

## **Agricultural shows, connectivity and families of choice**

GIBBESON, Carolyn and WESTWOOD, Caroline

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/28136/>

---

This document is the Submitted Version

### **Citation:**

GIBBESON, Carolyn and WESTWOOD, Caroline (2022). Agricultural shows, connectivity and families of choice. In: FLETCHER, Thomas, (ed.) Family events: Practices, displays and Intimacies. Routledge Critical Event Studies Research Series . Abingdon, Routledge, 223-238. [Book Section]

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

## **Agricultural shows, connectivity and families of choice**

Caroline Westwood and Carolyn Gibbeson, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

### **Author bios**

Caroline Westwood is a Senior Lecturer in the Business School at Sheffield Hallam University. Caroline's practitioner experience spans more than 15 years specialising in corporate event management. Her passion for the world of farming and rural events fuels her interest in this diverse, interesting, and sparsely researched area of the industry.

Carolyn Gibbeson is a Senior Lecture in Real Estate in the Department of Natural and Built Environment at Sheffield Hallam University. Carolyn's practitioner experience was as a commercial property surveyor. She researches people's attachment to places and how this affects the practical, management decisions of that place.

### **Abstract**

Agricultural shows are long established key events and the highlight of the farming calendar. They are a space to display livestock, mechanical, technological and skills innovations as well with many visitors attending these events on an annual basis. They are characterised as a places of ritual, engrained within rural society. As with all gatherings of people, agricultural shows allow for new ties to be formed and existing relationships strengthened. These events remain a significant platform, a place in society, a 'community hub' for farming families to connect with likeminded people. Despite their multifaceted significance, they remain relatively understudied in the literature. This chapter explores the 'familial' relationships which exist with the context of agricultural events, how these events act as a conduit for (farming) families to connect, develop a sense of belonging and affinity within an 'extended' family network and to therefore develop the concept of “families of choice”.

### **Introduction**

This chapter seeks to explore the 'familial' relationships which exist within the context of agricultural events, and how these events act as a conduit for farming families to connect and develop a sense of belonging and affinity within an 'extended' family network – what we refer to as ‘families of choice’. We will explore the nature of this concept and its importance within agricultural communities with particular reference to agricultural shows. Whilst the nuclear family is often viewed as close (both in terms of proximity and emotion) this research examines the way in which fragmented and geographically separated farming families come temporarily - but meaningfully - together, through participation in their farming communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) within the context of agricultural of agricultural shows. Our discussion will focus on the value which is placed on attending these events by members of the farming community, especially livestock breeders, and the meanings of space and place, and how individuals interact with others within these settings. It will also consider the co-created communities of practice which exist at these events, the importance of heritage and tradition

within the context of farming communities, the enthusiasm and commitment borne out of these traditions, and the value of socialisation and belonging to a ‘farming community’. Drawing upon primary data collected from seven in-depth interviews with members of the farming community, those involved with breed societies and associated activities, this chapter argues that agricultural shows are a critical platform in facilitating families of choice to (1) emerge and (2) be sustained through physical attendance at these events.

## **Families of choice**

Traditionally, ‘families’ have been viewed as the biological reproduction of human societies, with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) defining this as the formation of the family unit, people related by birth, marriage or form of partnership and adoption, living in the same residence (Office for National Statistics, 2019). This conceptualisation presents quite a narrow and rigid view, which may not represent the diversity of more contemporary family forms, including ‘families of choice’. It is our contention that the notion of ‘families of choice’ provides much needed, additional flexibility. This concept is really intended to represent the ‘chosen’ commitment of individuals, rather than ‘fixed’ family units, representing their relationships, support and intimacies, often referred to as ‘found family’ (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) or, more recently, *extended* family (Fletcher, 2020). The term ‘families of choice’ was popularised by Weston (1991) in earlier discussions, focusing on ‘non-heterosexual’ relationships. However, increasingly the term is associated with adopted families (Benavente and Gains, 2008) and those families formed through individualisation and nonconformity as a result of ‘chosen’ closeness, in contrast to traditional biological ties (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001).

