

# ‘Many attend chiefly in search of pleasure’: the Great National Horse Show at the Royal Dublin Society, 1868–80

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**ABSTRACT.** *This paper explores the foundation of the Dublin Horse Show from 1868–80, when it was held at the Royal Dublin Society’s (R.D.S.) headquarters on Merrion Square. Early iterations were intended to address the depletion of the equine population in the mid-nineteenth century, a matter of concern for agriculture and industry, but also for those with an interest in sport and horses as opportunities for leisure. Horse shows arose nearly simultaneously in Ireland and England as intersections between associational culture, agricultural improvement and a burgeoning middle-class leisure sphere established animal shows as instruments for improving breeding, but also as forms of entertainment. The popular success of horse shows fostered the development of economic clusters, as local businesses began to depend on them as reliable sources of annual income. They also reflected equestrian sport’s migration from largely elite pursuits into popular recreation, including competitions that would eventually lead to the modern sport of showjumping. The events established at the early R.D.S. Horse Show are still recognisable today in their combination of improvement and leisure based in the promotion of Irish horses as exemplars of sporting excellence.*

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In 1865, Lord William Pitt Lennox, writer, sports fan and man-about-town, stated that

Within the last few years there has been a mania for shows; we have had dog shows, donkey shows, baby shows, and last, not least, horse shows. There can be no doubt that such shows are highly beneficial, as they tend to improve the breed of at least the canine, asinine, and equine race, a consummation devoutly to be wished for, more especially in the last-mentioned case.<sup>1</sup>

The ‘mania for shows’ extended to Ireland. Since 1868, the Dublin Horse Show has promoted Irish horses and equestrian sport in a five-day international event held every summer in Ballsbridge, County Dublin. It was established as a project of the Royal Dublin Society (R.D.S.), whose membership included nobility, gentry,

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<sup>1</sup> William Lennox, ‘A chapter on horse shows’ in *Once a Week: An Illustrated Miscellany of Literature, Art, Science, and Popular Information*, xiii (London, 1865), p. 133.

businessmen and prosperous farmers, and its founding rationale was to halt the decline in Ireland's equine population. The Horse Show initially took place in the environs of the society's then-headquarters, Leinster House, on Merrion Square in Dublin. Improvement was a central tenet of the society's activities, and the Horse Show was founded as an extension of its agricultural exhibitions, which encouraged effective breeding practices and offered prizes for high-quality sheep, cattle and poultry. However, the early Horse Show was also shaped by an atmosphere of social change that characterised the mid-Victorian period overall, particularly the development of a leisure sphere that fostered middle-class participation in exhibitions, lectures, shows, sport, theatre and consumer activity. An increasing taste for entertainment and spectacle impelled horse shows in Ireland and England beyond improvement-focused displays of quality animals into annual social occasions and consumer showcases. Horse shows brought changes to equestrian pursuits, both meeting and fuelling demand as the idea of owning horses for sport and leisure moved beyond traditional associations with the privileged classes, becoming a signifier of prosperity in aspirational middle-class lifestyles. Equestrian sports themselves began to change, as horse shows introduced the practice of jumping horses over artificial obstacles in enclosed spaces, initially a novel activity that became a sport in its own right by the end of the century.

The historiography of horse sport in nineteenth-century Ireland has established hunting and horse racing as the progenitors of contemporary equestrian sports, and early horse shows were deeply influenced by them. Karen Raber and Treva Tucker note that by the late seventeenth century 'the English had begun to develop a heightened interest in horseracing and other forms of riding across country at speed and often over obstacles', styles of horsemanship that also served as expressions of national character.<sup>2</sup> Rejecting the stylised military and courtly traditions of dressage practiced in the riding academies of France and Spain, hunting and racing provided the Irish and British gentry with opportunities for displaying sporting prowess as a form of daring but convivial masculinity that valued bravery, loyalty, and the delights of the table.<sup>3</sup> James Kelly has argued that horse racing was the first organised sport in Ireland, promoted by the landowning classes, but with a strong popular following. From the 1630s, racing developed in tandem with stag and fox hunting in Britain and Ireland, prompting the foundation of clubs and associations that situated these sports within the associational impulse of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Their endorsement by the elite led to the creation of stud books and clear regulations, and to hybrid competitions such as drag racing and steeplechasing.<sup>5</sup> Fergus D'Arcy has traced the history of the Turf Club, the oldest racing club in Ireland, detailing the involvement of British and Irish landowners in its establishment at the Curragh in Kildare.<sup>6</sup> Paul Rouse's work on sport in Ireland has examined racing and hunting within a wider context, placing them alongside Gaelic games, football

<sup>2</sup> Karen Raber and Treva Tucker, 'Introduction' in eadem (eds), *The culture of the horse: status, discipline, and identity in the early modern world* (New York, 2005), pp 26–7.

<sup>3</sup> See B. M. Fitzpatrick, *Irish sport and sportsmen* (Dublin, 1878). Despite its title, this volume considers only hunting and steeplechase racing, and their attendant social occasions.

<sup>4</sup> James Kelly, *Sport in Ireland, 1600–1840* (Dublin, 2014): chapters 1 and 2 treat of racing and hunting, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly, *Sport in Ireland*, pp 151–3.

<sup>6</sup> Fergus D'Arcy, *Horses, lords and racing men: the Turf Club 1790–1990* (Kildare, 1991).

and athletics as representative of the importance of sporting clubs and associations in the development of Irish identity and social organisation.

While the early history of the Royal Dublin Society's Horse Show was entwined with associational culture and the pursuits of the elite, it was equally moulded by the growth of leisure activities throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The historiography of leisure in Ireland shows a distinct focus on the landed classes. Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgeway's *Sport and leisure in the Irish and British country house*, and Dooley, Maeve O'Riordan, and Ridgeway's *Women and the country house in Ireland and Britain*,<sup>8</sup> demonstrate that horse sport in general was promoted by landowning families, and that hunting in particular retained its alliance to the 'big house'. However, Rouse emphasises that horse sport enjoyed significant popular support, with race meetings proliferating in the towns served by rapidly expanding railway lines, the trains delivering spectators in large numbers.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, hunting became more widely pursued: interest in hunting crossed social boundaries, and people who did not belong to the elite classes participated as both riders and spectators.<sup>10</sup> Broadening participation aroused some concerns: Peter Bailey's work on leisure in Victorian England examines the growth of recreational pursuits as the middle and artisan classes gained economic and social influence, exploring the anxieties around morality and respectability engendered by leisure activities.<sup>11</sup> Developments in sporting and leisure culture also went hand-in-hand with economic shifts. Stephanie Rains has considered the relationship between leisure, exhibitions, entertainment and commodity culture in Dublin, detailing the atmosphere of change into which the R.D.S. Horse Show emerged.<sup>12</sup>

