen and gentlemen attending to advocate the interests of the various places with which they were connected'.³⁰ The case for Leeds was made by the town's mayor, William Kelsall, the iron master and locomotive builder James Kitson, and Sir Peter Fairbairn, the eminent engineer and proprietor of the town's Wellington Foundry.³¹ They were joined by the town's two MPs, George Beecroft and Edward Baines, whose newspaper, the *Leeds Mercury*, as we saw at the beginning of this article, had advocated the benefits of agricultural meetings over a decade earlier. The delegation brought with it promises of suitable accommodation and railway facilities, along with assurances that a £3,000 subscription had already been raised to support a RASE show in the town.³²

²⁶ Museum of English Rural Life [MERL], SR RASE, BI - 1, Minutes of Council, 1840-42 (rough copy), 4 May and 11 May 1842.

²⁷ MERL, RASE SR BI - 2, Minutes of Council 1842-44 (rough copy), 3 May 1843.

²⁸ For further information about the 'country meeting queries', see Goddard, *Harvests of change*, pp. 32-33.

²⁹ *Morning Chronicle*, 17 May 1853.

³⁰ *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 7 May 1860.

³¹ G. W. Carpenter, 'Kitson, James (1807-1885)' and G. Cookson, 'Fairbairn, Sir Peter (1799-1861)', both in ODNB.

³² MERL, SR RASE BI - 6 Minutes of Council, 1858-68 (rough copy), 2 May 1860.

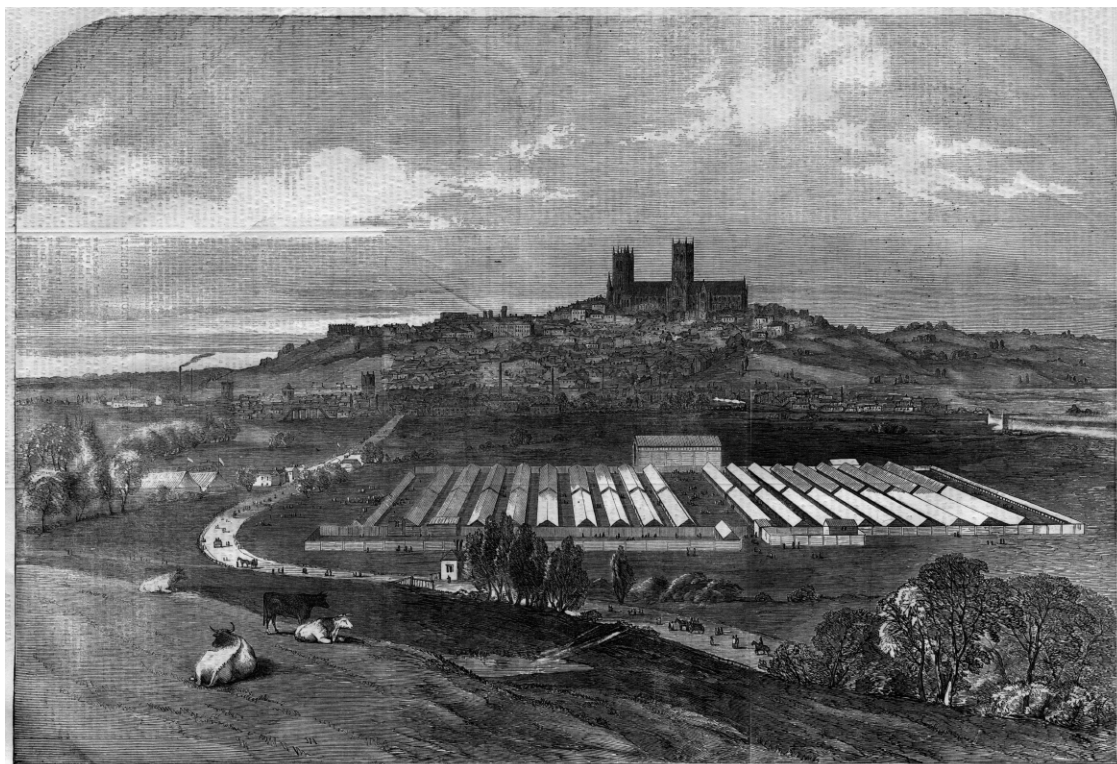


FIGURE 1. The meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society at Lincoln, taken from *The Illustrated London News*, 22 July 1854 (author's collection).

Selection by the Society's council members, however, was just the first part of a long process. Once chosen, the town charged with the task of hosting the annual show faced a protracted and potentially costly period of preparation, during which representatives from the Society would conduct inspection visits to ensure that arrangements were progressing satisfactorily. Reports of the work undertaken in Worcester to prepare the site for the show give a flavour of the task:

Worcester, indeed, has for two years, struggled with wonderful energy for the honour that has now fallen to her lot. The donation to the Society, raised by subscription, amounts to the munificent sum of £1,500 ... Worcester was not so well provided with a vast natural plain for the purposes of such an exhibition as some towns, but the want was supplied by laying two or three fields...into one large enclosure extending half a mile in length ... In addition to the show-yard, a large breadth of land was required for the use of implements in action, and altogether one hundred and forty acres of land had been put to into the Society's possession ... The ground has been in preparation since March last, and the Society's contractors have occupied it since that time to the 11th of July.³³

Occasionally, towns had to meet unforeseen demands for ground preparation, which placed an additional cost burden on the local organizing committee. At Leicester in 1868, for example,

³³ *Ipswich Journal*, 23 July 1863.

the town clerk received a request from the Society's secretary for a further 23 acres of parkland to be levelled at a cost of around £20 per acre.³⁴ Members of the organizing committee at Cardiff in 1872, meanwhile, found themselves reprimanded for the 'unsatisfactory state of the preparation for supply of water to the showground' and had to give an undertaking that the problem would be remedied 'without delay'.³⁵ In order to satisfy RASE's demands for good access to their showground, towns sometimes had to undertake the erection of bridges or the improvement of roads, such as Bristol in 1878, when the stretch of road from 'Black Boy' to the showground was upgraded.³⁶

The total financial cost incurred by towns hosting the Royal show varied from year to year, but the financial statement published by the local organizing committee for the 1864 meeting at Newcastle-upon-Tyne may be taken as representative. It included a payment of £2,000 to the Society from the town, and expenses included £1,807 for the levelling of the showground and £313 in expenses for members of deputations and other officials.³⁷