Families of choice, in the context of agriculture, are often based upon ‘insider’ extended families within the agricultural community - i.e., those that already have a connection to farming. Nevertheless, within the context of agricultural events, families of choice are arguably inclusive in terms of their accessibility and openness to ‘outsiders’, who can temporarily join their chosen family of choice, although many return each year. As such, agricultural families of choice represent both long-term relationships within the farming community and both long- and short-term relationships with interested external parties. Finch (2015) refers extensively to ‘transient encounters’ in relation to families and their identities using the work of Morgan (2009) to identify two dimensions of interaction. The first dimension (of interaction) is viewed as ‘intimates’ at one end of a continuum to ‘strangers’ at the other end. The second dimension focuses on duration; from ‘regular, sustained contact’ moving to ‘one off and brief’ contact (Finch, 2015, p.72). This characterisation of encounters in Finch’s context of family holidays is an interesting and valuable lens through which to view agricultural connections and families of choice. Certainly, some connections may well be sustained with regular contact at a series of events, others may be fleeting connections at as few as one show per year. Nevertheless, both of these encounters and connections are valuable, can add richness and be memorable interactions for those involved (Morgan, 2009).

A pertinent example of families of choice from the context of agriculture would be livestock breeders and breed societies; those who share a bond with others who breed the same livestock, and connect through an annual calendar of events, such as shows, cattle sales, and educational events/forums. Take the Ayrshire Cattle Society of Great Britain and Ireland (Ayrshires, 2020) for instance, which is a membership organisation, initially established to improve the breed, but now dedicated to keeping Ayrshire cattle at the forefront of modern dairy farming. This breed society (as with many others) offers social activities (e.g., an annual conference), business and networking opportunities through sales and shows, and also educational platforms, such as young breeders weekends; all of which facilitate friendships and familial relationships, before during and after these events.

Agricultural shows and rural events in general, provide platforms to socialise, communicate and educate their stakeholders through a variety of platforms (Langridge-Thomas, Crowther and Westwood, 2021). They play a vital (and wide) role in the community, fusing together knowledge, skills and experiences to positively impact social capital (Sligo and Massey, 2007). Pahl (2000) discusses the foundations of social capital, highlighting these are based upon friendships, particularly ‘quality relationships’, acknowledged in the literature as ‘network families’, ‘families of choice’ and ‘elective kin’ (Finch, 2007; Ribbens-McCarthy and Edwards, 2011). A significant number of relationships established through agricultural shows (and consequent networks) could be argued to be ‘families of choice’ - those relationships based on interests, effort, ethics, commitment, friendship, and support. Whilst attendance and involvement at agricultural shows will, for some, undoubtedly be based on biological family ties, for many they will not be. The make-up of farming families is often multigenerational, with ‘first family’ and ‘second family’ involved with key decision making (Farmer-Bowers, 2010), with parents and grandparents viewed as ‘first family’, whereas aunts, uncles and cousins form the ‘second family’ layer. Farming families also seek a wider connection with those who operate the same type of farm (arable, pastoral, mixed). It is this intergenerational experience which ultimately encourages social mobility and education (through shared knowledge with others operating in the same markets); valuing the connection with other like-minded people within ‘family-like’ relationships (Brannen, 2014).

### **Context of agricultural shows and rural events**

Agricultural shows are long established and key events within the farming social calendar, particularly for rural communities, but with many interconnections to wider society, these events also have an increasing appeal to wider audiences (Westwood, Schofield and Berridge, 2018). Steeped in history, many date back more than a century, with the longest running show established in Lancashire in 1768 (Royal Lancashire Show, 2020). Many of these events attract significant attendance. In 2020 for instance, The Royal Welsh Show, which was coincidentally in its 101<sup>st</sup> year, attracted over 200,000 people over four days (Royal Welsh Agricultural Society, 2020). The agricultural events sector continues to grow and strengthen, with attendance growing to over seven million in the last decade (from 6 million in 2010) and with over 400 show days in the UK each year the show calendar is a busy one (ASAO, 2020; Scott,

2014). Like the people who attend them, the events are hugely diverse, from those which display the finest livestock to others which showcase mechanical, technological and skills innovations. Despite their multifaceted significance, they remain relatively understudied in the events literature, particularly in relation to being viewed as leisure events providing a day of family entertainment, education, and ultimately, “balancing heritage and tradition with a contemporary view of modern agriculture” (Westwood et al., 2018: 148).

Agricultural shows are characterised as places of ritual, engrained within rural society. As with all gatherings of people, agricultural shows allow for new ties to be formed and existing relationships strengthened (Westwood et al., 2018). Most people do not go to agricultural shows with a specific purpose to gain knowledge; this is moreover, something that happens unintentionally, by simply engaging with the event, and its many features, allowing the development of social, cultural and educational outcomes (Thomas, 2016). These events remain a significant platform for knowledge exchange; a place in society; a 'community hub' for farming families to connect with likeminded people – defined by Thomas (2016) as ‘rural buzz’.

