

Aleen Cust Centenary Conference



Aleen Cust

Thursday 11th August 2022, 9:00am - 7:00pm
Mountbellew Agricultural College, Galway

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|-----------------|--|
| 8:30 - 9:30am | Registration
Tea/Coffee and Scones |
| 9:30 - 10:00am | Official opening by Maria Wash MEP |
| 10:00 - 10:45am | Taking inspiration from a veterinary pioneer
<i>Siobhan Mullan, Professor of Animal Welfare and Ethics UCD Vet School</i> |
| 10:45 - 11:15am | Panel Discussion and Q&A |
| 11:15 - 11:45 | Break and visit the Historic Exhibition |
| 11:45 - 12:15pm | Are healthy horses happy?
<i>Meta Osborne, Senior Steward Turf Club</i> |
| 12:15 - 12:30pm | Question and Answers |
| 12:30 - 1:30pm | Lunch with Exhibitors |
| 1:30 - 2:30pm | Lets look at it from their point of view!
<i>Temple Grandin</i> |
| 2:30 - 2:45pm | Panel Discussion and Q&A |
| 2:45 - 3:15pm | Break and visit the Historic Exhibition |
| 3:15 - 4:15pm | Aleen Cust uncovered
<i>Mary Fanning RTE</i> |
| | PANEL DISCUSSION |
| 5:00 - 7.00 | Parasitology workshop (field event)
<i>Professor John Dalton ATU and Michael Gottstein Teagasc</i>
<i>Animal Health Ireland TASAH team</i> |

