

The Class of '54

Bristol's First Veterinary Graduates



Back row: Bill Watson, Ray Ashdown, Bob Thomas, Alan Campbell, Keith Smith, Trevor Blandford, Lionel Hemsley, Norman Western

Middle row: Roger Oldham, Ken Hibbitt, Dave Ducker, Roger Johnson, Bill Manktelow, Roger Short, Dave Smith, Harold Pearson, Bill Jones-Davies

Front row: Pat Axten, Mavis Blackwell, Dinah France, Margaret Jacques, Joan Hopwood, Caroline Clark

Preface

In 2011 the veterinary profession celebrated the 250th anniversary of the first vet school (established in Lyon in 1761). As part of an online discussion about the history of vet schools in Europe and beyond, I was keen to write about Bristol. However, as the UK's 'new' vet school my initial search revealed very little, Bristol was too new to be of historic interest... until now!

The next few months took me on a journey during which I have been enthused and enthralled by stories about Bristol from those who were there at the beginning. As a Bristol graduate myself (Class of '86), I found it fascinating to hear about the origins of the vet school and those who delivered the first BVSc course. I also realised where some of the traditions, and pranks, originated! It has been a great pleasure and honour to collate some of the history, stories and memorabilia of 'The Class of '54'. They were, as I have come to learn, an exceptional group of individuals. They also shared a passion for Bristol that echoed my experiences during the 1980s which, as I have been pleased to hear from current students, is still very much part of the Bristol experience.

This pamphlet includes a brief overview of some of the stories and events from the times of 'The Class of '54'. Inevitably there are omissions but hopefully minimal inaccuracy. All the detailed material collected during this project has been digitised and is being archived by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Charitable Trust as part of the history of the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom.

Sarah Baillie (née Aizlewood) BVSc, MRCVS
January 2012

My thanks to 'The Class of '54'

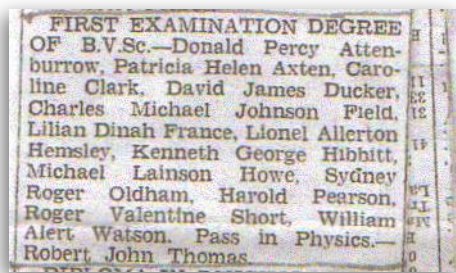
I would like to thank my neighbour Caroline Pym (née Clark) for her enthusiasm and, among other things, for 'keeping me to task'. Caroline set the ball rolling by writing to her peer group and asking them for reminiscences about their time at Bristol. In producing this pamphlet I have used information from letters and emails sent to Caroline by Bill Watson, Bill Jones-Davies, Dave Smith and Roger Short and from a conversation with Dinah Johnson (née France) during a lovely evening spent reminiscing about Bristol circa 1950s and 1980s. A big 'Thank you' is owed to them all and in particular to Bill Watson and Dave Smith for sending lots of photos, which importantly came with text that explained the context and the stories behind the pictures, and to Avril Waterman-Pearson for sharing with us the memorabilia collected and saved by Harold Pearson.

Introduction

In 1949 Bristol University opened its doors to the first group of students who embarked on a new veterinary course to be based in Park Row and out at Langford. At the time Winston Churchill was Chancellor of the university and the city was emerging from the aftermath of the Second World War. The new vet school was established in response to the Loveday committee's report on veterinary education (1944). The reasons for choosing Bristol as one of the sites (a new vet school also opened in Cambridge) may have related to its geographical location and Dr Thomas Loveday was a Bristol academic and Vice-Chancellor of the university (1922-1945). Professor Frederick Blakemore was appointed as Chair of Veterinary Studies and was instrumental in establishing and organising the new 'School of Veterinary Science'.

The BVSc Course

The course started in 1949 with a small group of students who were selected on academic qualifications and at interview. The 1st year subjects included biology, physics and chemistry, which were taught with the medical and dental students. The B.V.Sc. degree examination results were reported in the 'Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror' on Tuesday July 25th 1950:



Origin: Bill Watson

These students were joined by others who 'went up' in 1950 (who, for example, already had a degree or transferred from other courses) and this is when the main veterinary course began. The full cohort included six women (the maximum allowed) and among the men were some who had served in the armed forces or completed national service. Anatomy and embryology were taught in the new vet school at Park Row but physiology, biochemistry and pathology were still taught with the medical students.

"The vets always sat at the back of the lecture theatre and caused a certain amount of trouble!"

"We would slide along the bench en masse to push medics and females onto the floor!"

