



WITH GUY SMITH

Smith's SOAPBOX

Timeless charm of the tented field

“One suspects crowds of folk have been occasionally gathering in farmed fields for as long as there have been farmed fields. In times past, the causes of such al fresco occasions could be manifold – from fayres and markets to religious festivals or political rallies. In 1535, Henry VIII famously gathered his retinue in a sheep meadow for a spot of jousting and wrestling with the King of France.

Today, this dual use of farmed fields seems largely confined to pop concerts, car

boot sales and agricultural shows. Of course most agricultural shows now have their own dedicated showgrounds rather than having to convert a grazed pasture into a tented village. But this is quite a recent change in the history of our shows, most of which have their origins in Victorian times.

Until the Second World War the norm was for them to peripatetically move site every year. Even the Royal Show had no permanent home before the 1950s, instead, it would pop up in a different place in a different county every year.

Today this tradition of the shifting show ground is more or less gone, but there are still a few to be found that pitch up on what is for eleven months



The Tendring show has come a long way.

of the year a grazed field. I'm proud to say this includes my own show – the Tendring Show – held annually in 8ha of mown hay meadow at Lawford Park in north east Essex.

Of course, while the 'tented village' that leaves little trace after the event has its own charm, it's not without its challenges. The lack of decent roadways and buildings renders it perilously vulnerable to bad weather, then of course, there's that most crucial lack of facility due to no dedicated sewage system.

As a small boy, I can remember the gentlemen's toilets at my local show were simply a small marquee containing absolutely nothing. The regret here was you hadn't bought your wellies. Whether the ladies were similarly scant I don't know, although I suspect I'd have heard if that was the case.

As for the gents, they underwent ground breaking advancement in the 1960s with the addition of a sloping open trough with a hole in the ground at one end into which the processed outgoings of the beer tent would find their final destination. As a small boy, whose lack of height meant I had to relieve myself at the lowest part of the trough, I found myself rather disturbingly

close to this aforesaid hole full of its foul smelling effluent.

But today the Tendring Show has put such crude amenities long behind itself with porta loos that would benefit Royalty. With a crowd exceeding 20,000, it's become a substantial event attracting a huge number of non-farming folk.

Aware of this we put on events in the grand ring that tell a 'field-to-fork' story where we remind urban show-goers that much of their food on their meal tables can be traced back to the fields they drive past as motorised onlookers. It's called 'farming on the move' and the adjoining photo gives a full flavour of what we're about.

So here's wishing you a good show season – one of the most precious parts of our farming lives. ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely St. Osyth Marsh – officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of. @essexpeasant

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