

VETERINARY SURGEONS IN ALRESFORD PAST AND PRESENT

By

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Royal College of
Veterinary Surgeons

The first record of a Veterinary Surgeon practising in Alresford goes back to 1893. Dr. Isabel Sanderson's researches into the Dwellings of Alresford unearthed the fact that David Sinclair practised from No. 48 Broad Street, the single storied extension to the east of the main building being his dispensary. But Hampshire, if not Alresford itself, can claim a connection with the very origins of veterinary medicine as a 'profession' in the true sense of the word. Mr. Sinclair was a member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons but he may well have had no training or proper qualifications but for the enterprise of the Odiham Agricultural Society some hundred years previously. Members of this Society were much concerned with the lack of proper treatment for horses and farm animals, and were

instrumental in raising the money required to build the London Veterinary College. This was completed in 1792. The first English trained Veterinary Surgeon qualified there in 1794. Up to that time the care of livestock was in the hands of farriers and cow leeches who had no doubt some practical skills, but who lacked any formal instruction in the art and science of veterinary medicine.

No. 48 was ideally situated for a Veterinary practice as it was next door to the blacksmith whose house and smithy were at Nos. 46 and 44. At that time most of Mr. Sinclair's work would have been with horses, and many cases of lameness involving the foot could be cured or at least alleviated by the fitting of suitable surgical shoes. No doubt the veterinary surgeon and the blacksmith worked closely together.

In 1906 Henry Wallis Billinghamurst, MRCVS took over the practice and lived at No.48. In 1914 he moved to a house on the south side of West Street which is now Halliwell's shoe shop. This was on the right of the Volunteer Arms, now Charms and the Clipper. This house does not seem to have had a name or numbers but was presumably well known to any one requiring the services of a veterinary surgeon. Mrs Billinghamurst was the daughter of a well known veterinary surgeon, Lister Swann of Kings Lynn, whose descendants still practice there at the present time. Lister Swann's father was a farrier - a practical example of the evolution of veterinary medicine from farriery.

One of the three Billinghamurst children Maud, was born in 1907 and remembers life as it was in West Street. The practice was very much a one man, or rather a one family affair. While he was in Broad Street Mr. Billinghamurst had a dog cart, covering anything up to seventy miles a day on his visits, leaving home at 9 am. not to be seen again until 5 or 6 in the evening. He must have travelled far and wide, even looking after the Winchester and Basingstoke areas when Mr. Tutt was away. It was not until he moved to West Street that the dog cart was replaced by a motor car.

There was not much time for any social life and his daughter does not recall him ever having a holiday or a weekend off duty. He may have found time to serve on the Parish Council and to be a Governor of the Board School. Mr. Jesty, the headmaster was one of his few personal friends and he exchanged interesting microscope slides with Dr. Hodgson. He also judged horses at the Alresford Agricultural Show held in Arlebury Park.

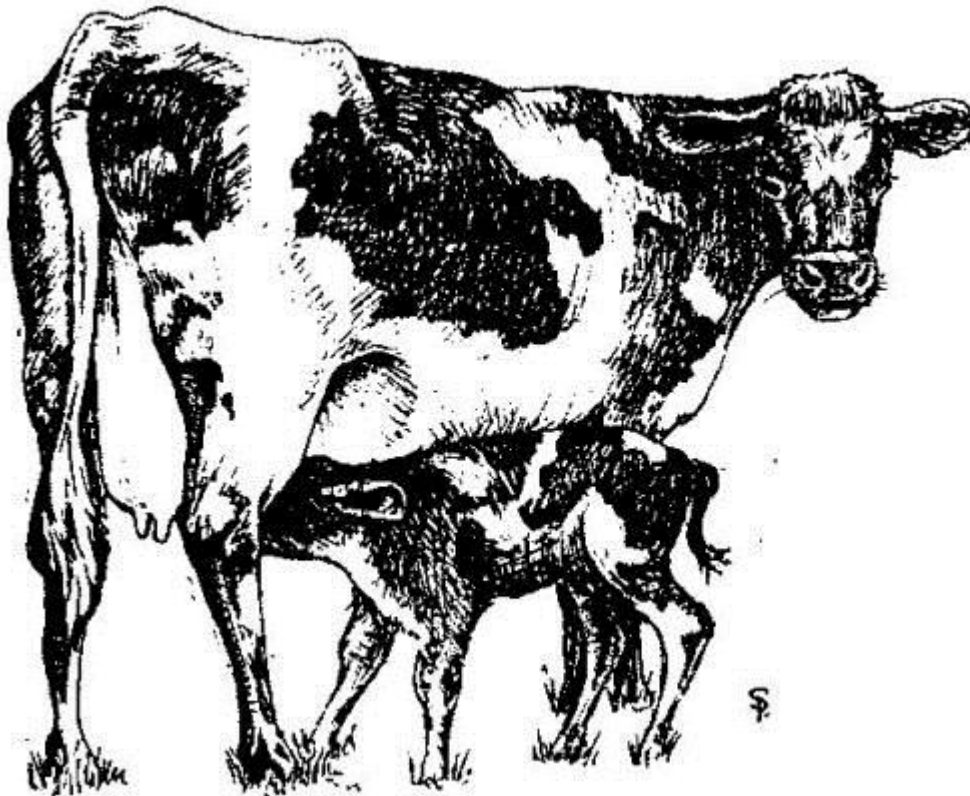
Meanwhile Mrs. Billinghamurst, in addition to bringing up three children, answered the door to receive messages and to give out medicines. These she dispensed herself to her husband's directions.

