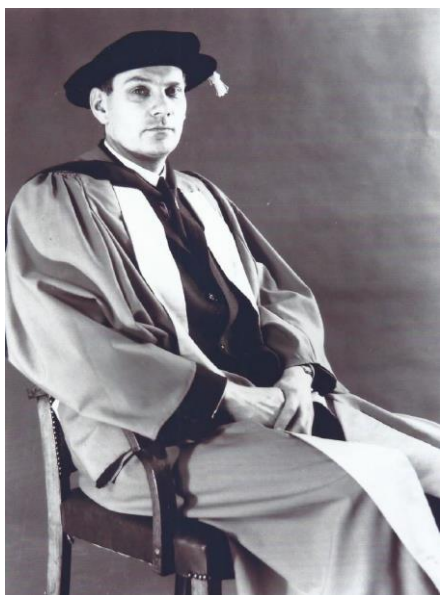




An Appreciation of the life of Dr R. N. Smith

Based on a paper originally published in The Veterinary Record and collated with the assistance of Professor Brian Pickering and published with permission from the British Chelonia Group:

"The death of Dick Smith on the 12th August 1988 resulted in a tragic loss to the veterinary profession in general and veterinary education in particular. He was not only a staunch colleague but also a great friend to many, both within the profession and outside. His life was dedicated to his family and his work; his contributions to both the University and the profession were outstanding. In terms of his subject, veterinary anatomy, he was a walking encyclopaedia; such a detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the subject represented a lifetime's dedication.

Many will remember Dick as a colleague and friend to whom they could turn for discussion and advice on both academic and personal problems. His ability to stop and find time for such consultations was an outstanding feature of his personality. However, Dick was an individual with firm beliefs and these were defended irrespective of the consequences. There is no doubt that he was not easily convinced on matters conflicting with his own philosophy, he spoke his mind directly and left no doubt as to his opinions. Dick was also one of life's perfectionists at home and at work, any task was carried out to perfection.

His areas of interest were wide and we believe no one person could convey a complete appreciation of his life. To overcome this difficulty we have solicited contributions from a numbers of friends who experienced Dick's influence in different areas.

In the beginning:

An appreciation of Dick from the start of his academic career is given by Tony King:

"Dick Smith was among one of the first groups of students that I encountered in 1945 as a newly appointed Demonstrator in Anatomy at the Royal Veterinary College under Oscar

Ottaway and Jimmy McGunn. I would like to say that his interest in Anatomy had not emerged at that time, but if it had, I was unaware of it. I remember being very pleasantly surprised when Jimmy announced that Dick was to join the Department after graduating in 1948, since by that time Oscar had gone to Cambridge and the Department staff was thin on the ground. Quite soon Dick went with Oscar, now Professor Ottaway, to the new Veterinary School at Bristol, where I joined them in early 1951.

Then followed a ten year revolution in the teaching of veterinary anatomy. Luckily the three of us shared the same messianic fervour in trimming irrelevant detail and in turning the subject towards the study of living tissues. We had all been rebels, activated by the never-to-be-forgotten Amo, against the old approach to anatomy. Now suddenly we had the chance to create a new and exciting curriculum. They were exhilarating days.

Dick and I also shared a desire to develop research. Veterinary anatomists had contributed relatively little to the advancement of learning. We therefore decided to present a paper at every meeting of the Anatomy Society of Great Britain and Ireland. It was a somewhat over-ambitious plan which we were unable to sustain completely, but our colleagues in the Department of Medical Anatomy did become aware that another species of anatomy existed. More important, it forced us to get on with active research ourselves, and quite quickly convinced us of the need to attract young researchers among our own students. A series of undergraduates worked with us during vacations and a substantial number returned as Dick's Ph.D students. This was, I think, by far the greatest contribution that Dick made to veterinary anatomy. Certainly he was an excellent teacher and a perfectionist in presenting his material in the classroom, but good teachers are quickly forgotten. The greatest memorial to his academic career is the array of distinguished researchers who passed through his hands.

I had the good fortune to work closely with Dick for 13 years, and to draw on his advice and anatomical expertise for another 25 years after that. He was an external examiner at Liverpool for four years, and several times recently has delighted our students with his knowledge of anatomy of exotic species and his armfuls of snakes and tortoises. In all these years I enjoyed his dry humour and admired his fearless criticism of incorrect behaviour on the part of great or small. Indeed, one of my earliest memories is of Dick ticking off his professor for parking his car in the Veterinary School yard. All in all he can fairly be described as an original, and life will be the poorer without him".

