

LIFE AFTER TANFIELD

ALEX BAINBRIDGE

PUPIL AT TANFIELD FROM 1944 TO 1950

MY LIFE AFTER LEAVING TANFIELD

Following two years' service as ground crew in the RAF, I trained as a teacher. I met my wife at college and happily she has stayed with me ever since. I taught for four years and then had a change of career when I was fortunate to be offered a place at Newcastle University to study for a degree in Agricultural Botany. I had thoughts of becoming a lecturer afterwards. After completing the degree course I gained a Commonwealth Scholarship which enabled me to study for a PhD in microbiology at the Waite Institute, Adelaide, Australia. While we lived in Adelaide we made an excursion into the "outback" hoping to reach Alice Springs. At that time there was no laid road just a dirt track and our aim proved to be over-ambitious. Our progress was too slow and after nearly two weeks we were running out of time so at about halfway, we turned back. We were fortunate in that the change of plan meant that we were able to return through the Gawler Range of Mountains. There we found that an unusual period of rain some weeks previously resulted in the valleys being carpeted in a profusion of wild flowers. The desert had bloomed. We were particularly thrilled to see large patches of the brilliant red Sturt Desert Pea.

While completing my PhD my plans had changed and on returning to the UK I now embarked on a more practical career and joined the Ministry of Agriculture's Advisory Service at Newcastle as a plant pathologist. With the food shortages of the post war years still sharp in people's memories the aim of the Advisory Service was to enable farmers and horticulturalists to produce as much home grown food as efficiently as possible. The work gave much satisfaction when a treatment could be recommended to counter a disease or condition that was harming a crop. After seven years I moved from the Advisory Service to Rothamsted Research Institute to do research into the epidemiology of foliar pathogens. By the early 1970s chemical companies were introducing fungicidal sprays that were effective in controlling pathogens but they were expensive and consequently could only be afforded once during the cropping season. The question was to identify the point in the life cycle of each pathogen when applying the fungicide was likely to give most benefit.

At age 50 I left Rothamsted to become an administrator of research funds when I joined the MAFF's Chief Scientist Group in Whitehall. By now it was becoming clear that pushing for ever more intensive agricultural practices was having a seriously detrimental effect on wildlife, either directly as were some of the insecticides or by depleting aspects of habitat that wildlife depended upon. A portion of the work the group commissioned was to study husbandry methods that were more conducive to wildlife. In recent years this research has become much more urgent.

During my years with the Chief Scientist Group I worked for two years with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in Ethiopia as a member of an international team selecting cereal varieties suitable for cultivation in the temperate conditions of the Ethiopian highlands. It is thought that Ethiopia is one centre of diversity of early types of barley which gave rise to the modern crop plant. It was interesting to see such a wide range of types being grown there, the result of the interplay between genetic variability and environment.

I have had an interesting and enjoyable career and it had its origin at Tanfield.