

# Preserving pages of profession's past

THE RCVS Trust Library's historical book collection is a showcase of prolific and plagiaristic writers, fame and farriery, rarities and resolutions, and unorthodox – and probably ineffectual – treatments.

The antiquarian texts take visitors to the fourth floor of Belgravia House on a veterinary and literary journey back 500 years.

Held in handsome cabinets are some 3,000 volumes, dating from 1514 to the current cut-off date of 1900. The books chart the chronology of the profession's origins, with each text mirroring the emergence of European veterinary science from the domain of farriers and livestock handlers towards today's formal qualifications and small animal dominance.

As valuable as the collection itself is its veterinary advisor, Norman Comben, whose instant recognition of each title and author – as well as his wider insights into veterinary history and antiquarian books – is encyclopaedic.

On a visit to Horseferry Road, the 84 year old explains that the surrounding compilation of books is almost entirely the result of donations to the 155-year-old library. The historical

## SARAH ROBERTS

*Veterinary Times* chief sub-editor

discovers an eclectic, and sometimes eccentric, historical book collection that reveals veterinary practice and progress across half a millennium

collection's diverse and unpredictable origins have led to a mixture of titles and topics.

"It originally came about as the result of gifts and donations," Mr Comben says. "What started as a small library of current titles became a historical collection with the passage of time."

Early on, the RCVS received a number of significant bequests from recurring donors, such as Army veterinary surgeon George Fleming, and William Field, who donated the "meticulous notes" kept by his brother John, a London equine practitioner and a former RCVS president. These and other bequests continue to form the core of the collection.

"The historical library has always been dependent upon gifts for its development, and the books continue to come today," Mr Comben explains.

"When veterinary surgeons retire, they usually leave behind a few shelves of relevant books, and these are often donated

to the library. Most vets started out with the same textbooks and these are often treasured throughout their working lives.

"When you are entirely dependent on gifts and bequests, you cannot choose what you acquire. It's probably quite remarkable that such a lot of really excellent material has ended up in this library."

### Coming of age

According to Mr Comben, although many of the early texts have little clinical value today – with patterns of "merciless plagiarism", repetition and questionable treatments – their strength is the fascinating insights they provide into the profession's coming of age. He explains that even the term veterinary took time to be widely adopted.

"Until the 1790s – or, for all practical purposes, until the beginning of the 19th century – there were no vets," he says.

"Veterinary surgeons didn't

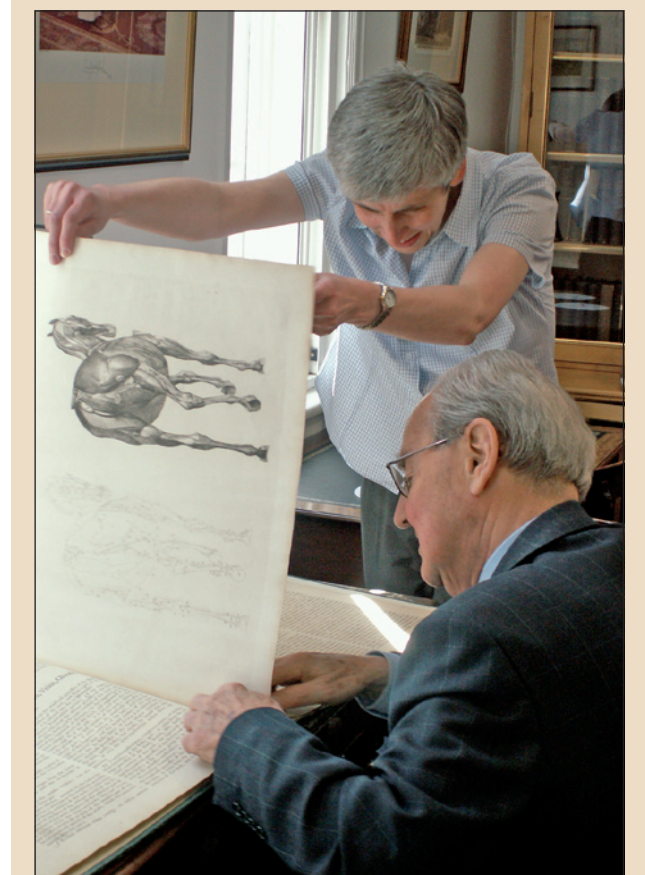
exist in England, the profession didn't exist – there were no vets or veterinary schools, there was nothing. If a horse had colic or went lame, you had to seek advice from the only people who were knowledgeable about horses and who handled horses all the time – namely the shoeing smiths, or farriers."