A close colleague, appointed to the Bristol School on the same day as Dick, was Hamish Batten, who recounts the association with Dick from the birth of the Veterinary School:

"The sudden and unexpected death of Dick Smith on 12th August 1988 deprived us of a staunch and dedicated teacher, who will greatly be missed within the Veterinary School – undergraduates, preclinical and clinical – as well as more widely in the University. After qualifying and teaching briefly at the Royal Veterinary College in London, he joined the small group appointed in August 1950 to initiate a School of Veterinary Science in Bristol (we had mountains of glassware, but no animals, packing cases of equipment, but neither teaching material nor museum!).

Dick developed and supervised radiological facilities in Park Row and gradually built up the museum collection, adding many of his own dissections, diagrams, models and later his audio-visual tape programmes on locomotion. For many years he generously provided specimen material to develop and extend the teaching collection of histology slides in the Physiology department. Initially his research interest lay in the ruminant gut and later in

ossification, bone and the biomechanical properties of the intervertebral disc, a field in which he supervised a series of Ph.D studies.

Dick achieved a deserved reputation as a well-prepared and fluent teacher – in every topic of comparative veterinary anatomy and also in the applied, surgical and radiological aspects, which he pioneered at Langford. His lucid approach and commendably clear anatomical illustrations remain available in various teaching manuals, used here and in other Schools. He viewed anatomy as a living, dynamic subject, directly applicable in clinical practice, and not merely as minutiae and dry old bones. Through long practical experience he became an extremely knowledgeable veterinary anatomist, whose opinion over the wide field of domestic and exotic species was sought with respect, and given with authority. For the genuine enquiry he always made time, diverting from his own work to advise or to help in the search for the answer. In his later years he became expert in exotic species, such as fish, snakes and lizards, and was frequently invited to lecture on these at other Veterinary Schools.

In personal dealing he exercised a sharp wit seasoned with a satirical turn of phrase, yet close beneath this façade lay a warm heart with genuine concern for the welfare of others. Since the Bristol Veterinary School began countless students have benefitted from his wise counsel, advice and friendly guidance; through him a few have become inspired about Anatomy! Much respected by the students, Dick had earlier been a Vice President and then elected Honorary President of the Centaur Society.

Within the Bristol School Dick mellowed into a father figure. Through his door came a stream of callers; former students visiting from home and abroad, local practitioners, clinicians seeking a second opinion, first and second year students with work or personal problems, young postgraduates with research to discuss, academic colleagues of all grades and technicians, for whom he had a special respect.

In 1964-65 he was Visiting Professor at Purdue University, Indiana and later gave invited courses in the Ontario Veterinary College, Guelph and at Tufts University, Boston. From the outset he was very active in the local Mid West Veterinary Association, serving as Secretary, and while President in 1964 he organised the BVA Congress in Bristol. Within the British Veterinary Association he was for several years Treasurer and in 1975 its President.

In 1983 he became the second non-professorial Chairman of the Board of Veterinary Studies, serving with great integrity and fairness and also representing the University on the Council of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Having worked in the Anatomisches Institut, he was an ardent supporter of the Bristol-Hannover veterinary exchange which we established in 1966. He created the much appreciated opportunity for visiting German students to spend a day working in local practices.

During the late 70s he ran the department while Professor Ottaway was ill and many in Bristol, and throughout the UK, were disappointed that he was excluded from this Chair by terms of the subsequent advertisement.

For a quarter century Dick played a prominent part in ceremonial affairs, having served since 1963 (re-opening of the Great Hall) successively as Bedell, Assistant Marshal, Deputy Macebearer and, from 1982, as Macebearer. To this office, he brought great dignity and invariably escorted our lady Chancellor within infinite courtesy and consideration. His astute observation and meticulous attention to detail and protocol underlay many of the innovations which have slowly refined our degree congregations.

Beyond the Veterinary School, his interests centred on his family and grandchildren, in any form of construction, the propagation of fuchsias and geraniums, and the challenge of a small, colourful town garden, kept immaculate and slug-free!"

Particularly in the early days a close association was established with local practitioners, which resulted in long-standing friendships. Dick always encouraged post-graduates in the department to assist colleagues in practice with research and also to participate in the local BVA activities, particularly the social events.

As an early colleague from practice Jim Allcock writes:

"As soon as he arrived at the (then very new) Bristol School in 1949 he began to build up a collection of anatomical specimens which will always be a monument to his enthusiasm. He was not alone, everyone at Park Row was imbued with the idea of filling empty rooms and specimen pots. Dick was in the van and a perfect specimen was the only one that was acceptable. His enthusiasm infected most of the practices within a thirty mile radius and they provided much of the material – but Dick arranged its collection and conversion into a high quality anatomical specimen.