Notwithstanding this level of commitment, there were plenty of towns willing to put themselves forward as hosts of the Society. They did so because the rewards accruing to the host location were potentially great. As a national association, the RASE had greater potential than county or regional agricultural societies to attract visitor numbers, press attention and income generation for local businesses during show week. But it was status enhancement over, or at least on a par with, one's neighbours that aspiring host towns prized most highly. In Leicester, an application to host the 1868 show was made 'to recognize the claims of this truly national institution on their hospitality, and to place the borough on an equal footing with other centres of manufacturing industry where the meetings of the Society had already been held'.³⁸ Similarly, in Gloucestershire, in March 1871, it was resolved at a meeting of county dignitaries that Cheltenham should offer to host the Royal the following year, to give that town the opportunity of 'enjoying an honour which Gloucester enjoyed eighteen years ago'.³⁹ For Wolverhampton, meanwhile, the hosting of a RASE show in 1871 can be seen as part of a wider campaign by the Corporation to elevate the standing of the town in its locality. The *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that,

The forthcoming visit of the Royal Agricultural Society will materially add to the growing renown of the borough. The meeting is prominently set forth by the Royal Agricultural Society as that for the district of North Wales, and the counties of Cheshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire. This fact should not be forgotten by those who desire to regard the show as conferring distinction upon Wolverhampton, for the meeting is not merely for Staffordshire.⁴⁰

For industrial towns with ambitions to usurp the regional capital status of older market and county towns, the ability to emphasize connections with the countryside was an essential part of positioning oneself as a trading centre serving a wider agricultural hinterland. The strategies employed to achieve this consisted not just of overtures to the Royal Agricultural

³⁴ *Leicester Chronicle*, 4 Jan. 1868.

³⁵ MERL, SR RASE BIII – 3 Agenda of Country Committees, 1864–76, 5 June 1872.

³⁶ MERL, SR RASE BIII – 4, Agenda of Country Committees, 1876–87, 3 Apr. 1878.

³⁷ *Newcastle Courant*, 3 Mar. 1865.

³⁸ *Leicester Chronicle*, 11 July 1868.

³⁹ *Bristol Mercury*, 11 Mar. 1871.

⁴⁰ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 23 June 1871.

Society, but of more physical developments too. The building of lavish new corn exchanges in places like Sheffield, Leeds, Hull and Dundee in the 1850s and 1860s further demonstrated the effort and money which growing manufacturing centres and ports were willing to expend on this cause. In Hull, where increasing imports of corn necessitated an enlarged building for traders, the new accommodation, opened in 1856, was given a prominent location on the town's High Street and the fine views from its upper storey of 'the Humber and of Holderness ... and the Lincolnshire coast' brought into view the area over which ambitious townsmen hoped to extend their sphere of influence.⁴¹ Connections with the countryside and the 'rurality' of even the most populous and industrial towns fed into all sorts of aspects of urban life. Studies of the civic water works schemes of the late Victorian period reveal perhaps most clearly the uses of rural imagery in civic celebrations as municipal leaders sought to emphasize the purity of water piped into the towns direct from remote rural mountains and valleys.⁴² The bringing of the countryside into the town during RASE show week was, in a similar way, a statement of close rural-urban connections and a way of demonstrating the extension of town influence well beyond its municipal boundaries.

The sense of rivalry between old county towns and newer centres of industry and commerce with growing regional influence intensified in the second half of the nineteenth century as transport networks developed to serve the new centres of trade and manufacture and administrative and political boundaries were re-drawn to take account of demographic shifts. The RASE unwittingly fanned the flames of these regional rivalries not just through the competitive nature of its shows but through its system of selecting venues. By considering several towns each year in its quest for the ideal show venue, it not only made known the merits of the successful town, but also the deficiencies of places which were not favoured, inevitably resulting in some bruised urban egos. Losing out in the selection process was an embittering experience for some unsuccessful applicant venues. When York was preferred to Leeds as the choice for the 1848 show, the decision prompted much soul searching in the unsuccessful town and a resolve to remedy the deficiencies identified:

The lack of hotel accommodation had considerable weight with the committee in deciding against Leeds. This is another proof of the want of public spirit in our townsmen, in not having buildings suitable for the entertainment and accommodation of such societies as the above. It is high time buildings commensurate with the importance and growing interests of the town – such as the public buildings in Manchester and other places – should be erected.⁴³

Elsewhere, successive failures to obtain selection led to a sense of resignation and withdrawal. Hereford, having lost out in 1852 to Gloucester and in 1862 to Worcester, did not send a deputation to compete for the 1872 show, leaving the Council to reflect that in some regions the favouring of particular towns over others was being seen as a foregone conclusion.⁴⁴ When

⁴¹ For a description of the building see William Shepherdson, *The New Hull Guide: a modern picture of Hull and Visitor's handbook to the various objects of interest in Hull and neighbourhood* (1875), p. 107; *Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, 11 Jan. 1856.

⁴² See, for example, O. G. Roberts, 'Waterworks and

commemoration: purity, rurality and civic identity in Britain, 1880–1921', *Continuity and Change* 22 (2009), pp. 305–25.

⁴³ *Leeds Mercury*, 8 May 1847.

⁴⁴ MERL, SR RASE, BI – 7, Minutes of Council, 1869–81 (rough copy), 7 Dec. 1870.

Exeter was overlooked in favour of Plymouth in 1865 it was a snub that still rankled, even ten years later when it was recalled that the decision had been arrived at, 'notwithstanding all that could be urged in favour of the unmistakable and unchallengeable claims of the Cathedral city of the Diocese'.⁴⁵

Given the hopes and aspirations that towns pinned on these events, it was no wonder that, once selected, every opportunity was seized by vigorous local organizing committees to use the show as a backdrop to promote the local town and region. This could be done quite naturally through the special focus on animals native to the region in which the show was being held each year. In this way, the annual change of locality gave 'variety to the Royal Shows by illustrating the diversity of British farming'.⁴⁶ Channel Island cattle were shown at the Southampton show in 1844 and Sussex cattle at the Lewes show eight years later.⁴⁷ When the show was held in Cardiff in 1872, the first time the Royal had visited Wales, it was an opportunity to showcase Welsh breeds, although one writer anticipated that:

We do not believe their mountain sheep will ever cut a good figure as show animals ... The classes of ponies and cobs will we hope be well filled. The gay, wiry, muscular Welsh pony is known everywhere, and the Cardiganshire cobs are almost a type of their own. Then again the Black cattle of the Pembroke and Anglesea [*sic*] breeds should form a good class.⁴⁸