The new veterinary students were inspired and enthused by those who taught them. Professor Hewer, for example, who taught pathology, was a flamboyant character with a bow tie, a renowned gardener and botanist, and pathologist to Bristol zoo. At the end of lectures and as a concession to the vet students he invariably included a description based on a recent case at the zoo – often from the monkey house. That *"always resulted in a great cheer from the back row"* i.e. the vet students!

Professor Ottaway was Head of Preclinical Studies and an anatomist. Memorable were his lectures on the rumen and the sweep of the mesentery and its attachments. He would twist arms and body (*"a vision of a small man who was something of a contortionist!"*) to demonstrate the anatomy of

the rumen (many years before computer animation and 3D graphics). He also liked to emphasise the importance of integrating preclinical disciplines, stating *“Form reflects function – never forget this”*. Dr Dick ‘Doggie’ Smith taught anatomy and Gwen Halley, who joined from the RVC, taught embryology, while some lectures were delivered by Professor Baxter. Physiology lectures were given with the medics and delivered by Professor Brocklehurst with veterinary content provided by Dr Arnold Carlyle (*“as it were”*) and Dr Bach, who joined from Cambridge. Mr McCrea, who was ex Royal Army Veterinary Corp, provided a sound grounding in animal management and Hamish Batten covered histology. Bacteriology was taught by Dr Linton and parasitology by Professor Crofton, which was extended in the clinical years by Lawson Soulsby, microbiologist and parasitologist. Dr Fitzpatrick provided an interesting and useful course in the relatively new discipline of veterinary pharmacology. Public health, meat hygiene and legislation were taught in Canynge Hall by a public health officer and the clarity of some descriptions were destined to put some of those present off shellfish for life!

To give students extra experience in animal handling and husbandry a six week residential course was held at the ‘Somerset Farm Institute’ at Cannington in 1951. The course was for those with limited agricultural experience and Harold Pearson (from a farm in Lancashire) and Alan Campbell (having a degree in agriculture) were excused. Notable events included a fruit salad enhanced with some fermented tinned grapes (a commodity quite hard to acquire during times of rationing) and the realisation that one’s capacity for beer did not equate volumetrically with cider! This course was not to be repeated for subsequent years although very recently Bristol students have once again started attending Bridgwater College in Cannington for some Animal Management classes. A trip was also organised to BOCM (British Oil and Cake Mills) at Avonmouth in June 1952.



Students, lab assistant and driver in front of the bus at BOCM

Origin: Dave Smith

After exams in the summer of 1952 the students then headed out to the field station at Langford in North Somerset. The student accommodation was still under construction so the women slept upstairs in Langford House while the men were billeted in digs in surrounding villages. Part way through the year the men’s hostel was ready and the students moved in, with some having to drag their belongings by sledge in the snow, only a few having cars at that time.



The men's hostel at Langford

Origin: Dave Smith

At Langford Professor Blakemore taught an excellent course on infectious disease, including memorable lectures on foot and mouth disease and rabies. His garden, however, was somewhat unkempt and the students placed an announcement in the local press saying that Professor Blakemore's garden would be open to the public the following weekend. Several visitors turned up, although no one discovered who was responsible! Some of the other staff came straight from practice. For example, Professor Messervy had a successful practice in the Channel Islands and taught surgery with skill and panache, often illustrating lectures with anecdotes about *"When I did this on a Jersey cow..."* and a lady vet, Marjorie Levy, had a practice in Bristol and taught small animal medicine and surgery. Other members of staff included Dr 'Ginger' Wynn Jones, Dr Archie Laing who taught reproduction and Dudley Osborne from the MAFF VI Centre. Dr Jimmy Holmes provided, among other things, comprehensive coverage of every possible poisonous plant *"even if the clinical significance was tenuous e.g. a reference to an unidentified illness in one pig in 1902...!"*

Although the course finished in the summer, finals weren't until September which left plenty of time to revise and to see practice. Finals included written papers with questions such as *"describe a grazing pattern to control worms in a flock of sheep"* and a few practicals and vivas. Finally, the 23 graduates, 'The Class of '54', received their degrees in the Wills Memorial Building in October 1954.



Getting ready for...

Graduation Photo
'Class of '54'



Extracurricular Activities

'The Class of '54' set the standard for years to come. They enthusiastically participated in Rag Week, established the Centaur Society, represented the university in a variety of sports (e.g. rugby, rowing, lacrosse), contributed to music and singing (e.g. Dinah France played grand piano in the Lady Chapel in Bristol), produced the first final year review (pantomime) and brought the Annual AVS Conference to Bristol in 1954. Other activities while in Bristol included:

"Light relief from lectures was provided by practical first aid in the Great Hall with much bandaging and splinting which produced mummies which could have graced the British Museum!"