Interestingly, a rare mention of the word veterinary is found in one of the collection's oldest books: a 1528 first edition of Vegetius' *Artis Veterinariae, sive mulomedicinae libri quatuor* (veterinary art, that is to say animal medication), published in Basel. The text refers to a wide range of bovine and equine diseases under the general term "mal-leus". Describing Vegetius' book as "a rather confused digest of current beliefs", Mr Comben notes: "So the word veterinary was in existence. It is very strange that it seems to have disappeared until it was reinvented by the French for the Ecole Vétérinaire in Lyon in the 1760s."

Its general use in English is linked to the Army's reference to veterinary surgeons – to distinguish between human surgeons and those caring for horses in cavalry regiments – and the founding of the first veterinary college in the English-speaking world (now the RVC), in London's Camden Town in 1791.

The RVC – whose own extensive collection of veterinary historical books is now housed at its Hawkshead campus – owes its foundation to the efforts of the Odiham Agricultural Society, which Mr Comben describes as "a group of well-to-do country gentlemen, which formed in the 1780s in the village of Odiham in Hampshire with the idea of encouraging arts and industry".

The society's original handwritten minute book from the George Inn, dating from May 16, 1783, is held in the RCVS Trust's historical collection. It



Norman Comben, the veterinary advisor to the RCVS Trust Library's historical collection, and librarian Clare Boulton examine George Stubbs' *Anatomy of the Horse* (1766). It is claimed that the artist carried dead horses up the stairs of his house and hung them from the rafters to sketch them.

marks the beginning of a ripple effect that would eventually lead to formal veterinary training and legislation, as the society – driven by Granville Penn, in particular – moved towards establishing an institute for farriery.

The resulting London Veterinary College (the RVC) produced graduates including William Dick – who set up his own school in Edinburgh – and Thomas Mayer and his son, Thomas Walton Mayer, who wrote personally to every British veterinary surgeon they could trace ("an enormous task in those days," according to Mr Comben) seeking support for a submission to the government.

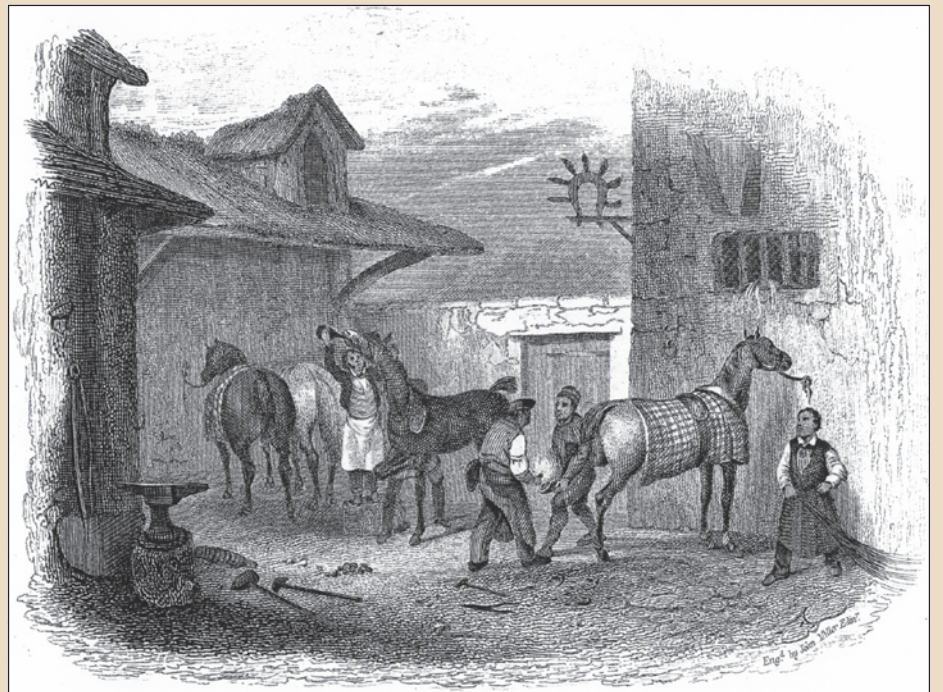
"This eventually led to a royal charter in 1844 recognising veterinary surgery as a profession,

not a trade, with a register of practitioners and rules of professional conduct, to be monitored by a body called the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons," Mr Comben continues.