### **Agricultural shows and families of choice**

As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, agricultural shows and societies have a long history (Yarwood and Evans, 2006). These shows enable knowledge of farming practices to be exchanged and therefore, the shows, livestock and practices have cultural and symbolic value, as well as the more obvious economic value, in that they are important in helping shape and construct local and farming identities (Yarwood and Evans, 2006). Consequently, agricultural events and shows have multiple purposes; the economic business of farming, the social purposes of meeting likeminded people and the preservation of tradition through the continuation of these events, showing heritage breeds and maintaining the longevity of the events themselves. They are the gathering of people in a particular location at a particular time, usually at a date and place that has been the same for generations and which attract a loyal following from both the farming and non-farming communities (Westwood et al., 2018). These different communities, therefore, derive particular value from these events, and the shared values espoused by participants and attendees create a sense of community, and are the basis and foundation of the agricultural show family of choice.

Westwood et al. (2018) argue that these shows are becoming diverse in terms of attendees, and that these events are seen as a way to link farming to consumers, to educate the general public and to show livestock (Holloway, 2004; Westwood et al., 2018). Like other forms of leisure communities, agricultural events consist of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in terms of who is potentially included and excluded from these families of choice. Moreover, different people inevitably attend for different reasons and thus, attach different meaning to the events and their attendance (Langridge-Thomas et al., 2021). This observation is important to this chapter for two reasons. Firstly, as collective tradition or heritage value in attending agricultural shows; and secondly, personal value for those who attend these shows and see other attendees as part of their families of choice. Inevitably, how people find meaning in places depends on a

variety of factors. As Massey (2005) has argued, place is fluid and therefore, can mean different things to different people. Agricultural shows are there to present farming to both those in the agricultural community and those outside it who have no connection to farming or that environment. Farmers and owners for example, are encouraged to show their animals, to highlight good examples of breeds (Yarwood and Evans, 2006), and to present a vision of farming that emphasises success and expertise (Holloway, 2004). Those outside the farming community have been seen to attend to socialise and relax, gain new knowledge and experience and to connect with the countryside (Westwood et al. 2018). Holloway (2004) argues that shows emphasise a ‘farming/non-farming’ distinction and this is evident among agricultural families of choice theory with those ‘inside’ (i.e., in the farming community) having a connection to the farming and agricultural communities and those ‘outside’ (having no connection at all).

### **Communities of practice**

In understanding the different perspectives and meanings attributable to agricultural shows, the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) is helpful. Several worlds inhabit a place (the show), each with different perspectives and meanings that they bring to, and attribute to, that show depending on whether they are ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’. The theory of communities of practice also provides a useful link with the concept of families of choice. As outlined above, families of choice are ‘chosen’, in contrast to families formed by traditional biological ties (Weeks et al., 2001). Similarly, communities of practice, as defined by Wenger (1998: 1), are social learning systems or “groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. Farming and agricultural shows provide the context and location for groups of farmers to share their knowledge, skills and passions and, through the exchange of information and opportunities, to learn, and improve their knowledge and skills. The farming community shares this knowledge internally, but also exchanges some of it externally to those members of the public who attend the shows, but do not necessarily come from farming backgrounds. This farming community therefore, provides knowledge from the inside of a community of practice, or a family of choice to those outside it.

Communities of practice have shared or common goals and, over time, create a shared history of learning (Locke, 2018; Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice could be official or unofficial and it is feasible that within an individual agricultural show or event there are multiple communities of practice, which individuals ascribe and belong to. For example, farming can be seen as an overarching community of practice for all those involved in the business of farming, but within that there are a plethora of different types of farms, farmers and farming techniques, disciplines and specialities. To illustrate, livestock breeding could be another community of practice, while exhibitors and suppliers is another, and so forth. Each are connected to the show or event, some more than others, and therefore, each derives particular value from attending and participating, with their own particular motives for doing so.

Communities of practice seek to determine what is considered valuable by that community and accordingly develops the relevant expertise and competence in these areas. This expertise and knowledge is gained through the daily life of farming, but also through the shared experiences of attending shows and events. Those attending the shows - the 'insiders' - choose to do so for a variety of reasons (discussed below); the people attending the shows are their family of choice; they choose to be members of that community. The agricultural show enables farmers to demonstrate this expertise to each other and those attending. Moreover, as a space or place, agricultural events also hold a more emotional element as they enable memories of previous events to be recalled. This, in turn, creates or sustains a familiarity and sense of belonging for those involved, and links with the tradition of the shows (Geoghegan, 2013). A group, or community of practice, of like-minded individuals, engenders a sociability through that formation and via participation in that group (Geoghegan, 2013). As Geoghegan (2013: 41) suggests, "the sociability and 'interactional' nature of enthusiasm in groups generates a community of emotion that is mediated and articulated spatially and brings people together with a common interest" and this can be seen through participation in agricultural events.

