



Established in 1954 · President Albert Ritter

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# ESU-Information

## European Showmen Union Annual Report 2025



At the ESU Congress 2025 in Edinburgh, specialist presentations formed a key part of the programme.

Unity is strength! This motto has always accompanied us showmen and showwomen throughout Europe – and it has rarely been as relevant as it is in 2025. At a time when our fairground culture is facing both major challenges and new opportunities, the true strength of our industry is becoming apparent: solidarity, passion and a shared love of tradition and our visitors.

The European showman industry is much more than just a sector – it is living culture, identity, and economic power. Our fairgrounds connect generations, regions, and nations. They are places of encounter, joy, and peaceful coexistence. In all European countries, showmen and showwomen contribute with their commitment to keeping this unique cultural heritage alive – in market squares, in towns and villages, wherever people come together to celebrate.

In 2025, the European Showmen's Union continued to work resolutely to represent the interests of our industry at European level, to highlight the importance of fairground culture and to strengthen exchanges between member countries. The principle here is that only by working together can we secure the future of our profession. Through unity we make ourselves heard, through cooperation we shape progress.

In the following annual report, we provide information on the key results of the ESU association meetings and the principal areas of focus for 2025.



ESU Congress 2025 in Edinburgh: Reception at the Scottish Parliament with MPs, the ESU Presidium, and representatives of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain.

### **ESU Congress in Edinburgh provides important impetus for the future of European fairground culture**

The ESU Congress, which takes place every two years in different European cities, is the most important working meeting of the European Showmen's Union and also the annual meeting place for European showmen and showwomen. The 43rd association meeting took place in Edinburgh from 21 to 23 January 2025. Representatives from nine European countries gathered in the Scottish capital to discuss current association issues and future challenges for the fairground industry and fairgrounds in Europe.

The conference programme was packed. The first part focused on the exchange and discussion of industry topics, specialist presentations, and the elections to the ESU Presidium.

In the Presidium elections, Albert Ritter (Germany) was confirmed in his position as ESU President. He is supported by the re-elected Vice-Presidents Atze Lubach-Koers (Netherlands), Are Arnardo (Norway) and Alex James Colquhoun (Great Britain) as well as the newly elected Vice-President Nicolas Lemay (France). The ESU leadership was completed by Secretary General Steve Severeyns (Belgium), who was also confirmed in his position, and 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 in his position as President of the European Showmen's Youth Union.



The newly elected ESU Executive Committee: (from left) Vice President Alex James Colquhoun, Secretary General Steve Severeyns, 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.

The second part of the conference focused on specialist presentations on current trends and developments. The enthusiastic response from participants highlighted the relevance of the topics covered and the high quality of the presentations.

The first speaker, Carl Hagemann, reported on the national programme for the inspection and certification of fairground rides and amusement devices in Great Britain (Amusement Device Inspection Procedures Scheme, or ADIPS for short). The standard, which has been adopted by the showmen's and amusement park associations, was developed in close consultation with the British Health and Safety Executive to improve safety standards at funfairs and thus strengthen public confidence.

DSB Managing Director Frank Hakelberg then gave an overview of the situation of fairground operators in Germany and the challenges they currently face. One focus was the presentation of the DSB economic study, which was updated last year. Other topics included the Cannabis Act, which came into force in April 2024, and its application to fairgrounds, which has not yet been sufficiently clarified, the double licensing requirement still in force in some federal states in the area of permits for mobile catering, and heavy goods traffic.

As in many sectors of the economy, the coronavirus pandemic has brought health issues to the forefront of the European fairground industry. In their presentation, Sheldon Chadwick and Courtney Caris from the Showmen's Mental Health Awareness organisation reported on the massive health consequences of the disease for affected showmen and showwomen and their

families in the United Kingdom. 'Showmen's Mental Health Awareness is a charity,' emphasised Sheldon Chadwick, 'founded and run by people from the fairground community. Our goal is to break the stigma surrounding mental health in our community. This includes providing support, information, and mental health services to all showmen and showwomen in the United Kingdom and Ireland.'



View into the plenary session.

Secretary General Steve Severeyns was proud to report in Edinburgh on his participation in the 19th Annual Meeting of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage on 4 December in Paraguay's capital, Asunción. On that day, the living fairground culture in Belgium and France was added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Further information on this topic can be found later in this annual report.

Following Steve Severeyns' presentation, T.S. Beall and Mitch Miller from the Fair Scotland organisation gave a presentation on 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, Fair Scotland's aim is to raise awareness of the cultural significance of showmen and their traditions and to secure the future of traditional fairgrounds in Scotland.

The Future 4 Fairgrounds campaign was launched in autumn 2020 against the backdrop of the profound consequences of the coronavirus pandemic for the fairground industry and fairgrounds in the United Kingdom. The group has set itself the task of informing and raising awareness among politicians and the public about current showman issues, as well as the cultural and social significance of funfairs, and of recognising the work of showmen and showwomen. In Edinburgh, Joannie Peaks and Bernice Wall reported on the success of their campaigns in 2024, such as World

Fun Fair Month in September. The aim of the campaign weeks is to pay tribute to showmen and showwomen around the world and to uphold and celebrate aspects of the fairground tradition.