In the show yard, the reputation of the locality and region was at stake as local breeders went up against competitors from far and wide. At the Plymouth show in 1865, the performance of the Cornish exhibitors was a matter of considerable pride:

The exhibitors at the Royal, as did those at the Bath and West of England Society, discovered that they had very formidable antagonists in the Cornish competitors. Not only have the second and third prizes for shorthorn bulls been awarded to Cornishmen – Mr E. Bolitho of Penzance and Colonel Coryton of Pentillie – but the first prizes in two classes of Devon bulls have been taken from the most celebrated Devon breeders, by Mr Sobey of Trewolland and by Viscount Falmouth.⁴⁹

But beyond the implement trials and exhibitions of livestock, there were numerous other ways in which host towns could put their own stamp on the proceedings. The historic, cultural and municipal attractions of host venues were also enthusiastically promoted. The *Leicester Chronicle* printed a 'Historical Summary' of the origins of the town in anticipation that visitors to the 1868 show, 'will take an interest in walking about the place and entering its ancient buildings'.⁵⁰ The aim was to convey the culture and refinement of the town and its inhabitants to visitors and outsiders and, in the months leading up to show week, the prospect of the arrival of RASE concentrated the minds of town leaders in this way on all manner of local business. Discussions in Leicester six months before the RASE show, when local councillors met to consider designs for a new clock tower in the Haymarket revealed the influence of the forthcoming event. It was noted by one council member that:

⁴⁵ *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 14 July 1875.

⁴⁶ Scott Watson, *History*, p. 56.

⁴⁷ Goddard, 'Royal Agricultural Society of England', p. 350.

⁴⁸ Extract from *The Milk Journal*, in *The Cambrian*, 13 Oct. 1871.

⁴⁹ *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 28 July 1865.

⁵⁰ *Leicester Chronicle*, 11 July 1868.

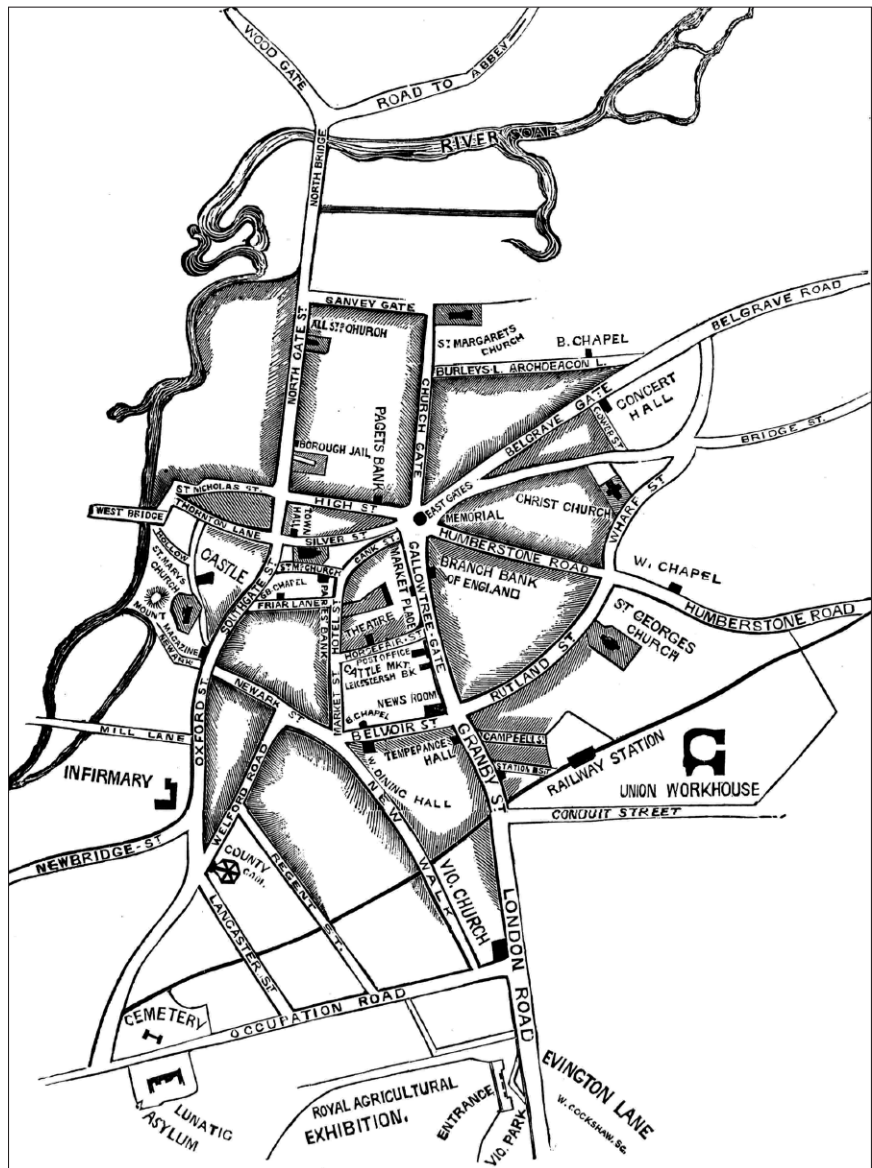


FIGURE 2.
Thoroughfare plan of
Leicester produced
for the RASE show,
1868, taken from the
Leicester Chronicle
and *Leicestershire*
Mercury, 18 July
1868, reproduced by
permission of the
British Library Board.

At the meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society, they would have some of the most cultivated and educated intellects of the day among them; and he thought, in courtesy to them, they ought to erect a monument that should commend itself to their refined and cultivated taste, and be an honour to the town and county'.⁵¹

During show week, the *Leicester Chronicle* printed a 'thoroughfare plan' of the town showing the location of the exhibition ground in relation to the main streets and the railway station (Figure 2).⁵² It was a map designed not just to help show-goers to pin-point the kind of facilities

⁵¹ *Leicester Chronicle*, 4 Jan. 1868.

⁵² *Leicester Chronicle*, 18 July 1868.

they might need to access during the week, such as banks, the post office, newsroom and the theatre. It also highlighted the locations of the town's key Victorian institutions including the lunatic asylum, county gaol, workhouse and infirmary. This was a town taking the opportunity presented by the RASE visit to show off its best assets to visitors.

