

Roll up for a right royal show, our own and our way

IT'S JUST 10 days out of a calendar of 365 but the Ekka remains a bookmark in the lives of

Queenslanders – whether they exhibit, participate, spectate or just salivate at the best of the best it puts on show every August.

The Ekka tells us the seasons are turning. Yes, the winds are up but what passes for winter in Brisbane will soon be past as the rides go up, the livestock trucks roll in and the fireworks light the night sky.

Other festivals come and go. The Ekka – officially the Royal Queensland Show – just goes on as it has for 144 years.

Is there anything more practically Queensland than to usurp such a grand title with the more practical, shorthand and unique moniker of the Ekka? There is no other Ekka, no other use of the word in the English

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language – just like there is no other place that marries its agricultural traditions with the life of a rapidly transforming inner city.

The Ekka's "tragedies" come in all forms – the breeders of beef and dairy cattle, the skilled horsemen and women, the cooks and craftspeople, the axemen of the woodchop, the growing throng of dog and cat lovers, the thrill seekers of sideshow alley, the families that mark their growing by the passage from Bertie Beetle showbags to the decadent food halls.

Then there's the Ekka stickybeaks – people like me who relish the chance to put their nose into the lives of the exhibitors who bring the best of the best to Brisbane every August.

My Ekka journey started at country shows – first in tiny sideshow alleys then as a young newspaper reporter on the circuit finding the best on offer on country showgrounds whose corrugated iron sheds opened only once a year.

Then I spent the better part of two decades working near the Ekka Grounds, finding reasons to sneak away for the sheepdogs, woodchops, livestock or beers at the Cattleman's Bar. But the grounds once walled off from the city around them have since opened to embrace it.

When I became editor of *The Courier-Mail* early in the century, I was encouraged to support a growing movement to push the Ekka out of the city centre. What a silly idea and one so easy to reject. The Ekka should be at the heart of the city as it is at the heart of city life.

For the Ekka is a great binding force in a state that absorbs change and the challenges that go with it.

It's a means to bind city and country – and a reminder to all of us in the city that we're just a cousin away from the bush.

It's a means to bind generations – the young exhibitors are as passionate as the seasoned exhibitors. And each learn from the other.

It's a means to bind political divides. Yes, politicians of all colours mingle with each other and their voters any chance they can get at the Ekka.

And the grounds that host the Ekka are becoming a binding force in a city, shaped by a river and looking for anywhere to grow.

Alleyways that once lay dormant most of the year have been transformed into public streets, lined with apartments and offices that buzz

365 days of the year. But the heritage and the breathing space live on.

By 2025, the rail station used just once a year will become a new commuter stop as the Cross River Rail takes pressure off the current lines, making the Ekka the easy access point for the nearby hospitals and schools.

This is a long way from what the founders of the first Exhibition had in mind when they put the state on show in 1876.

Among its early sample bags was a bag of coal – try telling that to your kids and grandkids.

But it's also achieving the vision that the RNA has always held to – to show the best of the best and bring the community together to enjoy it.

Get out your hats and boots. The Ekka's almost here. It's show time.

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