

BIOGRAPHY OF HARRY STEELE-BODGER

Henry William (Harry) Steele-Bodger MRCVS President, National Veterinary Medical Association (NVMA)* 1939-1941

**NVMA was renamed the British Veterinary Association in 1952*

Harry Steele-Bodger (S-B) was born at Peterborough in 1896. He was awarded his “running colours” at Cranleigh School and, during the First World War, came first in the Army cross-country championships. Too young for the Services in 1914, he joined the Blue Cross Ambulance Corps at the age of 17, was attached to the French Army under Professor Almy of Alfort Veterinary School and learned to speak French fluently.

In due course he came back to England and joined the Royal Engineers as a driver, becoming a farrier and instructor in shoeing before being commissioned in the Royal Field Artillery where he was appointed an instructor in horsemanship. On active service he was attached to the Ulster Division in France, wounded and gassed in 1918. On recovery, whilst in charge of “rogue” recruit horses at Edinburgh, he was kicked in the face, lost an eye – and was reported killed.

The day after qualifying from the Royal ‘Dick’ Veterinary College, Edinburgh in 1922 he acquired his practice in Tamworth, Staffordshire. He was afterwards described as ‘the very model of a modern veterinary surgeon’. Keen, with immense energy for work and a great capacity to learn; his special interests – in the late 1920’s – included the problems relating to bovine infertility and the status of the veterinary profession. His services as a consultant were soon in demand countrywide and he became very well know both within and without the profession.

He travelled to veterinary schools on the Continent to further his experience and when he visited Denmark he established a close relationship with Professor Folmar Neilsen – then the foremost authority on rectal diagnosis of pregnancy and the treatment of bovine infertility problems.

From 1936 to 1939 he acted as Examiner in Animal Management for the Royal College and in 1939 until his passing in 1952, was an influential and active member of the Council of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

Throughout his life he gave loyal and unstinted service to the National Veterinary Medical Association, but did not survive to see his election to Honorary Membership confirmed. A most memorable occasion was the presentation to him in verse by Sir Weldon and Lady Ann of the Dalrymple Champneys Cup and Medal at the first post-war NVMA Banquet in 1946 – S-B replying in verse. He generously provided accommodation for the NVMA Headquarters at his practice premises in Lichfield when the bombing of London made evacuation necessary, the Tamworth practice having extended there and to Sutton Coldfield.

He was greatly concerned for some years before the war at the low esteem in which the profession was held – both by government and the general public; also at the apathy which prevailed within the profession itself. The abbreviation ‘vet’ used as a noun was an anathema to him – he demanded the title ‘veterinary surgeon’ and took great delight in pointing out the integrity implied by the use of the word ‘vet’ as a verb in contradistinction to the word ‘doctor’.

He was also concerned by the widespread unemployment within the profession and the lack of leadership. To stimulate interest and instil pride amongst his colleagues he founded the Society of Veterinary Practitioners, of which he was the first Honorary Secretary and later President. Discussions within that Society were soon directed to the contribution the profession could make to the war effort in the event of hostilities. This led to a resolution being presented to the NVMA Conference at Great Yarmouth in 1939 that a committee be appointed to survey the prevailing health problems causing loss of production in dairy herds and to make recommendations for their control.

The resolution was accepted. The Survey Committee was formed under this chairmanship, and started work immediately as a matter of urgency. The original members were Dr W R Wooldridge, Sir Thomas Dalling and Professor William E Miller, Courtauld Professor of Animal Husbandry at the Royal Veterinary College. They selected practising veterinary surgeons, field members of the Ministry staff, academics and research workers to join them, and invited into discussion others whom they thought had knowledge or experience to contribute, including ancillary scientists such as Sir John Hammond and Dr Barlett, both of the School of Physiology of Animal Reproduction, Cambridge. War was in fact declared a few weeks later. The pressure to prepare a scheme was intense; the meetings were frequent, prolonged and held under war conditions – often terminating in the early hours of the morning.

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It would be difficult to appreciate Harry Steele-Bodger's achievements in the absence of an outline of the conditions obtaining in the industry and the profession at that time – over 60 years ago.

