

## **John Bleasdale CBE BSc PhD CBiol FIBiol FCIHort**

Professor John Bleasdale was an internationally-renowned Horticultural scientist, and a visionary, accomplished and inspirational Director of the National Vegetable Research Station at Wellesbourne.

He was deeply proud of its staff, their contributions to horticultural science and their contributions to improving productivity and to product quality in UK vegetable production. He was instrumental in ensuring the results of research and innovations in horticultural technology were broadcast on both a national and a world stage. In short, he understood the importance to an organisation of a 'Brand' and its marketing. In his tenure as Director, the National Vegetable Research Station became one of the premier field vegetable research centres in the world .

John won a Manchester Botanical Society Scholarship to attend Manchester University where he completed his Honours degree in Botany and a PhD on the subject of 'Atmospheric pollution and Plant Growth' .

This period of study delayed his National Service which he completed as a fighter pilot air-controller based in Egypt then in a war zone.

On return to the UK he secured in 1955 a research post in Harold Robert's Department working on weed/crop competition. Here, he became interested in competition between plants in vegetable crops and the effects on yield and this was to be his focus of research for the next 10 -15 years. He showed how the yield responses to changes in plant spacing were influenced by the type of vegetable and, in particular, by how it influenced the proportion of the total yield that was produced in different size grades of produce.

Traditional practice was to grow vegetables in wide rows to enable mechanical weeding but this limited yield and the ability to manage plant size. He quickly appreciated that the then recent introduction and use of a range of herbicides would enable growers to manipulate the between- row spacings and plant density. This work had an enormous and enduring impact in the Industry by improving marketable yields of vegetables in the size grades that food processors and supermarkets required.

For this work and his novel plant spacing field- experimental designs, a result of his collaboration with Nelder, his statistician colleague he was awarded in 1973 the Royal Agricultural Society of England medal for outstanding research in agriculture.

He was the author of over 60 scientific papers, general articles and books.

In 1961, he was appointed Head of the Plant Physiology Department and over the next 15 years built it into a thriving group of scientists. In 1977 he was appointed Institute Director, a post he held till retirement.

John was a natural leader. He had a commanding presence and a sharp, forensic mind that he retained to the end. He displayed a calmness and an inscrutability which, on occasions, was unnerving, particularly in Committees. Robust in discussion he fought hard for the interests of NVRS and the horticultural industry during periods of great change and attrition in horticultural research funding.

He was clear that Wellesbourne should focus on programmes of work of economic value and deliver benefit regardless of whether the lead time was just a few years or decades from the initiation of the work. Staff bought into this philosophy and this created a real sense of community and purpose.

The translation of research results into practical application was also a key component of his approach. He was keen to keep growers up to date with progress of research and early in his career he engaged actively

with industry leaders as he firmly believed that these links would assist rapid innovation and progress.

His friendships with leading figures in the Industry later proved to be of vital importance during his robust defence of Government support for agricultural research. In this respect he also appreciated the importance of maintaining close links to policy makers in Government departments. His preparedness helped to mitigate the most damaging effects of the reducing funds for agricultural and horticultural research experienced from the early 80s onwards. By and large he managed to retain core facilities and preserve vital expertise.

John was much in demand to chair a diversity of Scientific, Ministry of Agriculture and Research Council Committees. He travelled widely visiting and lecturing in Universities and research institutions in the UK, in North America, Australia, Europe and China and he promoted the importance of scientific exchanges for research staff with research institutions in the UK and overseas.

He received many honours throughout his career. He was President of the Association of Applied Biologists and of the Institute of Horticulture, an Honorary Professor at both Birmingham and Nottingham Universities

and an Emeritus Professor at Birmingham. In 1988 he was awarded CBE for his contribution to horticultural science and technology.

David Gray

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