

ANCESTORS AT WORK



VETERINARIANS

Caroline Roberts uncovers the lives of our forebears who cared for animals

Veterinary medicine has its origins in the ancient world, and advice on the welfare and treatment of domestic animals appears in early documents from Egypt and India. For much of history, care focused on the horse because of its importance in transport, agriculture and warfare and, through the Middle Ages up until the end of the 18th century, farriers combined shoeing with 'horse doctoring'. Among the

remedies listed in the 1721 *Farrier's Dispensatory* are lead, quicksilver and brimstone, along with cow-dung wraps for stiff legs.

In the second half of the 18th century there were moves to introduce a more scientific approach, and Europe's first veterinary college was established in Lyon, France, in 1762. The Odiham Agricultural Society, a group of Hampshire gentry, then proposed that a similar college be set up in Britain to provide young farriers

with a veterinary education. Granville Penn, whose grandfather William founded the province of Pennsylvania, was a key figure in bringing the idea to fruition, and he is often considered the pioneer of the British veterinary profession.

The Veterinary College of London, later the Royal Veterinary College, opened in Camden in 1791, with students taught by doctors who had turned to veterinary science. One of those to gain his diploma there was farrier's ►

Female veterinary students are taught how to examine a horse in 1929

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► son William Dick, who set up the country's second veterinary school, now the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, in Edinburgh in 1823.

EARLY TREATMENT

At the time the mechanisms of disease were poorly understood, and the methods of early veterinary surgeons were often no more scientific than those of farriers. As in human medicine, treatments often involved purges, blistering of the skin to release noxious vapours, and bloodletting – something that persisted until the late 19th century.

Practitioners shared their successes and failures in *The Veterinarian*, a journal first published in 1828. In an early issue, a vet reports dosing a sick calf with two ounces of salts and two tablespoonfuls of gin in a pint of milk, but to no avail. Another relates the case of a horse he believed had contracted tetanus through being kept in a cold, damp stable. And one poor vet is saddened by the decline and death of a horse he is treating: "Every time I visited him served as a reproach, either for my own

ignorance, or the defective state of the art I professed to practise."

In 1844 the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) was formed to regulate the profession. Graduates of the London and Edinburgh colleges who passed the RCVS exam could style

themselves 'veterinary surgeon'. However,

many unqualified vets continued to use the title until the 1881 Veterinary Surgeons Act made it illegal. An 'amnesty' from 1881 to 1883 allowed unqualified but experienced practitioners to join the register, and 800 men did just that.

In the late 19th century, vets

played an important role in furthering medical and scientific understanding. Cattle plague or 'rinderpest', a disease related to measles, was rife throughout Europe, and in 1865 there was a serious outbreak in Britain, with huge animal losses leading to food shortages and threatening livelihoods. At the time there were two competing theories about infectious disease: some believed that it arose spontaneously because of environmental factors, others that it was caused and spread by germs. The measures that vets put in place to bring



Aleen Cust, Britain's first female vet

1922

The year that Aleen Cust received a diploma from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, making her the first woman in Britain to qualify as a vet

9s 6d

A Windsor vet's 1937 charge for administering eight ounces of spirit lotion and two ounces of powder to royal corgi Jane

1948

The year it became illegal for anyone except a registered vet to practise veterinary surgery

Powdered marsh-mallow root

A cure for the inflammation of the respiratory passages recommended in an 1831 edition of *The Veterinarian*



cattle plague under control, such as containment through mass slaughter, provided more evidence to support the germ theory.

Vets also began to play a part in public health. The 1878 Contagious Diseases (Animals) Act required all local authorities to appoint suitably qualified veterinarians to monitor and control animal diseases, especially those transmissible to humans, and to inspect meat supplies.

VETS GO TO WAR

The first qualified vets to serve in the Army were recruited from the newly formed London college, and in 1880 the Army Veterinary School was established in Aldershot in Hampshire. Horses were vital to the Army, not just



This handwritten bill from E. Smith, a veterinary surgeon from Pontefract in West Yorkshire, dates from 1821

Go Visit

Find out more about the vital work that vets do in wartime

THE MUSEUM OF MILITARY MEDICINE

a Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale, Aldershot GU12 5RQ

t 01252 868612

w museumofmilitarymedicine.org.uk

The museum has 20,000 objects relating to both human and animal medicine, and a large archive including material relating to the Royal Army Veterinary Corps.



as cavalry mounts but also as transport. However, sick or lame animals were often slaughtered or abandoned, and until the early 20th century about 80 per cent of military horses were lost annually.

