

An appreciation of John Nix



Emeritus Professor John Sydney Nix
1927 - 2018

Professor John Nix, who died on March 15th 2018, had an outstanding career as the leading figure of his generation in the study of farm business management. Through his teaching, research, publications, public speaking and involvement with organisations, such as the Institute for Agricultural Management, his aim was to improve the application of management skills to agricultural businesses at a practical level. He was remarkably successful in that endeavor and in doing so he became a household name amongst the farming community. His influence has been both far reaching and profound in the UK but it has also been significant internationally.

John was brought up in an urban environment on a Council Estate in South London. An academic high achiever from a very early age, he gained a scholarship to read Economics at Exeter University. On graduation he joined the Royal Navy as an Instructor Lieutenant. He had hoped to see something of the world in his new job but sadly this did not extend beyond the confines of HMS Ganges, a shore-based establishment in Suffolk. After three years in the Navy, he decided in 1951 to apply for a post as Senior Research Officer in the School of Agriculture at the University of Cambridge. It was this somewhat unlikely change in direction that started his lifelong passion for agriculture and agricultural economics. His new job involved touring East Anglia visiting farms and collecting data and in doing so he developed an understanding and a fondness for the industry that never left him. Whilst at Cambridge John authored a number of studies into the economics of various farm enterprises in East Anglia and he became involved with the early modelling work on farm systems which was developing at that time.

In 1961 he moved to Wye College (University of London) to join the Economics Department as lecturer and also as Farm Management Liaison Officer whose task it was to provide economic and management support for the NAAS, the state run agricultural advisory service of those days. This latter role meant that, as well as conducting research and teaching within a university environment, he was expected to extend the

results of his research directly to individual farmer clients.

This gave him a unique insight into the practical data needs of farm planners and was a stimulus to the production of *The Farm Management Pocketbook*, the first edition of which came out in 1966. This publication, now titled the 'John Nix Farm Management Pocketbook' and under the editorship of Graham Redman of Anderson's, is currently in its 48th edition. Estimated to have sold a quarter of a million copies by the time John retired in 1989, it became a standard reference for business in UK agriculture.

He always emphasized that the data was for planning purposes only and should *always* be modified if local conditions or knowledge suggested it. He was sometimes frustrated by the way in which figures from the Pocketbook became treated as fixed targets, goals or objectives, rather than as guidance as to what was likely in an average year in a particular situation. He was also on one occasion taken aback when one farmer said that he found the Pocketbook very useful for filling in complicated farm survey questionnaires about yields, labour use and other items (thus completing the data circle!).

John built, over time, a large information exchange network with the industry to source data for the Pocketbook, for mutual benefit. An example of this was the dairy advisory support group Kingshay, which John helped found in 1991, and was then its President until 1996. John updated the Pocketbook on an annual basis. He imposed a strict timetable for himself and during this time he went into purdah. Woe betide anyone who interrupted him over that period!

As an academic, he was known for his analytical approach to farm management problems. The first edition of his textbook *Farm Planning and Control*, jointly authored with C.S. Barnard, came out in 1973, with a second edition in 1979. It was regarded as the best UK treatise on the subject, was used throughout the world and was translated into Spanish. He also authored, together with Paul Hill and Nigel Williams, a second textbook *Land and Estate Management* which appeared in 1987 and ran to three editions during the 90's. There was a third textbook,

Farm Mechanisation for Profit with Bill Butterworth appearing in 1983.

In 1973, following the expansion of the economics teaching at Wye, John was appointed as Head of the Farm Business Unit. He lost no time in developing a tight unit with a strong focus on teaching and research. He was always supportive of his staff in the development of their own careers and encouraged them to explore whatever avenues they felt might be productive. He was a popular lecturer with a heavy teaching load both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. His notes were legendary, often consisting of a few ragged foolscap sheets with scribbles added year after year until almost illegible. One of his secretaries even found a discarded sheet and had it framed. He supervised many PhD students and a number of these became good lifelong friends. Shortly after his retirement in 1989, he was appointed Emeritus Professor and in 1995 he was made a Fellow of Wye College.

John's personal success and that of the FBU at Wye led to him being granted a personal chair in Farm Business Management in 1982, the first such chair in the UK. In 1984 he oversaw the introduction of the undergraduate degree in Agricultural Business Management at Wye. This became highly successful and well regarded. Despite his commitments within College, he always maintained a heavy programme of lectures at farmers' meetings, conferences and other gatherings up and down the country. He was in demand as a speaker or advisor to many organisations associated with the industry. At one time he was a regular on local television. His easy style and willingness to explain things in simple language endeared him to his audiences.

John had considerable influence within the Agricultural Economics Society and the Institute of Agricultural

Management. He was President of the AES in 1990-91 and in 2011 the Society honoured him with its Award for Excellence in recognition of his outstanding contribution to public policy and the farming industry. He was a founder member of the Farm Management Association which was formed in 1965. He chaired the FMA from 1978 to 1981 and edited the journal *Farm Management* from 1971 to 1995. The organisation was later to become the Centre for Management in Agriculture and is now known as the Institute of Agricultural Management. The Institute honoured him with its first National Award in 1982 and a Fellowship in 1993.

The large number of other awards which John received give some indication of the very high regard in which he was held in the industry as well academia: Companion of the British Institute of Management (1983), Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (1984), Fellow of the Royal Agricultural Society (1985), Agricultural Communicators Award (first recipient in 1999), The Farmers Club Cup (2005), NFU Lifetime Achievement Award (2006), Honorary Fellow of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (2007) and the Farmers Weekly Lifetime Achievement Award (2014).

John's life was one full of extraordinary achievement and impact within the subject of farm business management and on the agricultural industry. But for those that knew him and worked with him it will be the extraordinary warmth of his personality, enthusiasm and friendship that has left such a huge impression on so many of their lives. His first wife Mavis, by whom he had two daughters and a son, died in 2004. In 2005 he married Sue who survives him.

James V.H. Jones and Paul Webster