Whilst participating in such groups and communities of practice can foster a sense of belonging, they can also be exclusionary. As communities of practice determine what is valuable to them, they also control what is seen to be acceptable knowledge within that community. By controlling what counts as knowledge and participation within the group, this determines the types of meaning that are created and how participants will develop (Wenger, 1998). As Wenger (1998: 103) argues, "over time, such histories create discontinuities between those who have been participating and those who have not" and as part of this, the communities hoard or restrict knowledge, can limit innovation and hold others hostage to their expertise. Agricultural shows present a farming/non-farming distinction, with those from outside the farming community most likely to be viewed as lacking knowledge (Holloway, 2004) and therefore, being excluded from that particular community of practice. This poses an interesting question in respect of families of choice: where do the boundaries of these families lie and who is permitted to become part of that family?

### **Agricultural shows as heritage and tradition**

The remainder of this chapter explores how farming community members are formed and performed at agricultural events and how they see themselves as both part of a farming community of practice but also a farming family of choice. It will also briefly explore how the heritage of these events manifests itself in their temporary locations and timings. As well as the functional, knowledge exchange and educational values associated with attending and participating in agricultural shows, these events have long histories and traditions (Westwood et al., 2018; Yarwood and Evans, 2006) and can therefore, also be viewed in terms of their cultural or heritage value. They can be viewed as both tangible and intangible heritage as they take place at a particular location (though only for a temporary, predefined period), but they involve the repetition of practices (if updated ones), stemming from their long histories. They

also invoke memories and intangible meanings and values for those who participate. Many of these events have been sustained over generations, with families (both farming and non-farming) returning each year. The shows therefore, have particular significance for families, both personally and socially. Westwood et al. (2021: 8) argue that “agricultural events are a temporal and spatial canvas which although possessing a unifying theme, are much more fragmented than that would suggest”. Whilst the shows occupy a particular physical space, many doing so for generations, and hosting families of choice and communities of practice, this fragmented nature is likely to be caused by the number of these different groups, some separate but some overlapping with each other.

Traditionally, heritage (whether tangible or intangible) has been seen as a product, either in terms of a physical building or a particular event, tradition or artefact. Recent work has argued for a reimagining of this, and states that it should be seen as a process; something that is *done* as opposed to something that just exists (Grewcock, 2014; Schorch, 2014; Smith, 2006). In viewing heritage as a process, it can be seen as personal, something social and something embodied (Grewcock, 2014) where meaning and value are found in that act of doing (Smith, 2006). In his work on the Lord Mayor’s Show, Grewcock (2014) views heritage as both porous and performative, as something that takes place in the present, even when it has a long history or past. The act of doing is always in the present and whilst events such as the Lord Mayor’s Show (and agricultural events) are temporary, they offer experiences and therefore, “acts of meaning making” (Schorch, 2014: 23) for those who participate. Farming community members return annually to the shows to continue their traditions, develop knowledge and to reaffirm their family of choice.

As heritage has to be experienced for it to be considered heritage (Smith, 2006), memory, remembering and performance are necessarily part of the process of meaning making. The process, experience or performance, is a way of retaining cultural heritage and keeping knowledge alive, passing it on, together with the associated meanings and values, to the younger generation. In attending and participating in agricultural shows, the collective memory of those who do so is shaped and passed on through the construction and negotiation of values and meanings (Smith, 2006). People derive a sense of identity through traditions and participating, in a working community (through their respective community(ies) of practice) and through the place itself (Gibbeson, forthcoming). Through attending events annually, farmers strengthen and pass on their traditions, modify them, shape them and maintain social and professional bonds with their community. Similarly, attendees (both consumers and the farming community) remember and repeat established family traditions by attending each year. Repeat attendance strengthens these bonds and traditions and reinforces memories of events gone by. These meanings and values are continually being reworked. Indeed, the processes of remembering and reminiscing are social (Smith, 2006). The shows are thus, both part of attendees’ individual heritage and, a collective tradition. Heritage and tradition are therefore, part of wider processes concerned with creating and sustaining families of choice.