Local authorities went into a kind of festive overdrive when the Royal was in town. The scene at Exeter during the visit of RASE in July 1850 was one such spectacle, described in hyperbolic terms in the *Morning Chronicle*:

Already the announcements of numberless extraneous attractions are glittering in many-hued placards from every corner and wall ... there is as much animation, as much bustle, ten times as many flags and twenty times as many triumphal arches in many one of its gay and French-like streets as was exhibited last year throughout the ... city of Norwich.⁵³

Such was the display of flags, banners and triumphal arches on show that it stood comparison with 'those periods in ancient history when the people of Greece and Rome honoured with a triumphal entry into the metropolis some citizen, who by noble deeds of arms had successfully indicated the honour of his country'.⁵⁴ Many towns decorated their public buildings and streets with festive ornamentation for the occasion. At Chester a 'Decoration Committee' was formed to oversee street adornments for the duration of the show.⁵⁵ Their work was admired by a visiting reporter in the days before the event who noted that, there were 'five triumphal arches in course of erection over prominent portions of the leading streets; and the four principal gates themselves are already decorated with emblems and devices, on the top of each the royal standard floating in the breeze'.⁵⁶ At Carlisle in 1855, 'floral designs were fitted up at the chief hotels and places of public resort', and 'balls, concerts and other festivities and amusements were announced on all hands'.⁵⁷ All of this helped ensure that the festival mood extended well beyond the showground to encompass the streets and businesses of the town itself. Catering, too, could be a measure of the wealth, hospitality and taste of the host venue. At Chelmsford, the Pavilion Dinner served to the hierarchy of the Society and invited guests at the end of the show week was a lavish occasion with a 'liberal bill of fare' served up to diners. The menu consisted of a total of 1,375 dishes containing 1,900 lbs of meat and 750 lbs of poultry. Desserts included 125 fruit tarts, 100 marrow puddings and 75 jellies and blancmanges. The allocation of wine per guest was one pint, and the whole was served up by an army of 125 waiters.⁵⁸

High levels of newspaper coverage meant that these aspects of the shows were subject to press scrutiny and the pressure to put on a good show was intense. Commentators did not hold back in their criticism if arrangements fell short of expectations. One newspaper reporter at the members' dinner during the RASE meeting at Norwich in 1849 wrote scathingly of the 'meagre, coarse and ill-served' meal offered to the 900 assembled noblemen and gentlemen.⁵⁹ At Lincoln in 1854, meanwhile, one visitor expressed disappointment at the lack of bunting put out to welcome the Society, concluding that, 'had I been stranger to what was going on,

⁵³ *Morning Chronicle*, 16 July 1850.

⁵⁴ *Mark Lane Express*, 22 July 1850.

⁵⁵ *Chester Observer and General Advertiser*, 17 July 1858.

⁵⁶ *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 July 1858.

⁵⁷ *Derby Mercury*, 25 July 1855.

⁵⁸ *Essex Standard*, 18 July 1856.

⁵⁹ *Essex Standard*, 27 July 1849.

I should indeed have been slow to believe anything out of the ordinary course was taking place'.⁶⁰

Elsewhere, local events could be dovetailed with the programme of the Show to maximize attendance and draw the widest possible public admiration. Many towns incorporated horticultural exhibitions such as that at Wolverhampton in 1871, where a Midland Counties exhibition of flowers was planned for the last three days of the Show week.⁶¹ These kinds of allied events were also often supplemented by activities designed purely for entertainment. At Chester, a programme of 'amusements' was laid on:

At the Linen Hall, a large marquee has been erected, and arrangements completed for giving a series of promenade concerts of a superior character, at which the celebrated band of the Coldstream Guards will perform every evening. Mr Archibald Mann, the tenor singer ... Mr W. G. Ross of Cremorne Gardens, London, whose comical vocal powers are well known, and Mr Inglis, the Ventriloquist are also engaged.⁶²

At Oxford in 1870, meanwhile, entertainments for the week included afternoon and evening performances at 'Bell's Circus', visits to 'Manders's Menagerie' which was conveniently located just opposite the showground, and a balloon ascent by 'the celebrated aeronaut', Mr Youens.⁶³ By billing these events as 'amusements for the week', and by locating them outside the perimeter of the showground, there was no attempt to pretend that such attractions had anything to do with the agricultural aims of RASE.

Nevertheless, in laying on these peripheral events, host towns caused debate and sometimes attracted criticism from both inside and beyond the agricultural community. At Exeter in 1850, for example, the organization of a 'political and Protectionist dinner' during show week invoked disapproval in the liberal London press. The *Morning Chronicle's* correspondent noted that, 'Any event which would have the effect of mixing up a purely agricultural society with party politics is, in the opinion of the principal members of the Royal Agricultural Society, much to be deplored'.⁶⁴ The editors of the *Mark Lane Express*, in contrast, gave generous coverage to the 'Grand Protectionist Banquet at Exeter' and to the anti-Free Trade rhetoric of the speakers in its special supplement, published to cover the events of the Exeter show.⁶⁵ The staging a horse jumping event at the Manchester show for the first time, for which a separate admission fee was charged by the local organizing committee, drew adverse comment. The initiative was roundly condemned by agricultural journalists who considered it a sign that RASE had ceded control of the event to the Manchester organizers who staged, 'exhibitions within exhibitions, and overlaid the show itself with absurdities, only to get more crowns, half-crowns and shillings out of the unfortunate public'.⁶⁶ The horse jumping clearly diverted attention away from the implement trials, which attracted the interest of only 'a few enthusiasts', while large crowds were drawn to the jumping for which 'no fee will be more cheerfully paid'.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ *Morning Post*, 19 July 1854.

⁶¹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 12 June 1871.

⁶² *Cheshire Observer and General Advertiser*, 17 July 1858.

⁶³ *Oxford Journal*, 20 July 1870.

⁶⁴ *Morning Chronicle*, 16 July 1850.

⁶⁵ *Mark Lane Express*, 22 July 1850.

⁶⁶ *Mark Lane Express*, 26 July 1869.

⁶⁷ *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 16 July 1869; *Daily News*, 21 July 1869.



FIGURE 3. The Royal Agricultural Society's exhibition at Chelmsford, taken from *The Illustrated London News*, 26 July 1856 (author's collection).

