Curing animals was for John Howell a matter of head — years of training, teaching, innovation and building international research partnerships for Murdoch University. Caring for animals, however, was also a matter of heart — giving illness, for example, a decent spread to roam. As chairman of the Perth Zoological Gardens Board (later renamed Zoological Parks Authority) he led the way to tripling the space for the elephants.

Long before taking this leadership role, the Englishman had vindicated Murdoch’s decision in 1974 to cast the net wide for academic leaders to launch WA’s second university on its mission to offer a less traditional type of education. Where to find a professor, what pathology with a blend of professional expertise and amenable personality?

The answer: Liverpool. John Howell was a senior lecturer and reader at the city’s university, where he had graduated before earning a PhD at Guy’s Hospital in London.

Professor Mal Nairn, then a senior WA Department of Agriculture scientist, remembers taking the keen applicant, who had arrived for an exploratory visit to WA, to Cottesloe, just north of Perth. “I knew the area well,” he recalls. “It was clear that not only was John knowledgeable about local pastures, but he was particularly adept at copper deficiency in livestock but he was easy to get on with. Murdoch had its man.”

At Liverpool he was comfortable with people was complemented by great affinity with the animal world. As a boy in the Staffordshire school of Tunstall he had loved the family’s dogs. John was born on October 5, 1932, in Stoke-on-Trent, the first of four children, to James Howell and Ivy (nee McCormack). At the end of high school, started during World War II, he won a place at Liverpool but first faced two years of army service, spent mainly in the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. He was one of many national servicemen to prefer the company of the army’s German shepherds to the semester-mates of Eisenhower.

While at university John met Elaine Doncaster at a dance. The building schoolteacher had grown up in the north of England. She recalls today that among John’s qualities was an enduring capacity to make her laugh. They were married in 1957 and in 1974 brought their daughters to settle in Perth. They also brought mother-and-daughter bulldogs.

Emerine Professor Byron Kakulas, a close friend and long-time colleague in the fields of animal and human pathology, says John became a pioneer in using animal models for investigating human diseases. Notably, various types of muscular dystrophy were among his research priorities. The discovery of faulty genes and muscle disorders in animals can help us understand how these affect people.

“He and I presented at many international conferences together,” he says. “He was always gentle and thoughtful — I never heard him raise his voice. Astute, with a dry sense of humour, what John said often stayed in your mind.”

The same personal praise comes from another retired professor, Frank Mastaglia, who credits John with a “major breakthrough” in McArdle disease, a rare condition that severely weakens muscles. “John was a dogged pursuer of new knowledge to pathology and science more generally,” he says. “A fierce intellect combined with a lovely disposition that put all at ease.”

This quality was a boon in conveying, in John’s many official positions, a sense of orderly progress. From 1974 to 1980 he was head of Murdoch University Veterinary School’s division of veterinary biology; in 1983 he began six years as third dean of the school. He held a number of positions in the Australian Neuromuscular Research Institute over the years. He was Murdoch’s Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research) from 1991 to 1994. In recognition of contributions to medical and veterinary research he was awarded Officer of the Order of Australia in 2000.

His membership of the Australian Veterinary Association WA included time as president, and he was awarded the AWA’s highest award, the Gilruth Prize, in 1993.

Arriving home from work was rarely the end of John’s Murdoch day. He and Elaine would go back to the university’s farm for a long walk. He fed the four-legged residents as faithfully as he fed the minds of thousands of students.

The residents included a stallion who as Satinover had been a star of Perth tracks and could now, in comfortable retirement, revel in the carrots brought by John. Walking the family’s dogs was another regular pleasure for the Howells.

Susan Hunt, chief executive of Perth Zoo, was its director of business when John became chairman in 2000. “He was amazingly supportive of our vet team,” she says. “Not every zoo is blessed with a hands-on animals expert heading the board. He had a terrific range of contacts. One day we did a trunk biopsy on a young elephant with a serious muscle problem. The vet did a standing sedation. John attended but not to tell her what to do. He simply lent forward and whispered in her ear ‘Relax. That worked nicely.’”

Poor health affected John last year, though his voice was rarely still. He died on March 15, survived by Elaine, their daughters Beverley and Louise, two grandsons and his brother Allan.

No one in the Howell household thinks of The Goon Show on radio without recalling John chuckling at Neddy Seagoon’s disastrous escapades.

There is also a familial legacy. The John Howell Zoo and Wildlife Medicine Residency Program enables WA veterinarians to undertake postgraduate and clinical work. Thus do willing hands continue helping all species on the planet.

Patrick Cornish