His public service to the profession is a matter of record. It included President of the Mid West, Treasurer BVA and President in 1975-6. He was on the Council of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons for eight years and Chairman of the Education Committee.

At a less formal level Dick's response to a phone call illustrates his way of life. This conversation would start with something like "Nice to hear from you". Then a few pleasantries about the weather or an enquiry about your family, and, to business, "What can I do for you". He expected to be asked to help in some way, because he believed that was why he was there. To help, advise and inform. Which he did. Effectively, generously, unselfishly and very frequently".

Another great attribute was Dick's concern for the support staff within the Department. He worked closely with them to provide a team that allowed the subject to be taught as relevant to the living animal with the numerous innovations in teaching techniques.

Alan Coombs (MAC) led the technical staff from the early days of the school and conveys the technicians' view of Dick:

"Dick Smith arrived in Bristol for the start of the very first term of veterinary students at Park Row, October 1950. Teaching and museum specimens were in short supply and very expensive. He soon became involved in rectifying the situation, taking up residence next to the dissecting room and technicians preparation room, he proceeded to work with and advise the technical staff producing dissections, displays and apparatus for teaching and research and student study in the museum. The early technical staff had no experience of veterinary anatomy requirements. The help and enthusiasm provided by him was to be of great value. His own high standards were passed on to all working with him. He made time to be available, to give advice and help in any way he could. A gradual increase year by year has compiled a comprehensive selection of material now available, brought about by the time, energy and co-operation provided by Dick Smith".

Many graduates were attracted to the Department to read for higher degrees by Dick's early interest in research. The team Dick initiated evolved over the years and expanded

considerably. Dick in later years saw his role predominantly as a teacher and this was to a large extent a positive move to allow the younger staff to develop and expand their research activities, again emphasising his encouragement of others.

One of his Bristol graduate students and long standing colleague, Lance Lanyon (LEL), Professor of Veterinary Anatomy and past Principal at the RVC writes:

"Most veterinarians who knew Dick Smith first encountered him in their early student days in the Anatomy Department at Bristol. He was in place to receive the first year of students at the new veterinary school which was established there and he came to know every nook and cranny within it, and everyone associated with it. This knowledge together with his mastery of a subject totally new to most students, his height, size and devastating humour made him a dominant figure in the student world.

To his colleagues he combined unstinting help and assistance at the personal level with an often maddening insistence on pointing out the flaws in new schemes or adventures which they wished to undertake. This trait together with the fact that he was often right, and always refused to show deference to those who could have helped his advancement, meant that he never reached the professional heights to which his abilities entitled him. His influence was not diminished by this, quite the reverse. It was a brave man who tried to launch a shaky or unsound initiative that would come within range of his comment.

His veterinary interests were wide and were widening at the time of his death. A small undergraduate course in 'veterinary exotics' developed into a travelling reptile roadshow in a number of UK veterinary schools. His interest in the profession extended to its art with the work of George Stubbs and its history in the Veterinary History Society. However, although he made significant contributions both at the fringes and in the mainstream of the profession, rising to the highest office in the BVA, most of us will remember him as a friend and colleague to whom one could always look to for help, support, information and a refreshingly stringent view of life".

As indicated the students were perhaps Dick's greatest raison d'être. Many of us as past students will have a firm impression of the contribution that Dick made to our careers, perhaps it is more appropriate that current students also wish to pay tribute.

Fiona Jemmett representing Bristol Centaur Society at the time of his death writes:

"As a first year newly arrived at Bristol Veterinary School, Dr Smith was pointed out as 'The Locomotor Man...who's also into snakes!' leaving one puzzled and intrigued.

Dr Smith, one of the mainstays of the Anatomy Department, was not only an excellent lecturer, but also a witty and refreshing personality. His quiet enthusiasm for his subject was infectious, while his dry sense of humour kept the unaware on their toes and the rest of us doubled up. I can remember the expression on a fellow student's face after a disastrous dissection resulted in this conversation:

Dr Smith: "Well..., we like people who make mistakes"

Student: "Is that 'cos we learn from our mistakes?"

Dr Smith: "No, it means you won't be back here next year!"

We vet students have a great deal to thank Dr Smith for. His course books on the locomotor system and exotics are second to none, and are widely used in other colleges, and by vets in practice. His ingenious Bone Booths have helped many a student grasp the finer details of limb structure, and the Anatomy course just wouldn't be the same if you couldn't collapse into a booth, put on the headphones and hear that calm soothing voice starting...five, four, three... Dr Smith was also a mine of information on rodents, reptiles, tortoises and exotics; his expertise in these fields was extremely valuable.

