

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Negotiating social licence to farm at agricultural and pastoral shows in Canterbury, New Zealand

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## Abstract

Agricultural and pastoral (A&P) shows have a long history in New Zealand, dating back to the early settler-colonial period. We approach A&P shows as places where non-farming publics can experience agricultural activities, which can help to build the trusted relationships needed for a social licence to farm. Drawing on participant observation at five A&P shows across the Canterbury region, we highlight what is visible and invisible in the image of farming life performed through A&P show activities. In doing so, we identify tensions that threaten their future, and opportunities for dialogue that could enhance social licence to farm.

## KEYWORDS

agricultural shows, performance, rural geography, social licence to operate, urban-rural divide

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Agricultural and pastoral (A&P) shows are often depicted as a meeting point for town and country (Scott & Laurie, 2010). They are public events that showcase animals, food, equipment, skills, and recreation associated with agriculture, and provide family fun and entertainment. Initially established through England's Royal Agricultural Society, New Zealand's earliest A&P shows were held in the 1840s. Today, nearly 100 annual A&P shows are organised across the country in urban and rural settings. The largest of these is the New Zealand Agricultural Show, which is held in the Canterbury region of the country's South Island. This 3-day event attracts regular attendance of over 100,000 people, with the final 'Show Day' enshrined as a public holiday for the Mid- and North-Canterbury region.

Despite the significance of A&P shows in New Zealand (NZ), social scientific analysis has been limited. There are some historical accounts (Shiels, 2012; Treadwell, 2006), and studies of NZ rural events and place-making are evident in the burgeoning festivals

literature (e.g., Fountain & Mackay, 2017). Nevertheless, the international literature indicates that A&P shows are unique in their blend of activities, participants and places, and warrant critical attention in themselves (Larsen, 2017; Thomas, 2018). This paper therefore provides a NZ-focused contribution to the A&P show literature through an empirical examination of five A&P shows across the Canterbury region (see Figure 1): the Ashburton Show, the Amberley Show, the Southern Canterbury Show, the New Zealand Agricultural Show (previously known as the Canterbury Show), and the Little River Show.

Previous research in international contexts has examined A&P shows with reference to diverse themes such as modernity and colonisation (Anderson, 2003; Edwards, 2008), gendered roles and identities (Darian-Smith & Wills, 2001; Gray, 2010) and more-than-human entanglements (Turner et al., 2017). Of particular significance to this study, A&P shows can also be interpreted as staged performances of A&P activities that promote a positive image of agriculture to non-farming publics (Holloway, 2004; Larsen, 2017). In this paper, we draw



FIGURE 1 Map showing the locations of five A&P shows across the Canterbury region that have been included in this study.

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parallels between these existing insights and the concept of social licence to operate (SLO), approaching A&P shows as places where a social licence to *farm* is negotiated. Beban et al. (2023) suggest A&P shows are places where urban and rural communities can interact, thus helping the country's agricultural sector build and maintain its SLO. Our research expands on this suggestion through an examination of the various activities and experiences available at A&P shows, asking what image of farming life these promote to non-farming publics, and considering how this can influence SLO negotiations.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the A&P shows literature and explore potential synergies with the concept of SLO. After outlining the study methods, we analyse our findings with reference to this literature. We discuss how images of farming life are performed through these activities, paying particular attention to what is included in, and excluded from, these performances. In doing so, we highlight tensions that threaten the SLO of A&P shows themselves, and opportunities for further dialogue that could enhance social licence to farm.