Horse shows were rooted within the structures of eighteenth-century associational culture. They arose out of clubs and societies, comprised primarily of privileged men, that championed the ethos of improvement in Ireland while simultaneously strengthening social ties through leisure activities.<sup>13</sup> Kelly notes that 'the aristocratic elite ... embraced horse racing, hunting, the theatre, classical music, sociability and association, reading and other activities that possessed the cachet of respectability'.<sup>14</sup> Martyn Powell's work on associational culture notes that

the importance of the horse ... cannot be gainsaid, and though groups involved in hunting and racing had urban meeting places — the Sportsmen's Club met in Dublin's Eagle Tavern ... and the Kildare Hunt met in Morrison's Hotel in Dawson Street — their focus was rural pursuits. Taverns were popular places of congregation, and a day's hunting or racing concluded invariably with eating and drinking.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: a history* (Oxford, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgeway (eds), *Sport and leisure in the Irish and British country house* (Dublin 2019); Terence Dooley, Maeve O'Riordan and Christopher Ridgeway (eds), *Women and the country house in Ireland and Britain* (Dublin, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, pp 106–7.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly, *Sport in Ireland*, pp 154–5.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Bailey, *Leisure and class in Victorian England: rational recreation and the contest for control 1830–1885* (London, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Rains, *Commodity culture and social class in Dublin, 1850–1916* (Dublin, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Martyn J. Powell, 'Civil society, c.1700–1850' in James Kelly (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Ireland*, iii: 1730–1880 (Cambridge, 2018), p. 469.

<sup>14</sup> James Kelly, 'Sport and recreation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' in idem (ed.), *Cambridge history of Ireland*, iii, p. 489.

<sup>15</sup> Powell, 'Civil society', pp 468–9.

R.D.S. members were prominent in hunt clubs and racing organisations, and the priorities of associational culture influenced their determination to found an annual event dedicated to horses. During the mid-nineteenth century, the values of associational culture were increasingly adopted by wealthy businessmen and the middle classes as increasing prosperity allowed them to participate in clubs and societies, granting access to an expanding menu of pleasures.<sup>16</sup>

It was increasingly argued that the intensity of modern working life must be balanced by amusement ‘to cast aside the restraint and constraint of care and application, to open up and distract the mind, to unchain it from serious absorption’.<sup>17</sup> Ireland and Britain experienced a shared burst of growth in exhibitions, lectures, theatre, sport, and other recreational pursuits, as well as clubs and societies devoted to them. A growing taste for spectacle led theatres to include optical illusions in performances, and ‘monster’ department stores began to provide amusements such as live music and ice skating. Horse shows, though dedicated to the improvement of breeding and standards, were also novel entertainments attracting audiences beyond devotees of hunting and racing. The first Islington Horse Show (1864) in London featured ‘leaping’, or trying horses over fences to test their suitability for hunting, using ‘hurdles, stuffed with gorse, over 4 ft. in height, ... placed at intervals on the arena’, providing a crowd-pleasing spectacle in addition to testing the athleticism of the horses.<sup>18</sup> This style of jumping was adopted at the first R.D.S. Horse Show, ensuring throngs of casual spectators alongside the knowledgeable horsemen and women it aimed to attract.

## I

In 1866, the Royal Dublin Society’s Committee of Agriculture formed a special Horse Show Committee to explore establishing an annual event. The idea was prompted by a confluence of factors, but in particular that the Royal Agricultural Improvement Society of Ireland (R.A.I.S.I.) had successfully mounted two horse shows in 1864 and 1866 on grounds loaned to them by the R.D.S.<sup>19</sup> The R.A.I.S.I. was established in 1841 by a group of noblemen and gentlemen, many of them also members of the R.D.S.: the established society supported the newer one by supplying representatives to its governing committees and professing willingness ‘to give such aid and co-operation as its means and premises may afford ... should the same be required’.<sup>20</sup> The R.A.I.S.I. mandate was focused on cattle, promoting improvements to breeding and management by holding annual shows in each of Ireland’s four provinces on a rotating basis. In 1864 a bovine disease outbreak prompted a show focused on horses that was held in Dublin and supported by

<sup>16</sup> Peter Bailey, ‘“A mingled mass of perfectly legitimate pleasures”: the Victorian middle class and the problem of leisure’ in *Victorian Studies*, xxi, no. 1 (1977), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Anon., ‘The philosophy of amusement’ in *Meliora: A Quarterly Review of Social Science*, vi (London, 1864), p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> *Illustrated Times*, 9 July 1864.

<sup>19</sup> *Farmers’ Gazette*, 16 Apr. 1864; *Proceedings of the Royal Dublin Society* [hereafter, *Proceedings R.D.S.*], c (1864), p. 66; *Proceedings R.D.S.*, cii (1866), p. 10 (accessed at [digitalarchive.rds.ie](http://digitalarchive.rds.ie)).

<sup>20</sup> *The first report of the Royal Agricultural Improvement Society of Ireland* (Dublin, 1841), p. 2.

the R.D.S., a successful experiment that was repeated in 1866.<sup>21</sup> As a result, dedicated horse shows began to emerge in the Irish provinces, and the R.D.S. Agricultural Committee spotted an opportunity to extend the society's improving activities in a new direction.<sup>22</sup> The positive reception of horse shows and the success of London's Islington Horse Show, particularly its financial solvency, convinced them that an annual national event could succeed.<sup>23</sup> Despite having expressed an intention to hold another horse show, the R.A.I.S.I. was reluctant to commit to an annual event, emphasising its limited finances, its concentration on cattle, and its dependence on the R.D.S. for space and resources.<sup>24</sup> Even so, the R.D.S. announcement was met with alarm by the council of the R.A.I.S.I., to the extent that the R.D.S. Horse Show Committee offered an olive branch, requesting that 'Council be requested to write to the Council of the Royal Agricultural Society to ask their cooperation in holding an Annual Horse Show in Dublin to be held in the year 1868'.<sup>25</sup> The R.A.I.S.I. rebuffed the overture, but the Horse Show Committee carried on undaunted.

The establishment of horse shows in Ireland was prompted by widespread concern that the calibre of the Irish horse was deteriorating. Newspapers, government reports and agricultural bodies all echoed the refrain that the number and quality of horses in Ireland was collapsing. Cormac Ó Gráda's work on agriculture prior to and after the Famine underscores that the quality of horses around the country was variable, but often poor.<sup>26</sup> In the post-Famine era, changes in land use from tillage to grazing had decreased the number of horses required for agricultural work, with a corresponding drop in farmers breeding horses for sale as supplementary income.<sup>27</sup> Registrar-General William Donnelly's agricultural statistics confirmed the decline, recording that numbers of sheep, cattle and pigs increased in 1859–65, while the population of horses simultaneously decreased.<sup>28</sup> In 1866, Donnelly's office recorded a further decline of 129,540 horses, while other agricultural animals increased by the tens of thousands.<sup>29</sup> The reduction in numbers meant not only that fewer horses were available, but that the breeding population was less diverse, resulting in poorer quality. The sale of horses abroad also featured as an element of the overall decline. Military and working horses for British and continental regiments were routinely purchased in Ireland, as were sport and leisure

<sup>21</sup> *Dublin Evening Post*, 4 Sept. 1866.