"But until the first Veterinary Surgeons Act of 1881 there was no legislation to back it, meaning farriers – or anyone – could call themselves veterinary surgeons if they wanted to, without breaking the law."

### Equine emphasis

The collection's oldest item is the 1514 edition of *Libri de re Rustica* (the book of country affairs), a Latin compendium of four books by Cato, Vano, Columella and Palladius, who describe husbandry, agriculture and the management of



A scene from the 18th-century Book of Trades, showing the iron horseshoe sign used by farriers.

a country estate. The topics reflect the target audience of the time: landed gentry, who were educated enough to read and wealthy enough to afford books.

However, it is the subject of farriery that dominates the collection – unsurprisingly, given the importance of the horse and the fact that the London and Edinburgh veterinary colleges only taught equine topics during the early decades of the 1800s.

“In those times there were probably as many working blacksmiths’ and farriers’ yards as there are garages today,” Mr Comben says. “The horse was as important in those days – until the last century – as the motor car is today. If you think how many articles are printed about motor cars today, it’s not surprising there was so much published on farriery.”

*The Fower Chiefyst Offices Belonging to Horsemanshippe* by Thomas Blundevill, from Norfolk, is considered the first significant English book on the management, dieting, ailments and treatments of horses. First published in 1561 (the library has copies from 1565 and 1580), its four topics are “the office of the breeder, of the rider, of the keeper [keeper] and of the ferrer [farrier]”. Although Blundevill was an educated and well-trav-

elled man whose works dominated 16th-century farriery literature, Mr Comben says the book’s value – as with many items in the collection – is its historical significance, not its academic or clinical merit.

Farriery was also the focus of one of the 17th century’s most prolific veterinary writers: Gervase Markham, who is described as “a very popular and accessible author”. One

of the earliest of his 40 titles, *Markham’s Maister-peece, or what doth a horse-man lacke*, was initially published in 1610, with the 21st edition released in 1734. The book was so popular that surviving copies can still be found at reasonable prices, according to Mr Comben.

“Very few copies are complete,” he adds. “Every copy from 1610 to about 1680 had an original folding plate [diagram]. Of the seven or eight copies in the library, only one or two have the original plate. People used to tear them out and put them on the wall, because they looked very nice in the cottage kitchen. Some people have called Markham ‘the James Herriot of the 17th century’, but the only similarity is that they both wrote a considerable number of books.”

## Fame and farriery

Although visitors’ eyes may be drawn to the very early books, Mr Comben believes later texts are “just as interesting and important for a variety of different significances”. The greater part of the historical collection consists of works dated between 1700 and 1900, when most “ambitious, forthright and successful farriers” sought to achieve fame by writing books.

Although some texts were very popular and had numerous reprints and new editions, Mr Comben explains that most of the successful 18th-century books were, in fact, not written by traditional farriers but by surgeons who had turned to the treatment of horses instead of human patients – often due to a surplus of candidates for appointments as Army surgeons.

“These men were well educated and intelligent. Many were well read, and they had all the current medical thinking to impart and they could write concisely,” he adds.

One such surgeon and author was William Gibson, who, in his 40s, after being retired as a military surgeon, set up as a farrier in London’s Duke Street, a fashionable area off Oxford Street. His three books – on farriery and diet, and a dispensatory – were

published from 1720 onwards and reprinted in a number of editions. Other successful surgeons-turned-farriers from the 18th century included Henry Bracken, John Bartlet and William Taplin. The latter’s *Gentleman’s Stable Directory* was first published in 1778 and immediately became so popular that it was reprinted about 10 times in its first year.

At a similar time, the term “hippopathology” was introduced by the father-and-son Percivalls, whose series of this name eventually expanded to six volumes.

An exception to the surgeon scribes was Francis Clater, the son of a Nottinghamshire farrier, who became a household name in the late 1700s with his extremely popular *Every Man His Own Farrier*, which eventually had more than 20 editions and was later combined with his book on cattle treatment.

Although the number of published texts blossomed in the 18th and 19th centuries, plagiarism and repetition were rife – reflecting the lack of serious advancement in veterinary medicine until 20th-century science opened new doors.

