RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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Starting from here

Welcome to the first edition of Rural History Today ...

It has not been a good year for either farming or the countryside: but it has been a most illuminating one.

In the summer of last year there was swine fever. In the autumn extremes of weather saw a large part of the countryside flooded, with the ground impossible to harvest or plant. Then, in the New Year, the countryside was visited by a plague of Old Testament proportions: Foot and Mouth which, as we go to press, still rumbles on in Cumbria and North Yorkshire. The public prints have been full of debates about the vaccination of cattle, the rival technologies of disposing of their carcasses and the wisdom of instituting a wholesale ban over access to the countryside even in predominantly arable counties, far from outbreaks of the disease. Foot and Mouth is not over. Nor is BSE. Public confidence in farming remains low. It is both a symptom but also an aspect of the problem that two polemical works on the state of English farming have recently appeared: Andrew O'Hagan's *The End of British Farming* and John Humphrys' *The Great Food Gamble.*

As Foot and Mouth took hold, it was noticed by some newspaper columnists that agriculture formed only 0.08 per cent of GNP. The industry employed only 2 per cent of the national workforce. For many writers the attention paid to animal disease and the severity of the steps taken to contain it seemed completely disproportionate to the weight of agriculture in the domestic economy. A Lake District hotelier was quoted as saying that his turnover was greater than that of

all the farmers in his valley. In the desperate circumstances of Easter, it was not clear which of them had the greater income (or any income at all).

But the point was made. Farming was a minority occupation. Food could be sourced more cheaply from abroad. (In June, Dairy Crest, a company part owned by farmers, was reported to be advertising New Zealand lamb on its milk floats.) The new economy of the countryside was tourism and recreation. Farming, it was held, should be subservient to their needs. The new seasonality of the countryside would not be ploughing, sowing and harvest but bank holidays, school holidays and cheap New Year breaks. The role of farmers would be as subsidised wardens to maintain the landscape. Farming itself was a smoke-stack industry, like coal or steel in the '80s, unviable without subsidy, which needed to be cut down to size. Farmers went, in a matter of months, from being the heroes of the petrol crisis of October (remember that?) to state pensioners, a burden on the tax payer, over-subsidised, over-compensated for the (compulsory) slaughter of

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their animals and making excessive capital gains on the value of their land. And whilst all this was going on, the new government indicated its intention to legislate against hunting with hounds, an activity of symbolic rather than economic significance. Whether the past twelve months will turn out to be of more than usual significance in the history of modern agriculture remains to be seen: our children will know in the fullness of time. But it has been a remarkable year for showing firstly, how little farming counts for economically against other countryside industries, especially tourism, and secondly, the great interest – or concern – which lay people have in both farming and agriculture. A minority have strong views about food, GM crops, factory farming, the transport of animals abroad and, we might add, hunting. Yet, as any teacher of undergraduates will tell you, many of the young have little or no understanding of food or where it comes from, nor are they greatly interested. For every person seriously concerned about the ecological consequences of McDonald's, there are dozens who cannot tell wheat from barley, or offer an account of how butter and cheese is made, and who eat intensively farmed chicken (or salmon) without any compunction. But many of these same people are alarmed without being informed, whether out of a conviction that food is unsafe (BSE, salmonella, pesticide residues, GM crops), believe that organic produce is best, that the battery farming of hens is inhumane.

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It is, you might say, about time that these thoughts arrived at rural history. It may be argued that the academic discipline is generally in good heart. For one thing, it is attracting young scholars into it, even if many of them do not necessarily accept the label. One knows of younger historians who are bringing to fruition excellent work on demesne farming, serfdom, agricultural labour (and particularly female labour) at all periods, on commons and that great perennial, enclosure. The more established historians have brought volume seven and so the whole, great series of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales* to a conclusion. As an article later in this newsletter shows, the team of Bethanie Afton, John Beckett and Michael Turner are injecting new life into the long running debate over the agricultural revolution. Whilst the old themes and debates have much life left in them, academic rural history has ceased to be about productivity: it now embraces the whole human experience in the countryside. Nor is rural history simply an academic pursuit. Outside the Universities there is a large body of enthusiasts engaged in research into the history of the countryside even if many of them espouse the flag of local history rather than that of rural history. (For, as a colleague recently pointed out, what is most local history but the rural history of localities?) The British Agricultural History Society – whose members are more non-university than university – is buoyant in numbers.