## 2 | A&P SHOWS AND 'SOCIAL LICENCE' TO FARM

Early A&P societies were formed as part of the societies and exhibition movement that began in 19th Century Britain (Treadwell, 2006; Wild, 1951). Their charitable objectives were to promote agriculture, hence the central role of an annual A&P 'Show' was to demonstrate best practice and direct the future of A&P activities.<sup>1</sup> Historically, A&P shows have therefore provided a venue for livestock and produce to be assessed for their quality, enabling production benchmarks to be set (Anderson, 2003; Henryks et al., 2016). Early A&P shows placed importance on breed lineage, purity and pedigree, as measured by the appearance of an animal. Awards played a key role in attracting entries and identifying superior livestock for breeding, directly resulting in commercial opportunities and increased value (Henryks et al., 2016). When the basis of stud breeding shifted to genetic records and statistical measurements, however, the importance of A&P shows decreased for breeders (Phillips, 2008). Somewhat ironically, therefore, 'there has apparently been at least partial evacuation of mainstream agricultural content from many shows' in modern-day contexts (Holloway, 2004, p. 326; also Langridge-Thomas et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, A&P societies' objectives are also to facilitate connections with their wider community. In rural contexts, research demonstrates that A&P shows help build social capital, facilitate knowledge exchange,

and exert political influence (Langridge-Thomas et al., 2021; Thomas, 2018). Studies also point to the role of shows in building community cohesion (Darian-Smith, 2011) and supporting rural resilience (Brown et al., 2019), with participation in show activities a key aspect of community membership (Gray, 2010). Furthermore, A&P shows are commonly depicted as the meeting point for town and country, providing a somewhat unique space for 'city people' and 'country people' to interact and understand each other (Scott & Laurie, 2010, p. 35.6; also Beban et al., 2023), and for urban children to learn where their food comes from (Larsen, 2017). Importantly, they provide an opportunity for 'showing and telling farming' through carefully stage-managed performances and a fun atmosphere that together create positive images of farming amongst urban, non-farming publics (Holloway, 2004; Larsen, 2017). These performances and direct encounters between farmers and non-farmers 'provide some visitors with a sense of trust in agriculture' (Larsen, 2017, p. 679), and can be construed as sites of socio-political negotiation (Holloway, 2004).

This focus on connections between farming and non-farming publics, including the building of trust, provides a useful link to the growing body of scholarship on SLO. While there are numerous meanings and uses of the term social licence, we follow McManus by defining it as 'an intangible, unwritten and non-legally binding social contract, or the existence of informal community acceptance of a social institution's activities' (McManus, 2023, p. 1243). The concept was first used in the mid-1990s by the American forestry and paper industry in relation to pro-environmental initiatives set up to enhance public trust (Moore, 1996), and subsequently gained prominence in the international mining industry (Cooney, 2017). SLO has since been deployed by researchers and practitioners to address issues concerning community relations and social approval in other industries including energy (e.g., Hall et al., 2015), forestry (e.g., Edwards et al., 2016), aquaculture and marine management (e.g., Sinner et al., 2020), and conservation (e.g., Kirk et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the concept has only found limited application in the agricultural sector (e.g., Williams & Martin, 2011). In NZ, researchers and practitioners have recently started to address this gap, partly in response to growing public scrutiny of the mounting environmental impacts associated with agricultural land use, including intensive dairying (e.g. Beban et al., 2023; Booth et al., 2024; Castka et al., 2023).

Social licence is more intangible and dynamic than a legal permit and trust-based relationships are particularly important in moving from mere acceptance to approval of a company or industry (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011; Moffat et al., 2016). Regarding trust in farming in NZ, Beban et al.'s (2023) study shows urban respondents were

less likely to trust the country's main farming sectors compared to rural respondents. However, they also noted differences in perceptions around the dairy versus horticultural sectors, and variation by respondents' demographics. These insights are complemented by Booth et al.'s (2024) findings that farmers are perceived as among the most trustworthy sources of information by both farmers and the public, especially when views on key characteristics of 'good farming' align. This research suggests that the 'rural-urban divide' within NZ may not be as wide as often proclaimed, and that questions of trust and social licence to farm require more careful analysis.

