

## **‘ A shining torch enriching our lives ’**

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**Alasdair Steele-Bodger** January 1, 1924 – September 17, 2008

**This is a very hard obituary to write. Alasdair and I first met at The Dick Vet in 1945. He was always enthusiastic and energetic. He served on the student representative body and, of course, had come to Edinburgh with a glorious past – first at Shrewsbury School and then in Cambridge, where he was a student of science at Gonville and Caius College.**

At Oxbridge, the greatest athletics honour is a “blue”, meaning you had represented the university, in whatever sport, in its first team. Alasdair had no less than three blues for athletics, football and cross-country running.

His father was equally famous. Harry Steele-Bodger was visiting lecturer at The Dick in veterinary jurisprudence. He always dressed immaculately, with a slight Edwardian flair, striped trousers, a grey silk tie and a black jacket. It was only when I saw practice in Guildford under the principal Eric Barrett that I learned that he had joined up with Harry Steele-Bodger. They were experts in pregnancy diagnosis in cows. The pair, in nationwide trips, became the educators for the entire profession in this relatively new rectal examination technique.

Alasdair’ s brother, Michael, was equally distinguished. In his case, this was as the guru of English rugby – as fly half for the national team, he was known as a “terrier” in the field. He went on to take office and be a selector with great success, and possibly became the best known Steele- Bodger in the outside world.

### **Limitless energy**

Alasdair seemed to have limitless energy. He threw himself into building up the membership and reach of SPVS, where he pioneered a fees survey in the face of some conservative opposition who believed that disclosure of fees was anti-competitive and unprofessional. It was, in fact, a milestone in veterinary practice development and a foundation for a much better business structure. This was the beginning of attempts to wean the profession off the philosophy that clients would not pay for professional skill, so profits were concentrated on high mark ups for products. Maybe this was part of the accusation in the major Champion report, in which our profession was accused of suffering from an inferiority complex.

That description could never be applied to Alasdair. He was a bundle of ideas and energy. He smoked enthusiastically and drove with great verve and a modicum of intolerance. Based in Lichfield, where he had inherited a role in his father's former practice, he would shoot around the country and down to London for meetings, while attempting to maintain an active clinical life.

This was an impossible circle to square and, in 1977, he gave up practice to concentrate on his many other roles with the Horserace Scientific Advisory Committee and the University Grants Committee's agricultural and veterinary sub-committee, as a council member of the Royal Agricultural Society of England and as a consultant to the British Agricultural Export Council.

He also wrote clinical papers on diagnosis and treatment and the application of new medicines to clinical practice. He served on the editorial boards of a number of veterinary publications and was chairman of the group producing the veterinary formulary for the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. He was the UK delegate to the Federation of Veterinarians of the European Community and was also on its veterinary training committee. He still found time to be, successively, president of SPVS, the BSAVA, the BVA and, finally, the RCVS.

## **Fine dining**

He once recalled for me an occasion when he was invited to dinner at Sandringham. He and his delightful wife, Anne – whom he married on graduation in 1948 – were advised to arrive dressed for dinner. They had to travel from Cambridge, where Alasdair was professor of clinical veterinary medicine. Not unreasonably, Anne refused to arrive before her Queen in a dress creased by the long car journey, so Alasdair rented a room in nearby King's Lynn for the changing procedure.

On arrival, their bags were taken from them and they were shown straight in to dinner. It later became clear that Alasdair's expertise on the appropriate use of "bute" in polo ponies and carriage horses was required.

When the couple retired to their room – which included a double bedroom and a small dressing room with its own single bed (a discreet allowance for marital misunderstandings) – their bags had been unpacked and their clothes, and even the contents of a wash bag, were carefully laid out. After that felicitous brush with royalty, there was clearly a recognition of Alasdair's eminence and

he went on to receive the CBE.

On an earlier occasion, as BVA president, Alasdair oversaw its annual congress. The guest of honour, Lord Mountbatten, embarrassed – if not outraged – the audience by spending his entire speech extolling the merits of alternative medicine as a panacea for all animal ailments. Under pressure from his council, Alasdair was obliged to politely indicate in his closing address that the speech had basically been a load of tosh. Lord Mountbatten was reportedly outraged and was rumoured to mutter: “That man will never get an honour in my lifetime.” Alasdair’s CBE came after the tragic explosion on Lord Mountbatten’s boat.

## **Determined views**

Alasdair was naturally capable of attracting criticism from the high and low in the profession. He was a man of determined views and may have been slightly inflexible in some people’s eyes. However, he was always courteous and a great friend to me.

He participated fully in the early development of the BSAVA and attended the first conference in the Shaftsbury (now Mountbatten) Hotel in London’s Monmouth Street. He and four other leading members of the BVA council sat quietly at the front observing proceedings and, presumably, reaching conclusions. Us “rebels” who had started the BSAVA – against the BVA’s aims and policy at the time – labelled them “spies” from the opposition. Whatever the truth, Alasdair was soon won over and became a vigorous member of the management group and, of course, an early president.

His academic appointment to Cambridge was seen as controversial in some eyes, since he was officially a non-academic stepping into a highly academic environment. At all events, Alasdair was extremely popular with his students. His charm and good humour were recognised and the students named one of their bulls in the dairy unit “Bodger” as a mark of affection for their teacher and friend.

Latterly and sadly, Alasdair was forced to pull back from his full-blooded veterinary life when he developed blindness – a great tragedy for such an active man.

He will be mourned not only by his wonderful family, but by many of us who saw in him a shining torch, lighting up and enriching every corner of our professional lives.





*Professor Alasdair Steele-Bodger: CBE, MA, BSc, FRASE, FRAgS, FRCVS.*