Whilst, quite appropriately, heritage can be viewed as a process, these shows take place at particular locations, usually where they have been for generations and, therefore, it is worth



reflecting on the influence of place in considering the values and meanings that are derived from attending and participating in these events. Place is something that is meaningfully organised (Smith, 2006) and whilst agricultural events are temporary, they take a physical space even though this physical space is normally used for something other than the show itself. Agricultural shows become a meaningful place through the layout, structure and set of events that take place during that time period. Once the event has finished, the place is returned to its original (and usual) use through the removal of these structures. Although only temporary, the physical place of the event is a vital part of the tradition, heritage and memories generated. Each new encounter with the event, space, and place rewrites memories and meanings of that place and binds groups and communities together through the shared memories and identities created there (Smith, 2006). As MacDonald (2009) had argued, it is through the process of preservation that memories are imprinted onto places. This is clearly complicated in terms of agricultural events as these places are temporary and therefore, not fixed or continuous. Peralta and Anico (2009: 1) suggested that “identities, in order to be effective, have to have some kind of materiality; the totems that symbolise the solidarity felt by generations of heterogeneous individuals towards a unifying sense of belonging”. The contention therefore, is that the physical manifestations of heritage places provide both a material and symbolic representation for people’s identities and a place to perform these.

## **Findings**

Seven members of the farming community were interviewed about their experiences of agricultural shows and to explore the reasons for attending them. The following section explores the findings from these interviews under the chapter’s themes of communities of practice, families of choice and the role of tradition and heritage.

### *Communities of practice*

The role of agricultural shows as places to hone skills and knowledge and to share good practice of farming and animal rearing techniques was highlighted by all interviewees. There was respect between peers, as well as the support and encouragement that came from these interactions. Jane (late 30s, from a pedigree dairy farming family) shows their herd at various shows across the country. She has been involved in breed societies most of her life. According to Jane:

It’s actually, it’s more important to be respected by your peers, I suppose. And sometimes you’ll come fourth, fifth or even further down and then you get somebody who, actually, their opinion matters more to you, will come up to you on the day and say “you were unlucky”. That actually means more from a fellow breeder.

The respect of fellow members of the agricultural community was important to interviewees. They felt they belonged to a particular community of practice which contains useful and important knowledge and experiences, as well as respect for members. This respect and experience were shared by members, but it sometimes took a while to become accepted as part

of that community of practice. As Sarah (in her late 20s, a sheep farmer with two different pedigree flocks. She has always shown livestock) articulated:

You've just got to be polite. You've just got to keep showing your face and ask a few questions. Just not too many to start off with. And then when you get to know them [members of the societies] better you can have a lot better conversation with them. And yeah, you're not hiding all your tricks all the time. If you genuinely want to learn, they are the members that will support and offer advice.

Levels of expertise between members of the community of practice were identified. According to William (in his late 30s) who is a pedigree pig breeder from a farming family and who has won a number of accolades for his stock and is now involved in judging livestock competitions, this was not necessarily a negative thing:

Where do I sit in the pecking order was quite important to me. What are the things I need to work on? And also, if I was thinking about buying a new boar or a new gilt line, I can then see who's got what and go and have a chat with those breeders.

For William, shows are a way of gaining knowledge from more experienced breeders. They were also seen as a way to network and to encourage the next generation of farmers. This view was supported by Jane:

[The] show is obviously about competing and doing well, but it's not all about that. I get more satisfaction from getting a new person or young breeder to go [...]. I find this aspect really rewarding; seeing people have a go and not be scared of the whole concept of showing.

From these examples, the farming and agricultural community can, therefore, be considered a community of practice which comes together at shows and events to network, share and develop knowledge. They also serve as a way of transmitting that knowledge to future generations and thereby sustaining the community. There is a social, as well as an economic and professional element to the events, and each contributes to the sense of community.

As with the communities of practice theory outlined earlier in the chapter, some negative aspects to this were seen by interviewees. John, a sheep farmer who has attended shows and shown livestock from an early age and who is involved as a committee member with breed societies, referred to the existence of cliques and a reluctance, among some breeders, to share their knowledge and expertise within the community:

I find that society quite cliquey anyway. And I'm not part of the clique for that point ... There are so many people that know an awful lot in the world and they just, they're quite selfish with the knowledge and they don't pass it on. Whereas I find, certainly in the [breeding] society, you turn up anywhere and there's people who have been around for years and years and they're willing to improve it.