Between the wars agriculture was a depressed industry and, with a few notable exceptions, 'dog and stick' farming was the order of the day. Shorthorns were the dominant dairy breed, average milk yield around 2000 litres, herds were small – the average being about 10 cows and these mostly nondescript cross-breeds. The 'premium' bulls of the day were selected by Livestock Officers on the basis of conformation; event pedigree breeders themselves failed to select effectively for milking potential.

Permanent pasture was sacrosanct under the terms of most leases and tenancies, ploughing-up being prohibited. The average productive grazing season was 15 weeks; the maintenance ration hay and mangolds; the production ration imported cereals (in particular flaked maize) and cake manufactured from imported oil seeds.

The onset of war saw the introduction of the "ploughing up" policy, this being permitted by law, and the widespread introduction of alternate husbandry for the first time on the vast majority of farms. "Self-sufficiency" was the objective on individual farms in respect of the livestock maintained, with emphasis on milk production – with greatly depleted imports of cattle food brought about by shortage of shipping and in particular the 'U' Boat campaign in the Atlantic. Silage making was introduced as an alternative grass conservation technique during the war years.

Between the wars the profession in general provided a "fire brigade" service to the depressed livestock industry other than in a few notable instances where individual veterinary surgeons had realised the contribution they could make to livestock production and had persuaded clients to use their services.

The Survey Committee was forced to discard the eradication of bovine tuberculosis, in spite of its known high incidence (estimated at 40% in dairy herds) its impact on human and animal health and high wastage factor, as not being practicable under war conditions.

Brucellosis was recognised as a major cause of production loss – with frequent and serious abortion "storms" occurring in groups of replacement dairy heifers in particular and not infrequently in the large number of "flying" herds, arising from the introduction of carrier replacements. There was too an associated high level of infertility in infected herds even in the absence of abortion. There was no standardised, attenuated vaccine available in this country – that supplied by the Ministry of those days not satisfying those requirements. The Committee were aware of the existence of the Str. 19 vaccine in America, and recommended its introduction.

Trichomoniasis had recently been recognised as a venereal disease causing high loss in certain areas where communal bulls were in use, and in some larger herds which had introduced infected bulls.

Infertility in many herds – at all levels of production – was not uncommon. The Committee recommended pregnancy diagnosis and the use of intra-uterine irrigation with 1:1000 iodine solution where treatment was required and other measures related to venereal diseases. Until enquiry was made, it was not realised that the teachings of Folmer Neilsen had been taken up by so few veterinary surgeons in this country. This resulted in the formulation of a very small band of those able, capable and willing to travel the country teaching the techniques. They visited veterinary surgeons asking for such refresher courses in their own practices for practical tuition on farms of their clients.

More than 400 veterinary surgeons received such tuition in less than 12 months, helping to mollify some of those who criticised from their fear of the failure of the profession to be able to "deliver" the services advised in the recommendations. A great deal of this work fell on the shoulders of Harry Steele-Bodger himself in addition to his many other commitments.

The prevailing mastitis problem associated with hand milking (machine milking being an exception at that time) was that caused by *Str. agalactiae*. The Committee recommended the use of sulphanilamide given orally - then recently introduced as a modern chemo-therapeutic, supplemented with infusions of infected quarters with acriflavine 1:10,000. In addition the use of sterilised udder cloths for each cow was advised (paper was not only in short supply, but paper towels were not then manufactured). Results compared to previous treatment and control were extraordinarily successful.

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Johne's disease was recognised as one which would increase its toll greatly under the new grassland improvement programme, leading to more intensive grazing. Advice in respect of earlier diagnosis and culling to control was given.

When war came the profession was reserved from military service – to its great surprise in view of the long period of underemployment. The Ministry however had no plans to use veterinary surgeons to maintain the milk supply to children for whom 'school milk' had been introduced together with rationing; MAFF was only concerned with notifiable diseases.