own veterinary background must have stood her in good stead in this respect. Mr. Billingham's prescription book survived, and gives an interesting record of veterinary pharmacy nearly 100 years ago.

"Colic Drench"

Oil of Turpentine	2oz
Laudanum	1oz
Spirit of Nitre	2oz
Peppermint Water	1 pint

"Should this not give ease in two hours, bleed and give a bottle of castor oil".



Today ninety five per cent of our medicines come from drug manufacturers, but this is a relatively recent change. As an assistant it was one of my duties to keep the shelves well stocked with various drenches and lotions which were still dispensed along with the more modern antibiotics. Pink milk medicine for cows with blood in their milk was of doubtful efficiency, but the skin dressing for ringworm containing black and yellow sulphur in a turpentine and liquid paraffin base smelt and looked lethally effective. My favourite preparation was the 'Electuary' for coughing horses. "A piece the size of a walnut to be placed on the tongue three times a day". This consisted of no less than nine different ingredients which were mixed in a very large pestle and mortar. To make the final paste to the right constituency you added 'Q.S.' - Quantum Sufficiat of 'Fowlers Black Treacle'. Having a sweet tooth made this part of the task particularly agreeable as well as ensuring that the horses found the electuary itself equally palatable.

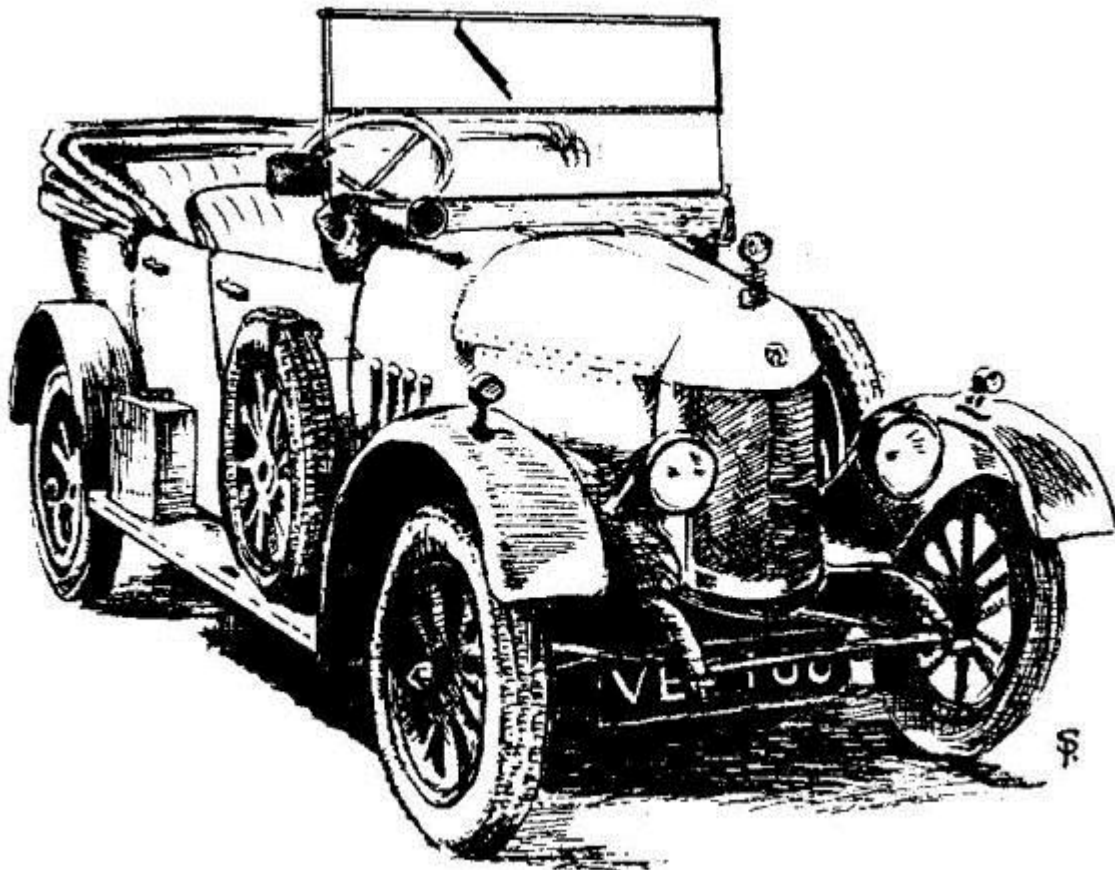
In addition to her domestic duties and dispensing Mrs. Billingham also looked after the accounts. Not perhaps too time consuming, as these were only sent out once a year.: It was not uncommon if an animal died for the account to remain unpaid? so perhaps the delay in rendering a bill was intended to blunt clients memories!