Such debates underlined the extent to which the shows had become a platform for competing objectives as they attempted to serve the interests of both rural and urban interest groups by bringing town and countryside together in one location. Inevitably, as the shows were held in populous towns and industrial districts, large numbers of attendees were not farming people at all, but day-trippers or curious locals (Figure 3). *The Times's* correspondent commented on the phenomenon in Newcastle in 1864, of shipbuilders, coalminers, craftsmen and gentry, all 'criticizing the points of prize animals and the performances of machinery'.⁶⁸ *Punch*, ever alert to the potential for ridicule, purported to offer advice to its 'non-farming readers' on how to behave if visiting a RASE show. 'On going up to a beast', it advised, 'Feel in a knowing way about the root of the animal's tail, and while doing so, glance along its back, and if that back presents a broad flat surface, look round at the bystanders and exclaim in notes of admiration, "level as a table"'.⁶⁹

Many of the supplementary activities laid on for the purposes of entertaining show-goers from both farming and non-farming backgrounds were also the principal opportunities for local businesses to generate income from the event, and the larger the crowds that could be

⁶⁸ *The Times*, 18 July 1864.

⁶⁹ *Punch*, 8 Aug. 1863.

attracted, the more revenue they were likely to accrue. It became an important measure of the success of a show if a town could demonstrate that visitor numbers and receipts compared favourably with money generated at previous shows. The *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, for instance, took pride in the success of Plymouth in hosting RASE in 1865 noting that:

in pecuniary results and in the number of attendants it ranks fourth, compared with all the meetings which the society has hitherto held. This is the more remarkable when we consider that the meetings of the society have frequently been held in the midst of the densest populations in the country'.⁷⁰

For local businesses and institutions, the income-generating potential of a RASE show, with its influx of visitors all in need of accommodation, entertainment and sustenance, was the primary benefit of the event and the main reason why it was eagerly anticipated and enthusiastically welcomed. In Derby in 1843, publicans and brewers flocked to the site of the showground to sell their wares to the show-going crowds. The *Leicester Chronicle* reported somewhat sniffily that, 'the victuallers of Derby and the neighbourhood, licensed and unlicensed, have erected refreshment-booths in great abundance in the immediate vicinity of the Pavilion'.⁷¹ Likewise an attempt was made to use the event to boost the funds of the town and county museum by staging an exhibition. It was noted disapprovingly that, 'The Committee availed themselves of the excitement of the occasion to charge their visitors one shilling instead of sixpence'.⁷² Innkeepers and proprietors of lodgings, it was claimed, also saw the occasion of a RASE show as an opportunity to raise their prices. One visiting newspaper reporter, a veteran of several RASE events, arriving in Lincoln ahead of the 1854 show, claimed that, 'it appears to be a settled principle that the Royal Agricultural Society carries with it charges of from 10s. to £1 a night for comparatively ordinary lodging, and the conviction that the farming interest are so burthened with cash that they know not what to do with it'.⁷³

II

The host towns, arguably, had always viewed the shows as a commercial and promotional undertaking but there was every incentive on the part of RASE, too, to embrace this approach. By the 1850s there were concerns in the Society about its annual revenue. Members' subscriptions formed an important source of RASE income, but after the enthusiasm of the Society's early years, membership levels had declined from a highpoint of 7,000 in 1843 to a plateau around the low 5,000s for much of the 1850s. Correspondingly, revenue from subscriptions also fell, exacerbated by the fact that many members were in arrears with their payments.⁷⁴ Income from subscriptions reached a low of £3,027 in 1859.⁷⁵ In these financial circumstances, the potential of the annual show as a vehicle to generate income was becoming more important.

⁷⁰ *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 28 July 1865.

⁷¹ *Leicester Chronicle*, 15 July 1843.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Morning Post*, 19 July 1854.

⁷⁴ See for example, MERL, SR RASE BII – 3, Finance Committee Minutes 1854–69, 1 June 1860.

⁷⁵ For full details of membership and subscriptions, 1841–77, see *Bristol Mercury*, 9 July 1878.

The County meeting 'receipts' shown in Table 1 include the financial contributions of the host towns, admissions paid for entry to the showground, as well as receipts from catalogue sales and fees paid by exhibitors. The Worcester receipts in 1863, for instance, included £408 from livestock entry fees, £509 from catalogue sales, £5,485 from admissions to the showgrounds and a subvention of £1,800 from the host town.⁷⁶

The greater the appeal of the show to a broad cross-section of the public, the more likely it was that high numbers of fee-paying visitors would attend. The watershed year in this regard was probably 1858 when the annual show was held at Chester. As Table 1 reveals, up to that point, the shows had always generated a loss, but at Chester, for the first time, receipts exceeded expenditure by a considerable margin. There were a number of reasons for the success of the Chester show. The district was closely associated with dairying and, in particular, cheese, which was 'considered the staple commodity'. As such, the show of dairy products and the related 'instruction and practical intelligence' on offer was a novel attraction.⁷⁷ Most important of all, the advantageous location of Chester, within easy reach of the 'teeming and busy hives' of Manchester and Liverpool, coupled with favourable timetabling and pricing arrangements put in place by local rail companies during the week, meant that unprecedented numbers flocked to the Show from a wide geographical area.⁷⁸ The resulting gate receipts from over 60,000 attendees made a real difference to show revenues; no previous RASE event had attracted more than 40,000 visitors (Table 2). The financial results demonstrated the clear money-spinning potential of the annual shows if a large attendance could be achieved. Once inside the showground, further revenue could be generated by adopting a commercial approach to some of the more practical arrangements. In 1869, for example, the Manchester organizing committee instituted a charge for refreshment providers to ply their wares in the showground. The income derived amounted to £725 which was passed on to a grateful RASE who described the sum as 'quite unprecedented' and rewarded the local organizer, Mr Whitworth, with a gift of 150 guineas.⁷⁹

Once this precedent was set, there was always a temptation to locate the shows in large, populous towns where high attendance figures could be almost guaranteed. At their general meeting in 1870, after a relatively unprofitable show at Oxford, it was noted that, 'when their resources fell short they must try a manufacturing district to get their coffers replenished'.⁸⁰ This priority was already evident in RASE's selection of show venues in the 1860s. Of the nine shows held in that decade, four were located in places which ranked among the top tier of most populous urban centres in England and Wales: London, Manchester, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Leeds.⁸¹ Places like Shrewsbury, Carlisle, York and Gloucester, all of whom had hosted the Society in the 1840s and '50s, were finding it harder to compete. The impact on attendance

⁷⁶ *Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald*, 12 July 1864.

