



Colour from cut flower classes in the floral marquee.

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## Dundee's Flower and Food Festival

Alison Anderson, Andrew Child & Peter Sandwell

The first Dundee Flower Show was held in 1864 in Baxter Park though there are records of various local societies holding shows as far back as 1825. The show was certainly popular in those Victorian days. In 1867 60,000 people attended a show with 5,000 exhibits. By 1876 the Earl of Strathmore suggested a Grand International Horticultural Exhibition to attract some of the finest gardeners and growers. In 1886 it moved to Magdalen Green when Dundee's famous, some would say notorious, poet William Topaz McGonagall wrote some of his uniquely laboured verses about the Dundee Flower Show which he dedicated to the Earl of Dalhousie.

*'Twas in the year of 1886 and in the 2nd day of September. Which the lovers of horticultural beauty will long remember. Especially those that visited the Flower Show, on the Magdalen Green, Dundee, Must confess it was really a most magnificent sight to see.'*

Paraphrasing the poem gives a flavour of what the public would have seen. Besides the flowers and produce, public entertainment came from the 4th Hussars band playing patriotic tunes including *God Save the Queen*. Other bands included the boy's band from the good ship Mars moored in McGonagall's favourite river the '*silvery Tay*'. The Industrial School Boys Band was also there.

As for the horticulture plants in pots, '*most lovely to see*' were shown by W. P. Laird & Sinclair, one of the trade stands. There were also exotic ferns, popular in Victorian days. As today there were beautiful chrysanthemums, '*Some of them short and some of them tall....And some of them belonging to Provost Ballingall*'. Twenty-four roses were shown by James Cocker and Sons of Aberdeen one of the few nurseries mentioned that still exist. Other roses came from Dickens & Turnbull of Perth.



*The show on Magdalen Green in 1909. Dundee Council Archives*







*Many specialist societies have their shows within the overall event.*

The role that large private estate gardens played in those days is demonstrated by a collection of eight varieties of fruit, two varieties of grapes and pines (pineapples) belonging to Colonel Moray of Abercairney; there were beautiful apples, pears '*which enchanted the scent*' besides red gooseberries and white currants. On the vegetable front he mentions potatoes, leeks, onions, turnips, cabbage, heads of parsley, curled greens (kale?) and pods of broad beans.

There was even a display of honey and a show glass where a variety of '*busy little bees*' could be seen working. In 2002, the Scottish National Honey Show became a feature of the modern Dundee Flower Show.

### **Changes**

The show has changed in many ways over the years, but it has always been held on the first weekend in September. There has been a tradition of high value prize money for some classes. In 1935, 40 shillings was on offer for a large table display of cut flowers. By 2015

there was a £300 first prize in the World Gladioli Championships.

In 1988 the Show, now called the City of Dundee Horticultural Exhibition, was moved to the lawns of Camperdown Park. The opening hours were rather different to today as it stayed open until 9 pm on Friday and 8 pm on Saturday; it now closes at 5.30 pm. It attracted 3,000 visitors paying £2 for adult tickets or 50p for OAPs and children. The exhibition was organised by a Show Committee made up of local organisations including: Dundee & District Chrysanthemum & Dahlia Society; Dundee Federation of Garden and Allotment Associations; Dundee Floral Art Club; Dundee Horticultural Society; East of Scotland Beekeepers Association and Tayside Amateur Wine Makers Association. All of these associations are still involved in the organisation of the Festival. One original committee member was chrysanthemum grower Dorothy Spencer, who is still involved in 2015.



*Some classes feature displays of flower, pot plants and produce together.*



By 1989 the event was called the Dundee Flower Show. In 1998 the name was changed to The Dundee Flower Show and Food Festival, finally changing to the Dundee Flower & Food Festival in 2004. During the 1990's visitor numbers continued to rise. In 1995 15,000 attended. The peak was 2011 with an estimated attendance of 26,000. In recent years the control of ticketing numbers and exhibitors has improved to provide an accurate figure, this has remained at about 20,000–21,000 over recent years despite the recent recession and the need to increase admission prices.