Rag Week

Rag Week's annual procession through the streets of Bristol saw the vet students build an impressive papier-mâché 'winged horse' or Pegasus, something for following years to emulate!



Rag procession: A papier-mâché 'winged horse' or Pegasus on the vet's float

Origin: Bill Watson

Rag Week activities included a battle between Wessex (Bristol and mostly vets) and Mercia (Birmingham students invited to join the festivities) and with Health and Safety to the fore even then, eye shields were compulsory!



Wessex Warriors

(Caroline Clark is at the far left of the back row)



Opening salvos



Storming of the Victoria Rooms

Origin: Dave Smith

Rag week was not to be forgotten by those out at the field station in Somerset and two intrepid or fool hardy individuals (Norman Western and Dave Smith) climbed the largest conifers in Langford House grounds to suspend a 'RAGWEEK' banner (although barely visible in the photo below, the height of the trees is very apparent!)

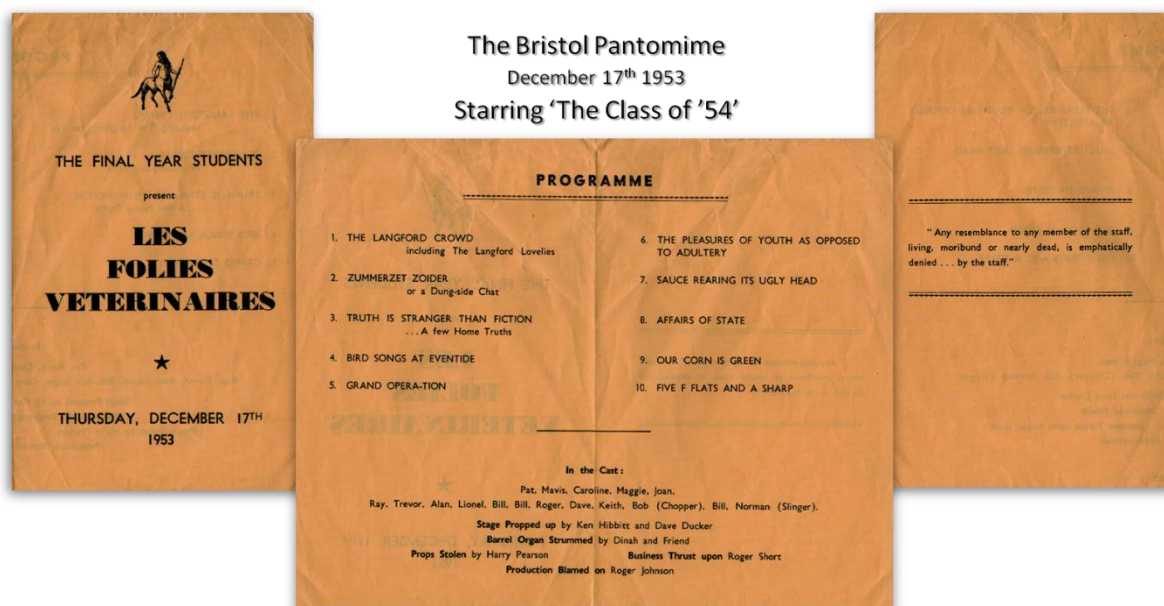


A 'RAGWEEK' banner was suspending between two large conifers in Langford House grounds

Origin: Dave Smith

The Final Year Pantomime and AVS

And so we come to some important events in the final year. The first pantomime was staged just before the Christmas break in 1953. A tradition was established that students should act their roles while also playing each part as a member of staff (*or was that then, and continues to be, just a coincidence and a figment of staff imagination?*). Let the programme tell the story...