⁷⁷ *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 19 July 1858.

⁷⁸ *Morning Post*, 24 July 1858; *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 19 July 1858.

⁷⁹ MERL, SR RASE BIII – 3, Agenda of Country Meetings Committee, 3 Aug. 1869.

⁸⁰ *The Standard*, 9 Dec. 1870.

⁸¹ No show was held in 1866 due to an outbreak of cattle plague. In 1871 there were thirteen towns in England and Wales with populations exceeding 100,000. These were London, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Salford, Sheffield, Oldham, Bradford, Portsmouth, Hull, Bristol and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. See *Census of England and Wales, 1871. General Report*, IV (1873), p. xxxi.

TABLE 1. Finances of RASE country meetings, 1841–76 (£)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>Expenditure</i>	<i>Receipts</i>	<i>Surplus</i>	<i>Loss</i>
1841	Liverpool	6,272	4,106		2,166
1842	Bristol	6,008	4,202		1,806
1843	Derby	6,554	3,390		3,164
1844	Southampton	7,071	4,929		2,142
1845	Shrewsbury	6,665	3,670		2,995
1846	Newcastle	6,257	4,119		2,138
1847	Northampton	6,291	4,565		1,636
1848	York	7,657	4,831		2,826
1849	Norwich	6,303	4,345		1,958
1850	Exeter	6,570	4,941		1,629
1851	Windsor	6,902	5,608		1,294
1852	Lewes	6,703	3,485		3,218
1853	Gloucester	7,576	5,493		2,083
1854	Lincoln	7,366	6,364		1,002
1855	Carlisle	6,889	6,029		860
1856	Chelmsford	7,328	5,346		1,982
1857	Salisbury	6,488	6,142		346
1858	Chester	9,131	10,312	1,181	
1859	Warwick	7,468	8,902	1,434	
1860	Canterbury	7,885	5,879		2,006
1861	Leeds	9,071	13,542	4,471	
1862	Battersea	15,794	12,160		3,634
1863	Worcester	11,112	9,833		1,279
1864	Newcastle	11,028	12,370	1,342	
1865	Plymouth	10,701	9,958		743
1866					
1867	Bury St Edmunds	10,439	8,399		2,040
1868	Leicester	10,045	10,899	448	
1869	Manchester	15,497	24,650	9,153	
1870	Oxford	14,396	11,892		2,504
1871	Wolverhampton	15,854	12,697		3,175
1872	Cardiff	13,753	13,150		603
1873	Hull	15,636	15,223		413
1874	Bedford	16,215	12,498		3,717
1875	Taunton	13,850	9,274		4,576
1876	Birmingham	17,363	20,787	3,424	

Note: The 1866 show, which was to have been held in Bury St Edmunds, was deferred to the following year due to the outbreak of cattle plague.

Source: *Newcastle Courant*, 22 July 1864; *York Herald*, 25 July 1868; *Cheshire Observer*, 14 July 1877.

TABLE 2. Exhibits and attendance at RASE country meetings, 1841–76

<i>Year</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>Number of implements exhibited</i>	<i>Number of livestock exhibited</i>	<i>Number of persons admitted</i>
1841	Liverpool	312		
1842	Bristol	455		
1843	Derby	604	617	
1844	Southampton	948		
1845	Shrewsbury	942		
1846	Newcastle	735		
1847	Northampton	1,321		
1848	York	1,508		
1849	Norwich	1,882		
1850	Exeter	1,223	619	
1851	Windsor		988	
1852	Lewes	1,722	655	
1853	Gloucester	1,803	737	36,245
1854	Lincoln	1,897	735	37,635
1855	Carlisle	1,314	808	37,533
1856	Chelmsford	2,702	752	32,982
1857	Salisbury	2,496	1,027	37,342
1858	Chester	3,648	1,026	62,539
1859	Warwick	4,618	1,159	55,577
1860	Canterbury	3,947	891	42,304
1861	Leeds	5,488	1,027	145,738
1862	Battersea	5,064	1,986	124,328
1863	Worcester	5,839	1,219	45,064
1864	Newcastle	4,024	1,099	114,683
1865	Plymouth	4,023	934	88,036
1866				
1867	Bury St Edmunds	4,804	719	61,837
1868	Leicester	6,369	934	91,138
1869	Manchester	7,724	1,315	200,733
1870	Oxford	7,851	1,377	75,749
1871	Wolverhampton	7,650	1,267	108,213
1872	Cardiff	5,843	1,293	87,047
1873	Hull	5,634	1,145	104,722
1874	Bedford	5,931	1,527	71,987
1875	Taunton	4,214	1,096	47,768
1876	Birmingham	6,414	1,499	163,413

Note: 1866 as Table 1.

Source: *Derby Mercury*, 13 July 1881.

figures was dramatic. An unprecedented 145,738 attended the show in Leeds in 1861. In parallel, the quantity of machinery and implement exhibits all increased over time. In Bristol in 1852, fewer than 500 implements were exhibited (see Table 2) although space had been provided for 700.⁸² Twenty years later, when the show was held in the metropolis for the first time, at Battersea, there were more than ten times this number of implements on show.⁸³ The 1876 Birmingham meeting was pronounced 'one of the most successful that the Society had ever held, alike in the number and excellence of the entries of livestock and implements, in the attendance of the public, and in the result to the Society's finances'.⁸⁴ In the towns, awareness of the increasing scale of the shows was heightened whenever there was a repeat visit. When RASE returned to Newcastle for its 1864 show, for example, comparisons were drawn with its previous visit to the town 18 years earlier. It was noted that the showground had grown in size from 12 to 45 acres, with twice the number of cattle and sheep and five times the number of implements and machines, everything being arranged in 'interminable rows of shedding'.⁸⁵

