EPILOGUE: VETERINARY MEDICINE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The previous chapters have explored various aspects of early modern veterinary medicine in England, an area that has been sadly ignored by academics. Although this facet of history is slowly gaining more serious attention by British researchers working in the modern period, the medical beliefs and practices of the early modern period are still relatively unexplored. This is partially due to the mistaken belief that a system of veterinary medicine simply did not exist in England before the late eighteenth century. It might also be linked to the mystique of a dramatic growth in what might be called ‘the modernisation of British society and culture’. This included medicine taking ‘a move towards centre-stage’ as well as developments in agriculture, commerce, communications, consumption and transport. Although the once fashionable term ‘scientific revolution’ is now rarely used, the period is also still lauded for developments in chemistry, mechanics and experimental philosophy. As this book has previously discussed, the late eighteenth century is also credited with the beginning of a ‘real’ interest in animal health triggered by reoccurring episodes of ‘cattle plague’. In England, the culmination of these concerns was said to be the foundation of the first London Veterinary College in 1791.

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3 E. Cotchin, Veterinary College, p. 13; I. Pattison, Veterinary Profession, p. 1; L. Pugh, ‘From Farriery to Veterinary Medicine’, Veterinary History, 75 (1975), p. 11; R. Dunlop and D. Williams, Veterinary, p. 266 and D. Karasszon, Concise History of Veterinary Medicine, p. 270.
The commonplace that what we now refer to as ‘rinderpest’ was the catalyst for the foundation of ‘scientific’ veterinary medicine in England is, however, open to debate. This is not to suggest that the disease and death of large numbers of economically valuable animals did not have a major impact on the course of history. One mid-twentieth century historian, in fact, argued that it resulted in a ‘whole social and economic dislocation’ in England. Inherent in this description are a range of political implications and the link with the growth of medical developments such as inoculation.\textsuperscript{4} However, such changes do not provide sufficient evidence to credit cattle-plague with the so called metamorphosis of veterinary medicine.\textsuperscript{5} As this book has argued, veterinary medicine at the end of the eighteenth century was little changed from a hundred years before. In the second place, the London College opened almost a century after the first outbreaks of cattle plague in England. Thirdly, the sporadic efforts to improve veterinary care in this country did not include cattle but focused exclusively on horses. Finally, the institution that was founded in the 1790’s was also based entirely on treating horses, rather than the more lowly animals actually effected by the ‘plague’.

As Chapter 3 has shown, there was a very real ‘medical marketplace’ for animals throughout the early modern period. This is hardly surprising due to the immense economic significance of working animals. Furthermore, as John Burnham has noted, in every society during all time periods ‘someone plays the role of healer’. For most medical historians, however, people who treated humans are considered more worthy of serious study than those who worked with animals.\textsuperscript{6} The continuing strength of anthropocentrism in modern society also undoubtedly contributes to the lack of attention paid to the history of animal health and illness. There is also the on-going danger of applying modern ideas and standards to the past. The fact that our modern system consists of a highly regulated and formally educated group of veterinary practitioners


\textsuperscript{5} Readers should note that this chapter focuses exclusively on England, which experienced both a different pattern of cattle plague as well as responses to the disease than countries in Continental Europe.