

A VETERINARY PRACTICE BY LOUGH GUR

By Austin Shinnors

In this article, I will take a drive down memory lane and recall the many changes in veterinary practice over the past decades.

George Shinnors – From the Medicine Bag to Warble Fly Eradication

Ireland and Irish agriculture were very different when my father graduated as a veterinary surgeon from the Veterinary College, Dublin in 1943. Down on the farm, it was the era of pre-mechanisation, pre-electricity and almost pre-motor car. It was also a time, ‘smack-bang’ in the middle of World War II, not long after the economic war and also the 1941 “foot and mouth” outbreak.

Farms were much smaller than now. Around this locality, the dairy cow was the mainstay of the economy. Every farm had a horse or two to transport the family to church and milk to the creamery. Many farmers reared pigs and some poultry.

And so, my father ‘stuck up his plate’ in his father’s grocery shop in Grange, where he opened an office. Younger readers will be amused that his phone number was “Bruff 7”. Yes, it was also the days of the manual telephone exchange; the automatic exchange followed in 1972 in the Bruff area.

If farming was rudimentary – so was veterinary practice. Of course, this was also the pre-antibiotic era. Veterinary drugs and instruments were few and far between, typically a few ropes for calving, procaine anaesthetic for dehorning and epidurals, as well as a few needles and syringes. It was all transportable in a medicine bag on the back of his BSA (Birmingham Small Arms Company) motorbike, which was just as well as petrol was rationed during the war.

While 1847 was described as “Black 47” because of ravages of the potato famine, 1947 was a famine year for livestock. It could be called “White 47” as it was the year of the big snow. It was the coldest and harshest winter in living memory. Because the temperatures rarely rose above freezing point, the snows that had fallen across Ireland in January remained until the middle of March. Of the fifty days between January 24th and March 17th, it snowed on thirty of them. What made “White 47” so bad was it followed the very wet summer of 1946 which made



George and Helen Shinnors on their wedding day with Matthew Shinnors and Hanny McGrath.

it impossible to save hay. As a result, there were record losses of animals. My father often spoke of the awful sight of starving cows unwilling to eat the “hay” in front of them as it was inedible.

In the late 1940s, there was better news for sick cattle (and humans) with the arrival of penicillin – the first antibiotic. It was a wonder drug; it cured virtually everything. It was followed by other antibiotics in the 1950s, such as streptomycin – the first

effective treatment for tuberculosis and then the tetracycline drugs. About this time, the anthelmintic drugs made their appearance. These were used for treatment for liver fluke and round worms.

An enormous number of Irish cattle were shipped live to Britain every year. The UK authorities became alarmed at the high level of Bovine TB (Tuberculosis) in these animals, and they issued an ultimatum to the Irish Government to eradicate Bovine TB – failing that, exports into the UK would be prohibited. And so, the Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication Scheme was launched here in Ireland in 1954. Initially, herd testing was voluntary but became compulsory in 1961. At that time, it was necessary to have calves tested prior to sale. My father had a kind of clinic for this task. He used to test the calves in Grange on a Tuesday afternoon and check them on Fridays. I can remember a queue of cars with calf trailers parked from the Shinnors shop down as far as “The Gables”, our family home some distance from the shop.

Initially, enormous numbers of cattle failed the herd test – on average, 17% failed while 22% of cows failed. By the mid-1960s, the failure figure had stabilised at around 0.4%. The incidence remained stubbornly at this level until the last decade of the century. When the scheme was computerised, and better management of wildlife was introduced, the incidence was reduced to 0.2%.

Many cows were still milked by hand. Some of the cow teats developed blockages – called spindles – which were freed by minor surgery. This was a challenge relished

by my father and he travelled far and wide, even outside the practice area, to tend to the animals. “Caesarean sections” were a rarity then. Attending a cow with uterine prolapse (or ‘vessel’ in local parlance) was more common and dramatic. At that time, cows were lighter than now and there was usually enough help available to lift the cow’s rear end on top of a milk tankard or barrel, so that the uterus would benefit from gravity on the return journey to its home in the abdominal cavity. Blood transfusions became a frequent operation from the 1960s. Cattle became infected with bovine babesiosis (red water) which resulted in a loss of blood. If there was a critical blood loss, a transfusion had to be done, with the donor blood coming from another animal of the same breed. There was no blood bank for cows or blood groups either. Fortunately, cattle crushes were becoming more popular around this time.

By the late 1960s, there were major changes in Irish agriculture. With intensive methods of farming, the cattle population jumped from 4.6m to 7.9m over the 1960-1998 period. Average lactation from a cow increased from 500 gallons (2,273 litres) in 1965 to 1,000 gallons (4,546 litres) in 2014. Meantime, the number of dairy farmers declined nationally and Grange was no exception. With the closure of Tullybrackey and Fedamore/Banogue Creameries, milk was now collected by truck. Perhaps the most significant single change in farming practice was the arrival of silage making machinery, replacing the difficult task of saving hay in fickle Irish summers.