As Wenger (1998) argued, communities of practice can hoard or restrict knowledge. However, while this was seen in some circumstances within the agricultural events community,

it was not universally experienced. Indeed, how the events were experienced seemed to depend on which breeding society it was. From data we have collected, on the whole, the agricultural events community was considered largely welcoming and could be seen as a family of choice as this chapter will now explore.

### *Families of choice*

Throughout the interviews it became clear that each interviewee had developed long-lasting friendships with people they may only meet a handful of times a year at agricultural events. These friendships developed from the community of practice of farming and from sharing expertise, but were also deeply social. Through their participation in agricultural events, participants referred to having found likeminded people who they could talk to about their passion. These relationships and friendships had often lasted many years and had extended into the development of families of choice. Several different aspects of families of choice were apparent from the interviews which will be explored. These aspects included a mentoring role of those with more experience in their particular areas of farming to those who were newer to the role or less experienced:

So, I think the ones [people] I value most. Some of them are probably no longer with us, I valued their knowledge and experience. They are not afraid to pass it on. I think that is really great.

As someone might look to an older relative for advice and experience, John (a sheep farmer and has shown livestock and attended shows from a really young age. He has been significantly involved with breed societies over the years being a committee member) valued opportunities to learn from others with whom he formed a close relationship. Similar feelings were expressed by Sarah (in her late 20's, is sheep farmer with her husband and have two different pedigree flocks. She has always shown livestock and now involves her young family in the traditions of showing of attending shows and preparing her livestock):

I feel it's nice to have made a friendship with them now and I had a bit of a turning point, when I did well at one of the sales myself with a sheep, and coming high up, then I did feel all of a sudden there was a new crowd of people that were happy to say "hello" to you and this has developed over the years. But yes, there is this couple, an elderly couple I chat to, and try to get plenty of advice from them. There is also an elderly chap with them ... they've got like a little friendship group themselves ... It's nice to think that I can be part of it. When I see them we have a good chat. It's good to have got to know them.

Attendance at, and participation in, agricultural shows enabled relationships across families to deepen and friendships to develop. These relationships subsequently were ones that could be called upon in times of need or to further deepen them. William (is a pedigree pig breeder and comes from a farming family. In his late 30's with a young family, over the years William has won numerous accolades with his pedigree stock attending shows across the country, now being involved in judging the livestock competitions) stated:

Yeah, so certainly, from showing I've developed a huge number of mates that you can ring up and chat to about anything. It's actually just a mate that you can sit down and talk to. I have a friend who is the opposite side of the country to me, but we speak fairly regularly or give each other, you know, mild friendly abuse over social media. But chat to and ask what they're up to, how's their family and all that sort of stuff... I wouldn't have known him through any other way than showing pigs. So I think there's a huge opportunity to develop good networks and great friends and a lot of my mates generally fall into a few categories. These are great mates I'll know I'll have forever; someone you can really turn to if you're ever stuck.

William, like others in this research, valued having made connections and formed 'family-like' relationships with like-minded people via his involvement with agricultural events (Brannen, 2014). In some cases, these connections extended well beyond national borders. As Rachel (a dairy farmer with two pedigree breeds, she is involved with the breed societies, exhibits her livestock and is socially and educationally involved in events) stated:

It's the world conference every four years and pretty much anybody can go as long as you are a member of the Ayrshire Society. We hosted the event in 2000, in the UK, and that's when I last went, met some of the Australian delegates, and they said we needed to go over when Australia next host it, so we said "yes" and decided to go. Now we have come back from that with a load more people that we know through breeding Ayrshires, and now it's so easy to keep in contact on the internet and share pictures and stories.

According to Rachel, agricultural shows and modern technology combined have resulted in friendships developing and being sustained globally. The community element of these friendships and families of choice mean that these relationships last even when people do not see each other regularly. As Rachel stated:

I've also just thought about when I went to Canada on the young farmers exchange. At the end of it I tagged on a week to go to their large agricultural show in Toronto. Got in contact with a farmer out there, they've got Ayrshire cows and I literally just rang up and asked, "Can I come and help you show your cows?" It was just like that, and because you just know them through the breed society, it was easy to connect with. Never met her before, but she was happy and so welcoming. The same lady who allowed me to help her was at the show in Toronto. I met her again at the world conference last year in Australia, and she was like "oh my gosh, I've not seen you since about 2003, wow that's nearly 17 years ago". We just had a great conversation about what happened at that show.

