

Chickens are not inconsiderable trifles: 150 years of the Bendigo Easter Fair

The 150th staging of the Bendigo Easter Fair will take place this April and we've delved into the BRAC archives to find some of the special history behind the event.

From the earliest time on the Bendigo goldfields, celebrations were being held across Easter. In 1856, locals had several events to choose from. At Wallach's Half-Way House in White Hills, a sports carnival was held with a program which included wrestling (both Cornish and Devonshire styles, which ultimately attracted 1,000 spectatorsⁱ), pigeon shooting, climbing a greasy pole, foot races, bobbing for oranges, jumping in sacks, catching a pig with a greasy tail, and a blindfolded wheelbarrow race. Another sports carnival was offered at Sydenham Gardens, with a program for foot races and wrestling, followed by a dance where many local ladies attendedⁱⁱ.

Leaning more toward artistic fashions was the Shamrock, who hosted singer Monsieur Coulon performing works by Mozart and Rossini, while the Criterion focused on the gourmand, with an 'excellent luncheon' – followed by the ubiquitous sportsⁱⁱⁱ.

John Hannah, keeper of the Manchester Arms Inn at Long Gully, offered the Manchester Wakes on Easter Monday^{iv}. This event was styled on Wakes Week in Manchester, England, where factory workers took a week to enjoy family holidays by the sea^v. The program here was extensive – shooting, quoits, boxing, races, Cornish wrestling, hornpipe dancing, games such as climbing the greasy pole and ring the bull, as well as a gingling match where blindfolded men – beaus – tried to catch the 'belle' who had a ringing, or jingling, bell. This was also followed by a concert and ball featuring Radford's band^{vi}.



Such sports and entertainments continued at Easter time across the decades but it was in 1871 where a fully organised event on a grand scale was introduced.

The Ancient Order of Foresters, who were one of the groups involved in the establishment of the Bendigo Easter Fair, had held an Easter Tuesday picnic for the public at Ravenswood since the early 1860s. In 1870, that event was broadened and, under the direction of George Aspinall and Brown, respectively President and Clerk of the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum, was held in benefit for that institution, attracting around 4,000 people to the picnic grounds, including 2,630 who travelled there by train^{vii}.

In late February of the following year however, Aspinall and his group of delegates from various societies around Bendigo met at the Shamrock Hotel to discuss planning another grand benefit in aid of both the Hospital and Asylum. Local councillor and president of the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum, Aspinall, was voted to the chair, with John Woodward appointed secretary (later to be joined by James Burnside in the role), and John Stewart was entrusted with the group's finances.

The meeting concluded with a resolution to hold a fete – a 'fancy fair' – rather than repeat the 1870 picnic at Ravenswood^{viii}, contingent on being granted use of the Camp Reserve^{ix}. The Executive wrote the Borough and asked their indulgence:

[TRANSCRIPTION

Letterhead – Bendigo Benevolent Asylum, Sandhurst
23 February 1871

To the Worshipful, the Mayor and Councillors of the Borough of Sandhurst
Gentlemen,

On Easter Monday last year the UUIOOF, AOF and other societies in the Bendigo district at the request of the committee of the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum were so kind as interest themselves in getting up a monster Pic Nic [sic] in aid of the funds of that institution.

This year it has been thought advisable by a number of these orders that the Hospital should share in the benefit.

At a meeting of delegates from the various orders held on last Tuesday the question was discussed whether it would not be better to hold a Fair in the Reserve.

As pertaining to the matter being definitely arranged, we have the honour to request that should it be decided to hold a Fair in the Reserve instead of a Pic Nic [sic] at Ravenswood, you will be so good as grant us the liberty of using the reserve on both sides of the Creek and also the loan of timber for fencing the ground from behind the Rifles Orderly Room to the Police Office.

We have the honour to be, gentlemen, most obediently yours
James Burside
JA Woodward
Joint secretaries]

The request was granted.

George Aspinall was at that time in the role of President of the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum committee, as well as serving as a councillor on the Sandhurst Borough Council. John Woodward was a successful speculator known as 'Gentleman John' about the district and had also served on the Council (later as Mayor) and Bendigo Hospital board. Other committee members included Jacob Cohn, A Thunder, Meader, Melrose, Houston and William Vahland.

James Burnside, while not named specifically in the list of initial delegates, was upon his death credited, along with Aspinall, as being the force behind the establishment and growth of the Easter Fair. A Scotsman who operated a hay and corn store in Howard Place from the mid-1850s, Burnside also served on the board of the Hospital and Asylum, including as inaugural chair of the latter institution. Like Woodward and Aspinall, Burnside had also served as a Councillor for Sandhurst. It was during the eighth Easter Fair in 1878 that he passed away.



