

OBITUARY

Professor John Pilkington Hudson CBE, MBE, GM, VMH, MSc, PhD, NDH

John Hudson, Editor of *Experimental Agriculture* between 1965 and 1982, formerly Professor and Head of the Department of Horticulture, University of Nottingham, and subsequently Director of Long Ashton Research Station, Bristol, died at his home on 6 December 2007, aged 97.

John Hudson was born in Derbyshire in 1910. He gained a scholarship to a grammar school and left at 16 with no qualifications and, surprisingly, no clear ambitions! He admitted to an interest in physics, though his teacher dissuaded him from pursuing avenues in this direction. (Later, it was his ready grasp of physics that subsequently saved his life and many others). Initially, he worked on a small garden nursery venture begun by his energetic father, who was primarily a postmaster and shopkeeper. Almost by chance rather than ambition, he enrolled on a one-year horticultural course at the Midland Agricultural College at Sutton Bonington, near Nottingham. He passed with distinction. It must have been sheer determination that drove him to apply himself and study to gain entry qualifications for a degree. Later, he took a BSc in Horticulture at Sutton Bonington, at that time an external degree of the University of London.

In 1935 John Hudson was briefly a lecturer at Plumpton School of Agriculture before becoming a horticultural adviser for Sussex County Council in the following year. While a student at Sutton Bonington he had met Gretta, a sister of a college lecturer. They married in 1936 and lived in Plumpton for three years while he was an adviser.

Shortly before war began he joined the Territorial Army and was soon serving with the British Expeditionary Force in Normandy and was subsequently evacuated from Dunkirk. He was assigned to the Royal Engineers Bomb Disposal Unit and was in charge of a group during the blitz on Sheffield. Later, due to his scientific background, keen observation and his own ad hoc report on his experiences, he was summoned to London. He was to lead a team working on a neutralizing mechanism for unexploded bombs, with a promotion which led to the rank of major. He also liaised with his opposite numbers in the Navy and Air Force and, after America came into the war in 1941, he spent several months in the United States interacting with bomb experts. He was awarded a military MBE in 1943. In the following year he received the George Medal and then, in 1945, a Bar for his personal work on defusing bombs, including the first unexploded V1 (Flying Bomb, or 'doodlebug'). In the early days the average life expectancy for a bomb disposal officer was about 10 weeks. New generations of fuses were being introduced in such devices and John Hudson and his colleagues devised



ingenious ways of overcoming these challenges. He wrote ‘There was no real training, we learned by experience.’ It is extraordinary that this dynamic man never mentioned his war exploits to his students and many of his friends only learnt of them from a comparatively recent TV series on unexploded bombs!

After the war John and Gretta Hudson and their two young boys went to New Zealand. He worked in the Department of Agriculture at Wellington and in this period initiated experiments on the transportation of a new fruit to the UK, the Chinese gooseberry, later known as the kiwi fruit. He helped to establish the Experimental Station at Levin.

In 1948 he returned to the School of Agriculture, then a faculty of the new University of Nottingham, as a lecturer in the Horticulture Department, and gained MSc and PhD degrees. He became Head in 1950, Professor of Horticulture in 1958, and Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and Horticulture in 1965. John Hudson recalled, ‘It was

an interesting time building up the Department,' and he was justly proud to have occupied the first Chair of Horticulture at Nottingham where he had graduated. He demonstrated his flair for organization; things had to go to plan and, generally, they did. He undertook research on the propagation of raspberries by root cuttings and introduced from New Zealand a virus-free clone of a raspberry to the industry. He carried out pioneering studies with his research students on environmental factors affecting plant growth, particularly that of water relations, especially with tomatoes. He had some rewarding collaborative research with Professor Fred Milthorpe and Dr Ian Cowan.

Partly as a result of his work on environmental factors affecting plant growth and his interest in tropical horticulture, he was seconded, part-time, to found the Department of Horticulture at Khartoum University and was visiting Professor of Horticulture from 1961 to 1963. He was able to spend six months of each year in the Sudan and share his time successfully between the two universities.

John Hudson left Nottingham in 1967 to become Director of Long Ashton Research Station with a Chair of Horticultural Science at the University of Bristol. Directing the Station in the late 1960s was a testing time since there were shadows of research budget reductions on the horizon. Initially, he undertook some vigorous reorganization while retaining the confidence of staff. He thoroughly enjoyed the job and the friendship of his colleagues. 'Prof', as he was known by his staff, always made himself available to any who wished to see him. He certainly had that rare gift to see the obvious and to cut through unnecessary detail.

John Hudson edited *Control of the Plant Environment*, (1957) and *Experimental Agriculture*, (1965–1982), and served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Horticultural Science* and *SPAN*. He chaired the Government's Joint Advisory Committee on Agricultural Education until 1973 and served on the RHS Examinations Board.

He was a good communicator and could present scientific information clearly and spoke with apparent ease, though he would be thoroughly prepared. His lectures were ordered and delivered with precise timing. (He tried to instill this latter attribute into his students; he had the unfortunate habit of bringing an alarm clock to student seminars which rang noisily when the forecast time of the presentation was exceeded!)

Among his many awards was an Associateship of Honour by the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture. He was a former President of the Horticultural Educational Association, a founder member and Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Horticulture. In 1975 he was appointed CBE, for services to horticulture, and in the following year received the prestigious Victoria Medal of Honour in Horticulture from the Royal Horticultural Society.

In the 1998 edition of *Who's Who*, under the heading 'Recreations', John Hudson listed 'Talking with my friends'. He was an extraordinarily modest man; he always seemed genuinely interested in the person with whom he was talking. Even on his 97th birthday, when he was not feeling too well, he spoke little about himself but was

keen to enquire about his guests' health, activities and family. It is not often that a church is packed at a funeral for someone in their nineties and All Saints' Church, Wrington, was full for his Celebration Service. He had made many good friends in his local community and in the world.

John Hudson's career embraced research, teaching and advisory spheres. Dr Peter Waister, a former postgraduate, who spoke at his funeral, said he excelled in all aspects and was impressed by his ability to balance the three areas and to be inspirational in them all, a rare achievement!

So many are grateful for his fellowship and have pleasant memories of one who had a remarkable influence on people's careers, lifestyle and behaviour. John Hudson was one of horticulture's gentlemen.

Sadly, Greta died in 1988 and his son, Colin, an accomplished tropical agronomist (who received an award from Her Majesty on the same day as his father) died in Barbados in 2004. John Hudson is survived by his younger son, Richard, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at University College, London.

Brian Self