Check back
here soon for
registration
information

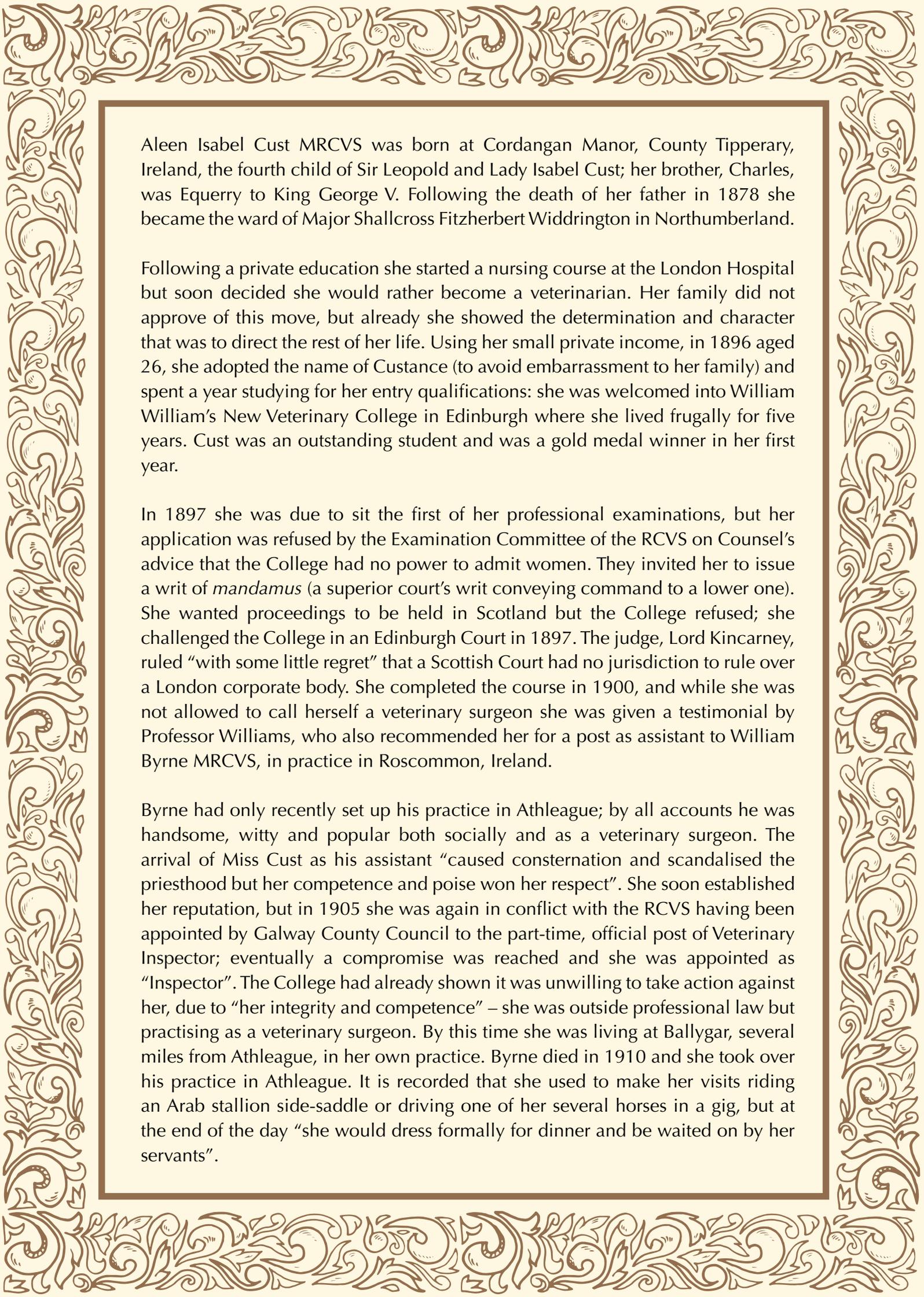


Aileen Cust

1868 - 1937

The first woman to become a veterinary surgeon in Ireland and the UK was Irish born. Remembered in Galway and Roscommon for her integrity, intelligence and determination, a highly capable practitioner.



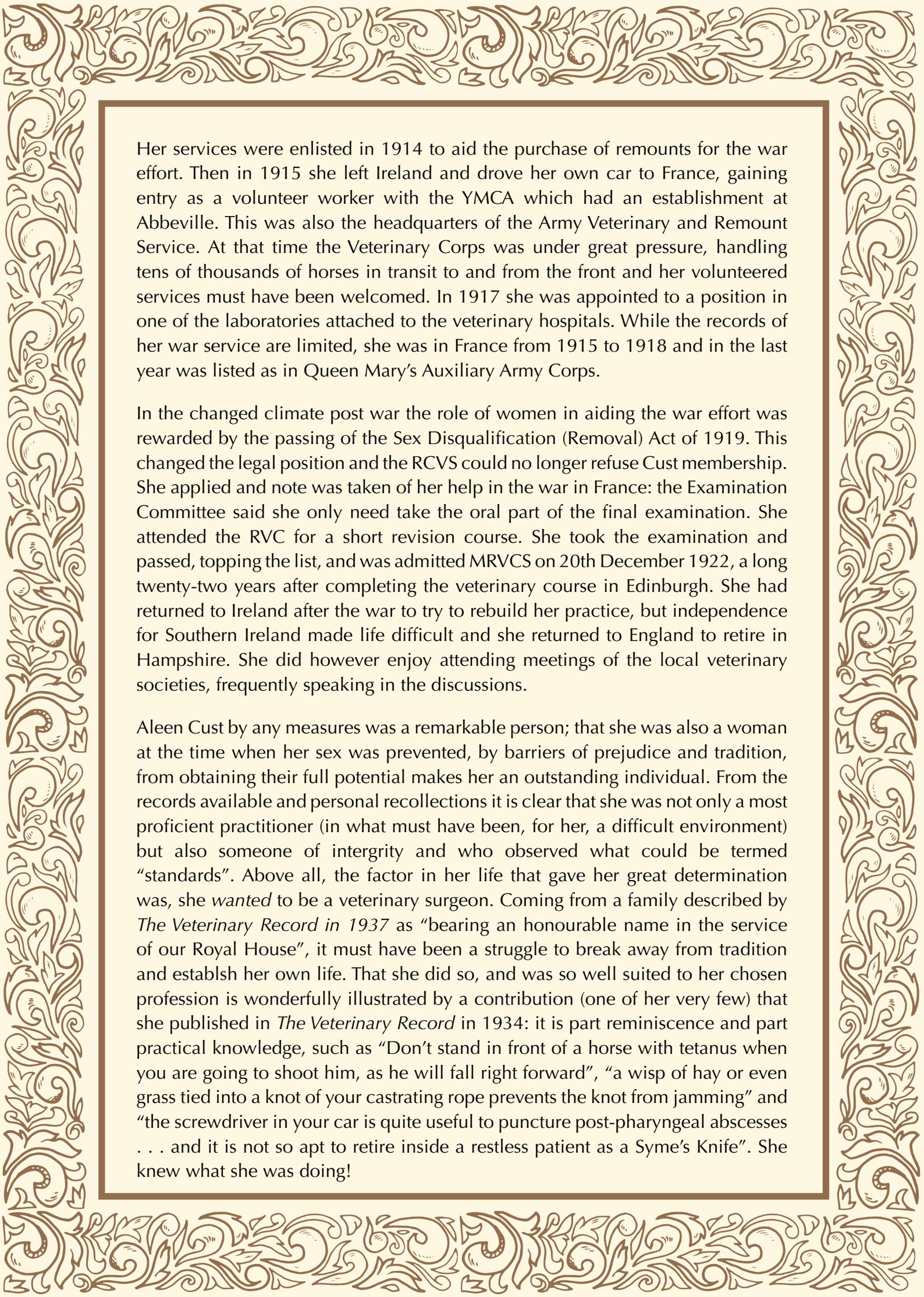
A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a light brown color, framing the entire page.