But bigger shows did not necessarily generate more income. Not surprisingly, the increasing size and attendance levels at shows had an escalating effect on the costs of staging these events, and the bulk of these costs had to be met by the Society. The host town was responsible for providing a secure and level showground space, making available any indoor venues required for dinners or other meetings, providing catering, the cost of which could be recouped from the ticket price for dinners, and also contributing to RASE's general show fund by providing a sum raised locally from subscriptions, such as the £1,500 provided by the authorities in Lincoln when the show was held there in 1854.⁸⁶ The remainder of the expenses, including the fitting out of the show yard, the cost of advertising, the employment of police from the Metropolitan force, animal feed, prizes and judging, were met by the Society and were offset against money raised from admission to the show. But these costs increased incrementally as the scale of the shows grew. As Table 1 reveals, expenditure on the shows topped £16,000 for the first time in 1874. Of this, some £6,000 was spent on the show yard, £2,000 on implement trials and £5,000 on the exhibition, judging and awarding of prizes for stock.⁸⁷ This scale of spending would have been acceptable if the monster shows could be guaranteed to turn a profit but, as the figures make clear, this was far from the case. With a few notable exceptions such as the shows at Leeds, Newcastle, Leicester and Manchester, in 1861, 1864, 1868 and 1869 respectively, RASE's country meetings in the 1860s continued to be loss-making. The trend seemed set to continue the following decade. With the Bedford show yielding a deficit of £3,717 in 1874, the Society's finance committee decided to act. They pleaded with the RASE Council to find ways of reducing the 'heavy and increasing expenditure' on country meetings. Among the ideas they proposed were less frequent and more restricted implement trials so that the costs of judging could be reduced. Later they also proposed that a cap of £3,000 should be set on the fund available for prizes, a sum which could be supplemented if required by donations from local

⁸² MERL, SR RASE BI – 1, Minutes of Council 1840–42 (rough copy), 24 Feb. 1841.

⁸³ *Derby Mercury*, 13 July 1881.

⁸⁴ *Morning Post*, 8 Dec. 1876.

⁸⁵ *The Times*, 20 July 1864.

⁸⁶ MERL, SR RASE BII – 3, Finance Committee Minutes, 1854–69, half-yearly accounts ending 31 Dec. 1853.

⁸⁷ MERL, SR RASE BII – 4, Finance Committee Minutes, 1870–87, 4 Nov. 1874.

agricultural societies or augmented by contributions from the local organising committee.⁸⁸ There was much soul searching among Council members over these issues in the 1870s before they finally took the decision to scale back the implement trials. Some questioned whether the country meetings should really be expected to make a profit and others warned of the potential loss of status for the show if trials were limited. Lord Vernon suggested that without the implement trials there would be little to distinguish a RASE country meeting from 'the level of ordinary stock shows of the country', while Lord Cathcart, doubtless mindful of the commercializing trend of the meetings over recent years, predicted that the show without its implement trials would resemble a 'mere bazaar'.⁸⁹

When looked at in the round, the reduction of the machinery trials combined with the growing commercial influences on the shows and the move towards larger manufacturing towns as venues, seemed to signal a shift in the role of the country meeting away from its original function as a tool to disseminate agricultural improvement among the farming population. The favouritism shown towards larger centres of population in the selection of show venues came at the expense of the Society's more traditional base in the county towns and criticism was levelled at the Society for moving away from its agricultural heartlands. The choice of Manchester over Preston for the 1869 show, for example, prompted indignation from the defeated town on the grounds that 'whilst Preston embraces the best part of Lancashire in an agricultural sense, Manchester has very little of it'.⁹⁰ The extent to which shows in industrial locations actually met the requirements of the farming community was occasionally questioned in the agricultural press. The lack of space in the Birmingham showground and the cramped arrangement of the implement sheds was identified by one agricultural correspondent as potentially problematic for any readers 'who may have business among the machinery or may wish to inspect the cattle in comfort'. It advised that they 'had better make their visit before the miners in their thousands are expected to arrive'.⁹¹ But, increasingly, care was taken over the choice of location for the shows to ensure that the promise of financial gain did not always take precedence over educational advantage in selecting a venue. This kind of cautionary note was voiced in council meetings when show venues were deliberated, and especially when smaller market towns went up against larger ports or manufacturing centres. Mr Bowley, commenting on the contest between Cardiff and Cheltenham in 1872 for example, warned fellow council members not to 'get into [the] habit to go about to collect shillings'.⁹² On this occasion, his caution was not heeded and the larger venue of Cardiff won out by a sizeable majority.⁹³ However, other show venues in the 1870s included Bedford and Taunton, where critics of the lucrative metropolitan shows could be assured of a more traditional 'country meeting'. It was perhaps partly in response to suggestions that commercialism and entertainment were gaining the upper hand over the aim of improving agricultural knowledge that the Society stepped up its efforts to further its educational and scientific objectives. In 1865, for example,

⁸⁸ MERL, SR RASE BII – 4 Finance Committee Minutes, 1870–87, 4 Nov. 1874; 13 July 1880.

⁸⁹ MERL, SR RASE/B/I/7, Minutes of Council, 1869–81 (rough copy), 10 Dec. 1874.

⁹⁰ *Preston Guardian*, 9 May 1868.

⁹¹ *Agricultural Gazette*, 17 July 1876.

⁹² From the 1840s show week traditionally included one or more designated days when admission to the showground was charged at 1s. instead of the usual fee of 2s. 6d. See, for example, the report on the Southampton show, *Morning Post*, 27 July 1844.

it inaugurated a new scheme of prizes for middle-class education, to assist 'those who depend for their support upon the cultivation of the soil'. The prizes were to be awarded to candidates for Oxford and Cambridge examinations in Mathematics, Mechanics, Chemistry, Zoology and Botany.⁹⁴ In 1871 a 'consulting botanist' was appointed so that members had access to expert advice on seed cultivation, pest prevention and other matters.⁹⁵

Attempts were also made to help the towns cope with various pressures associated with hosting the Society. The growing sense that hosting a show was a burdensome undertaking was proving a deterrent to towns to compete for RASE events by the 1870s. The level of escalation of livestock, implements and attendance seen when RASE visited industrial towns such as Manchester in 1869 (see Table 2) took the shows past a tipping point beyond which the burdens of hosting the Society began to outweigh the benefits for some towns. Compared to the 1840s, when ten or fewer acres were needed for the showground, by the 1860s and 1870s towns were required to provide between 40 and 70 acres to accommodate all of the additional implements and stock.⁹⁶ When it was the turn of the south-western counties to host the Society's 1875 meeting, the competition between prospective locations was described as 'by no means keen', with the majority of towns in the region 'either unwilling or unable to make the necessary exertion'.⁹⁷ It was a warning signal which the RASE hierarchy could not afford to ignore. In October 1876 a Special Country Meeting Districts Committee was convened. It regretted that 'there are important towns at which it would be greatly to the advantage of the Society to hold meetings, which will not enter into a rival competition, whilst there are others which from having before incurred the expense and trouble of competing, and having been unsuccessful, will not again come forward'.⁹⁸ The revised plans that were drawn up placed more responsibility on RASE itself for investigating the suitability for potential venues, rather than requiring rival towns to make representations. Members of its council, residing in the districts, would be expected to make enquiries with the relevant town authorities about whether the proposal of a show would be well received. The changes meant that, from 1876, delegations of urban worthies no longer lined up before the RASE council to plead their case, thus relieving interested towns from considerable anxiety and expense, and removing the element of head-to-head contest from the annual selection process. Instead, the May council meeting did little more than confirm the show location for the coming year based on information gathered and recommendations made beforehand.⁹⁹