Secretary General Steve Severeyns provided information about the UNESCO conference in 2024, with Vice President Alex James Colquhoun on the right.



President Albert Ritter

In addition to the plenary sessions, there was plenty of time in Edinburgh for meetings and exchanges among international colleagues. The hosts had also prepared an attractive supporting programme. This included a festive showmen's evening and an invitation to a debate in the Scottish Parliament on the future of the European showmen business, followed by a reception for European showmen and showwomen.

At the end of the 43rd ESU Congress, President Albert Ritter thanked "everyone who helped make our European friendship meeting a great success. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to our colleagues from the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain and the Scottish section team, led by Alex James Colquhoun. These were wonderful days of great European showman friendship."

### **UNESCO recognition promotes Europe's fairgrounds**

Since UNESCO's decision in December 2024, the historical and social significance of fairgrounds has come into sharper focus, as confirmed during the 2025 fairground season. Inclusion in programmes and events related to intangible cultural heritage enables showmen and women to share their experiences, provide insights into their work and convey the deep-rooted history of fairgrounds. "We are invited to conferences and cultural encounters to talk about our living traditions. This not only strengthens intercultural exchange but also helps to convey a realistic and positive image of our industry,' explained Steve Severeyns. 'The UNESCO recognition in Belgium and France also sends a signal to other European countries. It underlines the importance of preserving and promoting living cultural forms. For the fairground industry, this is a historic opportunity to consolidate its own identity, inspire young generations to take up the profession

and secure the future of fairgrounds in the long term. The award gives our culture the status it deserves – and motivates us to carry it forward with pride," emphasised President Albert Ritter.

### From the national ESU associations



Discussants at the Musée des Arts Forains: from left to right, Xavier Saguet, founding member of the Fédération des Forains de France; Karl Olive, member of the National Assembly; Minister of Culture Rachida Dati; and Clémentine and Jean Paul Favand. Photo: Fédération des Forains de France

### Fairground Culture Summit at the Musée des Arts Forains in Paris

On 18 July, French Minister of Culture Rachida Dati visited the Musée des Arts Forains in Paris to present her new concept for promoting and protecting fairground culture in France. In front of numerous guests, including Xavier Saguet, founding member of the ESU member association Fédération des Forains de France; Karl Olive, member of the National Assembly; and museum director Jean Paul Favand and his daughter Clémentine, the minister referred to the cultural significance of fairgrounds in Europe. Among other things, she announced measures to preserve and promote fairground culture in France, such as financial support for the restoration and maintenance of historic rides, the improvement of educational programmes for children from showman families, international cooperation to systematically promote the exchange of experience between France, Belgium and other countries, and the promotion of scientific research. Minister Dati praised the key role played by the Fédération des Forains de France in the political representation and professionalisation of the fairground industry in France. In conversation with the minister, Xavier Saguet emphasised the need to improve the legal framework. Xavier Saguet explained that fairground operators have made a central contribution to the revitalisation of leisure culture in cities for centuries. And yet, many fairgrounds are threatened with extinction. This makes it all the more important to implement the plans announced by the Ministry of Culture.



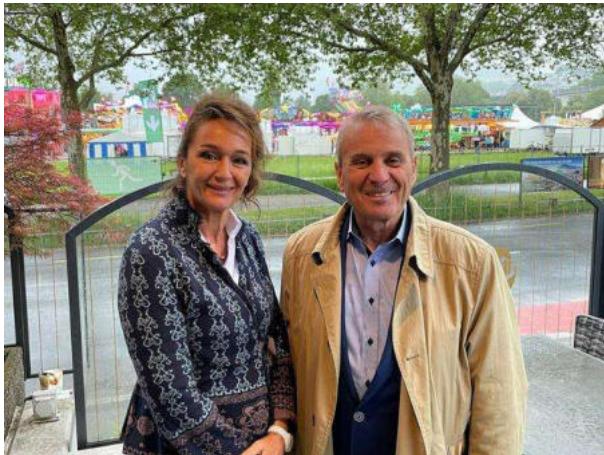
ESU meeting at Hull Fair with Secretary General Steve Severeyns (second from right), Steve Carrol, President of the British Showmen's Guild (centre) and fellow showmen.

### **ESU at the Hull Fair**

Continuous dialogue between the Executive Committee and the national associations is crucial to the success and further development of the ESU. These discussions not only promote transparency and trust, but also strengthen a shared understanding of goals, values and priorities. In addition, the meetings serve to cultivate contacts and – very importantly! – friendships within the European showman family. Regular exchanges serve as a reminder that the European Showmen's Union is much more than the sum of its parts: it is a European network of showmen connected by dialogue, mutual support, and shared traditions.

