

Hidden gems and Forgotten People
COUNTY ROSCOMMON ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Aleen Cust (1868 – 1937)

Aleen Cust was born into an aristocratic English family in Cordangan Manor near Tipperary town. In 1878 her father Leopold Cust, a land agent to the Smith-Barry family, died suddenly and the family of four boys and two girls moved to England with their mother.

Aleen entered New Veterinary College Edinburgh in 1894 as a student against the wishes of her family and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. In 1900, she left Edinburgh having been refused the right to sit final exams. She did however get a letter of recommendation from the college principal Mr Williams. She was employed as a Veterinary Assistant by William Augustine Byrne MRCVS, Athleague Co. Roscommon in defiance of the RCVS. Mr Byrne was at this time a member of the council of the RCVS. She was later appointed to the post of Veterinary Inspector by Galway Co. Council, again against the wishes of the RCVS. Local practitioners gallantly declined to put their names forward for the post in order to allow Cust a free run.

In 1910 on the untimely death of William Byrne she took over his veterinary practice and she was very successful at it.

In 1911 she invited Sir Frederick Hobday to perform the “roaring operation” on a valuable horse in her practice. Sir Frederick agreed and thus implicitly recognised her as a colleague. In 1915 she travelled to France to help out in the Veterinary Corps treating warhorses although she was still not recognised professionally by the British Army.

With the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 coming into law on December 23rd 1919 the RCVS could no longer refuse to recognise Cust's right to practice veterinary medicine.

She was finally allowed to sit the final exams and received her diploma from the RCVS on December 21st 1922. Thus Aleen Cust became the first female veterinary surgeon in Britain and Ireland.

In 1924 Aleen sold “Fort Lyster House” in Athleague where she had her practice. She settled in Hampshire in the New Forest village of Plaitford. She was now retired from practice but still attended

veterinary meetings and was a great inspiration to female veterinary students. She died of heart failure while on holiday in Jamaica on January 29th 1937.

For a more complete story of Aleen's career, see the book by Connie M Ford MBE MRCVS "Aleen Cust Veterinary Surgeon" ISBN 0-948-737-11-5, published by Biopress Ltd.