NVMA President S-B and the Survey Committee made urgent approaches to MAFF for discussion of the recommendations they had put forward; they met with indifference and resistance – even from senior veterinary staff. Repeated parliamentary questions to the Minister – drafted by the Survey Committee – finally resulted in the Minister agreeing to meet an NVMA delegation.

The meeting started with the Minister making clear his strong objection to it being forced upon him – demanding that the questions in the House be stopped – stating that they did no good and that they irritated him and would not change Ministry policy. S-B, his glass eye appearing to glint through his monocle, standing to his full height of 5'5", replied "Sir, but for those questions we would never have had this meeting". The Minister did listen and after some searching questions instructed his Permanent Secretary, Sir Donald Vandeeper, to prepare a detailed report. Subsequently, discussions were held with the veterinary and administrative staffs of the Ministry and eventually were referred to a joint meeting of the Agricultural and Medical Research Councils held at Dean's Yard, Westminster, under the chairmanship of Sir Joseph Barcroft. They listened, asked many questions and gave their support, Sir Joseph finalising the discussion by the dictum "war is the time for taking risks".

The Survey Scheme was then launched, sponsored by the Ministry, the National Farmers' Union and the NVMA. Strain 19 was brought over from America and provided free. Sulphanilamide was subsidised to farmers within the Scheme, which was based on a capitation fee for a minimum of four quarterly advisory visits plus the services laid down within the contract between farmer client and veterinary surgeon.

This accomplished the great objective of the Survey Committee – to get the veterinary surgeon on to the farm in an advisory capacity. The total effect of the Scheme was much wider than that of the considerable number of veterinary surgeons who took it up officially would suggest, many adopting the techniques advised but not operating the Scheme itself.

The contribution the profession made to the maintenance and improvement of milk production cannot be fully assessed but, despite wartime conditions, the average yield rose to over 2600 litres and many changes in traditional management had been introduced.

The sacrifices made by Harry Steele-Bodger and others mainly at their own expense (the NVMA in those days having little or no money available) in formulating and getting the Scheme adopted and implemented were high indeed. The refresher courses were only a part of a most demanding programme of attendances at NVMA, NFU branch meetings, meetings in market places, in farmers' clubs and any other place which could be arranged to discuss the Scheme. The interest and enthusiasm of farmers was remarkable and did much to stimulate further that of the profession itself. The problems of travel – train services under war conditions, the blackout, petrol rationing, the removal of road signposts, and the blacked-out headlights, added to the very heavy demands made on the few concerned.

This was not all. The new techniques introduced into farming produced their own problems which became the concern and matter for study and recommendation by the Survey Committee. For example, grassland improvement programmes resulted in bloat and in particular frothy bloat and hypomagnesaemia – previously an almost strictly localised problem on the lush pastures of Herefordshire. Parasitic gastritis and bronchitis became widespread herd problems for the first time, instead of mainly problems of out-wintered heifers.

AI, which was used by some veterinary surgeons to control trichomoniasis, was introduced as a national service in 1944 under proper veterinary supervision. Subsequently the Minister's edict – that farmers should decide on their breed type and then breed to it, introduced the first rational approach to improvement of the genetic potential of the national herd.

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Harry Steele-Bodger continued as Chairman of the Survey Committee until 1946, when its name was changed to the Technical Development Committee. His remarkable experience and capacity for hard work, his love of his profession and concern for its status and his intrepid leadership, inspired a spirit of enthusiasm in those around him which made the formulating of the Survey Scheme, its adoption and its implementation, possible. His great sense of humour, ready wit and gift of oratory made him a natural leader of men. He died in January 1952 at the early age of 56 years. "He loved life and lived it to the full, spending himself in the service of life." The war years undoubtedly saw the birth of the modern agricultural industry. Is it too much to suggest they too saw the birth of our modern veterinary profession, under his leadership?

The Harry Steele-Bodger Memorial Scholarship was launched by his friends as a tribute to the exceptional service he rendered to the profession as its leader in time of crisis. The amount subscribed was indeed exceptional for those days. It was written in a tribute to him "Never again will one man have such a profound effect on the whole profession".