Whilst the core competitive classes have remained constant over the years, the content has changed. The early years of the Festival saw a limited number of horticultural trade exhibitors; no trade prize money was paid at that time. The large floral displays were provided by local authorities, including displays that originated at the Chelsea Flower Show. Spending restrictions mean that these council showpieces are now largely a thing of

the past. The introduction of the Garden Design Showcase has provided the opportunity for local authorities, colleges, charities and landscape designers to display their expertise on a small scale, each display is 5m x 5m and viewed from all round. In addition to providing many of the committee members who help run the festival, local societies provide information stands and displays, competing in the annual George Gibson Rose Bowl Competition for the best society stand at the festival. To ensure that the displays are ever changing, in recent years the committee has decided to introduce a theme for the competition. The theme for 2016 is Scotland's Year of Innovation, Architecture and Design.

### **The current schedule**

Flowers, fruit and vegetables are covered by over 400 competitive classes. Further sections for floral art, baking, winemaking and handicrafts take the number of classes to over 650. There are over 100 trophies up for competition. Over 30 specialist judges



*Cacti feature prominently in the Festival.*



*Dundee regularly hosts highly competitive vegetable shows.*



*Local clubs and their members make a huge contribution to the Festival.*



adjudicate on the exhibits. Each year a Banksian medal donated by the RHS goes to the exhibitor who gains most prize money across horticultural classes of the festival.

### **Shows within a show**

Several specialist societies organise their own shows under the umbrella of the Festival. This is mutually advantageous as the society does not have to organise a venue while the overall show benefits from more high quality entries as well as the considerable work done by volunteer stewards interacting with the public. The Scottish Branch Championships of the National Vegetable Society were hosted for the first time in 1989. Dundee hosted the UK National Vegetable Championships for the first time in 1995 and these have also been held in 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015. 1998 saw the introduction of the World Potato Championships with a first prize of £300, the competition sponsored by John Webster.

Local chrysanthemum and dahlia societies are strong supporters of the festival. In 2015, for the first time The Scottish Dahlia Championships were held within the festival. Gladioli growers can compete for the World Gladioli Championship, the Tayside Gladioli Championship and the Scottish Gladioli Championship among other trophies. Local members of the British Cactus & Succulent Society always ensure a good display of cacti.

The festival's floral art exhibits housed in the magnificent Camperdown House are organised and stewarded by members of the Dundee Floral Art Society.

### **Horticultural Trade**

Despite long travel distances the organisers have been successful in attracting some of the very best horticultural trade exhibitors such as Craig House Cacti, North of England Bonsai, Chrysanthemums Direct, Medwyn Williams, Pretty Ugly Plants, Wilford Bulbs, Frank Charlton Chrysanthemums and Harperley Hall Nursery. Many of these nurseries loyally support the festival attending over a number of years.

### **Children**

One important factor in the current popularity of the festival is that it is set up to be child and family friendly. A large children's activity marquee is devoted to work produced by local schoolchildren. In 2015 their theme was *Dundee: Scotland's Sunshine Capital* while at the centre of the tent was a collaborative representation of Dundee Law, a well-known local landmark. Children can enter individually in classes split into four sections from Primary 1 to Junior i.e. under 16. There are classes ranging from traditional vases of flowers through a variety of handicrafts to computer-generated pictures. There is also a section for young people who have supported





*Award winning displays from Dundee Council showcase the local environment.  
© A Anderson and Daryl Smith.*





*Dundee has always been noted for jam making along with jute and journalism.*

learning. Schools and other youth groups can enter another series of classes also organised by age/stage and there is a further series of classes for photography. School gardens are automatically entered into the environmental actions section. Children can enter all these classes free of charge but still qualify for small amounts of prize money if they are successful. There are around 60 children's classes in all.

Accompanied children get free entry to the show ground. This encourages them to bring their older family members to admire the young person's work on public display.

Children's entertainment is also provided. Besides the usual bouncy castles and roundabouts each year sees special attractions. In 2015 children could say 'Ello!' to Mr Bloom the CBeebies TV star who provided stories, gardening games and catchy nursery songs.

### **Layout**

The Festival layout has also changed over the years. The first Camperdown Show in 1988 used Camperdown House to showcase many of the exhibits; other exhibits were displayed in marquees on the lawn in front of Camperdown House. Over the years they have stretched to over 3000 square metres of marquees stretching from the house to the tennis courts. Attractive as the park is it can be vulnerable to bad weather. In 2010 The

Festival could not open until the Saturday as heavy rain overnight on Thursday led to ankle deep water in some marquees on Friday morning. With the help of Dundee City Council staff and volunteers, the site was drained and cleared of water and mud, tons of bark chips were laid on footpaths and in the marquees to ensure that the festival was ready to open to the public on Saturday morning.

