

Report: WAHVM congress

For the first time in its 45 year existence, the World Association for the History of Veterinary Medicine visited Britain for its congress. Between September 10th and 13th, an array of vets, academic historians, librarians, archivists, archaeologists, museum curators and ethicists, congregated in London to study, celebrate and advance the field of veterinary history. The organisers had a hard act to follow as the congress in Utrecht, 2012, was superbly organised, but they rose to the occasion. Two years in the planning, this was the event that catapulted British veterinary history onto the world stage, and left both of them changed for the better.

Simon Jackson, Director of the RVC Library and Information services, saw the event off to a flying start by organising a fabulous evening reception in the courtyard of the Royal Veterinary College, where delegates sampled some of the best of British veterinary heritage. By then, the organisers had been hard at work for hours at Kings College London, unpacking conference material, packing it into bags, then packing the bags and themselves into three taxis bound for the RVC. At the end of the evening, the remaining bags made a further journey by bus to Imperial College. There, over the next two and a half days, delegates faced the difficult choice of which of the two parallel sessions of talks to attend.

In total, there were 130 delegates, drawn from a staggering 28 countries. Virtually all of Western Europe was represented, as well as North America, Mexico, Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Korea, Singapore, Japan and Kazakhstan. This diversity resulted in papers – and conversations – of an incredible range and depth, as well as a sense of intellectual vitality and excitement. The main theme of ‘One Health’ attracted many delegates who would not consider themselves to be veterinary historians, but the discussions and connections that transpired demonstrated that perhaps, after all, they were. Professor Donald Smith, former Dean of the Cornell University veterinary school gave an exemplary keynote speech on the topic. Covering zoonoses, comparative medicine, and the positive contributions that animals can bring to human health, he brought together the past, present and future of veterinary work.

The second theme, animals, vets and war, was no less successful. It was ably introduced by Colonel Neil Smith of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. The keynote speaker was British historian Hilda Kean, who not only presented a fascinating talk on veterinary activities and human-animal relations on the British home front. She also led a party of delegates on an ‘Animal pasts in Hyde Park’ walk. Meanwhile, it was standing room only in the ‘talking history’ session, organised by oral historian, Sue Bradley. Four senior veterinarians (including the VHS’s Carl Boyde), from different countries, and with over 200 years of veterinary professional experience between them, shared their reflections on why they had joined the profession, how they trained and practiced, and what had changed in their lifetimes. In the evening, delegates headed to Kings College London for dinner and a birds-eye view of the Thames, before rising early for the final half-day, which concluded with a selection of All Creatures Great and Small excerpts, made by Spanish veterinary film historian, Fernando Camerero Rioja.

With double the number of papers of previous congresses, and the cream of veterinary historians presenting, this congress elevated the standards of veterinary history to a new high, nationally and internationally. It was also a hugely enjoyable and well organised event, taking place in pleasant venues, with good food, wine and company. For the VHS, it attracted many new members and inspired existing ones. Delegates had nothing but praise for the society in assuming the considerable responsibility and financial risk involved in the hosting such an event. Thanks to our sponsors, the finances of the VHS remain healthy, while the profile of veterinary history has never been higher.

Congratulations to the organising committee: Tim Cox, Robin Bone, Andrew Gardiner, John Clewlow, Mike Hinton, Louise Curth, and Abigail Woods – who was unanimously voted in as the next president of WAHVM, so ensuring that the VHS remains part of this thriving international community. The next meeting is in Vienna, 2016. We hope to see you there!