

Obituary Notice

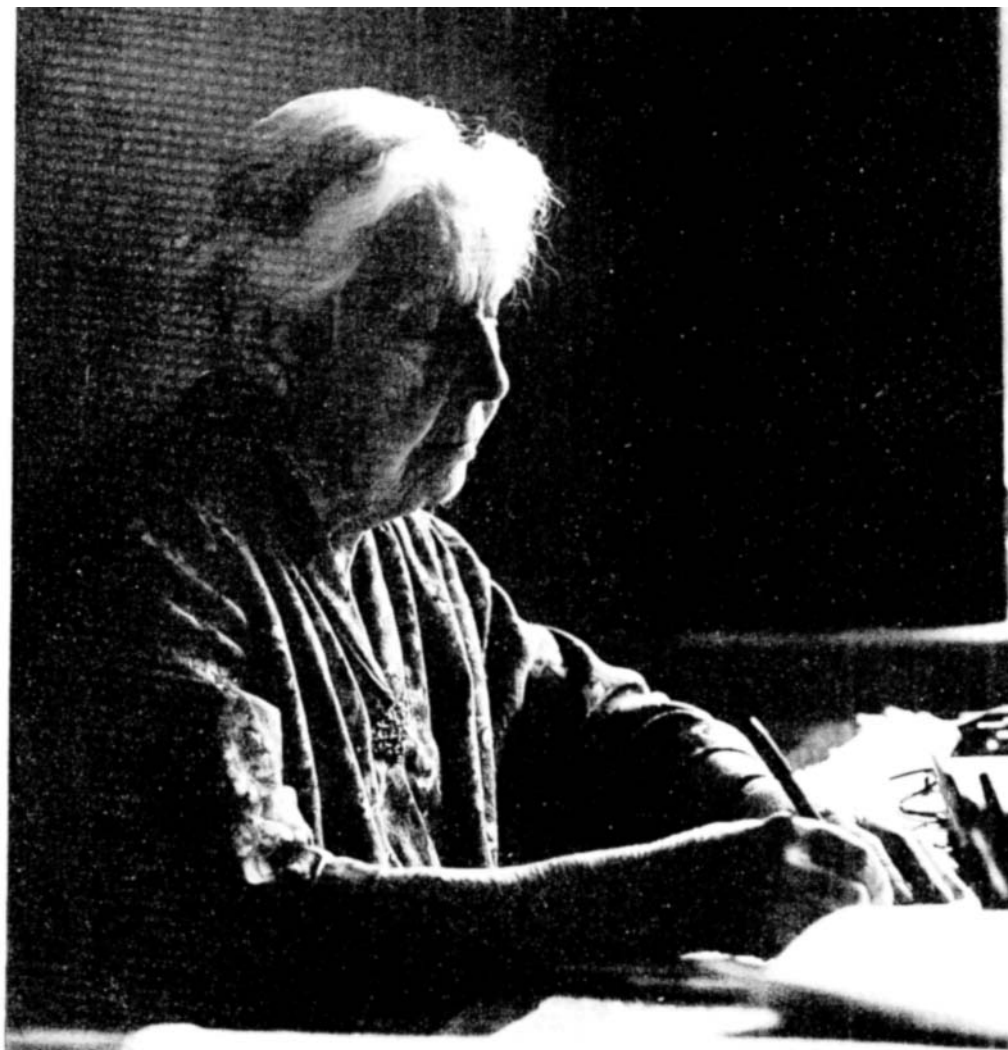
DAME HARRIETTE CHICK

(5 January 1875–9 July 1977)

With the death of Dame Harriette Chick in July the Nutrition Society has lost its oldest surviving founder member. Dame Harriette, who was Head of the Division of Nutrition of the Lister Institute, was one of the eleven distinguished nutritionists who signed the original circular letter in June 1941 inviting interested people to inaugurate the Nutrition Society. She attended all the preliminary discussions and was a member of the original committee set up to arrange the first plans for meetings of the Society and called in the help of her colleagues in the work of preparing for the first meeting of the new society in Cambridge on 18 October, 1941. For her early promotion of the Society Dame Harriette was honoured together with two other founders, Lord Boyd Orr and Sir Charles Martin, by being made an Honorary Member in 1949. Her interest and activity in the affairs and meetings were in no way decreased in spite of her age and in 1956 to 1959 she was President with no apparent limitations though already over 80 years of age. Her contact with the Society and with nutrition in general continued to the end of her long life.

