



ESU-Information

ESU Conference provides important impetus for the future of European fairground culture

Representatives from nine showmen nations at the annual meeting in Edinburgh
President Albert Ritter: “Thanks to our excellent hosts!”



Reception at the Scottish Parliament with Members of Parliament, ESU Executive Committee and representatives of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain.

The 43rd Conference of the European Showmen's Union took place in Edinburgh from 21 to 23 October 2025. Over three days, showmen and showwomen from nine European countries met in the Scottish capital to discuss current association topics and future challenges for the showmen's industry and fairgrounds in Europe.

The conference programme of the international showmen's meeting was packed full. The first part on 22 January focused on discussing current association and industry topics as well as the elections to the ESU Executive Committee.



The newly elected ESU Executive Committee: (from left) Vice President Alex James Colquhoun, Secretary General Steve Severeys, President Albert Ritter, Vice President Atze Lubach-Koers, Deputy Secretary General Nina Crommelin, Vice President Nicolas Lemay. Missing from the photo: Vice President Are Arnardo.

Albert Ritter (Germany) was confirmed in his position as President of the world's largest showmen's organisation in the Executive Committee elections. He is supported by the Vice Presidents Atze Lubach-Koers (Netherlands), Are Arnardo (Norway) and Alex James Colquhoun (Great Britain), who were also re-elected, as well as the newly elected Vice President Nicolas Lemay (France). The ESU management is completed by the Secretary General Steve Severeys (Belgium), who was also confirmed in office, and the re-elected Deputy Secretary General Nina Crommelin (Germany). The new President of the European Showmen's Women Union is Nancy Schneider (Germany). Bernhard Parpalioni (Germany) was confirmed as President of the European Showmen's Youth Union.

Specialist presentations on current industry topics



The second part of the conference focussed on specialist presentations on current trends and developments. The great response from participants emphasised the relevance of the topics covered and the high quality of the presentations.

ADIPS: Safety standards at fairgrounds in Great Britain

Carl Hagemann was the first speaker to report on the national programme for the inspection and certification of amusement rides and amusement devices in the UK (Amusement Device Inspection Procedures Scheme, or ADIPS for short). Adopted by the fairground and amusement park associations, the standard was developed in close consultation with the UK Health and Safety Executive to improve safety standards at fairgrounds and increase public confidence. ADIPS inspections are carried out by registered inspection bodies whose competence and independence is continually assessed and monitored. During his presentation, ADIPS General Manager Hagemann provided information on current events and training courses as well as the new ADIPS Safety Information System, which is designed to inform inspection bodies and inspectors about safety issues.



ADIPS General Manager Carl Hagemann



DSB Managing Director Frank Hakelberg

Current showmen topics in Germany

Frank Hakelberg, Managing Director of the German Showmen's Association (DSB), then gave an overview of the situation of showman businesses in Germany and the current challenges. One focal point was the presentation of the DSB economic study, which was updated last year. "The thoroughly pleasing figures on the vitality of German fairgrounds and Christmas markets", explained Frank Hakelberg, "and a number of guests that has now risen to almost 200 million are offset by difficult working conditions - with considerable increases in wages, food and, in particular, electricity costs - which can only be partially offset by increased turnover." The Cannabis Act, which came into force in April 2024, and its application at public festivals, which has not yet been sufficiently clarified, the double licensing requirement for permits in the area of catering, which is still in place in some federal states, and heavy goods traffic were further topics in the DSB Managing Director's presentation.

Showmen's Mental Health Awareness Charity

As in many sectors of the economy, the coronavirus pandemic has put health at the centre of attention in the European showmen's industry. Sheldon Chadwick and Courtney Caris from the organisation 'Showmen's Mental Health Awareness' began their presentation by reporting on the massive health consequences of the disease for the affected showmen and showwomen and their families in the UK. "Showmen's Mental Health Awareness is a charity" emphasised Sheldon Chadwick, "founded and run by people from the showmen's community. Our aim is to break the stigma of mental health in our community. This includes providing support, information and mental health services to all showpeople in the UK and Ireland." The organisation works in three areas: Crisis Management, Education and Awareness. The main aim is to prevent mental distress before it happens.