Rural history though has been slow to claim the twentieth century for itself. It should, and quickly. It is not only that we have entered a new century and millennium: it is also clear that a climactic was passed at the end of the 1980s just as at the end of the 1870s. No one can tell how long the depression will last, but we can now look back at the long expansionist phase in British farming which began in wartime and recognise that – for the moment – it has come to an end. We might notice that much of the polemical critique of current conditions is founded in history, notably in a critique of the 1947 Agriculture Act and all that flowed from it. For current writers, the great productivity gains of English agriculture from the '50s onwards now seem less impressive than the legacies of environmental degradation (healthland ploughing, drainage, inappropriate upland afforestation, hedgerow removal), excessive chemical use (whether in foodstuffs, fertilisers or pesticides) and overproductivity with which we live. The post-war period has a historical quality to it and now awaits our attention.

Academic rural history – in common with most university disciplines – is not going to attract a great public audience. To do so it needs popularisers, not polemicists, and these are few and far between (Alun Howkins being a notable exception). For all the public interest in the countryside, there is no single volume history of the twentieth-century countryside (or farming) available for the use of the curious whose commitment stops short of the academic weight of the *Agrarian History*. There should be, and I hope that in time we, at the RHC, will satisfy this need. But the natural point of contact between rural history and the public ought to be, as much as anywhere, through the rural history museum. Academic rural historians have generally been indifferent to museums: and they have been wrong. The report, *Farming, Countryside and Museums,* commissioned by the Museum and Galleries Commission (and published in its dying days) confirmed that time had not been kind to this corner of the museum sector. The criticisms are familiar: for one, too great an emphasis on the relics of pre-mechanised farming, rescued and first displayed in the 1950s when the tractor was carrying all before it. Nor have agricultural museums generally received the investment which they deserved or need. Their displays remain

static and object heavy. They have generally not moved to explain how agriculture works today, but remain rooted in a celebration of an older, slower rural life, of household and craftsman production. Hence their clientele is older, their pull over the middle aged and young diminished, and visitor numbers are declining.

All of this and more can be found in the MGC report. Where that report perhaps ran out of steam was in its prescriptions for the future. Let us be clear. All the signs are that there is a great public curiosity about food, farming and the countryside waiting to be exploited. We have already implied that farming issues take up a disproportionate amount of space in the press and media; but neither newspapers nor the media generally, can be expected to inform. They thrive on crisis rather than the daily round. It is in the interest of all concerned with farming and the countryside that agricultural museums accept the role of informing, educating and communicating to the public about what goes on in the modern countryside, the compromises necessary to produce cheap food and the political, economic and social contexts which agriculture has inhabited over the past half century (which is where the rural historians come in.) Rural and agricultural museums need to find a new audience by addressing contemporary issues. By doing this they will serve their communities better, for farmers and farming have much of which to be proud, and their service to the body politic ought to be acknowledged, just as the excesses of industrial-scale farming over the past half century need to be explained and explored. There are great choices to made in the next few years as to how we farm (even whether we farm): nobody is better placed than the agricultural museums to explain the choices between industrial-scale farming, organic farming and countryside stewardship.

Here in Reading, we hope to do something along these lines. Of course we have our own problems. By the time the second issue of *Rural History Today* appears, we hope to be able to announce a solution to the perennial problem of our housing. This will allow us not only to redevelop our displays, but the educational utility which lies behind them. We hope to be able to expand our outreach work, employing not only travelling exhibitions but also the web. We are looking to develop new academic programmes and areas of research. As we near our Golden Jubilee, we too are re-discovering ourselves, re-invigorating ourselves, re-inventing ourselves, all of them good, proper and exciting things to do.

Rural History Today is a part of this adventure, a joint initiative between the BAHS and ourselves which will, we hope, reach an audience concerned to understand the modern countryside in historical terms. And we hope that it will serve to draw together farmers and historians, museum and heritage professionals, and academics. We hope that you enjoy RHT, even more we look forward to receiving from you articles, news, letters, notes and queries, notices of conferences and meetings, praise and brickbats. The space is yours.

Professor Richard Hoyle is Director of the Rural History Centre and Editor of *Agricultural History Review*. He writes here in a personal capacity.