### **Celebrities**

Recent years have seen a policy of inviting well-known gardeners, often associated with TV, to promote the Festival. 2003 saw Charlie Dimmock visit the Festival as a guest gardener. Other prominent gardeners have included: Kim Wilde, Bob Flowerdew, Carol Klein, Monty Don, Joe Swift, Chris Beardshaw, the Beechgrove Gardeners and Christine Walkden.

### **Food**

During the 1990s the event began to attract a number of food retailers and cookery demonstrations as part of the entertainment programme. The food element increasingly became an important addition and the name of the show was changed to the Dundee Flower & Food Festival to reflect this. In 2001 Brian Turner became the first celebrity chef to appear at the Festival. Over the years a number of well-known celebrity chefs have appeared: Brian Turner, Anthony Worrall



*Saying hello to a TV personality.*



*Lots of work on show in the children's marquee.*





Thomson, Nick Nairn, Paul Rankine, Gordon Ramsay, Ainsley Harriot, James Martin, Gino D'Acampo, Mary Berry, Paul Hollywood, Tom & Henry Herbert - The Fabulous Baker Brothers, The Hairy Bikers and in 2015 Master Chef presenter Gregg Wallace and Scottish chef Tony Singh.

### **Sponsorship and support**

The Dundee Festival is continually looking to increase income and ensure that costs are kept to a minimum. Recent pressures on local government expenditure have made this task even more urgent. The festival relies heavily on support from a range of organisations and individuals, Dundee City Council continues to provide valuable financial and in kind support. Local societies and individuals volunteer their time, undertaking a wide range of stewarding duties. Financial support from the Festival partners remains extremely valuable. Since 1988 the Festival has been supported by a range of partners, in the early days these were often companies that provided services to the Parks Department, including Scottish Grass Machinery and AutoRent Van Hire. During the last twenty years, many of the county's major food retailers have sponsored the Festival, including Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury's. Recent partners have included Dundee College, The Courier, Forestry Commission Scotland and Scotch Lamb Quality Meat Scotland.

Over the years grant funding has played an important role in providing financial support. Funding from the Dundee Partnership helped support the growth of the food element of the

Festival, for many years funding the celebrity chefs who attended. Funding from Event Scotland has also assisted, providing marketing and development support.

Political support both local and national has proved invaluable to the Festival over the years, helping to secure maximum coverage by local and national media from the opening of the first Camperdown show in 1988 by Lord Provost Thomas Mitchell to the Scottish Government's promotion of Dundee Cake in 2013.

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*The Dundee Flower and Food Festival 2016 takes place in Camperdown Park, Dundee over the weekend of the 2, 3 and 4 September. More information on the show including the schedule can be found at [www.Dundeeflowerandfoodfestival.com](http://www.Dundeeflowerandfoodfestival.com)*

### **Appendix: the history of flower shows in Dundee**

Dundee has a long history of horticulture and flower shows extending back nearly 200 years. The Dundee Horticultural Society (DHS) has been in existence throughout. Other societies and shows in the early days included a Florists' Society, Dundee Working Men's Horticultural Society, Horticultural Societies in Broughty Ferry and Lochee, a Mains Parish Church Flower Show, the Dundee Dahlia Society, Dundee Chrysanthemum Society and the Dundee & District Fur & Feather Association. Even the Post Office had its own Horticultural





Society and allotment sites held their own flower shows.

The societies included members from all walks of life including owners of large country estates, their gardeners, civic dignitaries and allotment gardeners. Many were grand affairs. A local Dundee paper recorded two shows held in spring and autumn 1825 at the Crown and Anchor Hotel. At that time the autumn show was followed by an annual dinner with tickets at 2/6d. In these early shows fruits were the predominant exhibit; there were twenty five prizes as against only seven for flowers and five for vegetables. In 1827 an Annual Festival Meeting took place including displays and competition of flowers, fruits and vegetables including flake and bizard carnations, picottees, dahlias, hollyhocks, stocks and annuals whilst fruit included pineapples, melons, peaches, nectarines, apricots, greengages, figs and various varieties of grapes. In 1828 the show was followed by a dinner in the Merchant's Hall and Inn at 6/6d, attended by Provost Balfour which included many toasts, speeches and meal courses over a five hour period.