In the past, many students have benefited greatly from the excellent exchange between Bristol and Hannover Vet Schools, and Dr Smith was also very involved in making this scheme so successful. In recognition of all Dr Smith has contributed to students over the years, he was elected as Honorary President of Centaur at the AGM. The Vet students of Bristol, and all members of Centaur greatly appreciated his energy and dedication, and he will be sadly missed by all of us".

Dick was always striving to improve not only teaching methods but also the content of courses. In recent years he established an important emphasis on exotic species, including not only the small mammals commonly kept as pets but also reptiles and fish. He kept many of these himself and extended this means of learning to the students by setting up a rota for them to care for a range of such animals. His initiative in this field resulted in invitations not only to address students at other schools but also the various herpetological and chelonian societies outside of the School.

A long-standing campaigner in the area of exotic species and wildlife, John Cooper, writes:

"As an undergraduate at Bristol University in the early 1960's I was taught anatomy by Dick Smith. The course was concerned solely with domesticated mammals and the fowl but Dick's interest in comparative anatomy were evident at that stage and it cheered me, as a student with a yearning to work with the more 'exotic' species, to have a teacher who encouraged me in my pursuits.

About ten years ago Dick began to devote more of his time to non-mammalian vertebrates. He recognised, as did other far-sighted members of the profession, that veterinary surgeons of the future needed to know about a wider range of animals than in the past. He introduced into the anatomy course at Bristol, a programme of lectures and demonstrations which included, inter alia, reptiles and fish. His knowledge of lower vertebrate anatomy made him a popular lecturer at herpetological and other meetings where he was able to explain, concisely and accurately, the intricacies of the respiratory tract of a snake or why some turtle eggs were larger than others. His talks on the 'bony box', in which he described the shell of the chelonian and the various organs which it houses and protects, were always particularly popular and did a great deal to promote a better understanding of the needs of these creatures.

Dick Smith made important contributions to herpetology – not so much in terms of original research (although many of his data are of great importance and ought to be published in due course) – but because he served as a catalyst to veterinary surgeons, herpetologists and others who wanted to learn more about the biology of their charges. At a stage when many senior members of the profession who are established authorities in their own field might be inclined to rest on their laurels rather than embark upon new ventures, particularly in the relatively unconventional field of non-domesticated animals, Dick Smith responded enthusiastically to the challenge. Those with an interest in reptiles and a concern for the health, welfare and conservation of all species are indebted to him".

Barbara Weaver a contemporary of Dick Smith and veterinary anaesthetist writes:

"I knew Dick in the 1940's when we were both students at the Royal Veterinary College. In the early years after qualifying, Dick was an enthusiastic member of a small informal group formed to meet at least once a month, usually at the Beaumont Animals Hospital of the Royal Veterinary College, to discuss clinical cases. When the Veterinary School opened at Bristol University Dick moved there, to the Department of Veterinary Anatomy where he worked until his recent untimely death.

On moving to Bristol University myself in November 1957, I found Dick from the beginning to be supportive, dependable and always ready to be help. On telephoning him, his usual response on discovering who was calling, was something like "What can I do for you this time". If the request was for details of anatomy for clinical purposes he was particularly delighted to help. Every task Dick committed himself to, was always carried out with total thoroughness. This was so with as widely varied tasks as a lecture or being Mace Bearer at the University Degree Ceremonies. Foremost in his endeavour was the development of the department in which he worked. He was able to project the importance of Anatomy to veterinary students, in particular to the many post graduate students who worked with him. I was fortunate in learning something of his research work on this response of bones to stress and movement when anaesthetising experimental animals for him and his PhD students. Latterly he took a special interest in teaching the anatomy of some exotic animals.

Always quietly preparing and doing his work with the utmost care and always giving his opinion of matters, regardless as to whether his opinion would be popular, may have made him seem somewhat gruff and indifferent to other people. I have always believed him however to be a highly sensitive person. One could always call to see him and whether or not the visit was expected, one could be sure of a welcome. If he was at Langford he would usually call in to say hello and have a chat".

These authors from different standpoints all portray a similar picture of a man of great talent dedicated to the profession and its education. How can we pay tribute to his memory – in accordance with the wishes of his family we must now look forward in a positive way and attempt to continue and advance his ideas, building upon the firm foundation that he has provided. To this end it was decided not to proceed with a Memorial Service or to establish yet another prize, but to establish a 'Dick Smith Memorial Scholarship'. This was and is an ambitious project but we hope that the profession and in particular Bristol graduates will feel able to make significant contributions to this appeal.