Foot and Mouth Disease in the Past

By Paul Brassley

No doubt almost everybody over the age of fifty, who was brought up in the countryside, has been telling anybody still willing to listen how the last big outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease (FMD) affected them. But simply going back to 1967-8 is merely scratching the surface of the historical possibilities of FMD.

The standard twentieth century response to Foot and Mouth ... in the 1950s

One interesting change is in the number of animals slaughtered compared to the number of confirmed cases. By Wednesday 18th July there had been 1,868 confirmed cases, as a result of which over 3.5 million animals had been slaughtered. Of these, just over 1 million were on infected premises, and most of the rest fell under the heading of 'dangerous contacts'. Previous epidemics produced very different figures. In 1967-8 there were 2,364 cases, resulting in the slaughter of almost 434,000 animals. In the 1922 epidemic there were 1125 cases, with nearly 55,000 animals slaughtered, and back in 1892 95 'outbreaks' (which probably means infected farms) produced 5,267 affected animals but only 2,083 animals slaughtered. Clearly the

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trend which appears to emerge from these figures is one of a greater propensity to slaughter as time goes on. Presumably this is at least in part due to the greater concentration of animals today: they are now kept in bigger flocks and herds than they were in the nineteenth century. Another significant factor is that sheep have been much more affected in the present epidemic than in previous ones – they account for about 80 per cent of the total slaughtered – and the disease is especially difficult to diagnose in sheep. This is an added incentive to cull possible contacts. So is the present outbreak different from previous ones, and what can we learn from the history of the disease?

FMD was first recorded in Britain in 1839, although a medieval farming glossary based on Essex records mentions 'mal de lange', and there were fairly regular outbreaks up to 1869, so the probability is that it existed earlier. It became a notifiable disease under the provisions of the Contagious Diseases (Animals) Act, 1869, which means that from 1870 statistics on the number of outbreaks are available. These reveal a major epidemic in 1870-71, with a total of nearly 80,000 outbreaks, and another, less serious, between 1878 and 1884. After the compulsory slaughter policy was introduced in 1892, few years were without outbreaks, but equally few had very many, although from time to time there were more widespread epidemics, as in 1922 and the early 1950s. Between 1929 and 1953 there were, on average, 129 outbreaks, with over 15,000 animals slaughtered, each year. If these figures seem high, they are put into context by comparative data from continental Europe: 1.89 million animals slaughtered in Germany in 1899, and over 110,000 herds affected in Austria in October 1911. With one exception, each of the major epidemics triggered a government report (the exception being the outbreak of 1941-1). The Fellowes (1912), Pretyman (1922), Gowers (1954) and Northumberland (1969) Committees all examined the causes of and remedies for the disease. To a greater or lesser extent they all blamed imports of infected animal products of one kind or another, although the Fellowes Committee also drew attention to imported hay, straw, clothing and people as virus carriers. Except for Pretyman, they all examined the possibility of vaccination. Fellowes argued that it should be used on farms surrounding outbreaks, and Gowers felt that it might be useful in the case of 'severe' epidemics, and criticised the planned level of vaccine production at the Pirbright laboratories as too small. Northumberland too recommended contingency plans for ring vaccination. They all confirmed the necessity for import controls and slaughter, but varied on the treatment of infected animals: Pretyman, for example, reported that some vets were in favour of allowing infected animals to enter the food chain as long as their heads, hides and hoofs were removed. Seen in historical perspective, therefore, the present outbreak does appear, in simple numerical terms, to be particularly serious. Partly this is because animals are now kept in bigger herds and flocks, so when one is infected more are immediately at risk. In addition, because of the rapid spread into the sheep flock, a majority of the slaughtered animals have not been on infected premises, and this is a major difference from previous outbreaks. The large number of animals slaughtered arises from the practice of culling all suspected contacts, whether or not they showed signs of the disease. Otherwise, the issues raised in public discussion – uncertainty about sources of infection and the best control measures, especially the issue of vaccination – have all been discussed in previous outbreaks. The question which has achieved much greater prominence than in any previous epidemic is the controversy over access to the countryside. Here there is a distinct break with the practice of the past. If the Government declines to hold a public enquiry, there will be another for historians to consider.

