

Solving a mystery straight from the horse's mouth

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For years many of us have read the late Bob Michell's column Speculum in *Veterinary Times* with enjoyment as he covered subjects both of human and veterinary interest, medical issues and, at times, included political issues and other topics that have affected both professions.

Besides looking to the future or the present, at times he included subjects of a more historic nature, such as Edward Jenner and vaccination.

Bob Michell: the man

Fortuitously, I knew Bob on and off throughout our professional lives as our career paths crossed. I qualified from the RVC a year or two after him, which he always jokingly reminded me, saying although I looked much older than him, he had taught me.

He had one of the best intellects of any veterinary surgeon of our generation. In any intellectual argument, he would have his various points marshalled and would put them forward one by one to produce the view he wished to express, often with devastating effect. His intellect was admired by most, seen in awe by many, in trepidation by a few and, I suspect, also incited jealousy in some.

He had great intellectual integrity. When he eloquently expressed an idea, it would have been considered and honed by him to produce a cascade of words to extol his thoughts. He was also always very fair and would credit those who had themselves produced various new thoughts or ideas.

Others have already mentioned Bob's work on sodium and potassium metabolism and its regulation in the body, and how he had acted as a bridge between human and animal metabolism. Besides this, I knew he enjoyed playing tennis for many years and was a great music enthusiast, widely read and always kind.

Foxhunter: forgotten national hero

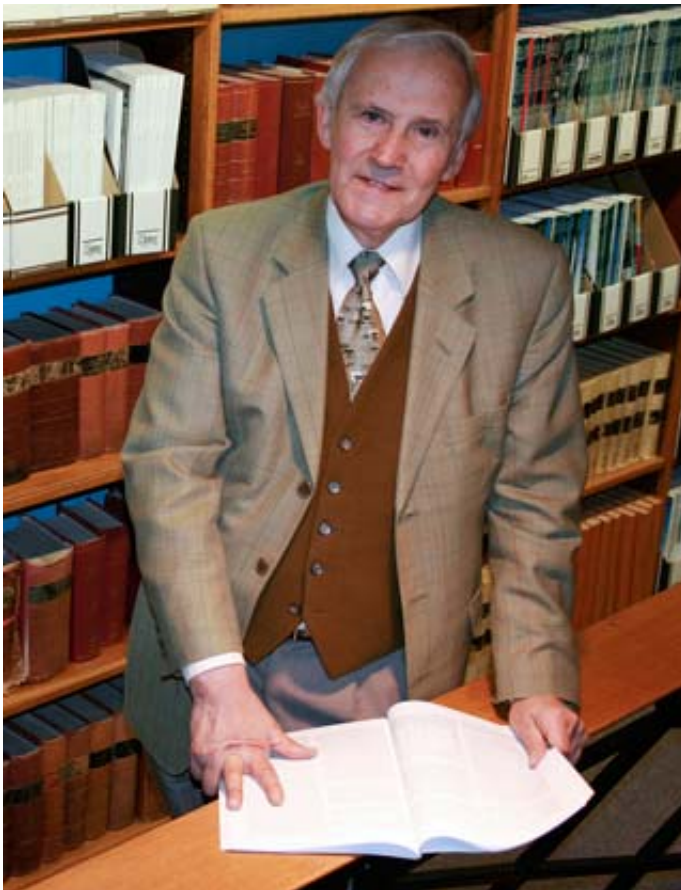
Just prior to the Rio Olympic Games, Bob produced a [Speculum piece about champion horse Foxhunter \(VT46.24\)](#). He explained, in his eloquent style, those exciting events at the Helsinki

Olympic Games of 1952 and their aftermath for horse and rider.

Foxhunter died in 1959 and, using a Guardian article of 25 May 2012, Bob describes how the Olympic torch procession passed within sight of his grave on the Bloreng mountain between Abergavenny and Blaenavon.

Foxhunter: the horse

The horse, described by Lieutenant Colonel Harry Llewellyn as a golden-bay gelding with dark points and a white sock on his right hind leg, was born on St George's Day (23 April) 1940 to mare Catcall, a Thoroughbred cross Clydesdale, and sired by Thoroughbred Erehwemos. Foxhunter was 16.35 hands (65.4in) high and was purchased by Lt Col Llewellyn in 1947 for £1,500. The horse and rider became a famous team, with Foxhunter winning 78 international championships. The books about Foxhunter describe Lt Col Llewellyn's and his most famous feat – at the 1952 Olympic Games at Helsinki that followed the London Olympics of 1948 when Great Britain won three gold medals. This second meeting after the Second World War was *The Boys Own Paper* stuff.



Speculum author Bob Michell.