These relationships were described as being international and which could be picked up and reignited instantly because of the connections between people who have a shared knowledge and a shared passion. A welcoming, open spirit was felt from the community by Rachel and

this extended to those ‘outside’ the farming community. Rachel described the experiences of her in-laws:

Last year my son was still a baby, so throughout the showing season my in-laws came with us so they could look after him whilst I was in the ring. They made friends with different people and kept meeting up at the shows throughout the year. There is no way they would have met those people and had something in common if it weren't for showing cattle and the breed society. They even came halfway across the world with us to the World Ayrshire Conference and reconnected with people they had met on the UK show circuit the previous season. They have nothing to do with cattle and are not from a farming background. They are gutted the shows are cancelled this year [due to the impact of COVID]. They are already booking in for next year's show season.

Whilst many families of choice in the agricultural context are based on 'insider' families (those with a connection to farming), they are also inclusive and open to 'outsiders' who are welcomed in and join, even if temporarily, that family of choice. As with William above, who valued the connections he had made in the agricultural community, and who he could talk to when and if needed, Rachel highlighted the strength of this extended community/family in helping and supporting those within and beyond it:

I know a lady in her later years, a music teacher by day but also always had a few Ayrshires just for showing. But because of the connections she has made through showing, it has meant she has got out and about showing [...]. She even came to Australia and felt totally comfortable being a solo traveller in the group. It's just an extended family (Rachel).

Testimonies from our interviewees reinforce the view that connections and relationships forged through the agricultural family of choice provides connections, friendships, and support to those within it and is seen by those interviewed as providing all the support a traditional family would.

### **The show as tradition and heritage**

The final theme that arose from the interviews was that of tradition and heritage which was closely tied to memory; both individual and collective. The interviewees all said that they had been attending and participating in shows since they were young:

I think it's [the show] so intertwined with my life. But it was just part of what we did every year. So, I think the earliest memories I have, and some of them are probably from photographs you look back on, but you make them into memories yourself. I remember walking around the show with my Gran. She was only about 4ft 10. She would drag me and my sister and then whichever other kids from the lines. She was like the babysitter of the show lines so everyone's together. That's one of the earliest memories I have. (John)

We've always shown some animals, it's just what I have been brought up doing; since I was a kid. Yeah, I'll have been doing it since I was little. I think Ashover show has been one of the regular ones that my parents have always gone to. So yeah, wherever they have gone we've always gone, and kept going. (Sarah)

As articulated by Sarah above, the shows were experienced annually as a multi-generational event, meaning they became part of their family tradition. Similarly, Rachel stated:

All my life, yeah, probably since I could first hold a calf halter in my hand - since I could walk really. I think it is a generational thing. If your family is a showing family, you are more inclined to get involved.

Interviewees attended shows with their traditional family resulting in them becoming part of their tradition and heritage. Thus, farming was regularly referred to as having been passed down through generations. Interviewees were continuing this with new generations. Take Sarah for example:

We started going to the [.....] show quite a few years ago and now, having my daughter, it's more of a family thing to take her to the show. [.....] - that has always been a family thing. We started going as children and we've always gone, it's a lovely day out. Instead of a holiday it's great to have these days out together as a family.

Attending shows as a family was cited as an important tradition; one that should be preserved. According to John continuing the shows was vital to preserve them and the changes over time in practices:

[...] it's also really important to the people that are keeping the shows going, take pictures and document what they are actually doing because actually, it's really good to see ... 60/70 year old pictures of the show.

The shows themselves are part of the farming community- (ies) tradition and heritage as they continue through time, and have a practical, economic, and social importance to those who attend and take part. This heritage is important but of more importance for those who attend is their significance as events where they can spend time with friends and family, seeing people they only see once a year (or even less) and deepening these relationships.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have introduced the notion of families of choice and explored the nature, dimensions, and value of this concept within the context of agricultural shows. We have highlighted the meaning and significance of attending these events, both for 'insiders' from the agricultural community and for 'outsider' members of these families of choice. We have also underlined the importance of heritage and tradition within these events, including showing livestock. The primary research also confirmed the importance of communities of practice as another critical dimension of agricultural society and farming identity. Being part of the shows

and societies enables networking, both on a social level (the interactions between like-minded people) and commercially (as farming professionals who attend the show for business purposes). Many agricultural families of choice are geographically disparate; nonetheless the findings suggest this can serve to strengthen the relationships and networks derived from these connections. The brief or ad hoc encounters between individuals at different events provide positive experiences and lasting memories for those involved. It is these positive experiences and lasting memories that consequently help to create the family of choice for the farming professionals. This is because these experiences and memories reinforce the communities of practice that they are part of, but go beyond this is creating a sense of belonging as well as community. Agricultural events enable these families of choices to be sustained, even if they take place once a year or are international; they aid the formation of connections and reinforce, repeat and strengthen these bonds. Memories are also a key part of families of choice and of the tradition and heritage of agricultural shows. These events have run for many generations with both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' returning each year because of their personal and social significance, and the feelings of belonging and solidarity experienced within their inclusive families of choice.

