

Dame Bridget Ogilvie obituary

Parasitologist and director of the Wellcome Trust who oversaw the launch of the UK's flagship genome sequencing centre

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 Bridget Ogilvie in 1992, during her time as director of the Wellcome Trust. Photograph: Fairfax Media Archives/Getty Images

In 2003 an international consortium published the complete sequence of all 3bn “letters” that make up the human genetic code. The UK’s leading role in this effort owed much to the guiding hand of the plain-speaking Australian-born scientist Bridget Ogilvie. As director of the Wellcome Trust, Britain’s largest medical research charity, she oversaw the creation in 1993 of the Sanger Centre at Hinxton near Cambridge, an innovation in scientific infrastructure dedicated to churning out high-quality sequence as fast as possible. Today the [Wellcome Sanger Institute](#) uses its high-throughput technology to study health and disease, and document the diversity of life.

Ogilvie, who has died aged 88, joined Wellcome in 1979 to oversee the charity’s tropical medicine research programmes half-time while continuing her own research into parasitic worms. She joined the full-time staff in 1981. At the time it was relatively small, disbursing around £12m in grants a year derived from the profits of its wholly owned drug company, the Wellcome Foundation.

During Ogilvie’s tenure as director, from 1991 until 1998, the trustees completed a staged sell-off of the company, which had become very profitable thanks to its drugs for herpes and HIV, and built an endowment worth £13-15bn. “When I became director in October 1991 my budget was £90m,” Ogilvie told me in 2001. “The following July it was suddenly £200m. To spend that kind of money sensibly is not easy.” Instead of funding dozens of short-term projects, Ogilvie encouraged the trustees to put serious backing behind activities that needed a longer-term view. “It was obvious to me that the Wellcome Trust needed to have a flagship enterprise,” she said. “It was always difficult to get people to change their mindset, and stop giving money away in little packets.”

In 1992 [Dai Rees](#), director of the government-funded Medical Research Council, and the Nobel prize-winning chemist [Aaron Klug](#), director of the MRC’s Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge, approached Ogilvie and asked for Wellcome’s support to keep their staff scientist [John Sulston](#) in the country. Sulston was the UK’s leading genome sequencer and was being actively courted to take a post in the US.

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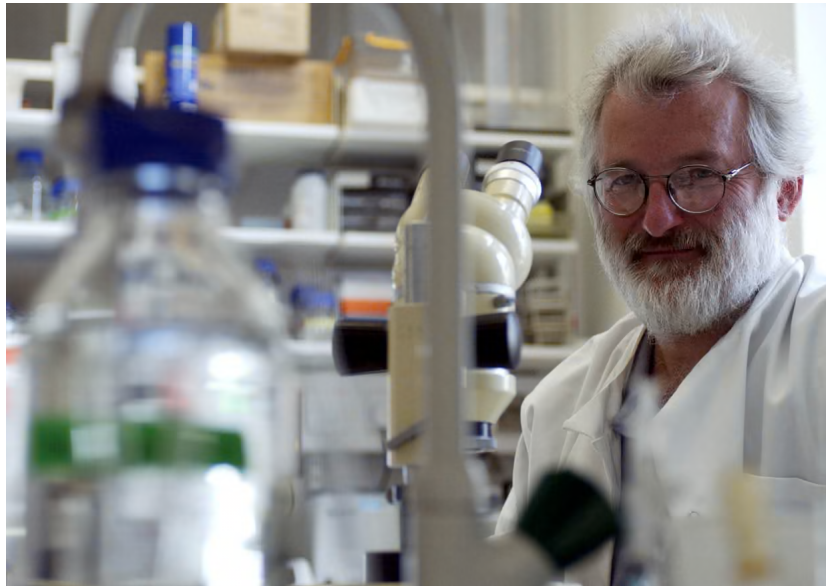
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📷 John Sulston in his laboratory at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute, after the announcement of his share of the 2002 Nobel prize in medicine or physiology. Photograph: Chris Young/PA

Wellcome agreed to match £2m from the MRC, and Ogilvie appointed one of her senior lieutenants, Michael Morgan, to lead on its genome activities. Almost immediately, Wellcome spent £40m buying and redeveloping the Hinxton Hall estate near Cambridge, where the Sanger Centre opened in 1993.

The purchase meant that the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus, as it became, could also host the [European Bioinformatics Institute](#), immediately enhancing its international importance. As competition from the American entrepreneur Craig Venter's Celera Genomics threatened the future of the human genome as a public good, Wellcome continued to invest heavily in the project, strengthening the arm of US public funders and sponsoring a crucial international meeting on data sharing in Bermuda. "John [Sulston] was absolutely determined to make everything available as a public good straight away," said Ogilvie. "As a charity, we were very supportive of that." The Sanger Centre went on to contribute a third of the total human sequence to the global effort.

Just before she retired in 1998, Ogilvie also persuaded the recently elected Labour government to match £300m of funding from the trust to set up the joint infrastructure fund (JIF). This enabled British universities to update their research buildings and equipment, which had deteriorated under the previous administration's cuts to capital expenditure and promotion of public-private partnerships.

Ogilvie was born in Glen Innes, a remote rural town in northern New South Wales, the daughter of Margaret (nee McRae) and John Mylne Ogilvie, a sheep farmer. She and her brother began their education in a "one-teacher, one-room bush school", and she went on to board at New England girls' school in Armidale, New South Wales. When the bank manager told her father, an Oxford graduate, that he should spend money on fertiliser rather

than his daughter's university education, he replied that education was "the finest fertiliser I know".



📷 Bridget Ogilvie pictured in 1995. Photograph: Album/Alamy

After a year at the University of Queensland, Ogilvie switched from a "boring" general science course to a new one in rural science at the less established but much more innovative University of New England in Armidale. She was the only woman in her year and outperformed all her classmates. From there she won one of the first Commonwealth scholarships to go to Cambridge University for her PhD.

Ogilvie had no time for flummery and was far from dazzled by Cambridge, but enjoyed her research on a gut parasite of rodents. In 1963 she won a fellowship to work at the National Institute of Medical Research at Mill Hill, north London. She focused on a problem she had first encountered on her father's sheep farm: why the massive immune response induced by parasitic infections does not lead to permanent immunity.

After she retired as director of the Wellcome Trust, Ogilvie took on a number of non-executive and trustee roles with organisations including the Science Museum, Cancer Research UK, Lloyds Bank and the drug company Zeneca (later AstraZeneca), and chaired the board of the [Medicines for Malaria Venture](#). She was as unerring in her capacity to get to the heart of a problem as she was in her ability to skewer a poorly evidenced argument.

Ogilvie was passionate about the need for scientists to engage with the public. While at Wellcome she made outreach and engagement a key part of its activities. She chaired the UK's Committee on the Public Understanding of Science from 1998 until 2002, and then helped to found [Sense About Science](#), a charity that provides accessible evidence to the public and policymakers to counter misleading claims about scientific issues.

Made a dame in 1997, Ogilvie received many other honours, including being appointed AC - a Companion of the Order of Australia - in 2007. She told the Australian radio presenter Robyn Williams that she had encountered prejudice on account of her gender only once. While she was spending a sabbatical at Australia's national science agency in the early 1970s, colleagues told her that they would have recommended her as a division head "if she had been a man". However, she recognised that gender bias was a persistent problem in science and worked hard to encourage inclusive policies.

In later life she escaped the dark days of the British winter at her house on the coast near Wollongong, south of Sydney, where she enjoyed gardening and the company of friends.

Bridget Margaret Ogilvie, parasitologist and foundation director, born 24 March 1938; died 27 April 2026

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