In this emerging body of NZ scholarship, Beban et al. (2023) show that meaningful, dialogue-based communication is closely related to trust, echoing findings from the wider SLO literature on the crucial role of reciprocal, context-based dialogue in building strong relationships across a broad spectrum of actors (e.g., Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Beban et al. (2023) suggest that A&P shows are a site for such dialogue; this leads us to question what forms of 'dialogue' are enabled at A&P shows and how these may contribute towards building trust as a foundation for the agricultural sector's SLO. Consequently, we look beyond verbal dialogue to consider the image of farming life that is performed through A&P show activities (Holloway, 2004; Larsen, 2017), which could in turn enhance trust between farmers and non-farming publics.

Recent scholarship also highlights that, while negotiating SLO is an inherently political process, the politics of *who* is involved in these negotiations requires explicit attention, 'as the answer defines whose voices are heard and whose are excluded' (Duncan et al., 2018, p. 319; also Edwards & Trafford, 2016; McManus, 2023). This politics of inclusion and exclusion provides another connection to A&P shows literature, particularly with regard to ongoing practices of colonisation. Early A&P shows have been described as 'an agent of colonialism', promoting European agricultural practices whilst excluding others (Edwards, 2008, p. 95; also Anderson, 2003). These observations resonate with Campbell's (2021) recent exploration of visible—and invisible—farming worlds in NZ. Speaking as a descendant of European settler-colonial farmers he notes:

Our farm didn't feel like a site of colonization, yet it most certainly was. It had a hidden history, the invisibility of which seemed the necessary precondition to our existence as farmers at all ... there were other worlds that were simply unthinkable and unseeable from inside our farming world. (Campbell, 2021, p. 6)

This leads us to question what 'farming world' is visible at A&P shows, and what 'other worlds' are made

'unthinkable and unseeable'. Hence, in our examination of the image of farming life that is performed through A&P show activities, we are also mindful of what is invisible or excluded from this performance. This also requires an appreciation of the heterogeneity of communities, not only of urban/non-farming publics, but also in rural/farming contexts. We consider these dynamics through an examination of the relational tensions and ongoing changes to the communities involved in A&P shows.

### 3 | METHODS

Our research draws primarily on participant observation (Watson, 2021) of five A&P shows across the Canterbury region that we visited during the 2022–23 summer period. In order of occurrence, these were: the Ashburton Show, the Amberley Show, the Southern Canterbury Show, the New Zealand Agricultural Show (hereafter NZAg Show; known as the Canterbury Show until 2018, see CAPA, 2024), and the Little River Show. These five shows were chosen because they are spread geographically across Canterbury, range in size based on visitor numbers, and are held at both privately owned showgrounds and public domains (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Ethical approval for this research was provided through Manaaki Whenua's social ethics process (approval number 2223/07).

We observed show activities and took notes and photographs to document the array of activities on offer and the experiences these provided (Watson, 2021). We also searched publicly available information sources including A&P association websites and local news media to augment observational data. Furthermore, we interviewed two A&P association committee members via Microsoft Teams in January 2023. These interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed. Given the small number of interviews, they are not central to our analysis, although we refer to key points raised to reinforce other data where relevant. In the sections that follow, we present our findings according to the main components of A&P shows as observed and identified in the literature: entertainment, animals, food, home industries and heritage.

## 4 | ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES AT CANTERBURY A&P SHOWS

### 4.1 | Entertainment

Carnival attractions were a key aspect of the visited A&P shows, echoing observations that such activities have



**TABLE 1** Date, location and visitor numbers for the five A&P shows included in this study.

	Date held	Location	Visitor numbers
Ashburton Show	28–29 Oct 2022	Ashburton Showgrounds	Unknown—‘largest two day annual agricultural event held in the Mid Canterbury District’ <sup>a</sup>
Amberley Show	29 Oct 2022	Amberley Domain	Approx. 6000 visitors in 2018 <sup>b</sup>
Southern Canterbury Show	5–6 Nov 2022	Waimate Showgrounds	Approx. 2–3000 visitors <sup>c</sup>
NZAg Show	9–11 Nov 2022	Canterbury Agricultural Park	Over 115,000 visitors in 2022 <sup>d</sup>
Little River Show	21 Jan 2023	Awa-Iti Domain	Unknown—appeared to be smallest show in this study

<sup>a</sup>See <http://www.ashburtonshow.co.nz/about-us/>.