In 1833 a new society was formed called the Florists Society catering for local amateurs whilst the professional gardeners from country estates exhibited at the DHS shows. In 1836 the two societies between them held five annual shows: April or May for auriculas, June for tulips, July for pinks and roses, August for dahlias, September for the festival meeting.

The DHS then declined, attributed to the poor weather and, bizarrely, to the Indian Mutiny. In 1841 and until 1847 The Florists Society became the Dundee Floral and Horticultural Society and continued to hold annual shows in Bell Street Hall. The festival meeting in 1844 was cancelled because of the royal visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to the city. In the year of the Great Exhibition in 1854 the shows took place in the Thistle Hall in Union Street by which time the after show dinners had ceased. The first show using tents was in 1855. One exhibit at this show included over 32 different varieties of fruit.

The most successful show occurred in 1867 with the visit to Dundee of the British Association. The show was classed as a Grand Floral Exhibition held over four days in Baxter Park in tents, with 5000 entries, 2000 prizes, £300 in prize money including a single prize of £10 for the best 12 stove and greenhouse plants in flower. The show attracted 60,000 visitors. The judges included J B Balfour, Professor of Botany at the University of Edinburgh, Thomas Moore, Curator of the Chelsea Botanic Garden and Editor of the *Gardeners' Chronicle* and William Thomson, Gardener to the Duke of Buccleuch.

The 1872 show was the first to fire a gun at the opening ceremony and experienced controversy over the political activities of the Provost who was also standing as an MP as well as being a judge at the show! A three day International Show was organised for the first time in 1876 with over £1000 in prize money, many exhibits including 400 bunches of grapes, plus an exhibit by Paradise Nursery of London, Messrs Veitch of Chelsea and other famous nurseries. There were over 32,000 visitors, the showground, gates had to be closed and it was described as the greatest show ever seen in Scotland. The show continued at the Drill Hall for the next two years although the number of visitors declined, attributable this time to the Afghan war! In 1880 the Dundee Horticultural Association for the Promotion and advancement of the Science and Practice of Horticulture was formed. The Association arranged six displays a year for the advancement of primroses, lilies, strawberries, dahlias, potatoes, apples and chrysanthemums. Two day Chrysanthemum Shows commenced in 1892 under the auspices of the Dundee Chrysanthemum Society.

During the 1914–1918 war no shows were held.

In 1935 a new society the East of Scotland Horticultural Society came into being apparently in direct competition with the DHS. The new society had as its first president EHM Cox of Broughty Ferry, one of the

area's most outstanding horticulturalists. Many trophies were presented to the new society by wealthy members some of which are still presented today: the Daily Express, Windolite, EHM Cox, R G Sharp Jr, H E B Sharp and T N Bell.

The new society was obviously ambitious because Sir Harry Lander and Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin were invited to open the show.

No flower shows took place during the war years but both societies continued to function at a lower key, one of the duties of the office bearers being to record the names of members killed on active service.

In 1946 the societies amalgamated with the Lord Provost of the City as Honorary President, an association which continues today. For some years the main show was held in the Caird Hall. In 1948 the first show in Camperdown Park took place as the park had been recently acquired by Dundee Corporation. This was linked to the Corporation's duty to "educate tenants of the prefabricated houses and other properties on horticulture as this would benefit the town." The show was for two days at the end of August and included the Fur and Feather Association Show. In addition, a Spring Bulb Show in

March and a Chrysanthemum Show in November at University College Hall also took place over the next few years.

In 1951 the main show was now well established in the Caird Hall due to the Corporation granting free use of the hall. Throughout the 1950's and 60's three shows each year continued. During this period the show committee visited a number of gardens to ensure exhibitors were actually growing their own exhibits. One exhibitor was actually banned for gluing tulip petals onto his exhibit! Handcrafts and baking classes were introduced in 1963 and for the very first time ladies were allowed to serve on the General Committee of the Society. These shows continued throughout the 1960's and 1970's though in 1975 the Bulb Show ceased. The Caird Hall was no longer used due to cost. In 1975 a much reduced Annual Show had to take place in Tay Square Halls as the Ice Rink was not available. In 1980 the DHS complained to the Ice Rink when the freezing plant for the rink was switched on too early, exhibits were stuck to the rink and members had to wear coats to clear the staging! After 1975 there was only one Annual Flower Show. In 1987 the District Council commenced negotiations with the DHS and the Dundee Federation of Allotment Holders. A combined show involving the Council in Camperdown Park then took place.