<sup>22</sup> *Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail*, 1 Oct. 1864.

<sup>23</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 16 July 1864.

<sup>24</sup> *Farmers' Gazette*, 21 Dec. 1867. This volume records a public airing of issues during a meeting attended by members of both organisations, including shared members.

<sup>25</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 13 Nov. 1866 (R.D.S. Library and Archives [hereafter, R.D.S.A.], ARC RDS/MAN HOR).

<sup>26</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Agriculture before and after the Famine' in idem, *Ireland before and after the Famine: explorations in economic history 1800–1925* (Manchester, 1993), pp 86–93.

<sup>27</sup> *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Horses; together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, and appendix*, pp 104–05, 110–11, H.C. 1873 (325), xiv, 1, 14.

<sup>28</sup> *Agricultural statistics, Ireland. General abstracts of the acreage under the several crops, and the number of live stock, in each county and province, for the year 1865*, p. 6 [C 3612], H.C. 1866, lxxiii, 121, 73.

<sup>29</sup> *The agricultural statistics of Ireland for the year 1866*, p. xviii [C 3958–II], H.C. 1867–68, lxx, 255, 70.

horses for export.<sup>30</sup> An 1866 report on the Ballinasloe horse fair noted that ‘buyers from England and the Continent are to be seen in various portions of the town making selections of animals for hunting and harness purposes, for which large sums are freely exchanged.’<sup>31</sup> While lamenting Donnelly’s statistics, the writer simultaneously opined that ‘we cannot “have our plum and eat it” and there can be no objection to a profitable trade being carried on in this country’, neatly capturing the paradox of Victorian *laissez-faire* economic ideals.<sup>32</sup>

The R.D.S. Horse Show Committee determined to address these trends. The long association of nobility and gentry with both the society and equestrian pursuits ensured the participation of members from aristocratic and Anglo-Irish families.<sup>33</sup> William St Lawrence, Lord Howth, was an M.P. who traced his family’s lineage to the 1100s.<sup>34</sup> An enthusiastic horseman, he was involved in developing hunts and race grounds, had served as master of the Kilkenny Hunt, and rode his own horses in steeplechases, as had his father before him.<sup>35</sup> Henry Moore, Lord Drogheda, raised and trained horses for both flat and steeplechase racing from his stables at Moore Abbey in Monasterevin, County Kildare.<sup>36</sup> He was a senior steward in the Turf Club, and the force behind the foundation of the Irish National Hunt Steeplechase Committee, which formulated regulations for the emerging sport. Lord Cloncurry, Valentine Lawless, belonged to the Kildare Hunt, and sometimes rode his own horses at Punchestown racecourse.<sup>37</sup> Of the forty members of the first Horse Show Committee, twelve held titles of nobility, and several more were members of landed families.<sup>38</sup> In its early years the committee drew titled and landed men into its orbit, most of whom were breeders, huntsmen and riders.

Landowners and owners of large farms, such as Allan Pollok, the Scottish improving owner of over 29,000 acres in County Galway, and Robert Craven Wade, from a landed family who farmed 9,500 acres in County Meath, were active in the committee from the start, bringing their practical knowledge and perspectives to the arrangements for the show.<sup>39</sup> Some members bred and raised high-quality livestock, and had shown sheep and cattle in the R.D.S. spring and winter shows, such as Captain Daniel Bayley, who bred Kerry cattle, as well as breeding and selling horses, from Friarstown House, Tallaght, County Dublin.<sup>40</sup> Richard

<sup>30</sup> *SC, House of Lords on horses* (1873), pp 143, 154, 192.

<sup>31</sup> *Saunders’s News-Letter*, 4 Oct. 1866.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Royal Dublin Society Horse Show catalogue 1868: catalogue of the annual Horse Show and manufactured articles* (Dublin, 1868) p. 1, available at R.D.S. Archives, ([digitalarchive.rds.ie](http://digitalarchive.rds.ie)).

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry of Ireland* (London, 1912), pp 620–24.

<sup>35</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Irish sports and sportsmen*, pp 330–35.

<sup>36</sup> Desmond McCabe, ‘Moore, Henry Francis Seymour’ in *D.I.B.* (online ed., [dib.ie](http://dib.ie)).

<sup>37</sup> *The Sporting Life, British hunts and huntsmen*, iv, (London, 1911), p. 436.

<sup>38</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 13 Nov. 1866; Burke, *Genealogical and heraldic history*, pp 730–31; *Burke’s peerage* (London, 1914), pp 371–2; John Bateman, *Great landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* (London 1883), pp 48, 459.

<sup>39</sup> See entry for ‘Pollok (Lismany)’ at University of Galway Landed Estates database, ([www.landedestates.ie](http://www.landedestates.ie)); Bateman, *Great landowners*, p. 459. Fitzpatrick notes Wade as belonging to the Meath Hunt: Fitzpatrick, *Irish sports & sportsmen*, p. 216.

<sup>40</sup> *Horse Show Catalogue 1868*, pp 1, 2, 32, 34.

Flynn, a gentleman farmer from Tulsk, County Roscommon, owned 190 acres on which he raised prize-winning long-wooled sheep for the R.D.S. and agricultural shows, as well as high-quality hunting horses.<sup>41</sup> Flynn's interest in the show was both reputational and financial: he was well-known for breeding, hunting, and steeplechasing prior to the first show, and during his involvement with the R.D.S. committee he regularly exhibited and sold horses at the show, sometimes for significant prices.<sup>42</sup>

The first Horse Show Committee also included prominent businessmen, who understood that an annual event would bring people to the city, not simply to see or purchase horses, but also to eat, drink, shop and stay in hotels. William Jury, owner of several hotels and boarding houses, including the Shelbourne Hotel on St Stephen's Green, was a staunch supporter of the show.<sup>43</sup> The founder of the *Irish Times*, Major L. E. Knox, also contributed to the success of the show not only through his membership on the committee, but through coverage in his paper.<sup>44</sup> Phineas Riall of Old Conna House, Bray, County Wicklow, from a long-established Quaker banking family, was a long-term stalwart on the committee, serving on the finance sub-committee.<sup>45</sup> While members from commercial and financial backgrounds would also have been familiar with horse sport, their motivations in making the show a success may also have included the desire to support business interests in the city with an annual event that invited a wide audience, and to contribute to Ireland's wider stability via the society's mission of developing stable agricultural and commercial interests.