<sup>b</sup>See <https://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/north-canterbury/108201975/amberley-ap-show-reflecting-change-as-north-canterbury-becomes-a-destination>.

<sup>c</sup>See <https://www.scsow.co.nz/>.

<sup>d</sup>See <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/canterbury-agricultural-show-huge-success-after-115000-turn-out/ZMKULRKQ3FAKVGSNMN522CUKTU/>.

long been present at A&P shows (Anderson, 2003; Shiels, 2012). They were most prominent at the NZAg Show: the carnival area was substantial and included a large ferris wheel and other commercially operated fairground rides. They also accounted for a significant proportion of the overall activities at other shows visited.<sup>2</sup> At the Little River Show, for example, these attractions were relatively low-key with a smaller blend of commercially operated rides and community-run entertainment such as pony rides (see Figure 2).

While these forms of entertainment appear to distract from the main purpose of A&P shows, they are integral to visitors' overall show experience, creating a positive image of farming through an association with fun and entertainment (Holloway, 2004). This association is also created through competitive agricultural activities (Gray, 2010) such as wood chopping, sheep shearing and dog trials, which were included in all five show programmes. While wood chopping was popular at all shows, commentary on an overhead speaker system at the NZAg Show heightened excitement and turned the event into a fast-paced spectator sport. This staging technique was also deployed in the sheep shearing auditorium at the NZAg Show, which attracted a large crowd that exceeded seating capacity (see Figure 2).

Further to these competitive agricultural activities, some events involved less conventional agricultural skills. The ‘duck herding’ event at the NZAg Show, for example, involved a Marlborough farmer, his dog and a flock of Indian Runner ducks navigating obstacles around a purpose-built course (CAPA, 2022a). This was a popular event that invoked laughter and joy in observers, thus consistent with the mood of family fun that pervaded the entertainment sections. Hence, although the presence of generic carnival attractions and fairground rides at A&P shows is undeniable, the various forms of *agricultural* entertainment arguably remind visitors that they are



**FIGURE 2** Entertainment at A&P shows. Inflatable rides at the Little River Show (top). Crowds watch the sheep shearing contest at the NZAg Show (bottom).

experiencing and enjoying rural farming life. These positive associations with farming are an important step in establishing trust-based relationships (Holloway, 2004; Larsen, 2017), which are a key foundation for building and maintaining SLO, a point we will expand on in subsequent sections.

## 4.2 | Animals

In addition to their involvement in demonstrations of agricultural skills, animals were central to livestock competition classes at all five A&P shows. From a visitor perspective, and consistent with prior research, these competitions did not appear to be the main focus of any of the shows (e.g., Holloway, 2004). Livestock was most visible at the NZAg Show, where animals were housed in a purpose-built pavilion with flags, banners and billboards, which added to its profile even though it was situated at the far end of the showgrounds. The NZAg Show also included the largest range of livestock competition classes across alpacas, cattle, goats, pigs, poultry, and sheep (see CAPA, 2023a).

The continued (albeit limited) presence of livestock at A&P shows plays a role in relationship building with non-farming/urban visitors as it allows them to get close to animals (Holloway, 2004). This enables them to experience sights, smells, and sounds that are absent from urban environments, which is particularly important for urban children (Larsen, 2017; Scott & Laurie, 2010). In addition to the showing of domesticated breeds of livestock, many shows also included domestic pets, and it was here that interactions between animals and children were particularly visible. The Amberley Show had a large pet tent with a variety of young animals that children could touch and feed. Furthermore, competitions in the pet dog ring included children as contestants displaying their dog-handling skills (see Figure 3).