“The fair will be an event of no ordinary character,” the *Bendigo Advertiser* editorial announced once plans had been made public. “Every possible means of amusement procurable the committee has set its mind on obtaining. The Reserve for the two days will become a scene of the gayest description, and as the whole of old Bendigo, with his wives and little ones, will make it a point to be present, the proceeds for admission will of course amount to a considerable sum. It may be that Sandhurst will show itself to be able to vie even with the ancient city of Chester, which was particularly famous for the magnificent manner in which it kept up the fest of Easter.”^x

This Executive group next wrote to Council requesting the proclamation of two public holidays – Easter Monday and Easter Tuesday – and the presence of the Mayor in the opening procession. The priority then became securing the Governor and Commander in Chief in and over the Colony of Victoria, His Excellency, the Right Honourable John Henry Thomas Manners-Sutton, Viscount Canterbury of the City of Canterbury in the County of Leicester, in the Peerage of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Knight Commander of the most Honourable Order of the Bath, to undertake the official opening. The Committee wrote to the Council, asking for the Municipality to take responsibility for entertaining Manners-Sutton, who accepted the invitation^{xi}.

[TRANSCRIPTION

“Committee rooms, Shamrock Hotel, 24 March 1871

To The Worshipful

The Mayor and Councillors of the Borough of Sandhurst

Gentlemen,

We have the honour by direction of the Executive Committee managing the projected Fair to be held in the Sandhurst Reserve on Easter Monday and Tuesday to enclose correspondence between us and the Mayor of the Borough relative to the necessary entertainment of His Excellency the Governor in the event of him consenting to open the Fair. The Mayor not considering that any duties devolve upon him in connection with His Excellency’s visit to the town suggests the propriety of addressing you upon the matter. As it seems absolutely necessary that provision should be made for the entertainment of our distinguished visitor of such a nature as will reflect credit on the Borough, and the committee deems it inadvisable to saddle the charities with the expense, we are directed to ask whether the Borough Council will be prepared to take the matter in hand on behalf of the Town.

We have the honour to remain, gentlemen

Your most obedient servants

James Burnside

JA Woodward

Honorary secretaries”

“Committee rooms, Shamrock Hotel, 22 March 1871

James Boyd Esq MD

Mayor of the Borough of Sandhurst

Dear Sir,

We have the honour by direction of the Committee managing the projected Easter Fair to be held in the Sandhurst Reserve on Easter Monday and the following day to inform you that it has been determined to request His Excellency Viscount Canterbury, the Governor of the Colony, to open the undertaking officially. If he consents, of which there can be little doubt, a great many people of influence will in all probability be attracted to the borough and the visitations must result to its material advantage. Under these circumstances the Committee have instructed us to ask early information as to what provisions you may consider it necessary to make as Mayor of the Borough for the proper entertainment of His Excellence and suite, so that we may make our arrangements for His Excellency’s attendance at the Fair to combine advantageously with those adopted by you on behalf of the town the leading institutions of which he may perhaps desire to visit with you.

We have the honour, dear Sir, to remain
Your most obedient servants
James Burnside
JA Woodward
Honorary Secretaries”]

The program was put together with incredible rapidity.

The festivities commence with a grand parade through the inner city, led by John Stewart, the Grand Marshall, who organised the list of participants at the starting point of Market Square.

The Grand Marshall, John Stewart Esq
Band
Cavalry
Governor
Suite
Mayor and councillors of Sandhurst
Mayor and councillors of Eaglehawk
Mining board
Presidents and members of Shire and Road Boards
Hospital & Asylum Committee
Band
Fire Brigade
MUIOOF (Oddfellows)
Northcott’s Band
AOF (Ancient Order of Foresters)
Rechabites Band
GUOOF
Band of Pipers
St Andrews Society
Irish Australian society
Band
Bendigo Deutscher Verein
Other societies
Citizens

The parade first headed to the railway station where His Excellence, John Manners-Sutton, accompanied by the Hon Miss Manners-Sutton (likely his youngest daughter Mabel) and aide-de-camp Lieutenant Rothwell, was welcomed at the station by crowds waving banners and sounding trumpets. Eventually, he was received by the Bendigo Mayor, Dr James Boyd, who was running late. The Mayor was joined by a group of councillors from Sandhurst, Marong, Strathfieldsaye, Huntly and Eaglehawk.

[Memorandum
To GA Fletcher Esq
From The Treasurer, Bendigo Gold District General Hospital

Dear Sir, Mr Aspinall received a telegram this evening stating that His Excellency would be up on Monday to open the Fair, Mr A wishes me to inform you of it as early as I could so as to give you more time to make arrangements.