The members of the Horse Show Committee brought a range of skills and concerns to the project of halting the deterioration of the Irish horse. Associational culture, hunting and racing were inextricably tied to improvement due to the social composition of the committee, but members also concerned themselves with the economic potential of the show and the advantages of catering to the growing taste for leisure. They established competitive classes from the already-familiar structures of livestock shows and previous horse shows, but altered them to cater to their intended audience. Classes were created for thoroughbred stallions, hunters, ladies' horses, carriage horses, roadsters, military horses, ponies, young horses, broodmares and agricultural stallions. Prizes and medals were to be awarded in each class, ranging from £40 for the best thoroughbred stallion to £5 for the best pony.<sup>46</sup> Winners of the stallion class were bound to stand at stud in Ireland for one year after the show, preventing them being sold abroad before they could accomplish the goal of improving Irish stock. The composition of classes and prizes overwhelmingly favoured the production of hunters and horses for sport rather than working or agricultural horses, reflecting the priorities of the committee members and the demand for leisure animals in the mid-century marketplace.

<sup>41</sup> Obituary in *Roscommon Messenger*, 21 Jan. 1905.

<sup>42</sup> 'Helter-skelter hunt races', *Irish Times*, 11 May 1868; *Saunders's News-Letter*, 31 Aug. 1868. Flynn joined the Horse Show Committee in 1869.

<sup>43</sup> Shaun Boylan, 'Jury, William' in *D.I.B.* (online ed., dib.ie).

<sup>44</sup> Patrick M. Geoghegan, 'Knox, Laurence Edward' in *D.I.B.* (online ed., dib.ie).

<sup>45</sup> See entry on 'Riall' family at University of Galway Landed Estates database (<https://landedestates.ie/estate/3183>); Seán Kenny and John D. Turner, 'Wildcat bankers or political failure? The Irish financial pantomime, 1797–1826' in *European Review of Economic History*, xxiv (2020), p. 569.

<sup>46</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, Dec. 1867 to July 1868; *Horse Show catalogue 1868*, pp 3–4.

## II

In early November 1867, the newspapers reported on the Horse Show Committee’s plan to proceed with an annual event.<sup>47</sup> Members William Jury and John Wight contributed £25 and £50 respectively toward the show, and Jury offered to assist in collecting subscriptions to finance expenses. A fund was opened, and the social network of the R.D.S. came into play as members and their contacts solicited donations to ensure the success of the new undertaking. The list of donors to the subscription fund mirrored the composition of the committee, as early supporters included gentry, landowners, businessmen and prominent citizens. Some names remain familiar in Ireland: Sir John Arnott & Co. and Samuel Bewley & Co. are listed, as is Charles Cobbe of Newbridge House, Donabate, County Dublin. The duke of Leinster, Lord Powerscourt, and Messrs Hodges & Co. are also listed.<sup>48</sup> George Nesbitt, proprietor of the Hibernian Hotel, captured a sense of their motivations in a note accompanying his donation:

I have the sincere pleasure to ask their acceptance of ten pounds for a purpose so beneficial to our various trades in the city and the best interests of Ireland. This offering I feel certain will be most freely emulated by many of the citizens of Dublin when the matter shall be made known to them as they are so fully aware of the great importance of those useful meetings that bring such a number of visitors to our Metropolis.<sup>49</sup>

The first R.D.S. Horse Show was made possible by crowdfunding, Victorian-style, with contributions ranging from £1 to £100, eventually totalling £830, and enhanced by £100 from the society’s council, which had declared that it must be otherwise self-supporting.<sup>50</sup>

In late April the show dates were fixed for the 28–30 July 1868, and the committee began planning its latest annual event, transforming the grounds of Leinster House into a combination of horse fair, steeplechase course and agricultural improvement show. They hung promotional placards at banks, horse dealers and railway stations in Dublin and in English cities.<sup>51</sup> Irish railways were requested to run ‘excursion trains at reduced fares’ on the days of the show.<sup>52</sup> Rouse notes that railways provided free transport for racehorses, but arrangements for the R.D.S. Horse Show are not recorded until 1870, when companies provided free return transport for unsold animals whose owners had paid carriage to the show.<sup>53</sup> In mid-June, the committee tendered ‘for the creation of horse boxes, stalls,

<sup>47</sup> *Saunders’s News-Letter*, 2 Nov. 1867; *Proceedings R.D.S.*, civ, (1868), pp 7–8; R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 13 Nov. 1866.

<sup>48</sup> ‘List of subscriptions already received’ in MS ledger R.D.S. Annual Horse Show (R.D.S.A., MS ARC RDS/MAN HOR).

<sup>49</sup> Nesbitt to George Maunsell Woods, 17 Oct. 1867 (R.D.S.A., MS R.D.S. letter book 1867, ARC RDS/Cor/16).

<sup>50</sup> ‘Annual report of the Royal Dublin Society for the year 1868’ appended to *Proceedings R.D.S.*, cv (1869), p. 6–7.

<sup>51</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 11 May 1868.

<sup>52</sup> MS letter copy with a list of rail companies, in R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 16 July 1868.

<sup>53</sup> Rouse, *Sport in Ireland*, pp 107–08; *Horse Show catalogue 1870*, n.p. (announcement at the end of the catalogue).

&c', leaving less than a month to build the requisite accommodation for the entries.<sup>54</sup> Veterinary support was headed by Hugh Ferguson, chief veterinary inspector for Ireland, and a former lecturer on horse health and anatomy at the R.D.S.<sup>55</sup> Lists of classes and prizes were printed for distribution, with Howth and Wade suggesting that the show might follow the example of Islington, and 'offer prizes for jumping, especially as such a course will be well attended with little or no pecuniary risk and will add considerably to the attractions of the Horse Show'.<sup>56</sup> Judges were invited from England, Ireland and the R.D.S. itself, their travel and accommodation at the Shelbourne Hotel being paid by the committee.<sup>57</sup>

Placards and prize lists were also placed at the 'horse repositories' (livery yards) of Dublin, where city dwellers who could afford horses kept or rented them.<sup>58</sup> The committee targeted nine establishments in central Dublin, but *Thom's directory* lists others in surrounding areas such as Malahide and Bray. Hannah Velten notes that the upper and middle classes of London kept their horses in such stables when in the city for business or daily work, and that the 'jobmasters' who rented horses enjoyed a brisk trade.<sup>59</sup> By mid-century, a 'good horse' for driving, hunting, leisure riding or racing became the desideratum of middle-class professionals and artisans with ambitions to the appearance of a town-and-country life, creating a healthy market for the purchase or leasing of leisure horses from dealers and livery yards. Renting a horse was common enough that *Punch* magazine regularly pilloried suburban day-trippers out hunting on a hired mount.<sup>60</sup> Though comparable research for Ireland is scant, evidence of horse repositories suggests that the burgeoning suburban middle classes of Dublin followed a similar pattern.<sup>61</sup> Rains notes that horse dealer John Hickey, who prospered at the 'upper end of that market' was a resident of the fashionable Mespil Road suburb in the 1870s.<sup>62</sup> Cutting a fine figure in a carriage or leasing a horse for a day's hunting meant that the upcoming show would have appeal beyond the 'big house' residents to whom current historiography normally attributes equestrian pursuits in the nineteenth century.