The visibility of livestock has SLO implications, as it allows farmers to show they are meeting animal welfare standards. At the NZAg Show, this was done through social media posts in the build-up to the show, clean pens that were often washed down and lined with fresh woodchips, and information offered by livestock owners who were present near the animal pens. Given that animal welfare is a key concern amongst New Zealand's urban

residents (Beban et al., 2023), this visible demonstration of concern for stock can help build trust, which is a key aspect of SLO negotiations (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011; Moffat et al., 2016). Nevertheless, any attempt to engage with show visitors regarding other concerns over livestock farming, such as water quality and carbon emissions, were notably absent. Furthermore, although the NZAg Show did include a focus on sustainability, this related to the running of the show (e.g., transport to and from the showgrounds) rather than farming industries.

Further to our observations of livestock and pets, however, the most easily visible animal stars of the show were the impeccably groomed horses in the equestrian events. All shows had a strong focus on equestrian events, which provided all-day entertainment, with audience crowds obviously enjoying themselves and seating areas always occupied. From overheard conversations at the Little River Show, audience members were asking permission to take photos of riders on their horses, and paying compliments to riders as they were waiting to enter the show ring (see Figure 4). Competition classes also reflect the focus on horses compared to other livestock. At the Amberley Show, there were 184 classes of horse entries, compared with 75 of sheep and wool, and 4 of cattle. Likewise, the Southern Canterbury show had 225 classes of horse entries, compared with 91 of sheep and wool, and 36 of cattle. Furthermore, at the NZAg Show, a horse won the Supreme Champion Animal of The Show (CAPA, 2022b), an honour that might be expected to be bestowed on production livestock.

The high number of equestrian entries meant there were also numerous horse floats and purpose-built trucks in zoned parking areas. This material presence of equestrian events was also evident in the corresponding infrastructure of A&P association-owned showgrounds (cf., public domains; see Table 1), providing a durability to these activities that lasted beyond the annual show itself.



FIGURE 3 Animals and children at the Amberley Show. A child feeds a goat in the pet tent (left), and contestants wait to compete in the pet dog ring (right).





**FIGURE 4** Equestrian events at A&P Shows. Horses and riders warm up at the Little River Show (top). The main show ring for equestrian events at the Ashburton Show (bottom).

These showground facilities are used to host various activities, including events that are part of the annual equestrian calendar, thus providing an important source of income for A&P associations during the year (Ashburton A&P Association, 2018). Importantly, these facilities have been developed as a result of declining uses by livestock farmers: for example, the reduction in sheep farming across Southern Canterbury means that there has been less demand for saleyard facilities at the showgrounds, while there has been a rise in demand for facilities that can be used to host family celebrations and equine events (Southern Canterbury A&P Association committee member, January 2023).

While there are thus clear reasons for this shift in focus from livestock to equestrian activities, such changes also lead to tensions:

What I can see is there's the animal showing and then there's the equestrian showing.

And, I don't know about another A&P association, but I hear it before, that you know the horsey people they are quite different and all. And also our association when we have the meetings, I mean the farmers that don't even know how a horse looks, that they are not interested in horses you know they don't want to do anything. But that's our main income the horse people, and that they are there for the horse people. So that creates friction you know. (Southern Canterbury A&P Association committee member, January 2023).

This suggests that A&P shows cannot simply include all animals: equestrian and livestock events are to some extent mutually exclusive due to differences between the material infrastructures and people that relate to them. These relational tensions could threaten the future stability of A&P shows, indicating that organisers must negotiate their own SLO. Furthermore, these tensions provide some insights into the heterogeneity of rural communities and the complex interplay between what is visible and invisible in the image of farming life that is performed at A&P shows.