Yours truly, John Stewart
Thursday morning]

The Governor and his suite were escorted by a guard of honour led by the Prince of Wales Light Horse and local mounted police down Mitchell Street, Pall Mall and Munday Street and in a large rectangle, down Hargreaves Street into Williamson Street to The Shamrock Hotel. Here, they departed from their vice-regal carriage and took position on the balcony with 'the elite of the town' to wave to the crowd and watch the progress of the progression^{xii}.

Just after midday, the Governor escorted the Mayoress, Mrs Boyd, to the Bazaar for the official opening:

'I have always retained a very pleasing recollection of my former visits to Sandhurst and I feel the greatest pleasure in having been able to revisit your district today because I recognise the widespread utility of the institutions for the support of which you have organised this gathering and I would not willingly withhold my cooperation. Gentlemen, I thank you heartily for your welcome and in accordance with your desire I now declare this Fair to be open'^{xiii}.



Upon arrival at the Camp Reserve, visitors would find themselves up for one shilling to enter the precinct, and six pence for each child they brought with them. The Reserve took on 'the appearance of an encampment' with canvas booths popping up all over the place, dressed in bunting and coloured decorations^{xiv}. At night, it was lit by strings of Chinese lanterns and gas lights^{xv}.

The focal point for the event was the Bazaar, the first massive structure visible as punters entered the main gates. Inside the large timber structure, shoppers would find a fountain, formed of lumps of quartz and flowering plants, in the centre, designed by architect Mr Ronald, and above the babble of voices, a singing bird could be heard performing^{xvi}.

An appeal was made through the *Bendigo Advertiser* and offices of various businesses and societies for donations of both cash and items for the bazaar:

"A bullock would not be rejected as too large, nor a pair of chickens as inconsiderable trifles, neither will the Committee decline to undertake the sale of all kinds of produce from a load of hay down to a dozen eggs. Clothing, kitchen utensils, pictures, chamber and other furniture, eatables, drinkables, fruit, bread, sweets, jams – in one word, anything will be received with thanks and turned to good account."^{xvii}

Bendigonians responded. In the inventory of literally hundreds and hundreds of goods donated were:

- 32lb cheese
- Model St Patrick's Cathedral carved in Irish bog oak

- Three emus
- Five bags of bone dust
- A dozen jars of Indian mock crab
- A native bear
- Two rabbits in a box
- Cases of ale, porter, gin and whisky
- A fat pig, a fattened calf and a pair of fat ducks
- A fiddle, a harmonium and a piccolo
- Six dozen turnips
- A pet lamb
- A dressed, performing monkey named Miss Birdy
- A box of Worcestershire sauce
- A white poodle
- Two bibles in Irish language
- A telescope and microscope
- A talking magpie in a cage
- Silk stockings
- A soda fountain
- A stuffed kangaroo
- Whalebone coach whip
- Copy of Young Englishman's Book of Fashion
- 500 shares in the London Tribute Company
- 20lb sausages
- Pots of musk and box of feathers

While it's not known if young Mabel left with a talking magpie or a wheel of cheese, it was noted that 'Miss Manners-Sutton along with her father and the Lieutenant all left the bazaar laden with purchases' before boarding their special train back to Melbourne that afternoon^{xviii}.



There was still a lot of fun to be had beyond the jumble sale. Food and drink offerings abounded, including an oyster stall. Roving entertainment in the form of minstrels, jugglers, Stanley's Great American Acrobatic booth and dancers added to the enclosed Richardson's Show which included amateur dramatic company performances. Patrons could look at expansive dioramas, get dizzy on the merry-go-round, take a boat ride or chance their arm at the Aunt Sally (throwing a stick at an object on a pedestal).

Of course a sporting program also featured, with prizes in quoits, walking matches, pole vaulting, three-legged races, running high leap and hop step jump, pony races, the standing high jump and a backwards race.

Support came from across the district given the beneficiaries of the fund raising. The Bendigo Omnibus Company waived fares for travel to and from the Fair site, as well as delivery costs for items being sent to the bazaar^{xix}.

The first Easter Fair did not go off without a hitch however; six-year-old Annie Mumford was killed on the night of the Easter Monday opening. Annie, her mum, father William and uncle Thomas, had spent the day enjoying the Fair, and at about 8PM they caught a cab to return to their Kangaroo Flat home^{xx}. She sat on her uncle's knee on the trip, but about 5km into the trip, the horse tripped, jolting the passengers and throwing both Thomas and Annie from the cab onto the road. The wheel of the vehicle passed over both of them but while Thomas was concussed, it caught Annie across the neck and upper body.