Aleen Isabel Cust MRCVS was born at Cordangan Manor, County Tipperary, Ireland, the fourth child of Sir Leopold and Lady Isabel Cust; her brother, Charles, was Equerry to King George V. Following the death of her father in 1878 she became the ward of Major Shallcross Fitzherbert Widdrington in Northumberland.

Following a private education she started a nursing course at the London Hospital but soon decided she would rather become a veterinarian. Her family did not approve of this move, but already she showed the determination and character that was to direct the rest of her life. Using her small private income, in 1896 aged 26, she adopted the name of Custance (to avoid embarrassment to her family) and spent a year studying for her entry qualifications: she was welcomed into William William's New Veterinary College in Edinburgh where she lived frugally for five years. Cust was an outstanding student and was a gold medal winner in her first year.

In 1897 she was due to sit the first of her professional examinations, but her application was refused by the Examination Committee of the RCVS on Counsel's advice that the College had no power to admit women. They invited her to issue a writ of *mandamus* (a superior court's writ conveying command to a lower one). She wanted proceedings to be held in Scotland but the College refused; she challenged the College in an Edinburgh Court in 1897. The judge, Lord Kincarmey, ruled "with some little regret" that a Scottish Court had no jurisdiction to rule over a London corporate body. She completed the course in 1900, and while she was not allowed to call herself a veterinary surgeon she was given a testimonial by Professor Williams, who also recommended her for a post as assistant to William Byrne MRCVS, in practice in Roscommon, Ireland.

Byrne had only recently set up his practice in Athleague; by all accounts he was handsome, witty and popular both socially and as a veterinary surgeon. The arrival of Miss Cust as his assistant "caused consternation and scandalised the priesthood but her competence and poise won her respect". She soon established her reputation, but in 1905 she was again in conflict with the RCVS having been appointed by Galway County Council to the part-time, official post of Veterinary Inspector; eventually a compromise was reached and she was appointed as "Inspector". The College had already shown it was unwilling to take action against her, due to "her integrity and competence" – she was outside professional law but practising as a veterinary surgeon. By this time she was living at Ballygar, several miles from Athleague, in her own practice. Byrne died in 1910 and she took over his practice in Athleague. It is recorded that she used to make her visits riding an Arab stallion side-saddle or driving one of her several horses in a gig, but at the end of the day "she would dress formally for dinner and be waited on by her servants".