### III

When it opened on 28 July 1868, the 'Great National Horse Show' established itself as an instant success. The show drew 6,029 visitors over the three days, crowded into the modest environs of Leinster House.<sup>63</sup> The buildings and yards of the R.D.S., including its spacious Agricultural Hall and the somewhat smaller

<sup>54</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 25 June 1868.

<sup>55</sup> Linde Lunney, 'Ferguson, Hugh' in *D.I.B.* (online ed., dib.ie); R.D.S. Natural History committee minutes, 26 Nov. 1839 (R.D.S.A.).

<sup>56</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 14 Apr. 1868.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, May–Aug. 1868.

<sup>58</sup> 'List of horse repositories in Dublin' in MS ledger R.D.S. Annual Horse Show

<sup>59</sup> Hannah Velten, *Beastly London: a history of animals in the city* (London, 2013), pp 47–50.

<sup>60</sup> See *Punch*, 'Tom Noddy hires a horse' 1 Mar. 1856, or 'A cockney on a fox-hunt', 28 Apr. 1860.

<sup>61</sup> Juliana Adelman, *Civilised by beasts: animals and urban change in nineteenth-century Dublin* (Manchester, 2020), pp 171–81.

<sup>62</sup> Rains, *Commodity culture*, pp 52–3.

<sup>63</sup> 'Annual report 1868' appended to *Proceedings R.D.S.*, cv (1869), pp 6–7.

Shelbourne Hall, as well as the surrounding Shelbourne Place and Clare Lane, were filled with stabling and exhibition stands. Leinster Lawn, between the National Gallery and Natural History Museum, was used for showing carriage, roadster, and ladies' horses. The courtyard at the front of Leinster House hosted the showing ring, where hunters in various weight classes were ridden for the judges, and young unriden horses were shown 'in hand'. Jumping competitions were conducted around an oval course laid down outside the show-ring fence. *Saunders's News-Letter* described the scene on the first day:

The courtyard of the society has been transformed into a huge circus-ring for the trial of prize horses in running, jumping &c., the 'course' being laid down with tan, and the centre reserved for visitors. A gallery has been raised for ladies who may wish to witness the trials. A strong barrier divides the 'ring' from the 'course'. A portion of raised platform has been covered in for the use of a band ... that of the Constabulary performed yesterday afternoon to the no small delectation of the visitors, and agitation of the horses who were being exercised or trotted in the circus at the time.<sup>64</sup>

366 horses were entered in the show, 210 of them in hunter classes.<sup>65</sup> All provinces were represented, but 285 came from Leinster, many of those from the Dublin region, imparting an urban character to the first show. Entries included animals for both agriculture and leisure, but the latter by far outnumbered the former, emphasising that the focus on improving horses was centred on sport rather than work. Agricultural and working horses became more visible in subsequent years, both for their value as working animals and as breeding stock for leisure horses. All the horses were from Ireland, as in the early years buyers travelled to the show from abroad, shipping horses home for personal use or sale.<sup>66</sup> Testimony to a House of Lords committee on horses asserted that the best hunting and carriage horses were found in the counties of Leinster province, and that dealers travelled to Ireland to buy them.<sup>67</sup> Hugh Ferguson observed in 1869 that there was 'little doubt of the Royal Dublin Society's Horse Show becoming the great market from which English, Scotch [sic] and foreign dealers will supply themselves ... with first class Irish horses' and that it should be scheduled to encourage their attendance.<sup>68</sup> Directly after the second Horse Show in 1869, an advertisement in *The Scotsman* announced that 'Mr Burns ... has returned from the Great Horse Show at Dublin with a selection of first-class hunters, which he will have pleasure in showing to gentlemen requiring high-class animals'.<sup>69</sup> Prior to the show in 1879, Dublin horse dealer Edward Sewell advertised in London's *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* that he would be holding auctions of quality breeding stock and young horses 'in connection with the Royal Dublin Society Horse Show'

<sup>64</sup> *Saunders's News-Letter*, 29 July 1868.

<sup>65</sup> *Horse Show catalogue 1868*, pp 5–54; 'Annual report 1868' appended to *Proceedings R.D.S.*, cv (1869), pp 6–7.

<sup>66</sup> See also *Catalogues of the annual shows of horses — hunters, roadsters, etc. at the Agricultural Hall, Islington, 1864–1895* (B.L., General Reference Collection, 7291.de). Shipping horses internationally for exhibition at shows was a rare occurrence.

<sup>67</sup> *SC, House of Lords on horses* (1873), pp 110–12.

<sup>68</sup> Ferguson to Edward Steele, 14 Apr. 1869 (R.D.S.A., MS R.D.S. letter book 1869, ARC RDS/Cor/18).

<sup>69</sup> *The Scotsman*, 17 Aug. 1869.

with the final sale day devoted to horses that had been entered for competition.<sup>70</sup> Horses purchased at the show also appear for re-sale in dealers' advertisements, such as 'Madame Rachel ... commended for jumping at the Dublin Horse Show', advertised in 1878 by the Royal Repository in Reading. Irish-purchased horses also turn up in English estate sales, as was the fate of 'Irish Times', advertised in the same year as having been prize-winner at the show in 1873 and 1874.<sup>71</sup> Similar announcements in the British news and sporting papers referencing animals acquired at the Dublin Horse Show suggest that entry into the show was seen as a mark of quality, and also shed light on the ongoing decline in the Irish equine population, highlighting tensions between the desire to improve Irish horses and the commercial value of high-quality animals in an international marketplace.

While the first Horse Show attracted its intended audience of knowledgeable horsemen and women, jumping was the main attraction for the general public, who came for the thrill of seeing elements of the hunting field transferred into the confined space of the Leinster House courtyard. Timber fences of various heights were modelled on Islington's examples, but the committee added two steeplechase-style challenges: a long jump over water and a high stone wall.<sup>72</sup> Observers 'required no small courage and no small perseverance to penetrate through the crowds' and 'applauded or laughed as the efforts of the horsemen seemed to deserve admiration or ridicule', cheering and clapping as the winners were chosen.<sup>73</sup> The *Farmers' Gazette* offered a close-up view of the action, relaying that 'the rumour of a six foot wall to be ridden over collected a very large concourse of persons' noting that the horses took it 'in cold blood, off wet sawdust, and in a crowded yard'.<sup>74</sup> 'In cold blood' references the hunting field, where jumping occurs in open country at speed in large groups; the excitement this produces is referred to as horses having their 'blood up' or being 'hot'. The writer here points out that the same athletic feats were difficult to reproduce individually in constrained spaces. At the first show, the stone wall jump was listed as the 'champion jump' in small type as the last entry on the printed prize list, and was not mentioned in the committee's minutes or anywhere else previously, so was perhaps a late addition to the proceedings. Howth wrote to the R.D.S. council in the aftermath of the show, reflecting that

the leaping prizes have proved a great incentive to the citizens of Dublin to visit the show, and have added (probably) very largely to the receipts. There is, at all times, a risk in having such exhibitions, a vast amount of care is requisite to remove, as far as possible, the probability of an accident.<sup>75</sup>

Howth was correct in his cautions. Jumps ringed the perimeter of the small courtyard, with crowds packed in behind the show ring fence, horses cantering around them to the outside while jumping. One report noted that 'it was no easy matter to manage the crowd ... on every side of the stone wall the throng was so great that the stewards, with the aid of police constables, had as much as they could do to keep

<sup>70</sup> *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 23 Aug. 1879.

