

HISTORY

About The Ekka

The Ekka is Queensland's largest and most loved annual event, attracting around 400,000 people each year.

Run by the RNA for nine days in August and staged at its original birthplace, the Brisbane Showgrounds, the Ekka brings the country and city together for a true celebration of agriculture.

The Ekka showcases the best of Queensland, attracting more than 20,000 competition entries from woodchop to quilts, 10,000 animals from beef cattle to cats and dogs, world-class live entertainment, award-winning food and beverages, carnival rides, showbags, family shopping, educational activities and much more.

The iconic show has been running since 1876 and is full of traditions, a unique atmosphere and childhood memories which have been passed down through generations of families.

Who is Behind the Show?

Founded in 1875, the RNA is an independent, not-for-profit member-based organisation that has freehold title to the iconic Brisbane Showgrounds.

The organisation's guiding mission is to bring people together to showcase, celebrate and experience agriculture and Queensland.

Governed by 21 elected Councillors, the RNA showcases and rewards the best of the best in agriculture through the Royal Queensland Show (Ekka) and Royal Queensland Awards (RQA) competitions.

Outside of Ekka, the Brisbane Showgrounds is a venue business which hosts more than 200 events each year including exhibitions, conferences, banquets and music festivals.

How It All Began

The RNA has a rich history stemming back to 1875 when a group of colonists joined together to encourage the development of Queensland's primary industries.

Leading members of the colonial society formed the first RNA Council, under the presidency of Governor Sir William Cairns, with most of the 35 members pastoralists and merchants.

The RNA Council immediately committed themselves to organising the very first exhibition for Brisbane - from calling for tenders for the initial building to meeting with the Premier of Queensland to establish a public holiday on opening day.

The result was the Intercolonial Exhibition of 1876 - the largest event to be held in the state up to that point.

The RNA, along with the exhibition, continued to expand and grow in popularity and in 1921, the association was granted the prefix 'Royal' under warrant from His Majesty King George V. Since then, the shortened name 'Ekka' has replaced 'Exhibition' in the Queensland vernacular.

The First Show

On August 22, 1876, a crowd of more than 15,000 people made their way by horse, foot or carriage to experience the very first Ekka, at what is now known as the Brisbane Showgrounds.

Some of today's traditions stem back to this first exhibition. Competitions were a cornerstone of the Ekka right from the beginning with 1,700 entries across 650 classes with people competing for trophies, cash prizes and medals.

Visitors were treated to more than 1,000 exhibits and charged an entry fee of a half-crown, or one shilling if they waited until after the official opening.

Celebrating the colony's achievements, the Intercolonial Exhibition of 1876 was praised as the most significant event in Queensland since its separation from New South Wales.

Since 1876 the Ekka has continued to grow in popularity and size, remaining one of the most anticipated yearly events.

Has the Ekka Ever Been Cancelled?

The Ekka has been held annually at the Brisbane Showgrounds since its inception, except for four instances - in 1919 at the height of the Spanish influenza epidemic, in 1942 during World War II when the grounds were used as a staging depot for troops and most recently in 2020 and 2021 due to the worldwide coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The Strawberry Sundae Story

A beloved tradition for more than 70 years, the iconic Ekka Strawberry Sundae first made its delicious debut in the 1950s.

The sweet sensation was born when Peter's Ice Cream Company dreamt up the perfect combination - strawberry ice cream, fresh locally grown strawberries, and a generous swirl of whipped cream, all served in a crunchy waffle cone.

The result? An instant crowd favourite that's remained a must-have treat at the Ekka ever since. More than just a dessert, the Strawberry Sundae is now a symbol of the Show itself - bringing smiles to faces, one scoop at a time.

*Historical information and statistics sourced from 'Showtime - A History of the Brisbane Exhibition' by Joanne Scott and Ross Laurie, 2008; and RNA Archives.



Ekka Through the Years – A Timeline

1876 The First Exhibition

The Intercolonial Exhibition of 1876 was held at Bowen Park with an estimated 15,000-17,000 people attending out of Brisbane's population at the time of just 20,600.

1877 First Ekka Ride

The first ride was a merry-go-round in Sideshow Alley*.

1879 Introduction of Queensland's Newest Technologies

Ekka patrons were amazed by telephones, microphones, electric lights and even an electric thief detector.

1889 Sheepdog Trials Held for the First Time

1891 District Exhibits

The first district exhibits contest was held – nine regions competed for a prize pool of £175*.

1894 First Fireworks Display in the Main Arena

1909 Jubilee Show

The 12 day show was the largest agricultural show in Australia that year with more than 7,000 competition entries*.

1919 First Ekka Cancelled Due to Influenza Epidemic

1920 Edward, Prince of Wales Visits the Ekka

1926 Queensland Country Women's Association Makes its First Appearance

1942 Second Ekka Cancelled Due to World War II

1950's Ekka Food Traditions

The now symbolic Ekka fairy floss, butter board sandwiches, strawberry sundaes and dagwood dogs were introduced*.

1954 Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip Visit the Ekka

1959 HRH Princess Alexandria of Kent Visits

1964 Animal Nursery at the Ekka First Introduced

1969 First Skymaster Ferris Wheel at Ekka

1988 Expo 88

Ekka achieved its highest attendance with an estimated 800,000 people flooding through the gates*.

2000 Sideshow Alley and Woodchop

Inner city bypass constructed, Sideshow Alley and the Woodchop Arena redeveloped.

2010 One of the Most Successful Ekka's in History Held

The 2010 Ekka saw a 20 per cent increase in crowd numbers.

2011 Grammy Award Winners Wolfmother Close Ekka's Concert Series

2012 Australian First

Ekka fans were able to customise their own fireworks on the show's free interactive fireworks iPhone app.

2012 Australian of the Year and Academy Award-winning actor and producer Geoffrey Rush attended the opening day of the Ekka

2013 Ekka Wins International Awards

The Royal Queensland Show took home the prestigious Best in Show title, along with 13 other awards, at the 2013 International Association of Fairs & Expositions (IAFE) Awards.

2014 Million Dollar Night Show

Australian-first million dollar night show EkkaNITES wowed the crowds each night of show. The Ekka ran over two full weekends for the first time in the show's history.

2015 The Year of the Flying Pigs

The Racing and Diving Pigs wowed the crowds at Ekka for the very first time, flying through the sky and diving into a pool of water.

2016 The Return of The Old Museum

After 119 years, The Old Museum came back home to Ekka, housing the Flower and Garden Exhibition and Quilts Across Queensland.

2017 Ekka's 140th Anniversary

The Ekka celebrates a remarkable milestone - its 140th anniversary. An early children's fireworks display features in EkkaNITES for the first time in recent history.

2018 Investing in Agriculture

The RNA invested in its charter of championing and celebrating agriculture, building two new event facilities that were used at Ekka for the very first time. The Pavilion was partially used to house beef and dairy cattle, dairy goats and poultry, while Marquee 2 was the new Woodchop Arena

2019 New Park for Dogs

Alexandria Park, completed in April 2019, became the new home of one of Ekka's largest and most popular competitions – Canine.

2020 Ekka cancelled for only the third time in history due to the global Covid-19 pandemic

2021 Ekka cancelled one week before gates open, due to the continuing Covid-19 pandemic

2022 The historic return of the Ekka, attended by more than 345,000 people

2023 Return to pre-pandemic crowds of more than 400,000 people

2024 Despite three days of wet weather which saw the postponement of the Grand Parade for the first time in more than 40 years, 346,000 people attended the Show

Learn more about the history of the Ekka by visiting our Heritage Display in the Channel 7 Pavilion from 9am to 7pm each day.