

The Croydon Country Show (1988 – 2002)

The first Forestry Open Day, as it was then called, was held in The Great Field in Selsdon Wood during the Autumn of 1988. The purpose was to show off Croydon Council's new equipment and to explain what actions were being taken in the aftermath the storm of 15/16 October 1987 which had brought down so many trees in the Borough.

The proposal for an "open day" sprang up from a casual conversation that 3 of us in the Parks Department (namely myself, Bob Roseberry and Bill Gilmore) were having on the return from a meeting about the storm. We thought it would be a good idea to hold an event showing the public what the Council actually did during the clear up operations and what equipment was used.

We decided that Selsdon Woods would be the ideal venue as it had a mixture of large open spaces and woodlands with good access and plenty of space for vehicle parking.

Councillor Dudley Mead (local Councillor for Selsdon) officially opened the first show and was given an axe to cut a ribbon. After several abortive attempts and a bit of friendly banter (aimed at me for giving him blunt equipment) he finally managed to splice the ribbon and release some balloons to the tumultuous cheers of the crowd. Dudley and his wife Margaret attended many of the shows and were always complimentary about the work and organisation that went into setting up the event.

The show proved so popular that it was decided to organise it the following year, and the following year and so on. Such was its success that we started holding it over two days and it eventually became the **Croydon Country Show**.

There were sunny days, dull days and rainy days – but such is the British temperament that they turned out in all weathers to support the show. I can recall numerous visitors from all parts of the country and even some from abroad.

There were some very funny moments – one show we had a Victorian horse drawn hand pump fire engine extinguishing a mock fire in a skip. Such was the enthusiasm of the firefighters that the jet of water from the hose not only extinguished the fire but went into the audience and gave them a thorough soaking (it was a very hot day as I rememberbut some of the spectators were not amused!).

The crowds thrilled to the fun packed Terrier racing and John Whiteley, (from Yorkshire) a farmer with his duck herding sheepdogs. These two events I always found particularly amusing.

As well as forestry and tree matters we had crafts, side stalls and a main arena with spectator attractions etc. Visitors will remember the various activities ranging from fairgrounds, charity stalls, craft marquees, arts and craft stalls, a Village Green with Morris Men and other performers showing their skills, beer and refreshment outlets, main and side arenas, dog shows, animal attractions (including one year a horse event which although popular proved too complicated and expensive to organise again).

In later years the event attracted vintage fairground rides (a memory of days gone by) and also attracted the interest of the vintage steam groups who travelled long distances (sometimes up to a week of travelling) to show off their prestigious engines of varying shapes, sizes and uses.

One particular weekend the show coincided with a Remembrance Service held at the Purley Way RAF Memorial. We knew the organisers of the Service and hinted that it would be a fitting tribute if the "Fly Past" arranged could go over the showground. Well, whether by design or just good fortune the RAF Memorial Fly Past (Spitfire, Hurricane and Lancaster) flew in formation over Selsdon Woods on their route to Purley, much to the sheer delight and applause of the crowds at the show.

Through one of our colleagues we managed to get a "Dad's Army" representation and several of the original cast turned up to add to the show's entertainment, much to the delight of visitors.

The show's success and popularity grew and a group called Round Timber asked if they could come along to see if it was the type of thing they would like to get involved with. After a first visit they were keen to return and did so for many years. They demonstrated "old style" steam driven timber milling, stone crushing and ancillary work connected with agriculture and highways of a bygone era.

One year I decided to invite all the Mayors of the London Boroughs and to my surprise many knew of the show and turned up in their Mayoral Regalia, and had a thoroughly enjoyable experience...such was the show's notoriety.

Setting up originally just took the Friday prior to the show, but as the event grew in size the setting up took virtually the whole week.

The logistics of organising the show became more complicated as the years progressed and I can remember setting to work on the next show immediately one finished.

My two colleagues retired and I remained to carry on the show ably assisted by two other members of staff namely Steve Greetham and Ian White, without whose input the show would not have continued.

I must also mention the proverbial back room staff, without whose dedicated assistance and help, the show would not have taken place. In particular my assistant, Linda Wood, who undertook all the paperwork for the show and had to endure my many outbursts of anger and frustration when I was in the office and not everything was going to plan.

On many a wet day the skill of the Council tractor drivers was put to good use towing cars and vans out of the mud. A task they undertook with zeal and good humour.

The show continued as an annual event, later called the "Croydon Country Show", until 2002. Over the years it grew enormously and attracted many many exhibitors and attractions from Sporting and cultural activities to cider makers and Saxon Villages. However it became a product of it's own success, growing too big for the site. There were safety concerns over access for emergency services, traffic and parking problems, the risk of damage to the environment from so much heavy equipment and escalating costs so it was reluctantly decided that there should be no further shows after 2002.

I should also mention the mementos - in the shape of brass plaques, produced each year and given to every exhibitor. Such was the success of the show that exhibitors asked each year for a plaque and I had to ensure sufficient quantities were available so that the participants were not disappointed.

The bear that stands beside the car park is a reminder of those days. It was carved at the first show as a spectator event. It was carved by a local tree surgeon, Selwyn Smith who attended most years and thrilled the crowd with his skill and dexterity carving everything from seats to large owls and many other animals.

I have very fond memories of those days, and although at times exhausting it was also exhilarating. The main thing was.... it was fun and enjoyable.

Roger Yates
Show Organiser