Fortunately enough, the veterinary profession was able to keep pace with the changes in agriculture. The drugs available were now indispensable for the new farming practices. The opening of the Regional Veterinary Laboratory in Knockalisheen in 1970 was another major fillip in the diagnosis of animal disease.



Graduating Veterinary Surgeon Austin Shinnors with his parents George (VS) and Helen.

In the late 1960s, the Warble Fly Eradication Scheme was introduced. An operator from an AI (artificial insemination) station would apply a “pour-on”

insecticide on the backs of the cattle. After a few years, the dreaded warble fly was eradicated, and it proved that an animal disease could be eradicated in Ireland. TB eradication was bedevilled by politicking by all the stakeholders, and a systematic approach was going nowhere in a hurry. Of course, brucellosis eradication had yet to be addressed.

Austin Shinnors – From Treatment to Disease Prevention

Twenty-eight years after my father's graduation, I "followed in his footsteps" and joined his practice in Grange in 1971 as a veterinary surgeon. At that time, the national economy was in good health, and the farming community was in nervous anticipation of Ireland joining the Common Market, with its promise of better farm prices.

My first car was a little Renault 4, and it was stacked up with all kinds of antibiotics. I also needed space for a "calving jack" and radio-phone. My father's old medicine bag on the back of the BSA would not have sufficed.

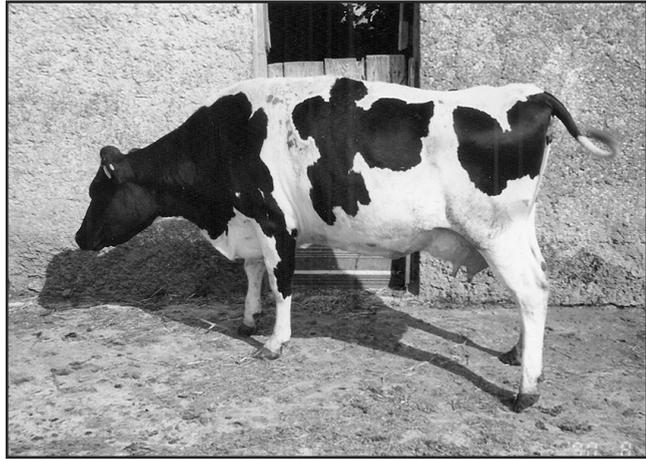
The Brucellosis Scheme was launched in 1973, on a voluntary basis initially and compulsorily in 1979. There was surprising progress initially. Everyone was delighted to see the back of a disease which caused contagious abortion in cows. Brucellosis is also transmissible to man causing an undulant fever that is like a bad dose of flu. Farmers and veterinary surgeons (including my father) were particularly prone to infection as were those who drank unpasteurised milk. Cost cutting by the bureaucrats failed to finish off the disease when it was on its knees; it made a comeback that cost the farmers and taxpayers dearly. Happily, the disease is now eradicated, and the Republic of Ireland was officially declared "brucellosis-free" in 2009.

In 1974, our neighbouring colleague, Willie O'Rourke, retired from his veterinary practice in Hospital after a back injury and we acquired his practice. We were joined, initially for two years, by Cyril O'Sullivan, Veterinary Surgeon and later by Bill Carmody, Veterinary Surgeon, who is now the senior partner. While Bill is a proud son of Athlacca, his father, Michael, hailed from Grange. My father continued to practice during the 1970s and 1980s, albeit in a reduced capacity. After a short illness in 1989, he succumbed to leukaemia.

In 1993, we opened Bruff Veterinary Centre as the practice headquarters. By now the accounts were computerised. A year later, the administration of the TB scheme was also computerised, and we started to use a handheld "Psion" device that replaced the familiar blue "TB book". In 2004, the whole scheme went online with the introduction of the Animal Health Computer System (AHCS). Pregnancy diagnosis was greatly helped by the arrival of the ultrasound scanner.

Another significant event in 1993 was the dismantling of internal EC barriers. This allowed free movement of people, services and animals. For "free movement of animals", read "free movement of disease". While the veterinary profession

warned about the health threat, nobody listened. While we could say goodbye to brucella and warble-fly, the native stock were saying hello to BVD (Bovine Viral Diarrhoea), Johne's disease and a host of other 'nasties'. Some Irish farmers continue to pay a high price for this decision.



Cow treated for photosensitisation (sunburn) – note the cow's swishing tail.

During the 1980s and 1990s, veterinary practice was evolving from treatment to prevention. Just as well, there was a virtual revolution in veterinary medicines. During my career in practice, the rate of new antibiotics has slowed to a trickle and resistance to drugs has reared its ugly head. Thankfully, a large numbers of vaccines have become available. Today we have a vaccine (or preventative) for virtually every disease.

A disease that caused havoc to the cattle trade was BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) or “mad cow disease” as it is commonly known. The disease was most easily transmitted to human beings by eating food contaminated with the brain or spinal cord of infected carcasses, causing a fatal condition in humans called Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), also known as “mad-cow disease in humans”.