### 4.3 | Food

The changing focus of A&P shows, and the different relationships that can result from these changes, can also be examined through the role of food at A&P shows. Numerous food retail stands were included at each of the five A&P shows, ranging from carnival fare such as hot-dogs and candy floss, through to local and artisanal produce. There were also international food stalls at most of the shows, and some international dishes were available to sample at a multi-cultural stand at the Southern Canterbury and Ashburton shows. Whatever form it took, food added an extra dimension to the sensory experience of A&P shows through pleasurable tastes and smells. Furthermore, the presentation of food was an integral part of each show through a variety of commercial competitions and cooking demonstrations. This is consistent with findings that, in contrast to the diminishing focus on showing livestock, A&P shows now include competitions and awards under various food and drink categories aimed at commercial companies (Henryks et al., 2016), thus enabling exhibitors to simultaneously compete and sell their food (Langridge-Thomas et al., 2021).

The Amberley Show provided visitors with an opportunity to purchase and taste local produce at several stalls, and the 'Paddock to Plate' tent hosted wine



FIGURE 5 The Paddock to Plate tent at the Amberley Show.

tastings, cooking demonstrations, and competitions open to local producers (see Figure 5). The ‘Alpine Pacific Wine Challenge’ showcased Canterbury-grown wines (Amberley A&P Association, 2022, p. 50), and the ‘Taste Hurunui Hoof to Hotplate’ competition showcased local sheep and beef production (Amberley A&P Association, 2022, p. 53). This emphasis on local food and wine rather than animals reflects changing land use, as there are fewer farms in the area and larger numbers of lifestyle blocks (Amberley A&P Association committee member, January 2023).

Interestingly, the Hoof to Hotplate competition combined aspects of livestock showing and food showing. Furthermore, judging was spatially distributed across three sites: ‘on the hoof’ in the paddock, ‘on the hook’ in the butchery, and in the food tent at the A&P Show, where it was cooked ‘on the hotplate’ and eaten (Amberley A&P Association, 2022, p. 53). Different qualities of the meat were assessed at these different sites as an animal changed from livestock, to a carcass, to a meal. Show visitors were also able to sample the cooked meat at the show and purchase cuts of meat at auction after judging had finished.

While the ‘Hoof to Hotplate’ competition was specific to the Amberley Show, the paddock-to-plate format of this competition was also evident elsewhere. The ‘Mint Lamb competition’ at the NZAg Show was open to all South Island sheep farmers, with lamb entries judged first as a carcass before being cooked and tasted by judges at the show (CAPA, 2023b). As with the ‘Hoof to Hotplate’ competition, these judging protocols shift livestock competition from the A&P Show arena to alternative sites within, and beyond, the showgrounds.

These competitions appear to contradict research suggesting that food and livestock are deliberately segregated

at A&P shows because visitors do not want to be reminded that they are eating agricultural products (Holloway, 2004). Nevertheless, they arguably play an important role in highlighting where food comes from and who is involved in producing it, thus following traceability initiatives that are increasingly used by the food industry to build trust with consumers (Wu et al., 2021). The visibility of food provenance creates the potential for meaningful dialogue between local farmers and show visitors during the competitions, which could help build trust-based relationships and can, therefore, be interpreted as a key mechanism for negotiating SLO (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Moffat et al., 2016).

#### 4.4 | Home industries

Arts, crafts, cooking, and various other ‘home industries’ have a long history at A&P shows (Edwards, 2008; Gray, 2010). Traditionally associated with domestic work done to support agricultural livelihoods (Gray, 2010), these entry classes usually occupy dedicated pavilion space; indeed, they are sometimes referred to as the ‘pavilion sections’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 99) or other names such as ‘leisure, pleasure and treasure’ (Rilkoff, 2013). The focus on domestic work has connotations with gendered divisions of labour in agricultural work, such that we may expect to see men’s work on show outside, and women’s work on show inside the pavilions. This has been observed in Australian A&P shows (Edwards, 2008), and resonates with the long-standing connection between Country Women’s Institutes and home industry competitions at New Zealand A&P shows (Katikati A&P Show, n.d.; Anon, 1996). Nevertheless, Gray’s (2010) study of the Teviothead Show in the Scottish Borders indicates that many classes in the home industries are gender neutral, thus complicating these assumptions. Furthermore, Gray notes that home industries are important for including a diverse range of farming and non-farming participants who would otherwise not engage directly in show activities.