Courtney Caris and Sheldon Chadwick



Arthur Newsome and Nina Crommelin

International educational work for the next generation of showmen

Promoting educational opportunities for showmen's children and young people is a central task of the European Showmen's Union. Nina Crommelin, Deputy Secretary General of the ESU and member of the board of the European Education Network ENTE, together with Arthur Newsome, Education Officer of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, reported on the current status of European education projects for the next generation of showmen. In her presentation, Nina Crommelin focussed on the work of ENTE and presented an overview of the education policy situation in the various European countries. Arthur Newsome explained the education policy situation in Great Britain.



ESU Secretary General Steve Severeys and Vice President Alex James Colquhoun



Mitch Miller and T.S. Beall

UNESCO recognition of living fairground culture

For many years, the ESU conferences have been passionately debating an association policy issue: the European Showmen's Union's demand for recognition of European showmen's and fairground culture. Secretary General Steve Severeys, Chairman of the Belgian showmen's association La Défense des Forains Belges, was proud to report in Edinburgh on his participation in the 19th annual meeting of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage on 4 December in Paraguay's capital Asunción. On this day, the living fairground culture in Belgium and France was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. At the end of March 2023, the multinational application for the recognition of living fairground culture and traditional showmanship as intangible cultural heritage was officially submitted to UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Fairground representatives from the national ESU associations had worked with international cultural experts over the past few years to prepare the application documents. In addition to a comprehensive justification, detailed positions and arguments on the cultural significance of the fairground profession, they also included a video documentary financed by the ESU on the cultural and historical significance of fairgrounds in Europe.

Intangible cultural heritage in Scotland

Following Steve Severeys' presentation on the international recognition of fairground culture, T.S. Beall and Mitch Miller from the 'Fair Scotland' organisation spoke on the topic of intangible cultural heritage in Scotland. "Fair Scotland is an association of showmen, artists and researchers who promote and support contemporary fairground culture in Scotland. As a registered charity, the aim of Fair Scotland is to raise awareness of the cultural significance of fairgrounds and their traditions and to safeguard the future of traditional fairgrounds in Scotland.



Bernice Wall and Joannie Peaks



ESU President Albert Ritter

‘Future 4 Fairgrounds’ initiative

British showwomen Joannie Peaks and Bernice Wall presented the ‘Future 4 Fairgrounds’ campaign at the last ESU Congress in Monte Carlo in 2023. ‘Future 4 Fairgrounds’ was founded in autumn 2020 against the backdrop of the serious consequences of the coronavirus pandemic for the fairground industry and fairgrounds in the UK. Since then, showwomen Bernice Wall, Narvenka Noyce, Hayley Danter, Nicola Hill, Joannie Peak and Colleen Roper have been causing a stir and attracting media attention with their marketing and PR campaigns, and not just in the UK. They have set themselves the task of informing politicians and the public about current fairground topics as well as the cultural and social significance of fairgrounds, raising awareness and recognising the work of fairground entertainers. In Edinburgh, Joannie Peaks and Bernice Wall reported on the successful progress of their campaigns in 2024, such as the ‘World Fun Fair Month’ in September. Numerous campaigns and events take place around the world during World Fun Fair Month. The aim of the action weeks is to recognise the showmen and showwomen around the world and to uphold and celebrate aspects of the funfair tradition.

A particular highlight last year was the participation of ‘Fair Bear’. The cheerful teddy bear, which symbolises the values of the fairground community ‘joy, tradition and solidarity’, was a guest at numerous fairgrounds and delighted both the youngest visitors and adults. The Fair bear played a key role in bringing the campaign's message to a wide audience in a likeable way.

At the end of the conference, President Albert Ritter thanked all the speakers for their interesting, high-calibre presentations and emphasised: "Once again, the ESU Conference in Edinburgh showed how important the regular exchange of ideas among international colleagues and the associated discussion of current industry topics is for the progress and future security of fairground companies and fairgrounds in Europe. The Conference of the European Showmen's Union has provided the best platform for this for over 70 years."

Showmen debate in the Scottish Parliament



View of the plenary chamber. Photo: BOVAK



MP David Torrance (centre) with General Secretary Steve Severeys (left) and President Albert Ritter

The International Showmen's Convention began on 21 January with a special honour for the European Showmen's Union and its delegates: On the occasion of the ESU Conference, a debate was held in the Scottish Parliament on current issues affecting the fairgrounds in Scotland and Europe.