In 1927 another move took place just across the road to Baytree House. This is the property on the right of the driveway to the Rectory, and now called Needlestyle. At this time Geoffrey Searles, well known to many readers, took over the practice and married Joan Wilkes in 1928. It was very much business as usual, not least for Joan Searles, who carried out much the same essential duties at home while her husband was out on his visits. Telephones were few and far between, and finding Mr. Searles once he had left the house was not easy. The manually operated Telephone Exchange was not normally very quick or reliable, but Mrs. Brown, the chief operator, could be relied upon to stand by when Mr. Searles was required urgently and would rapidly connect a series of farm numbers until he was located. One telephone enquiry Mrs. Searles remembers well concerned the cost of having a cat put to sleep. The client, on being informed that it would be five shillings, replied "Well how much is it if it is half dead already?" Another method of contact involved car spotting. Mr. Searles owned a distinctive coloured bull nosed Morris, and clients being informed of his route could waylay and flag him down, so that he could attend to their particular emergency.

While he remained single handed there was no such thing as time off. If he could get away to play a round of golf on a Sunday afternoon as like as not a caddy would have to be despatched from the Club house at the Cricketers Inn to call him away to some urgent case. This might well be a case of colic in a horse, by far the commonest emergency at that time, and one almost guaranteed to occur on a Sunday afternoon.

In spite of the importance of horses and their digestive systems, the number of cattle was increasing, and more than half the work was now concerned with dairy and beef herds. Consultations for dogs and cats were a rare occurrence, and would take place in the front room of Baytree House. It was not until 1945 that regular surgery hours were introduced, and even then minimal facilities for clients and patients were provided. There were, however, boarding kennels for six dogs at the bottom of Baytree House garden. The occupants would belong to clients and were looked after and exercised along the Avenue by a yardman - the first practice employee. One of the old prescription books enclosed a message, presumably to the yardman, about making up some medicine. It was written on the back of a telegram (itself now a historical document) and was sent from Beech on January 30th 1940 reading 'Please keep dog another week - snowed up here'.

The practice flourished and by 1931 there was sufficient work for an assistant, a real landmark in the expansion of the practice. 1937 saw another landmark - Mr. Searles took a week's holiday - the first in his nine years of practice in the town. Mr. Searles moved to Thodys New Farm Road in 1939 just before the outbreak of the second world war. Throughout the conflict, not content with the arduous practice work amid wartime restrictions and shortages, he was a member of the Alresford Fire Brigade. In this capacity attending numerous fires as far away as Southampton following German bombing raids on the town. It was just as well that most calls to fire-fighting duty were at night, when he was less likely to be called out for the practice.



Bull nosed MORRIS motor car c1930

After the war life at Tbody's returned to a more normal routine. There was soon work for a second assistant, and the practice was pushing back the frontiers of science by being the first in the district to possess its own X-ray machine. Prior to that it was necessary to have good friends in the Radiology Department of the Royal Hampshire County hospital. The machine itself was a secondhand dental apparatus with a large transformer from which numerous apparently bare wires issued forth. In humid weather the machine emitted spectacular and quite frightening sparks. Nonetheless it produced remarkably good X-ray plates.

When I joined the practice as an assistant in 1958 we rented the Manor Farm House at Bighton. This was really living on the job as far as the farm was concerned, and I was resident Veterinary Surgeon to the dairy and beef cows as well as a large flock of sheep. I remember being awakened one morning by a shower of small stones thrown up at the bedroom window. Looking out I could immediately see the patient, a large Hereford cow with magnesium deficiency having violent convulsions in the field on the opposite side of the road. This was a real emergency, and not the first time that pyjamas served just as well as conventional underwear when speed was of the essence'. I also recollect the first time I was bitten by a patient. It was again in Bighton, and involved a Great Dane dog from High Dell Farm just down the road from Manor Farm. He was large even for his breed, and as I bent down to examine him he managed to get most of the top of my head between his jaws. The consultation came to an abrupt conclusion and I quickly returned home, bleeding profusely from my scalp. My wife was naturally horrified at my both unexpected and bloody appearance. Fortunately the injury was only superficial. At that time there was no Group Surgery or treatment room but Dr. Skeggs arrived in no time at all, and I was soon stitched together again.

