



Lukehurst grew up around several aunts whose husbands had been killed in the First World War, and consequently she was influenced by their conservative view of the world

OBITUARY

Clare Lukehurst obituary

Lecturer and agro-energy consultant who helped to pioneer the use of biogas with her motto ‘where there’s muck, there’s money’

Wednesday June 22 2022, 12.01am, The Times

Share



Save



Striding in Wellington boots over muddy fields, Clare Lukehurst would enthuse about the joys of slurry — or as she preferred to call it, muck. Bemused farmers would listen as she explained animatedly how their animal manure and crops could soon be put to better use.

Lukehurst was a leading expert on anaerobic digestion, a process through which organic matter is broken down in an oxygen-free environment to produce biogas and fertiliser. Biogas, its proponents argue, has a large part to play in weaning the planet off fossil fuels. One of the first people in the UK to

recognise the technology's potential, Lukehurst played a key role in the development of the country's biogas industry.

The science behind biogas had existed for some time. The chemist Jan Baptista van Helmont determined in the 17th century that flammable gases were given off by decaying organic matter. Yet no serious experiments into the production of biogas were to take place in Europe until the 1980s, and they were conducted in Denmark and Germany rather than the UK. By the end of that decade, when high international oil prices became a matter of increasing concern and ministers in the UK were desperate for ideas that would help to expand energy production, Lukehurst began lobbying the British government, as well as sceptical farmers, to catch up.

Despite her role in expanding the UK's renewable energy portfolio, Lukehurst was not particularly preoccupied by the debate over the changing climate. She had no time for environmental activists, did not insulate her home and holidayed in Singapore, always flying first-class. On one such voyage, she encountered Hassanal Bolkiah, the Sultan of Brunei, who was charmed by her and invited her for tea.

Clare Therese Lukehurst was born in Canterbury, Kent, in 1935, to Florence (née Glasson) and Thomas Lukehurst, a civil engineer. Her mother was one of seven daughters descended from an old Cornish farming family; Florence's father, William Henry Glasson, had worked for the Ministry of Defence and the War Office.

ADVERTISEMENT

Lukehurst grew up around several aunts who had lost their husbands in the First World War and was influenced by their conservative view of the world, becoming a staunch Tory and Brexiteer in later life. Her younger brother Colin was a captain in the merchant navy and survives her.

When she was only a few years old, Lukehurst's family moved some 20 miles east to the coastal town of Broadstairs on the Isle of Thanet, where she was to develop a lifelong interest in the region's farming practices. While her brother was privately educated, she attended Simon Langton Girls' Grammar School in Canterbury before reading geography at the University College of the South West of England (now the University of Exeter).

At school she was a fastidious student, uninterested in boys or sports. Relations with her father soured after he left when Clare was 16 and she never saw him again after the day that he dropped her off at university.

Her talent as a geographer was quickly recognised and she was elected to a Fellowship of the Royal Geographical Society at the age of 24. This was despite spending long stretches of time during her early twenties in hospital with tuberculosis. She came under the influence early in her career of Professor Alice Coleman, emerita professor of geography at King's College London, who helped her to run the Isle of Thanet Geographical Association. Her doctorate, awarded by Birkbeck College in 1977, was on "The Changing Use of the Stour Marshes, 1840 to 1964".

Lukehurst had a focus on her work that allowed her time for little else. For her doctorate she once spent five days on her hands and knees examining every blade of grass in a square metre of grassland.



Despite her role in expanding the UK's renewable energy portfolio, Lukehurst had no time for environmental activists

After graduating, Lukehurst taught geography at the Bishop Thomas Grant School in Streatham, south London, and later at Brighton Polytechnic, now the University of Brighton, where she was the principal lecturer in geography. She directed the university's Countryside Research Unit, which looked at changing land use in Sussex and published widely on the geography and agriculture of the southeast of England.

In 1991 Lukehurst took early retirement and launched herself into a new career as an agro-energy consultant, helping to secure £3.5 million of funding to construct the UK's first biogas plant in Holsworthy, Devon. It stemmed from an inquiry into how to prevent muck spreading on large farms from polluting nearby rivers.

Investing in an anaerobic digester to process farm and other food waste offered dairy farmers a sustainable solution to the disposal of slurry and other animal manure, Lukehurst argued, while also helping to address the problem of landfill emissions. Such a scheme would prove financially lucrative too, providing

a renewable energy source in the form of green biogas that could power networks of local homes as well as producing a sustainable fertiliser that returned nutrients to the fields. “Where there’s muck there’s money” became one of Lukehurst’s mottos.

ADVERTISEMENT

The merits of biogas are debated by those who point out that the conversion of waste alone is less profitable than using purpose-grown crops, which risks incentivising farmers to divert arable land from food to fuel production. Lukehurst, however, remained a staunch defender of the technology.

From 2005 until her death she represented the UK’s farming and biogas interests at the forum hosted by the International Energy Agency (IEA). In recent years, although her health declined, she remained indefatigable in her work in the field. On several occasions when the government was reluctant to pay the IEA membership fees for its bioenergy group, she campaigned personally to raise the necessary funds. Faced with her particular blend of polite reproach and steely determination, those targeted invariably coughed up.

At home in Broadstairs, Lukehurst preferred to live simply, cultivating a wide range of vegetables, fruit and flowers in her garden. She was deeply involved in her community and regularly attended Mass at her local Catholic church. When not travelling in Asia, she enjoyed spending time in the Channel

Islands and was particularly fond of Jersey. Lukehurst never married, but she enjoyed the companionship of a long succession of much-loved cats and a 75-year-long friendship with an old school friend called Pam, who often accompanied her on her travels around the world.

Clare Lukehurst OBE, biogas pioneer, was born on February 25, 1935. She died of heart failure on April 23, 2022, aged 87

Comments (3)

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

Philippa Berry



Add to the conversation...

Sort by **Recommended** ▾



John Darby • 10 HOURS AGO



What an interesting obituary.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(18\)](#)



Phillip Taylor • 4 HOURS AGO



Fine lady

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(3\)](#)



John Witherow • 3 HOURS AGO



“Where there’s muck, there’s brass.”

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(1\)](#)