During the First World War, 1,700 veterinary surgeons – almost half of those in the country – served in the Army Veterinary Corps. They inspected horses and mules daily, and those suffering battle wounds, gas inhalation, mangle and even shellshock were evacuated to veterinary hospitals. Of the two-and-a-half million animals treated in France, two million were able to return to duty, and annual losses fell to about 15 per cent. In 1918, on the order of George V, the corps became the Royal Army Veterinary Corps in recognition of its contribution to the war effort. However, in subsequent years mechanisation meant there was less need for army vets.

The rise of the motor vehicle had an impact on civilian vets too and, as equine practice declined, they focused their attention on livestock as well as the increasing number of domestic pets. The growth of animal-welfare charities such as the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) also pushed the profession towards small-animal practice. PDSA clinics sprung up in many cities, and by the early 1930s were providing free treatment to one million pets a year. Although the charity's practitioners lacked formal veterinary qualifications,

A vet treats a canine patient in the street in August 1944 after bomb damage forced him to close his premises

many were skilled – the charity had opened a teaching hospital in East London in 1928.

PDSA clinics treated the animals of the poor who would have struggled to pay for treatment, but there were suspicions that the middle classes were using the service by getting servants to pass their animals off as their own. And practitioners' lack of proper qualifications was seen as threatening the status of the veterinary profession.

PEACE BREAKS OUT

After years of friction, in 1938 the charity and the RCVS came to an arrangement whereby the PDSA referred patients to nearby veterinary surgeons, who would receive a fee. The experience helped open the eyes of the profession to the potential of domestic pet treatment, and paved the way for huge growth in 'companion animal' practice.

Now, animals benefit from many of the same cutting-edge treatments available to us, and advances in veterinary treatments can improve human medicine too. It's been a long journey to this point, and one in which our vet forebears played a key role. 🍀

CAROLINE ROBERTS

is a writer based in London:
carolineroberts.co.uk

RESOURCES

Take your research further

BOOKS

The British Veterinary Profession, 1791–1948

Iain H Pattison

Hyperion, 1983

This comprehensive history is out of print, but secondhand copies can be found on such websites as abebooks.co.uk and amazon.co.uk.

A Victorian Veterinary Student's Diary

Dick Lane (ed)

Granville Penn Press, 2010

This chronicle of the life of George Williamson, a student at the Veterinary College of London, includes a clipper journey to Hong Kong. The book is available from the Veterinary History Society for £23 plus P&P (£19.70 plus P&P for society members): bit.ly/vet-diary.

WEBSITE

RCVS Vet History

rcvsvethistory.org

Browse an archive of letters, artwork, case notes, periodicals and pamphlets covering over 200 years, held by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

HOW TO FIND YOUR VET ANCESTORS

Caroline recommends these online and hard-copy resources

A *Register of Veterinary Surgeons*, listing date of qualification and place of practice for all those who qualified as vets before the end of May 1874, has been digitised and is free to download from the Internet Archive at bit.ly/rcvs-register. The register was compiled by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (rcvs.org.uk), which holds more detailed information about members who became fellows, and the existing practitioners who joined the register between 1881 and 1883. Contact library@rcvsknowledge.org. You can also find a searchable database of alumni of the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies at collections.ed.ac.uk/alumni.

Your relatives may also appear in obituaries and correspondence published in *The Veterinarian* (1828–1902). Volumes to 1875 are at rcvsvethistory.org/library-collection/the-veterinarian. Later volumes are currently being digitised, and the searchable digital archive is due to be completed by mid-2020.

In addition, The National Archives in Kew holds brief service details of veterinary officers who served in the early 20th century, along with some unit War Diaries (search discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk), while copies of the *Journal of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps* are held at the Museum of Military Medicine: museumofmilitarymedicine.org.uk.