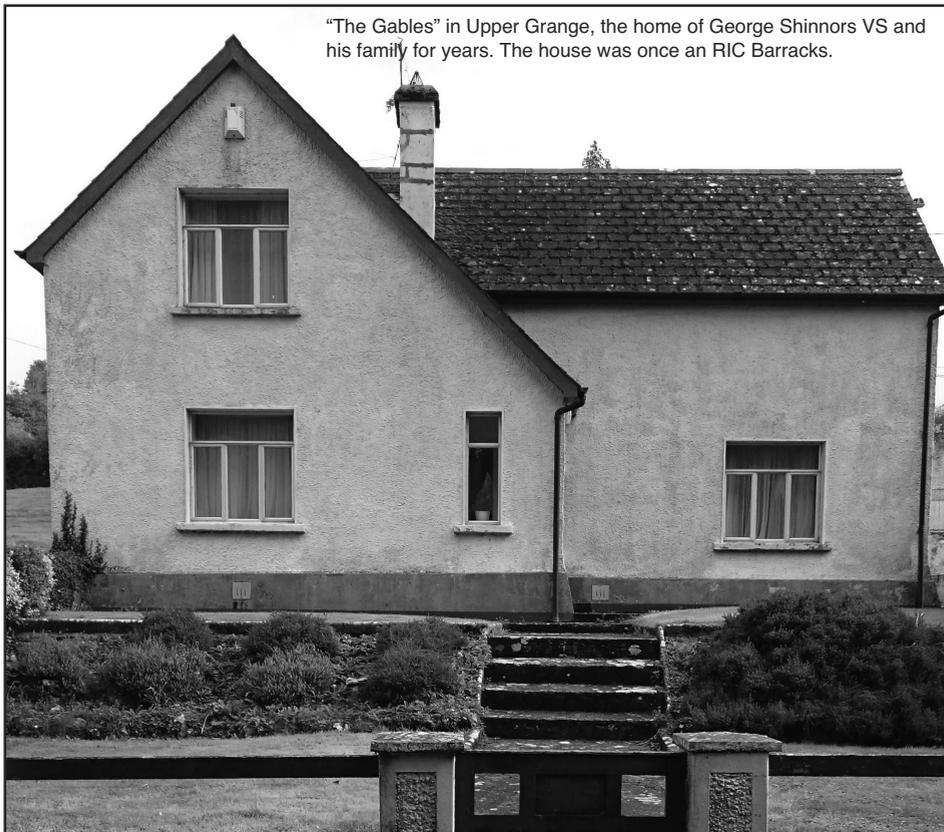
BSE was first confirmed in cattle in the UK in 1986. The first case in Ireland was confirmed three years later when there were fifteen cases confirmed. In the UK, the country worst affected, more than 180,000 cattle have been infected, and 4.4 million were slaughtered during the eradication programme. The disease had a drastic effect on Irish (and UK) cattle exports. A bleaker prospect faced those humans diagnosed with CJD. Quite a few people died from the disease, though not as many as were initially forecast.

“Foot and mouth” disease made its first appearance in Ireland in 2001 for 70 years. The 1941 epidemic was severe with Tipperary and Kilkenny badly hit. Just a few cases of this highly infectious disease were discovered in 2001, and these were in sheep in Armagh and Cooley mountains. However, the nation was on full alert; disinfection was the order of the day, and much of rural Ireland was closed down. It cost the Irish economy an estimated €100m in control measures, while a further €200m was lost in reduced tourist income.

The history of veterinary practice in Grange would not be complete without mentioning Dr Pat Hartigan. Pat graduated in 1955, and he practiced in Co Kerry

until he joined the Physiology Department of Trinity College School of Medicine. Incredibly, he was editor of the *Irish Veterinary Journal* at the same time as I edited the *Irish Veterinary News*. Other veterinary surgeons from this locality include Willie O'Rourke (Ballygrennan), Coleman Fraher (Ballynanty), Pat Slattery (Kilcullane), Martha Naughton (Ballygrennan), Michelle Broughton (Crean), Kevin Murnane (Lough Gur) and Patrick Thompson (Athlacca). Michael English (Kilcullane) is in his fourth year of studies at UCD.

No business would succeed without good staff and our practice was extremely fortunate to be able to call, over the years, on the likes of Anthony Bourke, Breda Bourke, Willy Carroll, John O'Donnell, Paddy Ryan and Pat Clancy. Vets who came to do some TB testing include Pat Connolly (Charleville), Owen O'Neill (Brittas) John Keating (Rathkeale,) Kerry Keane (Kerry) and Tom Walsh (Hospital).



Sincere Thanks

On behalf of my mother, Helen, and my siblings Yvonne, George, Dymphna and Matty, as well as my wife Muireann and myself, I wish to thank the people of Grange for their support of and loyalty to our veterinary practice over the last seventy-two years.