

Robert J M Crawford

Dairy Consultant

Born 26th April 1928 Isle of Cumbrae

Died 7th October 2015 Edinburgh

Mankind has known for centuries how to make cheese and butter but it was only last century that the skills needed for these processes moved from traditional knowledge into modern science.

One of those at the forefront on the change, Dr Bob Crawford, spread his scientific knowledge of milk production and the various dairy products of cheese, butter and yoghurt not only in Scotland but in many countries around the world. His expertise encouraged international agencies such as the Food and Agricultural Organisation, the British Council and the World Bank to sponsor his visits to areas where his knowledge was taken up by local people.

His much used passport with destinations as disparate as the USSR, Chile, Japan, the Middle East and the United States testified to his international reputation as an expert in dairy technology.

Robert Crawford's life started on his parents' family farm on the Isle of Cumbrae. Four years later he, his brother James and parents moved to a new farm at Leswalt, Wigtownshire and after attending Stranraer High school, he went off to Glasgow University where he was awarded a BSc in Agriculture in 1949.

He followed this with a Diploma in Dairying at the West of Scotland College of Agriculture at Auchincruive, which was to be the base for all of his working life and, although he did not know it at the time, also the source and mainstay of his family life.

He started work in its clumsily named but very important Milk Utilisation Department and ten years later he had become Head of that same Department which by then was called Dairy Technology.

As a lecturer, his easy approachable style made him a favourite with the students while his meticulous approach to his work and his enquiring mind saw him as the driving force behind a series of scientific papers.

These in turn saw him recognised beyond the Auchincruive campus and soon he was taking up external appointments as honorary lecturer at both Strathclyde and Glasgow

Universities. As his reputation grew, more invitations came in and soon he was also lecturing in Denmark; this being a singularly high honour as that country is famous worldwide for the quality of its dairy produce.

Early in his professional career, he became a member of a number of scientific organisations, most notably the Society of Dairy Technology where he soon moved on to be a member of Council prior to becoming President in 1967-68.

His first foreign consultancy work came in 1970, when the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations sent him to Valdivia in Chile to help develop educational programmes for their dairy industry.

Also in the 1970s, he made the first of several visits to the Middle East on a speaking tour to the Universities of Sulaimaniyeh, Mosul and Baghdad. This was later to be followed by work in Jordan for the Overseas Development Administration where again the work involved formulating courses for dairy students in that country.

With his knowledge of cheese technology and product development, he was in demand as a keynote speaker at major dairy conferences across the world with an invitation to the International Dairy Congress in Moscow in 1982, well before the Iron Curtain came down demonstrating his professional knowledge could overcome political barriers. Similar journeys were made to the USA where, again, his knowledge was wanted and prized.

Inevitably, his work abroad saw a return flow of students to the West College campus from the many countries he visited; a fact noted by the College chairman, Watson Peat on Bob's return when he remarked on the "international reputation" the college had gained as a result of his work.

Equally inevitably, his time spent abroad reduced his time in front of the local students with one batch marking the end of their final exams by presenting him with and comparing him to a roll of toilet paper because he was never there when desperately needed. A lesser more insecure person might have objected to this student humour but Bob took it in his stride as he did on another occasion when a colleague, unaware of Bob's presence behind him, asked a colleague, "Where is the big cheese?" In true pantomime fashion, Bob responded, "He is right behind you."

Apart from his all consuming work, his life centred on his family and to a lesser extent his garden and to an even smaller degree his golf with Prestwick St Nicholas.

He had met his wife Audrey on the campus where she was working as a Milk Officer for the local authority. Together in the family home in Ayr they brought up their three sons, Keith, Gregor and Duncan who in turn brought home their wives and more recently their children and grandchildren.

While Bob might have enjoyed a post retirement career as a dairy consultant, this option was curtailed through caring for Audrey at the time of her failing health. She died in 2001.

Among the many invitations to educational establishments around the world, one in 1984, came from the British Council to work as a Dairy Technology consultant in Syria with Damascus, Lattaquia and Aleppo as specific destinations. This confirmed his status as someone who could translate knowledge into everyday practical advice for those wanting to improve their dairy industries.

There are few compensations for those who suffer from dementia but some might consider it a minor blessing that Bob who suffered in his final three years from this debilitating disease did not know of the current damaging fundamentalist conflict in Syria where three decades earlier he had helped educational institutes prepare courses for their dairy students.

Andrew Arbuckle

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