Although there were no home industry classes at the NZAg Show, the other four shows included these competitions. Overall, it appeared that these classes included a large proportion of entries by children: several arts and crafts categories were open to school children, many of the traditional baking classes now only had student entries and classes for children’s Lego creations provided a more contemporary focus (see Figure 6). Further to Gray’s (2010) findings discussed above, these observations provide an inter-generational dimension to the role of home industries in involving the local community in show activities, which relates to our earlier observations





FIGURE 6 Student entries on display at the Southern Canterbury Show. Clockwise from top left: Art; Lego; Cooking; Fruit creations.

of dog showing that highlighted children as active show participants.

These observations resonate with a recurring focus on children in the A&P show literature; however, in contrast to research that emphasises the role of A&P shows in educating urban children about rural life (Larsen, 2017; Scott & Laurie, 2010), our observations highlight that children's work is also visibly 'on show'. This, in turn, relates to our earlier observations on the heterogeneity of the local community, and the need to consider if and how different community members are included in A&P show activities. An understanding of the diversity within a community is of central importance to SLO negotiations, as it influences the image of farming life that is included in and excluded from these negotiations. We will consider this in more detail the final section of our analysis.

#### 4.5 | Heritage

A&P shows and the associations that run them have a long history, and contemporary A&P shows celebrate that history in a variety of ways whilst also highlighting the past, present and possible futures of the agricultural

sector. Displays of vintage machinery at all five A&P shows are an obvious example of tangible links to farming heritage. Entertainment also promoted these links and provided visitors with a particular experience of farming in the process. For example, in contrast to the fast-paced spectator sport of modern shearing held in front of a large audience as outlined earlier, the blade shearing demonstration at the Amberley Show was deliberately slow. Observers were able to stand close to the shearer to see and hear each blade stroke and feel the newly cut fleece, the connection between shearer and animal palpable in such close proximity (see Figure 7). Also at the Amberley Show, connections to Scottish heritage were visible and audible through highland dancing competitions held throughout the entire day and a pipe band that played music while walking through the crowds of visitors.

It is also evident that the heritage of A&P shows strongly reflects their settler-colonial roots. Colonial influences permeate the institutional structure of A&P associations, which are linked to the Commonwealth through the Royal Agricultural Society of New Zealand (RAS, 2023). These influences are evident in machinery and entertainment as outlined above, as well as show-ground landscaping, livestock breeds, home industry



FIGURE 7 Heritage at A&P shows. A visitor at the Amberley Show watches the blade shearing demonstration (left). The Treasurer's Hut at the NZAg Show (right).

classes, sports competitions, trophies, patrons, and language. Furthermore, opportunities to break from these colonial influences do not appear to have resulted in change. The NZAg Show is the largest and longest-running show included in this study, and its showgrounds have also undergone the most significant changes as it has relocated to various sites during its more than 150-year history (Shiels, 2012). When the showgrounds were moved to Canterbury Park in 1996, the Treasurer's Hut was relocated from the previous showgrounds in Addington, thus forming a tangible link to the Canterbury A&P Association's long heritage (Shiels, 2012; see Figure 7). New buildings and streets were named in honour of regional settler-colonial farming dynasties and past A&P association presidents and patrons.