1959 saw a major reorganisation of the practice when the kennel block was converted to provide the luxury of a waiting room, two consulting rooms and even a small laboratory. All this improved the facilities for the expanding small animal side of the practice. Three or four kennels were retained for animals recovering from operations. Eighteen years on and the practice had yet again

outgrown itself. The need for more room all round was pressing, and 1970 saw the move down New Farm Road to the present premises. These in turn have seen extra building modifications to meet the changing needs of patients, clients, veterinary surgeons, nurses, receptionists and secretaries - a far cry from the one man and his wife in Broad Street eighty seven years ago.

If the premises and personnel of practice have changed so much over the years so has the art and science of veterinary medicine itself. Up to the outbreak of the second world war these changes may have been fairly slow, but with the discovery first of sulfphonamides, then of antibiotics, the older prescriptions were largely replaced by far more efficacious remedies. The dramatic response to the new medicines must have created its own demands for more veterinary attention. At the same time farms were becoming more mechanised, and the days of the draught horse were numbered. Their demise was only partially compensated for by the increased number of riding horses and children's ponies.

Cattle and sheep became economically more important, while pets of all sorts were beginning to receive the attention they surely deserved. Farming methods have also changed dramatically and have had an equally important influence on veterinary practice.

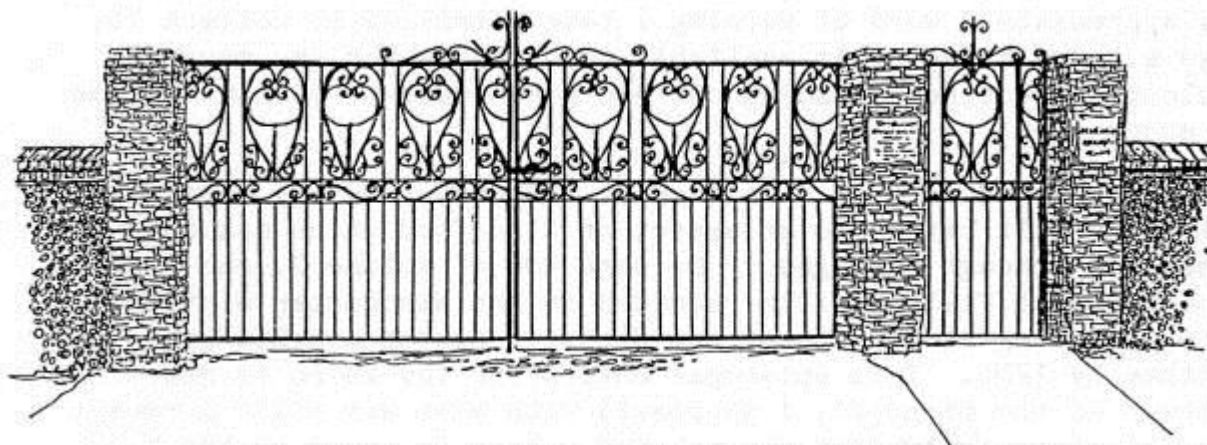
Thirty years ago there were over ninety dairy farms within a ten mile radius of Alresford now there are just thirty, much larger units. Big is not always beautiful! but this is not the place to debate the pros and cons of so-called 'factory farming'. One thing is certain Mr. Sinclair would hardly recognise the countryside through which he travelled, or the farms he visited as they are today. One wonders what sort of farms what sort of pets and veterinary surgeons will be here eighty years from now? It would be interesting to speculate, but more prudent to have restricted the title to the past and present.

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Appendix:

From Alresford Displayed No.22 1997:

Gates at Arlebury Park.



These handsome wrought iron gates were erected at the entrance to Arlebury Park Club and grounds in memory of Geoffrey Searles 1897-1979 who represented Alresford on the Winchester City Council for many years.

He was a Veterinary Surgeon with a practice in the town first in West Street in 1927 later in New Farm Road and was a partner in a practice at Four Marks. He had also served as a volunteer fireman.

The quality of the work on these gates cannot be appreciated by the public as they are kept open all the time to allow easy access to Arlebury Park Club but they are a permanent memorial to a man who carried out his civic duties with integrity.