Origin: Harold Pearson

LES FOLIES VETERINAIRES

1. THE LANGFORD CROWD
including the Langford Lovelies
2. ZUMMERZET ZOIDER
or a Dung-side Chat
3. TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION
... A few Home Truths
4. BIRD SONGS AT EVENTIDE
5. GRAND OPERA-TION
6. THE PLEASURES OF YOUTH AS OPPOSED TO ADULTERY
7. SAUCE REARING ITS UGLY HEAD
8. AFFAIRS OF STATE
9. OUR CORN IS GREEN
10. FIVE F FLATS AND A SHARP

In the Cast:

Pat, Mavis, Caroline, Maggie, Joan
Ray, Trevor, Alan, Lionel, Bill, Bill, Roger, Dave, Keith, Bob (Chopper), Bill, Norman (Slinger)

Stage Propped up by Ken Hibbitt and Dave Ducker

Barrel Organ Strummed by Dinah and Friend

Props Stolen by Harry Pearson

Business Thrust upon Roger Short

Production Blamed on Roger Johnson

"Any resemblance to any member of staff, living, moribund, or nearly dead is emphatically denied...
by the staff."

Keen to put Bristol on the map with students from the other six vet schools, the 11th Annual Conference of the Association of Veterinary Students (AVS) was held in Bristol from 28th to 30th January 1954 and was based at the Victoria Rooms. Talks included 'Veterinary Students and National Service' and careers in industry and the ministry. A debate on a somewhat controversial topic 'This house is in favour of more women veterinary students and less women veterinary surgeons' was proposed by Dublin and opposed by Bristol.



Front cover of the 11th AVS annual conference programme, the first to be held at Bristol

Origin: Harold Pearson

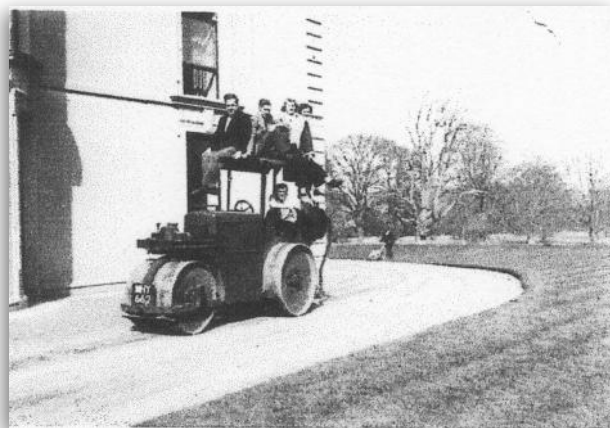
And there were some other, now longstanding, 'traditions' established by 'The Class of '54'... The 'Clock Attack' was launched on the clarion which played, and still does after a fashion, 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' *ad nauseam*. Access was through a tack room (usually locked). During the inaugural clock attack a plan of the pegs and drum was drawn along with slight modifications to change the tune...



The Langford clock renowned for chiming 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' on the hour, every hour

Origin: Dave Smith

On another occasion a bed complete with student (Norman Western) was transported to the lecture theatre at Langford. A variety of creatures were let loose in lectures e.g. some mice, hundreds of maybugs and a billy goat ("*the smell lingered for some time...*"). On Monday mornings Professor Messervy would wonder why the casting ropes were muddier than they had been on Friday (they doubled as the ropes for students going caving on the Mendips at the weekends). And a particularly daring scheme involved a steam roller being removed from road works just outside Langford gates and driven around Langford to be discovered some days later behind bales in a nearby Dutch barn.



The steamroller outside Langford House with Norman Western at the wheel and on the top (from left to right) Roger Short, Dave Smith, Mavis Blackwell and Caroline Clark

Origin: Dave Smith

And some final quotes:

"It started with us"

"What a wonderful time we had"

"I'm so proud to be a Bristol graduate"

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Postscript

While researching and writing this pamphlet it became clear that 'The Class of '54' went on to capitalise on their time at Bristol in their lives and careers. At the moment I don't have time to write those stories but hopefully I, or someone else, will do so in the not too distant future. One thing I can say is that their legacy lives on not just at Bristol but also through major contributions to the veterinary profession and society. There is a list of outstanding achievements in practice, in the ministry, in industry and in overseas services and through distinguished careers in research and academia. And, although perhaps not needing or wanting any official recognition, an extraordinary number of 'The Class of '54' were acclaimed through honours including a CB (Companion of the Order of the Bath), MBEs and FRCVSs, received Professorial appointments and became Deans (in Zambia and New Zealand), and more.

Acknowledgements

The photos and memorabilia were supplied by members of 'The Class of '54' and their relatives and are included with the permission of those who kindly sent them to me or Caroline. All the photos and all the memorabilia we received (including the complete AVS pamphlet, the pantomime programme, and the final year dinner menu and toasts) have been scanned to preserve them in electronic format.

I would also like to thank Andrew Gardiner (vet and historian) from the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, Edinburgh and Clare Boulton (librarian) at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Charitable Trust for their help and advice.