<sup>71</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, 19 Oct. 1878; *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 21 June 1878.

<sup>72</sup> *Farmers' Gazette*, 21 Aug. 1868.

<sup>73</sup> *Saunders's News-Letter*, 31 July 1868.

<sup>74</sup> *Farmers' Gazette*, 21 Aug. 1868.

<sup>75</sup> MS R.D.S. letter book 1868 (R.D.S.A., ARC RDS/Cor/17).

people within the prescribed limits'.<sup>76</sup> A rider's mistake or an obstreperous mount could have proven disastrous.

It soon became clear that the main aim of competitive jumping for prizes, showcasing the talents of hunting horses, was impeded by the enthusiastic and sometimes rowdy crowds. In 1870 *The Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail* averred that 'this kind of a trial is no fair test of a horse's jumping powers. When a horse has to gallop round, as in a circus, approaching the leap, when he is surrounded by crowds and barricades, he is, unless a wonderfully good-tempered animal, completely put out by the untoward circumstances'.<sup>77</sup> The competitions at Islington elicited similar commentary, one writer declaring that 'we don't like to see a fine old weight-carrier ... goaded in cold blood over gorse hurdles to the shrieking of a Cockney mob'.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps unintentionally, jumping competitions at horse shows began to reward new kinds of sporting skill, differing from the ability to ride at speed in groups across open country. As they became fixtures at shows across Europe and North America throughout the second half of the century, it is easy to imagine that riders who wanted to win them began to select horses that could cope with jumping in small enclosed spaces over artificial obstacles, and in spite of the carnival atmosphere. The challenging conditions at early horse shows encouraged new kinds of equestrian ability that, over time, evolved into the modern sport of showjumping.

The Dublin Horse Show soon became ensconced as one of a number of important equestrian events on a summer circuit that included Islington, Manchester and Birmingham, joining the traditional calendar of horse fairs and race meetings. The spectacle of competitive jumping had helped ensure the financial and popular success of the R.D.S. show through increased attendance, but the central rationale of improving the Irish horse saw the other show classes settle into distinct patterns. From 1870–75 the committee implemented regulations and standards designed to achieve fairness and consistency in confirming the quality of prize-winning animals. Provisions for measuring horses by height, ensuring proof of pedigree, and veterinary standards for heath and soundness were established.<sup>79</sup> Clear rules and pricing structures for entries, classes, stabling and ticketing were implemented and published. Entries were encouraged by increasing the prize funds and offering prestigious Challenge Cups: in an apparent change of heart, the R.A.I.S.I. inaugurated a cup for agricultural stallions in 1869, and in 1870 a group of prominent citizens commenced funding for a Citizens' Challenge Cup for the best hunter entered by a tenant farmer.<sup>80</sup> The show accommodated breeders, sellers and buyers with space and time each day for viewing animals and trying them under saddle. Bolstered by improved structures and incentives, the numbers of horses entered ranged between 450 and 600 each year. From 1869, the Committee of Agriculture decided that the annual Sheep Show, which had suffered a drop in attendance, be appended to the Horse Show, drawing a greater number of farmers and

<sup>76</sup> *Saunders's News-Letter*, 12 Aug. 1869.

<sup>77</sup> *Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail*, 17 Sept. 1870.

<sup>78</sup> *The Graphic*, 18 June 1870.

<sup>79</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 1872 (R.D.S.A., ARC RDS/MAN HOR). This is a separate volume, including entries to 1883.

<sup>80</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 31 Mar. 1869; *ibid.*, 26 Jan. 1870; prize lists for cups and medals were printed at the front of the annual *Horse Show catalogue*.

agriculturalists to the Leinster House grounds.<sup>81</sup> However, attendance numbers tended to fluctuate, influenced by weather and economic conditions. A bumper attendance of well over 21,000 in 1875 was accompanied by fine weather, and the 1879 drop to just under 10,000 coincided with the last of three years of poor weather that had widely adverse effects for Irish agriculture: the ensuing economic distress has been credited as a factor in the land wars of the same year.<sup>82</sup>

One curious element of the early R.D.S. show was its refusal to allow women riders. From its inception, women participated in the show as owners, breeders, and exhibitors, but were not allowed in ridden competition, despite being prominent competitors in the showrings of England. Prior to the first R.D.S. show, a Miss E. Teather had offered her services as a rider, but the committee did not ‘consider it advisable to engage the services of a Lady Equestrian’.<sup>83</sup> The committee considered the question of allowing women riders: in 1869 the secretary of the Islington show wrote to the R.D.S. ‘in reference to ladies riding at the Horse Show held there’, and an R.D.S. member was sent to the Manchester show to make ‘enquires of Manchester to all lady riders’.<sup>84</sup> At the Birmingham Horse Show of the same year, a winning horse was described as having ‘splendid action, and under the skilful management of Miss Carey, showed to great advantage on the oval’.<sup>85</sup> Illustrated newspapers from England depict men and women competing together in the show ring and over hurdles from the late 1860s onward.<sup>86</sup> Irish women were well-regarded for their knowledge of horses, and many rode as members of hunt clubs. In *Irish sports and sportsmen* Fitzpatrick records the women of the hunting field, and Irishwoman Nannie Power O’Donoghue’s 1877 articles on riding for ladies in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* were popular enough to be published as a bestselling book, *Ladies on horseback*.<sup>87</sup> The *Dublin Builder* noted that attendants at the first R.D.S. show included ‘a goodly array of the fair sex, many of whom, from remarks we heard, we concluded were no bad judges of the equine race’.<sup>88</sup> One of prize-winners in the non-ridden classes at the inaugural show was Mary Mooney, for her agricultural broodmare, Jessy.<sup>89</sup> Given that the committee conducted its shows in keeping with conventions at other shows, and that it relied upon women’s attendance as part of its success, the refusal (until 1919) to allow them in ridden competition is puzzling. However, the consistent listing of women in show catalogues as owners, breeders

<sup>81</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 26 May 1870; *Proceedings R.D.S.*, cvi, (1870), p. 42.

<sup>82</sup> Attendance figures were recorded in yearly annual reports appended to the *Proceedings R.D.S.*; volumes cv to cxiii (1868–1879) were referenced for these figures; *Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail*, 6 Aug. 1875; Terence Dooley, ‘Irish land questions, 1879–1923’ in Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *Cambridge history of Ireland*, iv: *1880 to the present* (Cambridge, 2018), pp 122–3.