"Seen in historical perspective .. the present outbreak does appear, in simple numerical terms, to be particularly serious"

The standard twentieth century response to Foot and Mouth ... in the 1930s

Farm Productivity in Farm Accounts

By Michael Turner

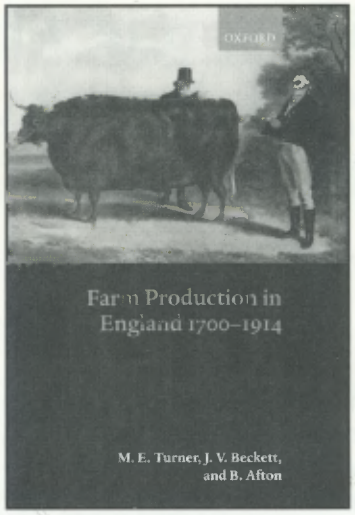
Ted Collins and Eric Jones advertised the richness and growing availability of historical farm records in the 1960s, but it has taken another 30 years for historians to rise to the challenge of using them systematically and on a large scale.

In 1996 Turner, Beckett and Afton published a survey of the farm record material that was available in Reading University Library and in record offices up and down the country (*Agricultural History Review*, 44, 1996, pp. 21-34). This survey formed the basis of a successful application to the Leverhulme Trust to mount a project on farm production in England. The resulting book – which has recently appeared – is arranged in seven chapters and two appendices, one of which is a listing of the over 300 farm records that were used in the work.

Chapter one surveys the current state of statistical work on production, output and productivity in English agriculture in the period 1700-1914, and the variety of arguments and debates that have ensued regarding the timing and character of the so-called agricultural revolution. A major conclusion of this historiographical overview is that it depends too much on recycling a tired and dated database.

Chapter two is about the farmers and their legacy of records. In particular it is a detailed account of the types of record that have survived. These can be divided most usefully into three categories: farm accounts; labour records; and a range of memoranda and related books. The farm accounts are primarily a record of income and expenditure; the labour books, which include wage and hiring books, provide a record of farm work and payments for labour; and the memoranda books cover a wide spectrum of records including pocket note books, farm diaries, weather books, crop and field books, stock books, valuations and inventories.

Chapters three to six form the analytical heart of the book. In chapter three the changing shape of farming practices and techniques over the period are illustrated by their incidence and diffusion as revealed in the farm records. This



includes the introduction and thereby the changing farming variety brought about by Norfolk-type crop rotations. The chapter also reveals the chronological diffusion of new seed varieties, soil conditioners, manure and fertilisers, both traditionally available and also externally introduced, as well as traditional and non-traditional livestock feeds.

Chapter four is based on an entirely new database of 1300 wheat yields, either listed in the farming records or calculated from other indicators in those records, covering most English counties and all years from 1720 to 1914. The principal conclusion is that the most important upturn in English wheat yields occurred after 1800 and especially from 1820. This conclusion is supported by the growing uptake of new or relatively new techniques from the second quarter of the nineteenth century, as illustrated in the preceding chapter three, and by an analysis of over 1000 barley yields in the following chapter five.

Chapter six is an analysis of thousands of animal carcass weights (including over 6000 sheep). For significant sub-sets of the animals there is also substantial evidence to illustrate an upturn in carcass weights in the nineteenth century.

The concluding chapter puts the new quantitative evidence into the context of an agricultural revolution, especially with respect to the challenge to feed not simply a growing population but an economy that was experiencing a demographic transition. The conclusion is inescapable. If the critical test for agriculture is whether it rose to the challenge of demographic change and fed the population then the answer is that from a hesitant start in the mid – to late eighteenth century, agriculture did rise successfully to that challenge. There was a significant rise in output relative to the mouths that needed to be fed, and therefore the location of the agricultural revolution is to be firmly located in the period from c.1800 to 1850.

Michael Turner is Professor of Economic History at the University of Hull and co-author with J. V. Beckett and B. Afton of *Farm Production in England 1700-1914* (Oxford University Press, 2001, £45).

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New Acquisitions at the RHC

The Diaries and Miscellaneous Papers of Thomas Doubleday of Gosberton, Lincolnshire, 1812-1833

By Nicola Verdon

Nicola Verdon is newly-appointed Research Fellow at the Rural History Centre.

A fortuitously long and unbroken set of diaries belonging to a Lincolnshire farmer forms one of the most recent new additions to the archival holdings at the RHC.