Nutrition research did not enter Harriette Chick's work directly until about 1915 when the then Director of the Lister Institute, Charles Martin, was serving with the Medical Corps of the Australian Army in the Middle East. He encountered conditions among the troops related to nutritional difficulties and resembling beriberi and sent back a request that an attempt should be made to discover some foods that might be given to troops in the field to protect them from beriberi. As a result of much experimental work it was recommended that dried eggs and dried yeast would be useful. Further studies on nutrition occupied Harriette Chick and her colleagues up to the end of the war in 1918. Then came the severe food shortages in many parts of Europe and reports of serious outbreaks of rickets in children and of bone diseases in adults, particularly in Austria. A preliminary investigation by a combined mission from the Lister Institute and the Medical Research Committee (which later became the Medical Research Council) indicated that there would be a good opportunity to study the relation of nutrition to bone disease in Vienna and that collaboration with the staff of the Universitäts Kinderklinik was available. Accordingly a small team of women led by Dr Chick and Dr Elsie Dalyell, with Miss E. M. Hume, Dr H. M. M. Mackay and Miss H. Henderson Smith, went to Vienna and worked there for more than two years to produce incontrovertible evidence of the nutritional nature of rickets and the fact that a fat-soluble vitamin present in cod liver oil, or exposure to ultraviolet light, could cure and prevent the bone changes. This study was of great practical value in dispelling much of the mystery that had previously surrounded rickets and in leading to the almost complete disappearance of the disease in the years between the wars.

When Dr Chick returned to the Lister Institute in 1922, her interest in the protein field, which had previously been largely related to phenomena of antitoxin production and heat coagulation, turned to problems of nutritive value. A very careful investigation of biological values required the preparation of highly purified diets at a time when knowledge of the vitamin B complex was rudimentary, and so an auxiliary team set to work on the study of experimental and clinical research on B vitamins. Dr Chick herself became especially interested in pellagra and in 1932 went to USA to give a series of lectures on the relation of maize diets to the disease. Work on proteins and B vitamins was related also to the nutritive value



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(By courtesy of the British Nutrition Foundation)

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of cereals other than maize and the Lister Division of Nutrition carried out extensive studies on the fractions of the wheat grain obtained in modern milling processes and on the comparative values of brown and white breads. This work bore fruit in the planning of the National Loaf in the second world war. Much further work on bread and flour went on during the war when the Division of Nutrition was moved from the Institute in Chelsea to temporary accommodation in Sir Charles Martin's house in Cambridge. Here too, invaluable research into the nutritive value of potatoes was carried out and assistance given in many aspects of wartime food problems. Dr Chick did not retire until after the end of the war when she was more than five years beyond the usual retiring age. She kept up her interest in nutrition and her contact with the Lister Institute as a member of its Governing Body, attending the annual general meeting up to June 1975. Her achievements in nutrition were honoured by award of CBE in 1932 and of DBE in 1949.

Dr Chick was secretary of the Accessory Food Factors Committee of the Medical Research Council from 1925 to 1945, and of the League of Nations Health Section Committee on the Physiological Bases of Nutrition from 1934 to 1937. She was closely involved with Committees on International Standardisation of vitamins and other factors. Her Division attracted scientists from all over the world to come for brief visits or to work for longer periods under her aegis, so it was a marvellous meeting place for international nutritionists even before the Nutrition Society set out to keep the subject in the forefront of world interest. In 1974 the British Nutrition Foundation awarded her their annual prize, for which she prepared a lecture on her work on rickets in Vienna. This was shortly before her 100th birthday and she did not feel able to deliver the entire lecture but provided a lively introduction and left me to complete the discourse. It was a stirring occasion and many old friends gathered to honour the centenarian Dame. The photograph accompanying this note was taken at that time and shows her happily at work at her desk where she could look out on the garden that she enjoyed so greatly. She was still remarkably active and always keen to hear news of friends and colleagues, and her interest in life continued to her last days. From her Victorian beginnings to her 103rd year she carried the attachment to fundamental research that opened channels for so much new knowledge that makes the Nutrition Society duly proud of one of its illustrious Founders.

A. M. COPPING