At first William thought his little daughter was dead but regardless, they climbed into the cab and were taken to Dr O'Donnell's where he examined her and declared her deceased, the wheel of the vehicle having passed over her neck and upper body.



While initially intended to be conducted on Easter Monday and Tuesday, the event ran through until the Saturday and a grand auction of all the remaining goods from the bazaar as late as the following Thursday. The official conclusion though took place on Wednesday 29 April with a plain dress ball in the specially-built bazaar building. A ticket for a lady and gentleman was ten shillings but ladies intending to be present had to submit their names to the Easter Fair committee for approval^{xxi}.

The estimated attendance across the event was over 20,000. The gross receipts amounted to £5,166 (\$807,000^{xxii}) with £200 (\$31,000) set aside for the delivery of the 1872 Fair and the institutions given both an endowment of £1,000 (\$156,000) each and donations of the profits - £914 (\$142,000) split between the two^{xxiii}.

Such was the success of the Easter Fair that by July, the Alfred Hospital Committee had written to request details for the delivery of the event with the intent of replicating it in Melbourne^{xxiv}.

"As we had anticipated," reported the *Bendigo Advertiser*, "Easter Monday proved the greatest holiday we have ever had on Sandhurst, if we except, perhaps the visit of the Duke. There were more people in town, on doubt. Yesterday will long be remembered as one of the greatest gaiety ever passed in Sandhurst, gaiety that was devoted to the best purposes – to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and heal the sick."^{xxv}



In 2022, the 150th staging of the Fair will be held, under the auspices of the Bendigo Easter Fair Society (BEFS), the custodians of the festival which continues to include the various community groups, and events like the market, the torchlight procession and teddy bear's picnic which have long formed a part of the event.

The Chinese Association had their first entry in the parade in 1879 with the first Imperial Dragon appearing in 1892. Other elements such as the Ways of the Cross were introduced much later in the 1980s.

The Council has continued to support the event over time, with councillors often serving a dual purpose within the organising committee.

This annual event, which has long relied upon volunteers and private and corporate donors, and the support of the Victorian public, ceased the charitable nature of the festival in the 1980s^{xxvi}. up to this point, it was instrumental in providing significant financial support to the key institutes that cared for countless people in the Bendigo region. Like a pair of chickens, these amounts were not inconsiderable trifles in the days before a formal pension scheme and Medicare.

ⁱ 'Easter sports', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 25 Mar 1856, p3

ⁱⁱ 'Easter sports', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 25 Mar 1856, p3

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Easter sports', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 25 Mar 1856, p3

^{iv} 'Easter holidays!', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 1 Mar 1856, p1

^v 'Manchester Wakes', The University of Manchester website,

<https://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/about/news/latest-news/news-archive/manchester-wakes/>, accessed 24 March 2022

^{vi} 'Easter holidays!', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 1 Mar 1856, p1

^{vii} 'Picnic in aid of the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 19 Apr 1870, p2

^{viii} Public Record Office Victoria, VA 4862 Sandhurst Borough, VPRS16936 Inward Correspondence Files, Unit 4, 23 February 1871

^{ix} 'A grand benefit', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 22 Feb 1871, p2

^x 'Editorial', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 23 Mar 1871, p2

^{xi} Public Record Office Victoria, VA 4862 Sandhurst Borough, VPRS16936 Inward Correspondence Files, Unit 4, 24 March 1871

^{xii} 'The Easter Fair', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 11 Apr 1871, p3

^{xiii} 'The Easter Fair', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 11 Apr 1871, p3

^{xiv} 'Easter amusements', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 10 Apr 1871, p2

^{xv} 'Easter amusements', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 12 Apr 1871, p2

^{xvi} 'Easter amusements', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 12 Apr 1871, p2

^{xvii} 'Amusements', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 14 Mar 1871, p1

^{xviii} 'The Easter Fair', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 11 Apr 1871, p3

^{xix} 'The Bendigo Omnibus Company', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 5 Apr 1871, p2

^{xx} Public Record Office Victoria, VA 2889 Registrar-General's Department, VPRS 24 Inquest Deposition Files, 1871/94 Annie Mumford

^{xxi} 'Easter Fair', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 19 Apr 1871, p1

^{xxii} All estimates of relative modern values have been calculated using Thom Blake's historical monetary conversion tool, available at <https://www.thomblake.com.au/secondary/hisdata/query.php>.

^{xxiii} 'The Easter Fair', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 12 May 1871, p3

^{xxiv} 'Bendigo Hospital', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 13 Jul 1871, p2

^{xxv} 'The Easter Fair', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 11 Apr 1871, p3

^{xxvi} Wikipedia, Bendigo Easter Festival, accessed 5 April 2022