

# ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF THE STATE VETERINARY SERVICE 1865 – 2015



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slaughter or quarantine of affected animals and their contacts, one of the approaches that continues to this day.

Two widespread endemic diseases, bovine tuberculosis (bTB) and brucellosis remained an issue for both animal and human health. Controlling these was more difficult as signs did not appear until the disease was advanced, so veterinary surgeons looked to develop better diagnostic methods.

This need for better diagnostic support had first been recognised in 1894 during an

In 1905, under Chief Veterinary Officer Sir Stewart Stockman, the VLS expanded its remit and started to research animal diseases. In 1917 this research was transferred to the newly opened Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL) at a site near Weybridge<sup>1</sup>. The CVL was one of the first purpose-built state veterinary laboratories in the world and is now an integral part of the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA).

Sir Stewart's appointment brought about significant changes in the development of

veterinary medicine. His time in post saw the passing of the Tuberculosis Order 1925, which for the first time linked the spread of disease in humans with the consumption of untreated milk and led to bTB testing in cattle herds.

The importance of the veterinary profession in fulfilling a public service was further recognised in 1919 when the newly established Ministry of Agriculture had veterinary expertise at its core in its new Diseases of Animal Division. By unifying the provision of state veterinary medicine and providing leadership to the profession, a significant step had been taken in controlling animal diseases.

During the 1930s demand for veterinary services increased as farmers and the government sought to eliminate bTB and improve the health of the nation's farm animals in order to safeguard agriculture and food production<sup>2</sup>. During that time various Acts and schemes were introduced including:

- the Milk Act 1934, which introduced the notion of an 'attested herd' (ie certified as being free from disease) whereby milk guaranteed as disease-free attracted a premium;
- the Attested Herds Scheme 1935, which enabled farmers to apply for official bTB testing and, in the absence of reactors, to be entered into the Register of Attested Herds;
- the Agriculture Act 1937 saw the Ministry's Animal Health Division take over the Veterinary Investigation Service (VIS), under the control of the

The State Veterinary Service was created in 1865 when the Government established the Veterinary Department of the Privy Council to tackle a devastating epidemic of cattle plague (Rinderpest), a highly infectious viral disease which caused the loss of around 400,000 animals. For the first time, veterinary medicine was seen as nationally important and attempts to control disease, although effective locally, needed national co-ordination and standardisation.

By 1900 the nation had suffered numerous serious outbreaks of infectious livestock diseases including sheep pox, cattle plague, swine fever, foot and mouth disease and bovine pleuro-pneumonia. The policy for eliminating these diseases was to place restrictions on the importation and movement of livestock, and the compulsory



outbreak of swine fever. At that time dead animals were taken to the Royal Veterinary College at Camden Town for *post mortem* examination. However, the Board of Agriculture decided to set up its own diagnostic service for animal disease eradication schemes. The Veterinary Laboratory Service (VLS) was established in a basement at 4 Whitehall Place and, over the next decade, samples from diseased pigs were transported to the centre of London for examination.



Sir Stewart Stockman

CVL Director at Weybridge. This function, previously carried out by local authorities, was responsible for livestock disease surveillance in the regions, encompassing both animal health and the safety of meat and milk intended for human consumption.

- a system of financial compensation for farmers' losses through compulsory slaughter policies, providing an incentive to them to abide by government regulations and facilitate the work of state veterinary surgeons.

This culminated in the establishment in 1938 of the

in Starcross identified the first case of *Mycobacterium bovis* in badgers and found that badgers were a significant reservoir of the disease.

The wild badger population at Woodchester Park in Gloucestershire has been intensively studied by government scientists since 1975. This is the only long-term study of TB epidemiology in a wild badger population. The capture, examination and sampling of individual animals throughout their lifetimes has yielded a unique database and fundamental insights into badger ecology and TB dynamics. This research has benefited from



State Veterinary Service (SVS), as part of the Animal Health Division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF), under Sir Daniel Cabot, the Chief Veterinary Officer<sup>3</sup>.

World War II further emphasised the important role of the SVS as the Government sought to boost food production in Britain. Following the war, the 1947 and 1957 Agriculture Acts were introduced to increase food production and agricultural systems became more intensive.

During the 1960s, the SVS was heavily involved in eradicating bTB and brucellosis. However, pockets of bTB persisted in the South West; complete eradication has continued to pose a challenge.

Government vets and scientists also played a key role in identifying and investigating emerging diseases in wildlife. In 1971, the regional VIS laboratory

close collaboration with scientists from Weybridge and led, in 2010, to licensing of the first tuberculosis vaccine for badgers (BadgerBCG) which is in regular use in parts of the country.

Government vets also played a very significant role in enforcing animal welfare legislation, providing an excellent and much appreciated service to the public in relation to safeguarding animal welfare standards.

The VIS continued to work closely with CVL to facilitate investigation into outbreaks of disease. Issues identified by the VIS often led to further research by the laboratory. For example, CVL characterised the first case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in 1986 and, from the epidemiological information provided by the VIS, identified a link between the disease and feed containing a

scrapie-like agent in ruminant-derived meat and bone meal.

There followed a period of significant change as Civil Service reforms transformed the delivery of central government services. In 1990, CVL became one of the government's first executive agencies, followed by the merger of CVL and VIS to form the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) in recognition of the links between them. This brought together a national network of laboratories providing veterinary surveillance, research, laboratory services and specialist advice to MAFF, private veterinarians and the agricultural industry. The VLA was responsible for many significant developments in animal disease recognition, diagnosis, surveillance and monitoring, providing MAFF with scientific evidence to aid policy development. This work extended to zoonotic diseases such as salmonella, working closely with public health bodies to protect human health.

In 2009, Defra created the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA) as part of a review of its arms-length bodies. The new Agency brought together a wide range of field services, wildlife and veterinary expertise and scientific capabilities in order to make the delivery of these important services and the ability to respond to disease outbreaks more resilient in the economic climate at that time.

In 2014 the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) was formed by merging the AHVLA with those Defra Inspectorates covering plant, seed and bee health, creating a single organisation responsible for safeguarding animal and plant health.

Over the course of 150 years, the constant theme has been the promotion of better animal health and the detection of threats to the national livestock population. Vets have worked tirelessly to achieve this aim, and will continue to do so for as long as there are animals at risk.



The SVS became an Agency of the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2005 and changed its name to Animal Health in 2007 following mergers with the Egg Marketing Inspectorate, Dairy Hygiene Inspectorate and Wildlife Licensing and Registration Service in line with recommendations made by the Hampton Review.

#### References

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