

Robert Fraser Gordon
1908 - 1981



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Robert Fraser Gordon

Robert (Bob) Fraser Gordon was one of a small number of veterinarians in Britain who dedicated his professional career to the understanding and prevention of diseases of poultry. His early working life was spent at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Veterinary Laboratory at Weybridge, where he became head of the poultry diagnostic department. He did notable work on avian salmonellosis, particularly on the eradication of pullorum disease (bacillary white diarrhoea). In 1948 he left Weybridge to become the founding director of the newly established Poultry Research Station at Houghton in Huntingdonshire. From small beginnings to the time of his retirement in 1973, he developed the Houghton Poultry Research Station into the largest centre for poultry disease research in the world. Here he applied his wide knowledge and leadership abilities to the analysis of the prevalence and economic cost of poultry diseases, persuaded the growing British poultry industry of the need for veterinary research, and established the research projects and their funding. As an appreciation of him at the time of his retirement it was said "In the past 25 years there has been no aspect of progress or change when the poultry industry did not have at its elbow the guiding skills of this most eminent man" (Denis Wellstead, *Poultry Forum*).

Bob Gordon was born in Aberdeen in 1908, and educated at Robert Gordon's College and the University of Aberdeen, where he graduated with a degree in zoology and geology in 1930. He was a University demonstrator for a short period, but then gained a Colonial Veterinary Scholarship to study at the Royal Veterinary College, London. He graduated as a veterinary surgeon in 1933, and had hoped to join the colonial veterinary service. However, there were no vacancies at the time, and he obtained a temporary post at the Veterinary Laboratory, Weybridge, which happened to be in the Poultry Department. Gordon later recalled the reaction of one of his lecturers: "I was a great disappointment to him. 'That's not a job for a grown man. I had a nice job lined-up for you in the LMS (railway) stables' ". This was at a time when veterinary surgeons showed little interest in working with poultry and their diseases. An editorial in *The Veterinary Journal* in 1932 encouraged veterinary workers to take up poultry disease research, but added (and perhaps weakening its case) "It is a branch of the profession which is admirably suited for the women graduates".

At this time the UK poultry industry was growing significantly, but its progress was hampered by many serious disease problems. Gordon was responsible for routine poultry diagnostic work at Weybridge, and he quickly became aware of these problems. His dedication was soon recognised, and in 1937 he was appointed Senior Research Officer, and did important work on developing a rapid whole blood stained antigen test for identifying pullorum carriers in the field. Compulsory testing under the Poultry Stock Improvement Plan led to the eradication of the disease. In 1947 the University of Aberdeen awarded him the degree of Doctor of Science for his work on avian salmonellosis.

In 1948, the Animal Health Trust (AHT), a charitable organisation founded in 1942 by the distinguished veterinarian Dr W. R. Wooldridge to provide veterinary research training, announced its intention to develop a group of Farm Livestock Research Stations, beginning with a research station for poultry. This was established at Houghton Grange (a private country house) in Huntingdonshire, and Gordon was appointed as Director. Three other research scientists were appointed: C. Horton-Smith (a parasitologist), A. Buxton (a bacteriologist), and K. Chodnik (a pathologist). The first laboratories were two ex-prisoner-of-war huts.

Over the following years staff numbers, research facilities, and the breadth of the research grew, though the research work was always directed to meet the pressing disease problems of the industry. These were years of great growth of the UK poultry industry, both of the meat sector and the egg sector following the introduction of intensive production methods, nutritional improvements and genetic selection. By 1972 the poultry industry had become the second most important branch of British agriculture. Gordon worked hard to involve the industry in the research and to interest the veterinary profession in poultry matters. But there was continuing difficulty in persuading the industry to provide the funds for the running costs of Houghton. In 1952, the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) gave a grant to the Station to further the work, and in 1956, the Houghton Poultry Research Station became an independent grant-aided institute financed jointly by the ARC and the AHT. The governmental ARC grant was contingent on

