

# HISTORY OF WOMEN VETERINARIANS

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**HAVING** always known the veterinary profession to be well represented by women, throughout both my working career and as a student seeing practice – and in the days of discussions about the profession’s feminisation – it is hard for me to imagine a time when women were not only in the minority, but almost absent from the veterinary profession.

One hundred years ago, the picture for women was very different – and not just in the veterinary world. The Women’s Social and Political Union had been founded by Emmeline Pankhurst and daughters in 1903 and the suffragette movement was in full swing<sup>1</sup>.

Women had come a long way in the latter 19th century, with the first women attending universities and the first woman doctor, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. However, it was not until 1918 they gained the right to vote – albeit with restrictions – and, following the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 1919, were able to enter the veterinary profession, with the first woman gaining MRCVS status in 1922<sup>2</sup>.

## Breaking the mould

That first woman was called Aileen Isobel Cust, who by 1922 had already been a qualified veterinarian for 22 years. Born in 1868 in County Tipperary, Ireland and the daughter of a land agent, Aileen grew up in a wealthy family. Following her father’s death, her guardian, Major Shallcross Fitzherbert Wriddington, encouraged her to pursue an education, leading her to move to London to study nursing. She soon decided to become a veterinarian, so headed north to study at the New Edinburgh Veterinary College (that later moved south to become the University of Liverpool School of Veterinary Science).

Unable to take the university’s exams or be admitted to the RCVS, Aileen had to make do with a testimonial and personal recommendation from veterinary school founder William Williams when she completed her studies in 1900. This was, however, enough to gain her the position of assistant to William Augustine Byrne, who had a practice in County Roscommon, Ireland<sup>3</sup>.

Five years later, there was further conflict regarding Aileen's professional position when she was appointed a veterinary inspector by Galway County Council, under the Diseases of Animals Act – an appointment the RCVS denied her since she was not officially recognised as a veterinarian. After some dispute and readvertisement of the post, which she again was appointed to, a compromise was reached with the RCVS whereby Aileen was allowed to carry out her duties, but only under the title “inspector” due to her unrecognised status. The fact she was appointed twice suggests the esteem and respect in which she was held locally and probably within her practice too<sup>3</sup>.

Reportedly, Aileen went about daily visits riding sidesaddle on an Arab stallion, before returning home to dress for dinner, attended to by servants<sup>3</sup>. She remained in practice in Ireland until 1915 when, following the outbreak of the First World War, she drove herself to France to volunteer in the war effort and, though records are sparse, it seems she spent the rest of the war volunteering her not inconsiderable services to the care and treatment of the horses on the western front<sup>3</sup>.

After the law change in 1919, the RCVS could no longer deny Aileen entry, but it did require her to pass a further exam to prove her qualification. She took a revision course at the RVC and, after success in the oral exam that followed, finally gained MRCVS status. Aileen was to work as a veterinarian only for two more years before retiring in 1924. Having then suffered ill health, she travelled to Jamaica in 1937 to visit friends and died shortly after<sup>3</sup>.

## **Blazing a trail**

Aileen's biography was written by another notable female veterinarian, Connie Ford. Born in 1912, she qualified from the RVC in 1933 before working in her own London practice, where she specialised in marmosets. Like Aileen, Connie volunteered for the war effort – this time the Second World War – then went on to work for the Veterinary Investigation Service for 29 years. Having published both Aileen's biography and several volumes of poetry, she was awarded an MBE in 1970 and died in 1998. Her papers are kept in the RCVS Knowledge archives<sup>4</sup>.

## **Presidential power**

I think we generally have a tendency to remember people who were the first to do something or be in a position of note. So who was the first woman RCVS president? Olga Uvarov. Born in Russia in 1910, she came from an affluent family and, following the death of her parents in the Russian revolution, fled to England in 1917.

After graduating from the RVC in 1934, Olga worked in practice for 16 years, moved into the pharmaceutical industry in 1950, then become head of the Glaxo Laboratories veterinary advisory department between 1967 and 1970. She was president of the Society of Women Veterinary Surgeons from 1947 to 1949 and of the Central Veterinary Society from 1951 to 1952. In 1973, Olga was made an RCVS fellow and became its first woman president in 1976. The RCVS

Knowledge archive collection holds her papers and work<sup>4</sup>.

Another RVC graduate, this time in 1937, was Mary Brancker – one of the Society of Women Veterinary Surgeons' founding members in 1941. After graduation, she worked as an assistant in Harry Steele-Bodger's Lichfield practice. When the Second World War broke out, Mr Steele-Bodger was president of the BVA and meetings were often held at his practice after the London headquarters were badly bomb damaged. This first experience of veterinary practice politics led Mary into a lifelong interest in this side of veterinary work and she was elected the first BVA woman president in 1967.

Mary's time in office coincided with the foot-and-mouth outbreak of 1967 to 1968, therefore she was heavily involved in organising the veterinary response to this epidemic and was afterwards awarded an OBE in 1969 for her contribution. Her veterinary career included much work with exotic species, notably fish farming, invertebrates and primates. She became an RCVS fellow in 1977, was presented with an honorary doctorate by the University of Stirling in 1996 and made CBE in 2000. Mary died in 2010 at the age of 95<sup>5</sup>.

Interestingly, Mary was instrumental in the winding up of a society she had helped found – the Society of Women Veterinary Surgeons – in 1990. Having seen great change in the profession she was a part of and represented this society – founded to promote women's interests within the profession – was felt to be no longer needed, due to greatly increased numbers of women in the profession.

## Conclusion

Over the past century, our profession has changed greatly, with female veterinary degree enrolment now at around 70 per cent<sup>6</sup>. The history of women in the profession reflects the feminist movement as a whole. As a woman who has never had to fight for my right to be educated, vote or work in our profession and be a professional body member, I can only stand in awe of these incredible women who blazed a trail for those of us left in their wake and who had the courage, intelligence and strength of will to pursue their dreams.

## References

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***Olga Uvarov, the first woman RCVS president.***

Photo: RCVS KNOWLEDGE LIBRARY.