A further reform implemented by RASE was that the boundaries of the districts which took it in turns to host the Society were revised. The main difference under the new scheme was that the divisions in the southern and western parts of the country were enlarged. The south-western counties, for example no longer formed a district of their own, but were combined with Hampshire, Berkshire, Surrey, Sussex and Kent. The aim of such a reconfiguration was to

⁹³ MERL, SR RASE BI – 7, Minutes of Council, 1869–81 (rough copy), 3 May 1871.

⁹⁴ *Derby Mercury*, 23 Aug. 1865.

⁹⁵ *Agricultural Gazette*, 7 July 1879 (review of the history of the Royal Agricultural Society on the occasion of its 41st anniversary).

⁹⁶ Goddard, 'Royal Agricultural Society of England',

p. 316.

⁹⁷ *Bristol Mercury*, 10 July 1875.

⁹⁸ MERL, SR RASE BXIII – 4, Miscellaneous, Special Country Meetings Districts Committee, 1 Oct. 1876.

⁹⁹ See for example, MERL, SR RASE BI – 7, Minutes of Council, 1869–81 (rough copy), 2 May 1877.

ensure that there was 'in each district a sufficient number of large towns capable of accommodating the Society'.¹⁰⁰ Under these new arrangements, the scenario that had left Taunton as the only option for the 1875 show would henceforth be avoided. It was also an acknowledgment of the Society's need for the big urban centres, and saw their support for its shows as essential for the future.

IV

The changing dynamic of the RASE show over three decades reveals much about the evolving relationship between rural and urban, agricultural and industrial in Victorian Britain. As the foregoing analysis has shown, growing urban metropolises recognized both the commercial and civic gains to be made from positioning themselves as centres well connected to the surrounding countryside. Likewise, the associational world of English agriculture relied heavily on the major provincial urban centres in the mid-Victorian years. Through the instrument of its flagship annual show, the Society used its host towns as a base from which to disseminate agricultural knowledge to the widest possible audience. Its choice of show venues from the 1840s to the 1870s mirrored the changes in the urban hierarchy in the period, with the emergence of a new stratum of manufacturing and commercial metropolises overshadowing the influence of some of the country's older, county and regional centres. The RASE adapted its regional rotation system of town selection in part to keep up with this changing urban map of Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, but also to harness the potential of the large towns to deliver big crowds and rich rewards for the Society's coffers.

But the Society's reliance on the towns for the staging of its show was something of a double-edged sword. It was, arguably, the towns' agendas that loomed largest in the show's boom years in the 1860s and '70s, encouraged by the Society's venue-selection system, which tapped into the competitive urban culture of the mid-Victorian period. In the course of the show week, the agricultural improvement agenda of the Society had to sit alongside each town's aims of income generation for local businesses, civic, commercial and cultural place promotion. The ambition of towns to be bigger, bolder and better than their neighbours, which was manifest in such things as the building of lavish town halls and the staging of municipal ceremony,¹⁰¹ was easily extendable to the hosting of events and meetings of major national associations like the Royal Agricultural Society. Thus RASE shows grew in scale, driven by the ambition of the towns to ever more spectacular feats of event staging. This set the shows on a trajectory of escalation which, for the RASE, was not altogether unwelcome. Bigger shows had the potential to generate greater funds for the Society, albeit subject to increasing costs and regular diversions from its traditional heartlands in the county towns with their large agricultural hinterlands. It is important to note, however, that this was not a one-way, linear journey. Looking beyond the chronological scope of this study into the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the county towns continued to supply show venues for RASE, not least because the largest centres could

¹⁰⁰ Report of monthly meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society in *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 10 Nov. 1876.

¹⁰¹ See for example, C. Cunningham, *Victorian and*

Edwardian Town Halls (1981); S. Gunn, *The public culture of the Victorian middle class. Ritual and authority in the English industrial city, 1840-1914* (2000).

not be visited every year. The editors of the *Preston Herald*, still smarting from their town's defeat by Manchester in the contest for the 1869 show, warned that:

It would be easy to select a dozen of the largest towns in England for their visits in succession. This policy may succeed for a time, but we think ... their round of visits will come to an end by the withdrawal of the support ... from those for whom these meetings were originally designed.¹⁰²

Equally, RASE's attempt to defuse the element of competition in its system of selecting show venues in the 1870s by making the bidding process less onerous and risky for participating towns, also proved to be only a temporary fix. Ultimately, the increasing scale and expense of the shows prompted the Society, in 1900, to begin the process of seeking a permanent location for a showground where its show could be held every year.¹⁰³

By undertaking an examination of the RASE shows of the mid-Victorian period which is centred on the host towns, rather than on the Society itself, some new perspectives become apparent. Viewed not just as an agricultural show, but as a key event in the repertoire of civic and cultural life in the provinces, the appeal of the RASE show comes more sharply into focus. The shows were not just vehicles for agricultural improvement and knowledge dissemination, but also for 'cultural capital' and urban advancement. This explains why both the host towns and the visiting Society had such a sense of shared investment in the success of the shows. The more place-centred approach to the shows adopted here reveals how readily RASE meetings could be adapted and shaped to reflect the character and the ambitions of their host town, not just in terms of the cattle breeds and equipment makers who exhibited, but in a much more forthright promotion of the urban setting, the public buildings, the attractions and facilities of the host town. The latter could be regarded as just as much 'on show' as the livestock and implements which filled the exhibition grounds. From this perspective, an urban analysis is not only valid, but essential in understanding the nature and development of the Royal's agricultural shows.

¹⁰² *Preston Herald*, quoted in the *Lancaster Gazette*, 16 May 1868. The Royal show came to Preston in 1885.

¹⁰³ Goddard, *Harvests of change*, p. 140.