Starting in 1812 and written in Crosby's Gentleman's pocket books, the diaries record brief day by day entries on the running of the farm, which was situated at Gosberton in the Fen district of south-east Lincolnshire (he also owned land in the neighbouring village of Quadring). Interspersed with this information are observations concerning other business transactions, payments of taxes and rents, hired labour and occasionally family news. Thomas Doubleday was not consistent in his compilation of these diaries, which end in 1833, and there are some significant gaps in his record keeping. Despite this however, there are a number of ways historians could utilise this source to aid our understanding of farming and farmers in the early nineteenth century.

Firstly, although these diaries do not offer a full account of crop yields or livestock production, from a detailed analysis of expenditure and income, a case-study of the general profitability of a regional farming business across a period broadly characterised by depression and disquiet would be attainable. In 1812 for example Doubleday calculates his income at £436 8s 2d and his expenditure at £436 8s 4d. Evidence on his management of the farm, on the source and destination of incomings and outgoings, on his daily interactions with other local farmers and businesses and on his efforts to diversify (into brewing by the mid 1820s) are all provided in the pages of these diaries.

This source also reveals insights into the use of farm labour in the early nineteenth century. Doubleday hired two yearly servants, one male and one female. There appears to have been a clear distinction in their roles: the male servant was hired for outdoor farm labour whilst the female servant was more closely connected to the farmhouse, under the supervision of Doubleday's wife. The entry for April 1819 reads: 'I have hired William Cowham for the ensuing year at £8 10s wages the 10s being left to merit. Mrs. D has Hired Ann Brocklesby for £8 wages.' Local men, women and children were hired on a more casual basis by the week, day or task, as a supplementary workforce. This source seems to confirm the familial link between such workers: it appears many of the casual female and child workers were related to the male labourers. For example, in August 1812 Thomas Shillington was paid for four day's work at 3s a day and his wife for four days at 1s 3d a day. In July 1818 Luke Sprate and his wife were paid 14s for pulling flax, whilst in the same month, the children of Thomas Fairbank, another male labourer, were paid 10s 6d for weeding and twitching. Harvest hirings are also recorded and show the use of both local and itinerant workers. This is illustrated by entries for August 1819. 'I have paid Richard Hallam for 3 weeks and 1 day @ 6s per week ' Doubleday noted, 'and I have hired him from last Monday until Mich. for 10s 6d per week'. Towards the end of the same month he 'settled with 3 Irishmen for cutting seven acres of wheat @ 14s per acre '. Again, whilst these diaries do not provide full labour accounts across the years covered, they do enable a reconstitution of the types of labour hired, the level of wages paid and the tasks performed by different workers.

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What can the diaries tell us about the wider socio-cultural existence of the early nineteenth century farmer? Consideration of farmers as a social group, rather than an economic force, is now recognised as an area largely neglected in the historiography of farming. Indeed the September conference at the RHC has been organised with a view to specifically addressing this gap in our knowledge. At first glance, the Doubleday diaries appear to do little more than offer tantalising glimpses into the social and familial life of this early nineteenth-century farmer. For example he factually records the births and then deaths of his children: 1825 seems to have been a particularly fraught year with the death of his son Frederick and mother in January, followed by his daughter

Selina in March. He simply notes; 'I Paid Thomas Fox the burial fees for Mother and Child'. But beyond this, it may be possible to build up a wider picture of Doubleday the traveller (locally and beyond), Doubleday the consumer (books, presents etc.), Doubleday the local society member (Gosberton Literary Society and Donington Association for the Prosecution of Felons) and so on. Sketchy and incomplete though this source is, with a little imaginative reconstruction, the intrepid researcher will be offered a valuable opportunity to assess both the farm as a business and the farmer as an individual in the early nineteenth century.

The Rural Life Museums Action Group and the Rural History Centre

By Catherine Wilson OBE

In March 2000 the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC) published a Report on Farming, Countryside and Museums. The evolution of the Report was guided by a Steering Group of representatives from leading rural life museums throughout the UK. The Report identified a number of common problems facing rural life museums and made a number of recommendations for addressing them, identifying the RHC as an important cross-domain study, research and information centre.

The MGC's successor Resource has now commissioned Rob Shorland-Ball, author of the MGC Report, to write a further, more holistic study, with a particular focus on contemporary issues and the contribution which rural life museums can make in helping to regenerate their communities.