continuing industry support, with the industry, via the AHT, providing £1 for every £2 from the government. However, this level of industry support was not forthcoming, and in 1959 the Station became a fully-fledged ARC grant-aided institute. The ARC assumed full financial responsibility in 1970. In 1959, new laboratories were built at Houghton, and an agreement was reached between the ARC and the AHT to provide a special unit at Houghton for the study of leukosis and fowl paralysis (Marek's disease). Here under Gordon's watch the cause of Marek's disease was discovered and the first vaccine developed. In 1969 a new laboratory wing was added to the Station to house the virology and parasitology departments.

Thus for most of the 25 years of his Directorship, Gordon struggled, in the end successfully and with the support of the ARC, to increase the funding and facilities at Houghton to a level commensurate with the importance of the poultry industry. It reached its greatest size, with a staff of 228, at the time of his retirement. During his tenure he continued his scientific work, publishing many review and research papers on the occurrence, importance and control of various classes of poultry disease – salmonellosis, leukosis complex, respiratory diseases, and on research organisation and other topics. He was appointed to the editorial boards of a number of scientific journals. In 1977 he edited the first edition of the popular textbook *Poultry Diseases* (Bailliere Tindall), aimed primarily at veterinary students, which has since been translated into many languages, including Spanish and Russian, and is now (2007) due to appear in a 6th edition. Gordon was in demand as a speaker, where he addressed the poultry industry, the veterinary profession, and poultry farmers, on disease matters. His contributions extended abroad: in 1963/4 he directed veterinary post-graduate courses in avian pathology for veterinarians in Mexico City and Beirut, and he made advisory visits to many countries.

Gordon held numerous important national and international appointments whilst Director. He played key roles in furthering veterinary involvement in the poultry industry at home and abroad, and particularly in the founding of the British Veterinary Poultry Association (BVPA) and the World Veterinary Poultry Association (WVPA). In 1954 he became President of the UK branch of the World Poultry Science Association and Vice-President of the World Association. In 1956 he became the founder chairman and then first President of the BVPA, and the Provisional Secretary of the newly proposed International Association of Veterinary Poultry Pathologists (renamed the WVPA in 1959). In the same year, he became a Member and Technical Secretary of the ARC Technical Committee on Poultry Research, which advised government on research needs and informed the research programme of Houghton. In 1967 he became President of the WVPA, and Honorary Life President in 1969.

Bob Gordon received many honours for his work. In 1956 he received the Distinguished Service Medal of the Poultry Association of Great Britain; in 1957, the British Oil and Cake Mills Poultry Award; and in 1965 the Dalrymple Champneys Cup and Medal of the British Veterinary Association. In 1970 he received the Victory Medal of the Central Veterinary Society, was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and awarded an honorary DVSc degree by the University of Liverpool. He received the honour of Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1972.

Gordon retired as Director of Houghton Poultry Research Station in 1973 amid much acclaim. He became Chairman of the Council of the Animal Health Trust and its Honorary Scientific Adviser, and remained scientifically active until his death in 1981.

An annual Gordon Memorial Lecture was established in 1982 and is published each year in *British Poultry Science*. The Poultry Research Station at Houghton continued as a visible memorial to Gordon. It carried out ground-breaking research under the new Director, Professor P.M. Biggs FRS, until 1992, when it was closed as part of a far-reaching reorganisation of agricultural research, and the poultry disease research activity was moved to the Institute for Animal Health at Compton in Berkshire.

Bob Gordon's qualities were summed up in the oration given at the conferment of his honorary degree by Liverpool University, which included his expertise, popularity with colleagues, modesty and kindness. He was described then as the person who, more than any other person, had a truly comprehensive knowledge of the scientific and professional problems of the British poultry industry.

Biography solicited by the Committee on the History of Avian Medicine, American Association of Avian Pathologists.

Additional biographical materials may be available from the AAAP Historical Archives located at Iowa State University. Contact information is as follows:

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