

SCOTTISH NATIONAL EXHIBITION - 1908

The Scottish National Exhibition in Saughton Park, Edinburgh, ran for only six months. It was opened on 1st May by Prince Arthur of Connaught, and was closed on Saturday 31st October by Sir Robert Cranston, Chairman of the Executive Committee.



Nearly 3.5 million people visited the Exhibition. On the last day the attendance totalled 53,563, which fell short of the figures for the preceding Saturday when, with an all-day charge of 6d., the attendance reached the record of 65,140. The suggestion to hold a Scottish National Exhibition in Edinburgh, in 1908, originated amongst the promoters of the very successful Exhibition carried on in the Meadows in 1886. The ideal site of the Meadows, however, was not available for the later venture, but encouragement was given by the Corporation's offer of 43 acres of beautifully-wooded ground at Saughton Hall estate. In addition, the City Fathers contributed a liberal sum of money to the guarantee fund, an example that was followed by other Scottish cities and towns. In return, Edinburgh was to secure from the Exhibition authorities a permanent winter-garden, a bandstand and a ferro-concrete bridge over the Water of Leith, all of which were to be valuable assets to the city after the Exhibition had closed down. Sir Robert Cranston declared at the opening that it was assured of financial success because of the support of the season ticket holders, over 60,000 of them paid 10s 6d. for their tickets. A contemporary account describes how a season ticket holder knew exactly when free samples of food and drinks were being distributed from the various trade stands!



A small army of workers was kept exceedingly busy during the winter of 1907-08, and the white stucco buildings, peculiar to exhibitions, took shape almost magically. On 6th May, the turnstiles began to click, and seldom could the portents have been less favourable as on that opening day, when a severe snowstorm swept the city! Fortunately, the weather relented, and the exhibition enjoyed glorious conditions, so much so that in October audiences could sit listening to the band in the open without resorting to overcoats and gloves.

A special station was erected at the junction of the Corstophine branch, on the N.B.R., and every day crowded trains disgorged here, swelling the throngs who had journeyed to the exhibition by tram and by foot. Once inside the exhibition the visitor might have entered the Palace of Industries, built at a cost of over £10,000. Its ornamental towers reminded the visitors of something from the Arabian Nights but inside, with its floor space of over 10,000 square feet were to be found exhibits from Holland, Japan, Canada, and other countries. There were models of every description, probably the most noticeable was the miniature railway around which gathered hundreds of 'boys' of all ages. The Machinery Hall dealt, romantically, with the more prosaic subjects of printing, shipping, mining, electricity, gas, steam and hydraulics. This building cost over £3,000 to construct and its interior measured round about 31,500 square feet. Then came the Fine Art Galleries, lined throughout with asbestos, in which was housed a representative collection of the finest pictures ever assembled. Many interesting relics were on view here - a brooch worn by Bruce, a letter written by Prince Charlie, and old regimental colours, uniform and medals.



The Music and Conference Hall was built on the cantilever principle, no pillars being necessary in the interior. It accounted for a further £5,000 and a variety of fare could be enjoyed within. A three-manual organ delighted the music lovers, and few forgot the remarkable fairy fountain that functioned at frequent periods.

From a well in the floor a column of water rose to within a few yards of the roof. Strong beams of coloured lights were directed down upon the fountain, every change being accompanied by an audible 'oh' of admiration. Other colour effects to be found in the grounds were provided by various local nurserymen, who laid out gorgeous flower-beds, whilst throughout the season spectacular fire works displays added to the gaiety of the exhibition.

In the Amusement Park there were devices galore to loosen the purse strings. The Water Chute was a favourite with visitors of all ages and everyone saved their 2d. for this spectacular ride. At the top of a wooden tower, the passengers were seated in a boat with a sailor standing at the back. The operator signalled release and off it went gliding down a long wooden ramp to hit the water with a great spurt of spray. On one occasion the boat swerved, struck a wooden beam and capsized. The passengers got a ducking, but as the water was only 3 feet deep they were none the worse, indeed all the better for the Exhibition authorities gave them new clothing.

The Cake Walk was another source of joy for the spectators, as women folk, with those alarmingly stupid hats of the day, bounced and tottered trying to keep balance. The Venitian gondolas on the Water of Leith were apparently a complete flop! Other attractions in the Amusement Park included a Figure of 8 Railway, House of Troubles, Spiders Web Maze and Moulin Rouge.



A unique event took place in connection with the Senegalese Village, namely the christening of a dusky baby born in Edinburgh. With due solemnity this infant, too young to be able to protest, had bestowed upon it the double-barrelled name - Scotia Reekie.



There were exciting scenes on the last day of the exhibition when the police and rowdy elements in the crowd came to grips. The Terrace Bar was closed at 9.30 p.m. and the customers were ejected after a struggle. This closing day compares with the last day of the Franco-British Exhibition, when similar scenes forced the police to use special measures to eject the crowd before they could pull the exhibits to pieces.

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