<sup>83</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 11 July 1868.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 15 July 1869.

<sup>85</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, 19 Aug. 1869.

<sup>86</sup> See *Illustrated London News*, 13 June 1868, and *Pictorial World*, 9 June 1877.

<sup>87</sup> Bridget Hourican, ‘O’Donoghue, Nannie Power’ in *D.I.B.* (online ed., dib.ie); Nannie Power O’Donoghue, *Ladies on horseback* (London, 1881).

<sup>88</sup> *Dublin Builder*, 1 Aug. 1868.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Adjudication of prizes’ in *Horse Show catalogue 1868*, p. 5.

and trainers suggests their influence on the history of Irish agricultural and breeding programmes, and their contribution to the development of the Irish horse.<sup>90</sup>

#### IV

The Royal Dublin Society Horse Show was not only a vehicle for improvement, but also an occasion for leisure. As early as 1869 the press noted that 'the general body of visitors ... attend chiefly in search of pleasure', and the society developed its accommodation to attract visitors with comforts, entertainment, and commerce.<sup>91</sup> Stands were erected along the front of Leinster House to accommodate spectators for the showing classes, and in 1873 the society tendered for a company to provide first-class and third-class bars and luncheons, as well as a refreshment counter at the front of the building near the show yard. In the same year, it contracted for an increased provision of privies and urinals in corridors alongside and underneath the stands and bars.<sup>92</sup> The viewing stands at the front of Leinster House improved each year, growing larger with roofing for protection from the elements, and including offices and stands for the judges.

From its inception, the R.D.S. Horse Show included an exhibition of manufactured articles, an extension of the society's Exhibitions of Manufacture, held every three years at Leinster House, promoting Irish industry, invention and raw materials, and offering items for sale. The Agricultural Hall accommodated stands for coachbuilders, manufacturers of agricultural machinery and feed merchants to display their goods to an audience of interested buyers. They were joined by merchants who catered specifically to equestrian interests, including makers of riding clothing, saddlers and purveyors of harnesses, as well as farriers and veterinarians. However, the trade stands also included sellers of domestic machinery such as sewing and washing machines, as well as home furnishings, soft goods, fabrics and 'fancy goods', a catch-all term for small personal items and domestic luxuries.<sup>93</sup> The inclusion of trade stands established a feature of the show that became more diverse over time, taking on a 'lifestyle' sensibility in addition to its agricultural ethos, so that one could purchase animal feed or children's toys, and inspect hunting breeches or the latest washing machines. The initial impulse to create a showcase for Irish horses had the unexpected result of creating a new kind of venue for leisure, and a new form of engagement with equestrian culture in a middle-class urban environment, in which interest in horses was not essential to participation and enjoyment. The goods on display ushered in a confluence of improvement, agriculture, sport and leisure that remains part of the show's enduring attractions.

As the show stabilised into a reliable annual event, local businesses took advantage of 'Horse Show Week' to advertise their wares and services. Establishments as diverse as livery yards, hotels, carpenters, tailors and victuallers began to benefit from an influx of travellers and locals. On 19 August 1870 the *Freeman's Journal* advertised cattle spice (a feed supplement), tweed suits and winter garments waterproofed and reinforced with gutta percha, all headed by reference to

<sup>90</sup> In 1919, the rules on p. 24 of the *Dublin Horse Show catalogue* state 'ladies are not allowed to ride except in competition specially provided for ladies'.

<sup>91</sup> *Saunders's News-Letter*, 12 Aug. 1869.

<sup>92</sup> R.D.S. Horse Show committee minutes, 19, 24 July 1873.

<sup>93</sup> *Horse Show catalogue 1868*, pp 55–9.

the Great National Horse Show. Culture and entertainment venues followed suit, giving notice that special performances had been organised for visitors to the show: the Exhibition Palace announced four grand concerts, and the Queen's Royal Theatre a programme of a drama and two farces.<sup>94</sup> As they developed throughout century, horse shows in Ireland and England began to form recurring economic clusters, temporary sets of interlocking concerns that coalesced annually and exercised demonstrable impact for their duration. As opportunities for sport and leisure began to change significantly, equestrian competitions quickly moved from their elite origins into middle-class and future-focused showcases for good horses, leisure activity, consumer goods and new experiences.

By 1875, ticket prices for the Horse Show had settled into a stratified formula that recognised class differences, but still made it broadly accessible. Inclusive tickets for the entire show cost ten shillings. Single tickets descended in price daily, with the first day priced at 5s. for gentlemen and 2s. 6d. for ladies, affordable to affluent potential buyers but costly for a more general audience. Hunters and stallions were generally shown on the first day, allowing wealthier enthusiasts to examine the most desirable entries in their stables without the impediment of larger crowds. The champion stone wall jump was confined to this day, affording the most exciting jumping to more privileged members of the hunting fraternity and avoiding the rowdy scenes that had accompanied its early appearances. The second and third days were priced at 3s. 6d. for gentlemen and 2s. 6d. for ladies, falling to 2s. 6d. and 2s. These prices were more likely to attract the comfortable middle classes, who could see hunters, ladies' horses, carriage horses and ponies, as well as jumping over timber fences and water. The final day was priced at one shilling, featuring showing classes and a programme of prizes for jumping over hurdles, starting at two and a half feet and progressively rising to four and a half. Shilling entry had originated with 'shilling days' at London's Great Exhibition of 1851 and had become a solution to allowing the working classes access to exhibitions.<sup>95</sup> Shilling tickets opened the proceedings to a wider audience, but also swelled the crowds who came primarily to see the jumping on the final day. Rains records that the prices for the 1872 Dublin Exhibition of Arts, Industries, and Manufactures were 5s., 2s. 6d. or 1s. for variously designated days and times.<sup>96</sup> The similar pricing structure for the Horse Show suggests a conscious effort to place it within general expectations for similar exhibitions and entertainments.

An 1874 complaint from Major Borrowes to the rest of the committee that 'in future Horse Shows no exhibition of anything except horses in the show ring be allowed — as the Bicycle Exhibition at the last show' indicated that the show was becoming an attractive venue for wider audiences, new inventions and novel experiences. His assertion that such displays tended 'to lower the character of the horse shows held by the Royal Dublin Society' signalled conflicts in the culture of leisure as it continued to shift away from its connections to the gentry and their dominance of associational culture.<sup>97</sup> He represented a long-established ascendancy family, so Borrowes's objections perhaps signal tensions in some

<sup>94</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 18 Aug. 1870.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Leapman, *The world for a shilling: how the Great Exhibition of 1851 shaped a nation* (London, 2001).

