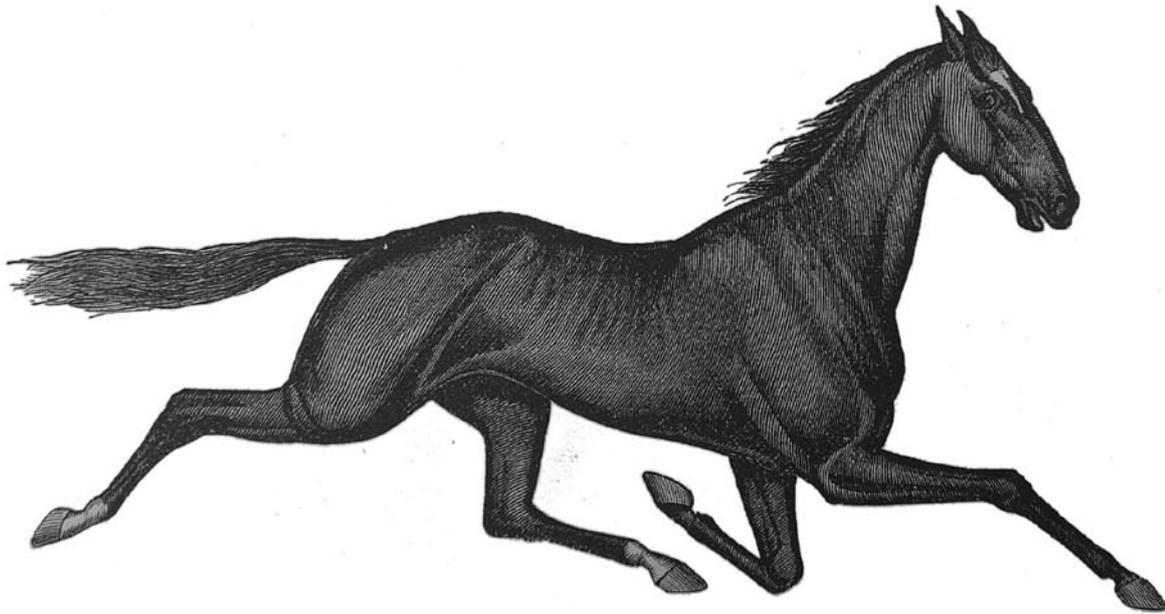


# THE LEGEND OF THE BLACK HORSE

## OR HOW THE BNA CONTRIBUTED TO THE BIRTH OF NEUROSCIENCE OVER A PINT IN A LONDON PUB

Joelle M. Abi-Rached, Anne Cooke and Steven Rose

*Joelle Abi-Rached<sup>1</sup>, a History of Science PhD student at Harvard, and Steven Rose, well-known researcher, broadcaster, author, political activist and one of the founding fathers of the BNA, recount how its birth marked a key moment in time for neuroscience worldwide*



**F**ree love, the moon landing, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy all mark the 1960s as a decade of change. And significant change was also afoot in the long history of brain science for, in the 1960s, a new type of interdisciplinary science gained an official name: neuroscience.

Neuroscience first saw the day of light under the name of the 'Neurosciences Research Program' or NRP. Founded in 1962 by American biophysicist Francis O. Schmitt, the NRP was predecessor to the American Society for Neuroscience, the world's largest organisation dedicated to neuroscience today.

In Britain, meanwhile, the first organisation that could lay claim to being dedicated to neuroscience was the Brain Research Association (BRA) formally founded in London in 1968. Although not, yet, neuroscience by name, the BRA shared the ethos of the American NRP, namely to promote multidisciplinary and collaboration across the brain sciences.

Yet the BRA came from very humble beginnings. It started as an eclectic group of like-minded scientists – not yet neuroscientists – who would gather at the Black Horse pub in Rathbone Place, London, to discuss topics that cut across different disciplines in brain science (see box).

During the mid-1960s this 'London Black Horse Group' actively promoted neuroscience in the UK, organizing conferences and workshops, acting as a lobby group, promoting new courses, degrees, centres and chairs in the neurosciences and gradually engaging in the ethical and social implications emerging from this new field of research.

It wasn't until three decades later, in 1996, that BRA became the British Neuroscience Association. The linguistic mutation from 'brain' to 'neuroscience' is an illuminating moment in the history of the BNA (and brain research more broadly) for it reflects the rise of neuroscience in both scientific and popular imaginations. Indeed the new century, on the cusp of which this mutation took place, was heralded as 'the century of neuroscience'.<sup>2</sup>

And now? Fifteen years on, the BNA is again making significant change. Outwardly this can be seen in the new logo. As for more... come to Harrogate 2011 to find out!

<sup>1</sup> Joelle has written the much fuller, fascinating account: From brain to neuro: the BRA and the making of British neuroscience, 1965-1996 in the Journal of the History of the Neurosciences. [jabi@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:jabi@fas.harvard.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Kandel, E.R. 1999. Biology and the future of psychoanalysis: a new intellectual framework for psychiatry revisited. *Am J Psychiatry* 156(4): 505-24; Jacob, F. 1998. *Of Flies, Mice and Men* Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press.



It was back in the dark ages of the mid 1960s. The word neuroscience was almost unheard of – we were neurochemists, neurophysiologists, neuroanatomists, scattered through the various departments of the London colleges. We were well used to the technical seminars in our own specialist departments, each on a highly specific microdetail of some brain process, structure or molecule. But somehow the grander picture – the reason why we had chosen to study brains and not livers or toenails – was lacking.

A group of us – some half dozen postdocs and young lecturers - decided we could do something better. Between us we assembled a mailing list of all the brain scientists and departments in the London area and called a meeting to plan a London-wide seminar series. The idea would be that we would choose a broad topic such as memory, or pain and invite three or four speakers from different disciplines to approach it each from their own perspective. There were to be two rules; eschew technical jargon so that disciplinary divides could be bridged; and no professors or heads of department so we would not feel intimidated.

If I remember rightly the first meeting was held in a lecture theatre in UCL, where it was immediately apparent that we needed a third rule – to meet in a more convivial place. We chose a meeting room in a pub in Rathbone Place just off Oxford Street, with beer on tap, and the meetings grew wings and flew.

Soon similar groups took off in other university cities, and from the London discussion group we became the BRA. Our informality was only marginally affected when the much lamented Pat Wall joined us, just back from the US in protest against the Vietnam war and the controller of a small grant intended to foster communication amongst neuroscientists.

Of course we became more established, though we fobbed off an attempt to turn us into a subsidiary of the International Brain Research Organisation. But we knew we had finally become respectable when a group of younger women published a spoof article in New Scientist proposing a rival outfit to the BRA, with the acronym JOCKSTRAP.

In due course the young postdocs and lecturers became professors in their turn, and in even due-er course grew old and retired.

Our legacy is the BNA. Santé!

#### FOUNDERS OF THE BLACK HORSE GROUP

Steven Rose

John Lagnado

John Dobbing (1922-99)

Robert Balázs

#### LATER JOINED BY:

Chris R. Evans

Patrick (Pat) Wall



Top right: the BNA logo old (l) and new (r)

Right: The Black Horse pub in Rathbone Place, London, where the seeds of BNA were sown.