Determined not to lose the initiative created by the Report, the UK-wide members of the original Report's Steering Group have remained at work under their new title – the Rural Life Museums Action Group, under the auspices of the Society for Folk Life Studies (SFLS). Catherine Wilson OBE, President of the SFLS, has been asked to chair the Action Group and Rob Shorland-Ball, complementing his work on the Resource Study, is the Co-ordinating Secretary. Professor Richard Hoyle, the new Director of the RHC, has been very supportive and has agreed that, through Roy Brigden and Richard Statham who are members of the Action Group, the RHC can provide a secretariat. They are currently setting-up an e-mail network for museums and other interested bodies and considering ways of providing a national database for collections.

This is one of a number of initiatives, involving the Area Museums Councils and individual museums, which are in progress across the UK. The RHC will play a key role in working with the Action Group to develop these initiatives, building on the Centre's unrivalled significance in England. Nowhere else is there an academic rural life history resource which holds artefact, archive and library collections in an holistic institution as a significant part of a University – Reading – which itself embraces significant agricultural disciplines.

The overall intentions of the Group will be to enhance the role of museums in the preservation of 'local identity', in preserving regional distinctiveness, in sustaining the rural economy, in interpreting the contemporary relevance of rural life museums, and in helping to address a variety of issues that are currently high on the political agenda. Already the networking partnership is encouraging co-operation between museums and other agencies – national, regional and local, official and voluntary, academic and enthusiast – indeed all those agencies which have a role to play in rural regeneration and in interpreting the context of the food we eat.

For further information about the Rural Life Museums Action Group, contact Catherine Wilson at catherine@penates.demon.co.uk

Catherine Wilson OBE is Chair of the Rural Life Museums Action Group and President of the Society for Folk Life Studies.

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Rural History Centre News

Interface: The Rural History Centre's Designation Challenge Project

by Dr. Roy Brigden

Dr. Roy Brigden is Deputy Director and Keeper of the Rural History Centre.

The collections of the Rural History Centre were Designated as being of national importance by the government in 1997. Subsequently, a three year £15 million Challenge Fund was established to spend on development projects for the 50 or so Designated collections around the country. The RHC's project is all about improving Internet access to the collections. With such a wealth of information and illustrative material available, the technology that now offers the possibility of making sequenced, downloadable images available to all is opening up many new opportunities for us. The project began in the summer of 1999 and by March 2002, the end of the current phase, will have spent around £250,000 on a large-scale programme of databasing, digitising and web design.

"Hits to the Rural History Centre website are now running at over 20,000 per month compared to less than 4,000 two years ago. There is still much to be done but the foundations have been laid for what will grow into a comprehensive system for exploring the rural past"

The Project

The principal objective was to devise a means of online exploration of the collections that was capable of indefinite expansion and of being adapted to the needs of a wide range of potential users. There were immediately two main aspects: the creation of an online database for the collections, and the design of a new front end operating over it to deliver material dynamically in different forms for different audiences. The database already in use for the Centre's library had to be adapted to accommodate a whole range of non-book material from objects to photographs to archives and film. Then programmes of work were devised and implemented for transferring manual records across to the database and linking them to digital images of the material concerned.

For the creation of a new front end to operate online over the top of the database, three main categories of user were identified: (younger) school children; the general public (includes older school children); and specialists, whether they be academics, commercial researchers or members of the public with a particular interest. A system was devised for navigation through the collections from three primary headings - Farming, Country People and The Countryside - through secondary and tertiary lists of progressively more specific subjects. It was then possible to tag individual database records with their respective subject key words and with three separate and sequentially numbered captions, one for each user category. The system would then be able to generate on-line from the database a series of captioned images within each subject and user category through active server pages.

For general and specialist users, the layout of the system is the same, operating on screen from the subject listings on the left hand side. They differ in that the caption sequence is longer in the specialist section and the amount of information given is greater. In the children's section, the approach is different. The starting point is a colourful picture of a fictional village and its surrounding countryside. When particular features, such as the blacksmith's shop or the farm, are moused over this activates the link to the relevant series of captioned images generated by the database. Additional interactive features, including a quiz, are also built into the village scene.