## References

- Association of Show and Agricultural Organisations (ASAO). (2017) *The voice of the British agricultural show industry*. Available at: [www.asao.co.uk/](http://www.asao.co.uk/)
- Ayrshires. (2020) *About the Society*. Available from: <https://www.ayrshirescs.org/ayrshires-cattle-society/society/>
- Benavente, J. and Gains, S. (2008) *Families of choice*. Colorado: Colorado State University Press.
- Brannen, J. (2014) From the concept of generation to an intergenerational lens on family lives. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 3(3): 485-89.
- Farmer-Bowers, Q. (2010) Understanding the strategic decisions women make in farming families. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 26: 141-151.
- Finch, J. (2007) Displaying families. *Sociology*, 41(1): 65-81.
- Finch, J. (2015) Reflections on ourselves: family identities and transient encounters on holiday. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 4(1): 71-86.
- Fletcher, T. (2020) *Negotiating fatherhood: Sport and family practices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Geoghegan, H. (2013) Emotional geographies of enthusiasm: Belonging to the Telecommunications Heritage Group. *Area*, 45(1): 40-46.
- Gibbeson, C (forthcoming) 'Not just a building, a community.' Staff reflections on former historic asylum sites. *Journal of the Oral History Society*.
- Grewcock, D. (2014) Performing heritage (studies) at the Lord Mayor's Show. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 20(7-8): 760-781.
- Holloway, L. (2004) Showing and telling farming: Agricultural shows and re-imaging British agriculture. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 20: 319-330.
- Langridge-Thomas, G., Crowther, P. and Westwood, C. (2021) The Royal Welsh Show: The nation's true cauldron. *Events Management*, 25(1): <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599520X15894679115466>
- Locke, J. (2018) *Organising people, constructing meanings: Social and institutional dynamics in the production of art museum knowledges*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Newcastle: Newcastle University.
- MacDonald, S. (2009) Unsettling memories: Intervention and controversy over difficult public heritage. In M. Peralta. and E. Anico (eds), *Heritage and identity engagement and demission in the contemporary world*. London: Routledge, pp. 93-104
- Massey, D. (2005) *For space*. London: Sage.
- Morgan, D. (2009) *Acquaintances: The space between intimates and strangers*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.



Office for National Statistics. (2019) *Families and households in the UK: 2019*. Available from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2019>

Pahl, R. (2000) *On friendship*. Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Peraltal, M. and Anico, E. (2009) *Heritage and identity engagement and demission in the contemporary world*. London: Routledge.

Ribbens-McCarthy, J. and Edwards, R. (2011) *Key concepts in family studies*. London: Sage.

Royal Lancashire Show. (2019) *About*. Available from: [www.royallancashireshow.co.uk/about/](http://www.royallancashireshow.co.uk/about/)

Royal Welsh Agricultural Society. (2020) *About*. Available from: <https://rwas.wales/royal-welsh/about-royal-welsh/>

Schorch, P. (2014) Cultural feelings and the making of meaning. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 20(1): 1-14.

Scott, J. (2014) *Why are country shows making a comeback?* Available from: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-28244080](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-28244080)

Sligo, F. and Massey, C. (2007) Risk, trust and knowledge networks in famers' learning. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 23(2): 170-182.

Smith, L. (2006) *Uses of heritage*. London: Routledge

Spencer, L. and Pahl, R. (2006) *Rethinking friendships: Hidden solidarities today*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Thomas, G. (2016) The Royal Welsh Show: Facilitating rural buzz. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 3(1): 328-436.

Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. and Donovan, C. (2001) *Same sex intimacies, families of choice and other life experiences*. London: Routledge.

Weston, K. (1991) *Families we choose. Between men—between women: Lesbian and gay*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Westwood, C., Schofield, P. and Berridge, G (2018) Agricultural shows: Visitor motivation, experience and behavioural intention. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 2: 147-165.

Yarwood, R. and Evans, N. (2006) A Lleyen sweep for local sheep? Breed societies and the geographies of Welsh livestock. *Environment and Planning A*, 38: 1307–1326.