Up until the last day of the games, Britain had not won any gold medals. It looked as if the team would go home empty-handed without a gold – especially as, in the last event, the team jumping equestrian event – the team would need a final round with only one mistake to win. This round was to be undertaken by Foxhunter and Lt Col Llewellyn, and hopes were not high, as they had gained 16.25 penalty points previously (the highest in the GB team).

Despite this, horse and rider showed complete composure and achieved what appeared to be the impossible by gaining a clear round. The team won gold with 40.75 points, followed by Chile with 45.75 points and the US with 52.5 points. Subsequently, Foxhunter became a national legend and gave his name to the Foxhunter Championship for novice horses at the Horse of the Year Show.

Lt Col Llewellyn continued to showjump Foxhunter until 1954, then (according to his book *Passports to Life – An Autobiography*) had “two marvellous seasons hunting on him. I could jump anything on him, water, huge rails – you really could have fun.”

In 1956 they went to Dublin where they won both the first and last competition at the Dublin Committee Cup, “which was then one of the big events in the showjumping calendar... In fact, Foxhunter finished on that brilliant performance at Dublin and retired at the top”.

Foxhunter continued to be used by Lt Col Llewellyn in the winters for hunting, “but he started tiring so quickly that I did not bring him up from grass for the 1959-60 season, just after I had given up after my first term as Master of the Monmouthshire”.

Foxhunter died on 28 November 1959 aged 19 “having done something to himself in the field... He died of a ruptured artery to his kidneys and went very quickly”.

Uncovering a mystery

This is where the mystery starts. When I was a young student at the RVC, I can remember learning some of my anatomy from the reconstructed skeleton said to be Foxhunter. It was in the RVC Anatomy Museum at the Camden campus and, despite the horse being what would be considered to be “a national treasure”, we were not only allowed to look at the skeleton, but also touch and handle the mounted bones.

Bob’s article was illustrated with a photograph, not provided himself, which showed the green memorial plaque on the Bloreng mountain with an inscription stating “Here lies FOXHUNTER Champion International Show Jumper.”

This set me thinking as to whether I had imagined this close encounter at the museum, whether there were two horses and whether there was a horse buried in Wales, as well as several other possible explanations.

At the time I was involved in some complex problems, so could not devote all the time I required to this conundrum. However, looking at Wikipedia and several other sources gave credence to the Welsh grave.

It took some time before I was helped by the RVC library to locate the “RVC” Foxhunter. This was, in fact, present standing dead, but kicking at the RVC Anatomy Museum. Once the original or imposter was located in its splendid display case, I contacted Bob to tell him of my discovery and the apparent mystery.

We discussed it and he wondered if at some stage a posse of ex-national service students had managed to flog a dead horse to the college. I suggested he or we should investigate the matter further. Unfortunately, Bob died a few weeks later, so he was unable to provide an answer to the Foxhunter questions, so I took it on myself to try to solve the mystery. It was not an easy task and some of the mysteries surrounding this equine legend may still not have been solved.

Is the mystery solved?

At least two books were published about Foxhunter – *Foxhunter in Pictures* (Lt Col Llewellyn, 1952) and *Foxhunter: The Story of a Champion* (Pat Landsberg, 1952). However, both of these were published after Foxhunter’s Olympic success, so did not deal with his subsequent life.

Initially, nearly all the information available pointed towards the Welsh grave. However, an RVC contemporary also remembered looking at a Foxhunter. RVC annual reports from 1959 to 1965 mention increasing the number and types of skeletons for student education, but no reference to Foxhunter.

However, I came across *Passports to Life – An Autobiography* (Lt Col Llewellyn and Pat Lucas, 1980) and in it, Lt Col Llewellyn said:

“Shortly after Foxhunter died we decided on his burial. I own some land situated at the top of the Blorenge mountain overlooking both Gobion and Llanvair Grange; and on my property right at the top are some rocks. Here, we found a cavity into which we put a stainless-steel casket. In this was placed the book I had written, Foxhunter in Pictures, and his hide, which we had brought back from the kennels where he had been taken after his death. His skeleton was carefully preserved and this was asked for by the Royal Veterinary College; it still stands there next-door to the statue of Hermit, a famous racehorse who won the Snowstorm Derby in 1867.”

So, we have it from the horse’s mouth – or at least as near to it as we can get. If this is all correct then as to whether or not Foxhunter is buried and where can be argued in many different ways for the years to come. I am sure this would bring a wry smile to Bob’s face.

There we have it, Foxhunter and Bob Michell, two real greats in their fields. Neither of you are

forgotten, you are both warmly remembered.

Acknowledgment

Sally Burton and the RVC library staff played a key part in helping track down the information for this article.

- [Foxhunter: a forgotten national hero](#)

References

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