David Torrance, Member of Parliament for the Scottish National Party (SNP) and leader of the Scottish Showmen's Guild cross-party group in the Parliament, welcomed the numerous European showmen's representatives, including ESU President Albert Ritter and General Secretary Steve Severeys and, from the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, President Keith Carroll and Junior Vice President and ESU Vice President Alex James Colquhoun as well as General Secretary Joe Mercer, to the Parliament building, which opened in 2004.

David Torrance, who along with other MPs tabled the motion for the current debate, emphasised that Scotland is a country that "values the power of entertainment and community. From ancient gatherings around the fire to our music and cultural celebrations, Scots have always valued the shared experiences that bring people together." Showmen, Torrance said, are the keepers of this rich cultural tradition, innovators who have adapted to changing times and who contribute to the vibrant social fabric of Scotland. The fairgrounds represented by the showmen are woven into the fabric of Scottish and European culture. Through their work, they continue centuries-old traditions while adapting to modernity and the changing tastes of the public.

"The history of the European Showmen's Union," explained David Torrance, "is a history of commitment, unity and pride. For centuries, travelling showmen have captivated their audiences, young and old, with daring feats, mechanical marvels and the joy of performance.

From the medieval fairs of Europe to the great exhibitions of the 19th and 20th centuries, showmen were innovators and pioneers. In the late 19th century, as industrialisation transformed Europe, showmen began to organise themselves to protect their way of life and ensure the continuity of their art. In 1954, the European Showmen's Union was born out of a shared commitment to preserve the traditions of travelling entertainment while adapting to the demands of a rapidly changing world. It has become a voice for showmen across borders, providing support, representation and advocacy."

David Torrance's comments were followed by further speeches from the party representatives in Parliament. They all emphasised the cultural importance of the European fairground industry and pledged their support to safeguard the future of the fairgrounds.

Following the political debate, the showmen's representatives were invited to a reception in the foyer of the Parliament. President Albert Ritter thanked the politicians for their appreciation of the centuries-old fairground tradition in Europe and encouraged them not to let up in their commitment to the fairground industry.

The ESU President emphasised the important role played by the European Showmen's Union and its national member associations, which have successfully championed the interests of showmen since the ESU was founded more than 70 years ago under the motto 'Unity is strength'.

Supporting programme for the ESU Conference inspires participants

When the showmen and showwomen meet every two years for the Conference of the European Showmen's Union, the focus is on discussion, exchange and consultation on current industry and association topics. After all, the association meeting has been the most important platform for international cooperation between the oldest European professional organisations and their national associations for over 70 years.



Opening of the gala dinner



President Albert Ritter (right) with representatives of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, including President Keith Carroll (centre) and Junior Vice President and ESU Vice President Alex James Colquhoun (left)

However, the ESU Conference is far more than “just” a working meeting of delegates who discuss the current and future challenges of safeguarding European fairground culture - it is the encounters and discussions among colleagues that make the conference a special - indeed, unique! - experience every time. This year, the Scottish section of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain had prepared a supporting programme that left nothing to be desired. Whether it was the debate in the Scottish Parliament followed by a reception and exchange with the parliamentarians, the gala dinner with a colourful traditional Scottish cultural programme, city tours or the numerous meetings and discussions with colleagues - Edinburgh 2025 will remain an unforgettable memory for all participants!

In a personal letter, ESU President Albert Ritter and General Secretary Steve Severeys thanked the host Showmen's Guild of Great Britain and its Scottish section “most sincerely for the excellent hosting and organisation of the 43rd Conference of the European Showmen's Union.” The award of Honorary Membership of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, Ritter and Severeys explained, was a real privilege and continued: "We are fully aware that this honour required the approval of many people from different sections. The fact that this honour has been bestowed on showmen outside the UK fills us with deep humility. This recognition, together with the reception and gala dinner organised by the Showmen's Guild at the Scottish Parliament, will always remain in our memories. Furthermore, we look forward to many more fruitful meetings and close co-operation in the future, with the aim of protecting the fairground industry and the fairground culture in Europe for generations to come."

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