

THE BULAWAYO SHOWGROUNDS AND CENTRAL AFRICAN TRADE FAIR

The Bulawayo Showground was fascinating and entertaining long before the Central African Trade Fair and The Eskimo Hut arrived on the scene. Before building the ceremonial promenade, the main entrance to the showground was next to The Eskimo Hut site. The showground stood empty for most of the year, barring one or two spots hired out for functions. I can recall one Saturday night in an intimate hall, with about thirty people dancing to music by The Shadows, played by a live band.

Once through the main gate, on the right, lay a large shallow pool maintained by the Bulawayo Model Boat Club. It proved popular at the annual agricultural show and on weekends when the model boat enthusiasts tested their boats with varying degrees of success. The clubhouse contained a workshop and model display that showed the talent of the local enthusiasts. I was a regular visitor, fascinated not only by the boats but also by model airplanes and a Scalextric car racing track.

Opposite the model boat club, the motor car stands came to life only during the agricultural show. Further into the showgrounds on the left stood the poultry hall with its splendid collection of feathered creatures, crowing and clucking, trying to be heard above the crowd. Rhode Island Reds, Australian Australorps, and White Leghorns were the most common breeds of chicken, with Muscovy ducks also popular. Further on, Luna Park, with its rides, stalls and coloured lights, was a magnet for the kids.

Close to the showground stadium, the cattle stalls with the leathery-skinned farmers dressed in their traditional khaki attracted curious onlookers. Seeing those enormous bulls at close range was an eye-opener for the townies.

The kennel club stood next to the fence on Hillside Road. The bull terriers looked impressively dangerous locked in their metal cages. Other breeds sat smugly in open cubicles. Outside, the show ring provided much amusement for the crowd, watching dogs and their owners prancing together to win the admiration of the judges.

Dog and owner would adopt a dignified pose before trotting around the ring, with the owner trying to keep up, while making it look as effortless as possible. Not an easy task for the heavier or mature owners. Someone suggested that the judges awarded points to both dog and owner and added them together for a final score towards the best in show award.

Besides the major stands, dozens of smaller stands and stalls advertised both Rhodesian and imported products. It was an impressive display of Rhodesian industry and ingenuity.

At the showground stadium, the politicians and the mayor would make their speeches. The audience seated in the grandstand overlooking the field listened politely, willing them to hurry and finish, so that the show could start. This would usually include a display of the British South Africa Police's synchronised motorcycle skills, show jumping, dancing Matabele warriors, a parade of prize bulls, and several other entertainments.

Between agricultural shows, the stadium was probably the most used of all the showground's facilities. The sports field, though not a major venue for cricket, boasted cricket nets, a fielding cradle, and, of course, a cricket pitch. After school, or during school holidays, we'd meet other kids there. Often, the matches were two a side, but that didn't lessen our enjoyment. Thanks to the format, it's where I scored my first and last century. In

February 1962, an international team made up of several of the world's best cricketers played a match there against Rhodesia, because the Queens Sports Club ground was not available.

We shouldn't forget the speedway on the cinder track that surrounded the field. The riders came from South Africa. On speedway night, we'd take a blanket and arrive early to book a corner spot. When the riders raced around the corners, we'd raise the blanket to protect ourselves from the flying cinders. The sound of those cinders hitting the blanket was always a thrill. If we sat on the straight, we'd see the riders racing through the corners in a suicidal dash to challenge for the lead.

The stadium also served other purposes, including a venue for inter-school sports days and periodic show jumping, among others. Most important of all, if not booked for an official event, it remained available for us kids to use. No official ever chased us away from one of the many magnificent sporting facilities in Rhodesia.

In early 1960, on Fifteenth Avenue, at the end of Borrow and Wilson Streets, a flurry of building activity suggested something big was happening to the showgrounds. It turned out to be the grand entrance to the Central African Trade Fair, which the Queen Mother opened in May 1960.

The long, imposing ceremonial promenade, leading to the trade fair spire, soon became a Bulawayo landmark. Glamorous pavilions and a huge new show hall, together with other improvements, bolstered the showgrounds, changing the agricultural show into a showcase for the region's development and manufacturing capabilities. Little apart from the showground stadium remained unchanged. Sadly, the trade fair marked the end of the Bulawayo Model Boat Club and pool in its former location.

Eskimo Hut's arrival coinciding with the trade fair was the silver lining to the boat club's closure. It served delicious soft-serve vanilla ice cream, but my favourite was the aromatic Eskimo Hut minced meat yellow curry with fluffy white rice.

The most prestigious pavilions surrounded the fair spire. Most popular was the Portugal pavilion, with long queues waiting to enter. It was a mystery how those black and white photographs of rural farms and public works in Mozambique could attract such a crowd. Once you passed all the photographs and reached the exit, a friendly official would hand you a half-bottle of Portuguese wine. Mystery solved! And you didn't need to be of the official drinking age.

The Rhodesian Army pavilion next door also proved popular, with several interesting exhibits, including one depicting a camping scene. You could sign up on the spot for military service if the exhibits and the friendly soldiers on duty inspired you. I always thought with conscription mandatory in Rhodesia, why not try before you buy at the army pavilion?

The grand hall contained many stands for smaller exhibitors. One year, a stay-awake competition occupied a stand. I can't recall the prize, but for the winner's sake, I hope it was worth it. As the days passed, the once bright contestants looked as tired as the stand they occupied.

Northern and Southern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland, the members of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, exhibited their products and capabilities in separate pavilions. International and local companies also displayed their products and services in pavilions or stands in the grand hall and other smaller halls.

With the UK, USA, West Germany, Japan, France, Portugal, and South Africa taking part with their impressive pavilions, Bulawayo had arrived on the international scene. Rhodesia, famous for its high-quality tobacco, showcased its other agricultural produce and minerals, and announced itself as a customer for sophisticated overseas industrial goods. If only it were still so!