<sup>96</sup> Rains, *Commodity culture*, p. 75.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Major Borrowes, Horse Show committee minutes, 1 Oct. 1874.

quarters around new forms of leisure that increasingly altered the social order. Brian Griffin's work on the social and economic mobility afforded by bicycles in the mid-to-late Victorian era details the expanded freedoms for work, travel or recreation they offered to workers and women.<sup>98</sup> In 1869, a *Punch* cartoon satirised a man and woman riding velocipedes, conflating bicycles and horses by dressing the characters in equestrian clothing, the lady seated side-saddle in her riding habit.<sup>99</sup> Along with rapidly increasing modern developments such as railways and department stores, bicycles were signifiers of how the changes wrought by modernity might challenge class structures and the social dominance of the elite. At the R.D.S. Horse Show bicycles had been displayed for a diverse audience in the very space dedicated to a longstanding signifier of privilege — the well-bred hunting horse. The contents of the trade stands hint at similar tensions and transformations: in 1879, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals stand was set up directly next to a booth selling hunting attire, including dog-skin gloves, a coincidence that reminds us how popular movements as well as new inventions had begun to foster social change.<sup>100</sup>

## V

Mid-century enhancements stretched the Leinster House grounds to their limits, with one report noting that 'the growing importance of the Dublin show has become so manifest, that at last the executive have discovered that their premises in Kildare Street are altogether too confined for such an exhibition'.<sup>101</sup> However, the R.D.S. was forced into seeking new premises for the show due to events in a different area of its improving ventures. Since the early 1800s it had maintained a natural history museum, library and art collections, which were largely placed into state control under the 1877 Science and Museums Act.<sup>102</sup> During negotiations for the transfer of collections, it was agreed that the society's agricultural shows, including the Horse Show, would relocate to accommodate the construction of a National Museum and National Library. In 1879 the society secured a site in Ballsbridge, at the edge of the city, on a 500-year lease from the earl of Pembroke.<sup>103</sup> The National Horse Show opened on the new site in 1881 with an expanded menu of classes, including a programme of jumping around a course of purpose-built obstacles.<sup>104</sup> The new grounds allowed the leisure elements of the show to expand, eventually extending to craft demonstrations, art shows and performances. The economic cluster created by the early shows deepened and stabilised, aided by the construction of a railroad siding in 1893 that delivered horses, people and goods straight to the site.<sup>105</sup> The move to Ballsbridge propelled the Horse Show into new avenues, shaping its trajectory into the present.

<sup>98</sup> Brian Griffin, *Cycling in Victorian Ireland* (Dublin, 2006).

<sup>99</sup> *Punch*, 15 May 1869.

<sup>100</sup> *Horse Show catalogue 1879*, pp 105–06. The history of the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is covered in Adelman, *Civilised by beasts*, pp 38–52.

<sup>101</sup> *The Field, the Country Gentlemen's Newspaper*, 30 Aug. 1879.

<sup>102</sup> 40 & 41 Vict., c. 234.

<sup>103</sup> Henry F. Berry, *A history of the Royal Dublin Society* (London, 1915), p. 312.

<sup>104</sup> James Meenan and Desmond Clarke, *The Royal Dublin Society 1731–1981* (Dublin, 1981), p. 108.

<sup>105</sup> Berry, *Royal Dublin Society*, p. 313.

The society's aim to improve the Irish horse bore fruit through increasing attention to breeding, and to standards for assessing quality and performance that helped create templates for modern Irish breeds, encouraging the development of the Irish hunter into the Irish sport horse. The influence of its jumping programme, alongside other early shows such as Islington, was perhaps evident in the 1900 Paris Olympics, where equestrian competitions included the long jump and high jump, as well as hack and hunter classes.<sup>106</sup> Team-jumping as a military competition — the Nations Cup — began at the London International Horse Show in 1910, internationalising horse sport.<sup>107</sup> By the time equestrian sports were regularised as Olympic competitions in Stockholm in 1912, the term showjumping had entered common parlance, and early courses were based on the gates, banks and stone walls of the hunting tradition, strongly resembling the obstacles at Ballsbridge.<sup>108</sup> Nations Cup competitions made an appearance at the Dublin Horse Show in 1926, finally regularising the show as an international event.<sup>109</sup> However, the show ring remained a primary focal point, with ridden and in-hand classes serving as important show-cases for Irish horses, breeders and riders.

In associating the history of equestrian sport in nineteenth-century Ireland largely with the Anglo-Irish ruling classes and the residents of the 'big house', Irish cultural history has elided the developments in popular culture that began to see equestrianism migrate across class divides and become more widely practiced as a leisure and sporting pursuit. The R.D.S. Horse Show emerged into an atmosphere of rapid social change, drawing audiences from a range of constituencies with varying reasons for attending. The Horse Show Committee was composed of (male) members of the aristocracy and gentry, as well as influential large farmers and businessmen, but the economic success and long-term viability of the show relied on its potential for attracting large numbers of entries and selling as many tickets as possible, priorities made clear by the Horse Show Committee's annual reports to the R.D.S. council. The provision of novel entertainments, refreshments and comforts, and the display of consumer goods, moved the annual event beyond the confines of an agricultural show and surpassed its origins in the elite spheres of racing, hunting and associational culture. Its status as a marketplace for quality leisure horses drew an increasing number of buyers from Ireland and abroad, particularly dealers who catered for a growing number of prosperous middle-class equestrians. The Horse Show committee's choices in aligning its ticket pricing with accepted norms for other large exhibitions and events, including a shilling day, suggests that it was keen to take advantage of a changing culture of leisure and entertainment, in the knowledge that strong ticket sales were a vehicle for financial stability.

By the turn of the century, horse shows across Europe had matured into events that combined improvement, sport, and leisure in equal measure. The R.D.S. Dublin Horse Show is the lone survivor of the late Victorian horse shows of Ireland and Britain, the oldest of its kind in the region. It retains a brief of promoting

<sup>106</sup> Donna de Haan and Lucy Claire Dumbell, 'Equestrian sport at the Olympic Games from 1900 to 1948' in *International Journal of the History of Sport*, xxxiii no. 6–7 (2016), pp 648–50.

<sup>107</sup> Michael Slavin and Louise Parkes, *Ambassadors on horseback: the army equitation school* (Dublin, 2010), p. 18

<sup>108</sup> Marie de Pellegar and Benoît Capdebarthes, *An illustrated history of equestrian sports: dressage, jumping, eventing* (Paris, 2019), pp 9–10.

<sup>109</sup> Slavin & Parkes, *Ambassadors*, pp 26–9.

Irish horses, economic activity and leisure pursuits that would be recognisable to its originators. However, the power of its economic cluster has increased significantly as it has become one of signature events of the international equestrian calendar, drawing competitors and visitors from around the world. Its influence can be seen throughout the year as horses and riders who compete at the Dublin Horse Show also make their way around national and international competition circuits, a long-term and world-wide legacy of the structures put in place by the Great National Horse Show of 1868.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>110</sup> This work was undertaken under the terms of the Royal Dublin Society’s Library and Archives Bursary 2019, awarded for research in the society’s equestrian archives. I would like to offer my sincere thanks for the society’s generous support.