“The [early] remedies con-

*continued overleaf*

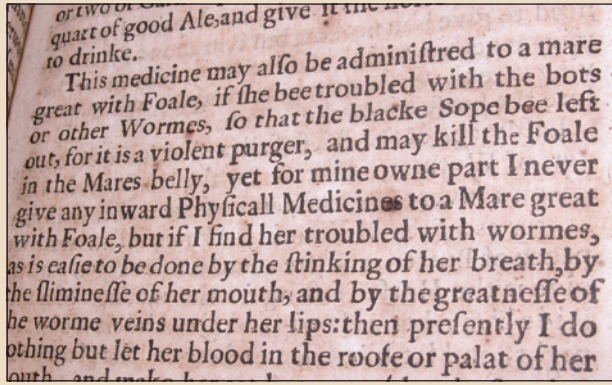


Above: a selection of 16th and 17th-century texts from the historical collection.

Above right: *The Fower Chiefyst Offices Belonging to Horsemanshippe*, first published in 1561, is considered the first significant English book on horse medicine and management.

Right: prolific writer Gervase Markham has been described as “the 17th century James Herriot”.





Left: the collection's oldest book is the 1514 edition of *Libri de re Rustica* (foreground) – the book of country affairs – pictured with another 16th-century text, *Vegetius' Artis Veterinariae*. Above: an example of an early equine remedy.

## ■ PRESERVING PAGES OF PROFESSION'S PAST – from page five

sisted mainly of herbal mixtures together with concoctions of animal and plant parts and products, for there was little else," Mr Comben explains.

"Farriers resorted to bleeding, purging and, for lameness, hot firing. These practices had two advantages: the farriers would be seen to actually be doing something, and they could accurately forecast the outcome. In the majority of cases, such treatments were of no benefit, except possibly for the enforced rest that became necessary. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the majority of cases that recovered did so in spite of, rather than because of, their treatment."

Anatomy books from the collection have slightly more

modern-day relevance, including "one of the treasures of the college": George Stubbs' landscape folio, *Anatomy of the Horse*, from 1766 – a landmark production that "is a veritable monument to art, engraving and anatomy", according to Mr Comben.

"His love was equine anatomy," he says of Stubbs. "Equine anatomy in Europe in general was in a very poor state, with only one book published, and I think he thought he would improve matters. According to the literature, he bought a three-storey house in the midlands, made the roof space into a studio and used to carry dead horses up the stairs on his shoulders and hang them in the rafters to produce these drawings."

Another equine anatomy book, by 17th-century English farrier Andrew Snape, borrowed "quite mercilessly" from the first major tome of this kind: a 1596 two-part text by Italian author Carlo Ruini.

Mr Comben says: "Of Snape's 49 whole-page anatomy drawings, more than 20 were copied from Ruini – but he very cheekily reversed the pictures from left to right to reduce the chances of being accused of plagiarism."

### Restoration and repairs

The collection also sheds light on developments in printing and binding. The shiny Morocco leather bindings of some books make them look almost too new for their historical location.

"This is the result of the Second World War, when the books

were in Red Lion Square," Mr Comben explains. "The building suffered from incendiary bombs that landed on the roof, and the fire brigade doused everything with water – there was a lot of damage to the books.

"If you had property that was damaged as the result of enemy action during the war, there was a scheme after the war whereby the Government paid for the repairs. So the librarian at the time probably sent away all the books in the collection that needed restoration or repairs – and this explains why so many books now have this high-quality, but otherwise quite unsuitable, shiny Morocco leather [goat skin] bindings."

When the RCVS moved to Belgrave Square in the 1960s, elegant housing was provided for the historical book collection when sycamore wood bookcases were fitted around the first floor – the result of a generous grant from The Wellcome Trust. The historical library then became known as the RCVS Wellcome Library, and the bookcases were removed and refitted in Belgravia House when the college moved there.

### Accessible resource

The RCVS Trust later recognised that further action was needed to ensure the longevity of the collection as an accessible reference source. Enter the Adopt-a-Book appeal, which has raised more than £15,000 towards ongoing conservation work through the sponsorship of 130 rare books in the past four years.

RCVS Trust librarian Clare Boulton explains: "Apart from a programme of re-binding in the late 1940s, following war damage, little had been invested in the historical collection to ensure its longevity. The Adopt-a-Book scheme was set up to enable the RCVS Trust library to ensure the historical collection could be conserved and preserved for future generations."