Her services were enlisted in 1914 to aid the purchase of remounts for the war effort. Then in 1915 she left Ireland and drove her own car to France, gaining entry as a volunteer worker with the YMCA which had an establishment at Abbeville. This was also the headquarters of the Army Veterinary and Remount Service. At that time the Veterinary Corps was under great pressure, handling tens of thousands of horses in transit to and from the front and her volunteered services must have been welcomed. In 1917 she was appointed to a position in one of the laboratories attached to the veterinary hospitals. While the records of her war service are limited, she was in France from 1915 to 1918 and in the last year was listed as in Queen Mary's Auxiliary Army Corps.

In the changed climate post war the role of women in aiding the war effort was rewarded by the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919. This changed the legal position and the RCVS could no longer refuse Cust membership. She applied and note was taken of her help in the war in France: the Examination Committee said she only need take the oral part of the final examination. She attended the RVC for a short revision course. She took the examination and passed, topping the list, and was admitted MRVCS on 20th December 1922, a long twenty-two years after completing the veterinary course in Edinburgh. She had returned to Ireland after the war to try to rebuild her practice, but independence for Southern Ireland made life difficult and she returned to England to retire in Hampshire. She did however enjoy attending meetings of the local veterinary societies, frequently speaking in the discussions.

Aleen Cust by any measures was a remarkable person; that she was also a woman at the time when her sex was prevented, by barriers of prejudice and tradition, from obtaining their full potential makes her an outstanding individual. From the records available and personal recollections it is clear that she was not only a most proficient practitioner (in what must have been, for her, a difficult environment) but also someone of integrity and who observed what could be termed "standards". Above all, the factor in her life that gave her great determination was, she *wanted* to be a veterinary surgeon. Coming from a family described by *The Veterinary Record* in 1937 as "bearing an honourable name in the service of our Royal House", it must have been a struggle to break away from tradition and establish her own life. That she did so, and was so well suited to her chosen profession is wonderfully illustrated by a contribution (one of her very few) that she published in *The Veterinary Record* in 1934: it is part reminiscence and part practical knowledge, such as "Don't stand in front of a horse with tetanus when you are going to shoot him, as he will fall right forward", "a wisp of hay or even grass tied into a knot of your castrating rope prevents the knot from jamming" and "the screwdriver in your car is quite useful to puncture post-pharyngeal abscesses . . . and it is not so apt to retire inside a restless patient as a Syme's Knife". She knew what she was doing!

In the totally changed environment of the twenty-first century it is difficult to appreciate that Aleen Cust was refused consent to take the RCVS examinations as it was 'contrary to long usage and all precedent that women should be admitted to the veterinary profession'. When in 1922 she was finally admitted, 90% of the profession was in general practice and 96% of work was with horses and farm animals; the opinion of the vast majority of the profession was that the work was hard, dangerous, involved physical labour and often very noisy: this was deemed quite unsuitable for women.

There is some mystery, or concealment, about her private life. In 1904 she was engaged for a while to Bertram Widdrington son of her guardian, but her main relationship was with William Byrne. There is reason to believe that they lived together and had two daughters, born in Scotland and adopted, one in England one in Ireland. She severed her roots with Ireland in 1924, sold her properties and practice and retired to Plaitford in the New Forest. She maintained her lifestyle as well as she could, employing a housekeeper and always changing for dinner in the evening. The house and grounds were well populated with dogs, horses and poultry and she lived a quiet social life; however her family appear to have cut all links with her and she was not mentioned in their wills. She suffered from declining health in later years and in 1937 went to Jamaica to spend the winter in a warmer climate: three weeks later she died of a heart attack and was buried there. She left £29,915 of which £5000 went to the RCVS for scholarships in research, preferably to women. One has to feel a certain sadness about the latter years and the lonely end of the life of a quite remarkable determined woman, who blazed the trail which is now followed by the majority of new entrants to the veterinary profession.

A debt of gratitude is owed to Bruce Vivash Jones for allowing this article on Aleen Cust to be reproduced. Bruce Vivash Jones '*Twentieth-Century Veterinary Lives*' (Cirencester : Granville Penn Press, 2012).