Alongside this inclusion of settler-colonial farming histories, practices, and materialities is the simultaneous exclusion of Indigenous and non-European cultures. Farming by and for Māori was notably absent from heritage displays, even though Indigenous farming histories extend much further back than those of Pākehā. Furthermore, the histories of other non-European ethnic groups in farming industries, such as Pasifika, Chinese, and Filipino communities were similarly absent from the A&P shows visited. Although two shows—the Southern Canterbury and Ashburton Shows—had a 'multi-cultural' theme, this appeared to acknowledge the currently increasing ethnic diversity of the surrounding residential

community as opposed to the farming community per se. It did not, therefore, appear to represent the historical development of NZ primary production as an inherently bi- and multi-cultural endeavour.

This connection between A&P shows and colonisation has been described previously (Anderson, 2003; Edwards, 2008), but there are further consequences for SLO negotiations. As we have shown, A&P shows provide relatively unique spaces for farming and non-farming publics to interact and can thus promote connection and the building of trust that is required for SLO. Others have noted that, while negotiating SLO is an inherently political process, the politics of *who* is involved in these negotiations requires more explicit attention (Duncan et al., 2018). These previous observations have been made in relation to the community with whom SLO is being negotiated. Our observations of farming heritage at A&P shows add nuance to this argument by highlighting that a similar politics of inclusion and exclusion may relate to the industry involved. While we cannot verify the ethnicity of farmers in attendance at the observed shows, the performance of farming life reflected distinctively European settler-colonial roots. This leads us to argue that, in the Canterbury region at least, A&P show visitors are not provided with an opportunity to experience the 'farming worlds' of Māori and non-European farmers (Campbell, 2021, p. 6); instead, these 'other worlds' remain 'unthinkable and unseeable' (Campbell, 2021) and are, therefore, not included in SLO negotiations. This



suggests there is a need for a more inclusive range of farming histories so that A&P shows can provide a place to negotiate SLO for the future of farming in the bi- and multi-cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

Our examination of A&P shows in Canterbury provides an empirically grounded, place-based contribution to an emerging literature on SLO in NZ farming contexts (e.g., Beban et al., 2023; Booth et al., 2024; Castka et al., 2023). A&P shows have been described as staged performances that promote a positive image of agriculture to non-farming publics (Holloway, 2004), thereby building a 'sense of trust in agriculture' (Larsen, 2017, p. 679). Extending these ideas, we have interpreted such performances through the lens of SLO, approaching A&P shows as places where non-farming publics can experience agriculture through activities that centre on entertainment, animals, food, home industries and heritage. These face-to-face, interactive and enjoyable activities serve as forms of 'dialogue' between farmers and non-farming publics, which can help build the trust-based and meaningful relationships needed for a social licence to farm. If urban New Zealanders are indeed less likely to trust the country's main farming sectors compared to those living in rural areas (Beban et al., 2023) but consider farmers among the most trustworthy sources of information (Booth et al., 2024), it is plausible to reason that direct engagements between farmers and urban communities at A&P shows can improve trust and thereby farmers' SLO.

Throughout our analysis, we have highlighted what is visible, and what is invisible, in the image of farming life performed at A&P shows. We have noted the visibility of children's work, animal welfare and food provenance; we have also noted the invisibility of non-European farming histories and agriculture's environmental impacts. Furthermore, we have observed tensions between the growing visibility of equine events and corresponding invisibility of livestock showing that could threaten the future stability of A&P shows. These insights add further nuance to our understanding of the 'dialogue' that is—and could be—enabled through A&P show activities. Contemporary debates over desirable farming futures in NZ should be progressed through meaningful dialogue rather than public relations campaigns that arguably seek to manage dialogue rather than promote it, or polarising tactics that serve to separate farmers from non-farming publics. A&P shows are important places for such dialogue, but they currently only provide a partial view of farming in New Zealand. Widening this view to include

images of farming life that are currently invisible could promote meaningful dialogue and thereby enhance the agricultural sector's social licence to farm.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The charitable purposes of A&P associations are recorded in the Charities Register: <https://www.charities.govt.nz/>.

<sup>2</sup> A full summary of activities at each of the five A&P Shows included in this study is available as a supplementary file, which can be accessed via the online version of this article.

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