On 16 October, the ESU Secretary General visited Hull Fair, one of the oldest and largest funfairs in the United Kingdom, with two Belgian showmen colleagues. Topics of discussion with the President of the British Showmen's Guild, Steve Carrol, and the Guild's former President, David Wallis, included a review of the ESU Congress in Edinburgh in January 2025 and the recognition of British fairground culture as intangible cultural heritage. Background: The United Kingdom is not yet a signatory to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The convention was adopted by UNESCO in 2003 and came into force in 2006. It aims to protect and promote cultural expressions, fairgrounds, traditions, rituals, and crafts as 'intangible cultural heritage.' Following its signing by the British government, the British Showmen's Guild is calling for circuses and fairgrounds to be included in the national register.

During the rest of his visit to the northern English city of Kingston upon Hull, Secretary General Severeyns attended an information evening organised by the Showmen's Mental Health Awareness organisation on health issues in the fairground industry, as well as an event organised by the City of Kingston upon Hull on safety and fairground rides.



President Albert Ritter and Lisa Zanolla, President of the United Showmen's Associations of Switzerland.  
Photo: Martina Füger-Schmidt

### **ESU talks at the Luga trade fair in Lucerne**

On 4 May, ESU President Albert Ritter and Lisa Zanolla, President of the United Showmen's Associations of Switzerland (VSVS), met for constructive talks at the LUGA trade fair in Lucerne. In what Albert Ritter described as a 'personal and appreciative exchange,' the ESU President and the VSVS President discussed the current challenges facing the fairground industry in Europe. A key topic was the Europe-wide labour shortage, which is placing a particular strain on labour-intensive businesses. Ritter emphasised the need for political solutions to secure the long-term future of events. Another key topic was the recognition of the vibrant fairground culture by UNESCO. Lisa Zanolla emphasised that close cooperation with the ESU is crucial to preserving and promoting the diversity and richness of European fairground culture. Both presidents expressed their confidence that the challenges can be overcome through continuous dialogue and cooperation at European level.



Opening of the new digital Irish showmen's archive at the University of Galway with (from left) David Duffy, Irish Showmen's Guild; Dr Barry Houlihan, archivist at the University of Galway Library; Chris Piper, Irish Showmen's Guild and Lucy Medlycott, director of the ISACS network. Photo: Andrew Downes

### **Opening of the 'Voices of the Showmen' showmen's archive at the University of Galway**

Ireland's fairground culture is deeply rooted in the country's social and cultural identity. For centuries, fairgrounds and circuses have formed a network across the island, bringing people

together and facilitating encounters, connections, and cultural exchange between young and old, town and country.

As part of National Heritage Week 2025, the new digital oral history archive ‘Voices of the Showmen’ was officially opened at the University of Galway on 21 August. The project is a collaboration between Galway University Library, ESU member association Irish Showmen’s Guild, Irish Street Arts, Circus and Spectacle Network (ISACS) and Archives Ireland. The aim is to preserve the cultural heritage of Ireland’s showman families for future generations.

The archive documents personal life stories, family biographies, and experiences of Irish showmen and showwomen. The aim is to create a ‘digital memory’ that makes the cultural tradition of the showman business in Ireland visible and tangible over two centuries.

At the opening ceremony, board member David Duffy, speaking on behalf of the Irish Showmen’s Association, said that it was ‘a great honour to be here today. (...) We are delighted that the archive has enabled the first steps to be taken towards documenting the history of Irish showmen (...) and their role in Irish heritage, culture, and social history.’

The Irish showmen’s archive ‘Voices of the Showmen’ is more than just an academic project – it is a cultural promise: the voices, memories, and stories of the showmen and showwomen will not be forgotten. Instead, they continue to tell – beyond nostalgia – of a historical and contemporary life that has shaped Ireland over the last two centuries and continues to do so.



## Outlook

For the European Showmen’s Union, 2025 was a year of responsibility, encounters and joint development. In a period that continues to be marked by social, economic, and cultural change, it

has once again become clear how important cohesion, reliability and a clear, united voice are for the showman business industry in Europe.

Our member associations have demonstrated with great commitment that tradition and the future are not contradictory. They stand for living cultural heritage, economic performance, and the ability to face new conditions with creativity and innovative strength. Fairgrounds remain places of joy, encounter, and cultural exchange – across borders.

More than ever, the European Showmen's Union sees itself as a platform for dialogue: between generations, between countries, between politics, administration, and practice. The discussions held in 2025, the projects initiated and the concerns represented are an expression of a clear goal – to secure the future of our profession in a European context in the long term.

Looking ahead, we would like to thank everyone who makes this work possible: the showmen and showwomen who, with passion and a sense of responsibility, shape our wonderful traditional trade every day and are committed to the future of European fairground culture in the associations. Their dedication gives the European Showmen's Union its strength and credibility.

## **ESU-Information**

**Issue 1.2026, 19.01.2026**

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