Another income source is the ongoing sale of duplicate copies.

"Part of the reason we ask people to contact us regarding donations is that if we already have a book, we would want to suggest alternative homes and/or ask if we could sell it to raise money to preserve our existing collection," Ms Boulton says.

## Lifelong passion for early literature

A SCHOOLBOY'S interest in books extended to veterinary texts when Norman Comben studied at the RVC in the 1940s.

"I started collecting when I was a student at the RVC during the war years, when the London college was evacuated to the University of Reading," he recalls. "I used to go to lectures in the morning and then wander down to the old London Road bookshop in Reading. That's

where I bought my first few antiquarian

books, and I've been collecting on and off ever since."

His collection continued to evolve as he entered small animal practice in South Kensington and then worked for a pharmaceutical company. Mr Comben is now recognised as a world authority on early veterinary literature and history.

"Nothing was planned," he explains. "Whoever would have thought that here I would be 60 years later talking as an expert on old books? It's a case of making the most of opportunities when they present themselves."

In the 1960s, he began to trade books from his own collection, producing an annual compilation of sale items from 1966. His collection eventually became "too big and too important and too all embracing". Around the same time, the Science Museum acquired medical, dental and veterinary artefacts from The Wellcome Trust. As a result, the museum library was in the market for historic veterinary material and, in 1987, Mr Comben sold his collection of more than 700 volumes – mostly dating from before 1800. These texts are still housed at the Science Museum library, which has been amalgamated with the library of Imperial College London.

However, he continued to collect books of veterinary interest and also published a book of his own, *The Durham Ox*. It tells the tale of a "remarkable animal" that toured the UK in the early 1800s, leaving the modern-day legacy of several pubs named after it – and even a township in Victoria, Australia.

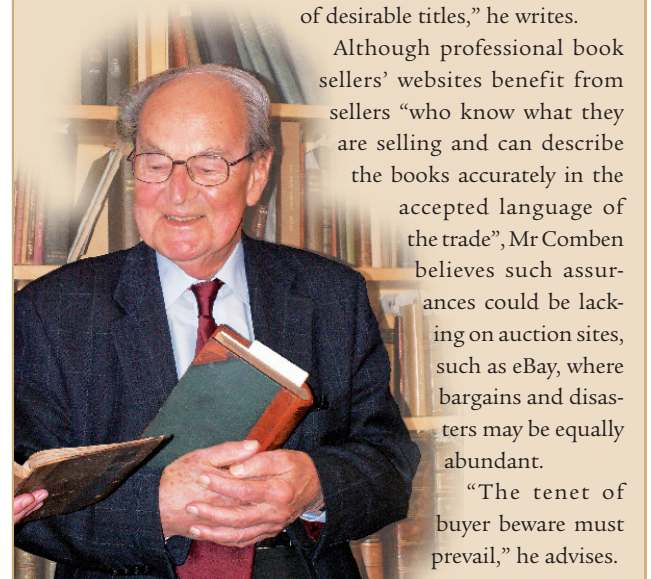
Mr Comben's deteriorating eyesight led to his recent decision to officially close the pages of his book business after 42 years. A final catalogue of stock includes books, trade literature, prints and engravings valued up to £4,200 (a "superb copy" of Thomas Blundevill from 1609).

In what he described as his farewell contribution to the "Collectors' Corner" column in the *Veterinary History Society's* journal, *Veterinary History*, Mr Comben reflects on changes to the historic literature market relating to the profession. He says early husbandry and farriery books are becoming particularly scarce, general sales have declined, and the internet has opened up both opportunities and pitfalls for collectors.

"If you talk with a book dealer you can expect to be told that the trade is becoming increasingly difficult because of the shortage of good books to handle, and the ever-soaring prices of desirable titles," he writes.

Although professional book sellers' websites benefit from sellers "who know what they are selling and can describe the books accurately in the accepted language of the trade", Mr Comben believes such assurances could be lacking on auction sites, such as eBay, where bargains and disasters may be equally abundant.

"The tenet of buyer beware must prevail," he advises.



"The historical collection is a nationally important resource formed from the generous donations of veterinarians and others over the years. The breadth of the collection – from the earliest veterinary text to important works published in English in the

18th and 19th centuries – allows users to trace the development of veterinary science and practice from its earliest days."

● The RCVS Trust library can be contacted by telephone (020 7202 0752) or email (library@rcvstrust.org.uk). ■