

SHOWCASE revival

The Ekka's long history is central to its appeal. Will new developments respect that heritage? **Lucy Brook reports**

At his first Royal Queensland Show – or Ekka – in 1966, Guy Creighton, who grew up on a property in Casino, NSW, fell in love with the camaraderie, country spirit and tradition. The former Olympic showjumper, 62, now trains his 18-year-old daughter Gemma and other young hopefuls in the sport, and returns to the Ekka every year, these days as a ring steward.

"I wanted to be a showjumper from day dot," says Guy from his property in Helidon, west of Brisbane.

"I came to the Ekka as a youngster and it helped set me on the path to going professional."

In 1976, Guy was placed fifth in showjumping at the Olympic Games in Montreal. He represented Australia in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and qualified for the 1980 Moscow Olympics, but didn't go, due to the Australian Government's support for a US-led boycott following the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan.

After a string of wins at World Cup events, Guy retired from competition and turned his attention to Gemma, who this year will compete in the Ekka's senior and young rider showjumping categories. She won a Queensland Sportswoman of the Year Rising Star Award last year.

Equestrian competitions have been part of the Ekka since the first show in 1876, with military jumping introduced in 1890. Back then, winners were awarded five guineas and a sweepstakes entry, but the game changed in 1920 when the Prince of Wales visited Australia and officials created the Prince of Wales High Jump, which offered a hefty £200 as prize money. These days, the total prize money in the Ekka's World Cup showjumping qualifier is \$7000.

Jan McMillan, a thoroughbred breeder, international horse judge and racehorse owner, has made her mark on the history of horse competitions at the Ekka, becoming the first female ringmaster in 2007.

"I was asked by my peers to take the role, which was a great honour," says Jan, who won't reveal her age but says she's "old enough to do the job".

"It's a job you have to absolutely love or you don't do it. I oversee everything that happens in the ring, from the stewards and their rosters to



making sure the events run on time. If we run late, even a minute or two, it has a domino effect."

Jan, who is on her feet from 8.30am to 6.30pm every day of the Ekka, also changed the way the ring operates, ditching her box seat and choosing to work within the ring instead. "I felt it was better to run the ring from the centre," says Jan, who lives in Noosa.

"This year, we're bringing back a historical jumping event that involves teams of three. It hasn't been at the show since the 1940s, so it's good to get back to tradition."

Though long-term favourites – such as the showjumping, showbag pavilion, cattle judging, cake and cookery competitions and ever-popular strawberry sundaes – should satisfy nostalgia lovers, the 2012 Ekka will fuse history and tradition with the beginnings of an ambitious redevelopment.

Construction for this 15-year project started in April 2011. Stage one – including major works to the industrial pavilion to transform it into a state-of-the-art convention and exhibition centre – is well under way.

The Ekka will continue to operate during the rejuvenation project, which RNA chief executive Brendan Christou says is "on track". The design will eventually bring apartments, shops, cafes, bars and a permanent fresh food market reminiscent of the Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco or Prahran Market in Melbourne, and will be sympathetic to the historical aspects of the site.

"A lot of work and forethought went into creating plans that would keep the true feel of the Ekka," says Brendan. "Every Queenslanders has some sort of attachment to or memory of the showgrounds, so we need to make sure that connection is maintained and enhanced."

Michael Rayner of Cox Rayner Architects, which is in charge of morphing the historic industrial pavilion into a sleek convention and

PRIZE VISION ... RNA Showground precincts in the future, opposite, Jan McMillan focuses on this year's show as do Guy Creighton and daughter Gemma

exhibition space, says the process has been enormously challenging, but he and his team are committed to retaining as much of the original facade as possible.

"It wasn't something we were specifically asked to do, but everyone had a great desire to protect what we could and there's a huge public affection for the grounds," says Michael, who has been an architect for 32 years.

"We had two very high-quality facades to work with, but the challenge was the heights and levels of the windows, which didn't work for an exhibition space."

The crumbly facades were reinforced and repositioned and the floor plates rebuilt, while the building was split into two levels: the upper for exhibitions and meetings, and the lower a carpark with event space.

"It will be open for the next show, and I think it will become a symbol of the Ekka," he says.

"It's a massive challenge, retaining historical elements while creating something highly contemporary, but the whole development will make the grounds infinitely more versatile."

For Guy Creighton, the Ekka will always be a sentimental favourite among the many shows he and Gemma attend for competition each year. "When those winds come through the stables, you know you're at the Ekka," says Guy.

"I hope the development doesn't wipe out the tradition. But mostly, I hope I know where I'm going in a few years' time. I always say to people, 'I'll meet you in that spot'. If my 'spot' isn't there, I'll be in trouble!"

When those winds come through the stables, you know you're at the Ekka

RNA SHOWGROUNDS MASTER PLAN

- **TRANSFORMATION OF** the industrial pavilion into a world-class exhibition and convention centre.
- **A FRESH FOOD** market, 340,000sq m of new residential, commercial and retail development on 5.5ha around the extremities of the RNA site.
- **NEW LARGE** animal pavilions.
- **RETENTION OF** important heritage elements.
- **SOFTENING THE** boundaries of the RNA Showgrounds to open up the site to the community.
- **CREATING OPEN**, green spaces within the site.
- **UPGRADING THE** pavilions, ovals and stands.
- **LINKING NEIGHBOURING** precincts and suburbs with cycle and walking paths.
- **A HOTEL TO** accommodate Brisbane's business visitors and tourists.
- **AN URBAN** community consisting of contemporary work, lifestyle and retail spaces.



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