The great benefit of the system overall is its flexibility: the captioned image sequences can be extended indefinitely, the captions themselves can be altered at any time on the database, and further subject headings can be added. In this way it will continue to grow and develop along with the collections. Packaging of the system on-line involved the complete redesign of the Rural History Centre's website in order to set it within a logical arrangement and create a portal for the new access system, which came to be called INTERFACE - standing for the Internet Farm and Countryside Explorer. From the new website (www.ruralhistory.org), INTERFACE is accessed directly from the home page. The raw data of the on-line catalogue can be viewed elsewhere from the Collections link on the site. Other links provide more information about the Centre and its activities; there is also provision for virtual exhibitions, the first of which will be developed later in 2001.

The new website with the mark I version of INTERFACE went live in June 2000 and was subsequently updated to mark II in February 2001, following a process of evaluation. Additional

features continue to be added, including further elements to the schools section, and an online image selection facility whereby users can order higher resolution versions of the material shown. A presentation of INTERFACE was made at the Museums and the Web 2001 conference in Seattle and two papers on its development have been published. At the end of the second year of the project, most of the principal design work for the system has been successfully completed allowing energies to be concentrated in the third year on further databasing of the collections and completion of the initial phase of subject sequences.

The Project Team

The project has recruited a team of four young committed graduates who have been trained in the various component tasks - cataloguing, digitising, authoring, evaluation etc. - and have done a remarkable job in the short space of time to date. They are part of a wider team which includes: members of the RHC's own specialist staff, especially the project manager, Dr. Roy Brigden and the technician, Robin Harrison, two expert academic advisers, Dr. Mary Dyson from the Department of Typography and Professor Jonathan Bowen of the Dept. of Computing, South Bank University, the University's IT Services department which manages the RHC's server, Fretwell Downing Informatics Ltd of Sheffield, the database providers Designation.com Ltd of Reading and London, the web designers Realvision Ltd of Portsmouth, commercial producers of digitised material.

The Project Benefits

The principal benefit of the project is that the collections are more accessible to more people than ever before. Hits to the Rural History Centre website are now running at over 20,000 per month compared to less than 4,000 two years ago. There is still much to be done but the foundations have been laid for what will grow into a comprehensive system for exploring the rural past. Without the funding made available through the Challenge Fund, such an objective could hardly have been contemplated because of the considerable additional resource required both to create the system and to carry out the huge task of databasing and digitising of materials. With the impetus provided by this project, the provision of remote access to the collections has become a key element in the Rural History Centre's continuing development.

New Opportunities Fund Award

The Rural History Centre and the Berkshire Record Office have recently been awarded £283,000 for a joint project under the New Opportunities Fund's digitisation of learning materials programme.

This is a nationwide scheme aimed at making more social and cultural material publicly accessible via the Internet. The Berkshire Record Office will be digitising its enclosure maps and associated information for the county while the Rural History Centre will be doing likewise for its collections of archive and illustrative material of Victorian farm equipment and machinery. Both categories will be searchable through a database, will have educational add-ons attached, and will be accessible through a joint portal on their respective host websites. The project will begin in the autumn and last for two years.

The Rural History Database

The Rural History Database is an on-line bibliography of British and Irish rural history available at: www.rhc.rdg.ac.uk/olibcgi/w207.sh

The database contains over 44,000 records covering the period from prehistory to the recent past and mainly consists of journal articles. The database also contains references to over 5,000 thesis – awarded degrees world-wide since the 1870s and 7,000 books and articles from edited works.

The field covered by the bibliography relates to man's interaction with the environment and to rural, social and economic history. Information on the processing of the produce of the land is also collected.

A select list of articles collected by the Rural History Centre is published each year in part 1 of the *Agricultural History Review.*

The Rural History Database is administered by Janet Collett, e-mail: j.collett@reading.ac.uk

DATABASE TOPICS INCLUDE:

- Landscape and the environment
- Settlement and agriculture
- Law, government and administration
- Economic development
- Communications and trade
- Rural food and industries
- Agricultural science
- Population, demography and social structure
- Rural society, culture, customs and beliefs
- Welfare and domestic economy
- Buildings and architecture

BAHS Golden Jubilee Prize Essay Competition 2003

To mark the celebration in 2003 of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the British Agricultural History Society, the Society invites submissions for its Golden Jubilee Prize Essay Competition.

The author of the winning essay will be awarded a prize of £500 and the author of the essay judged to be proxime accessit £250. It is intended that the prize-winning essays will be read at the Society's Spring Conference in 2003 and published in *Agricultural History Review*. There is no restriction on the subject matter of the essays save that they fall within the remit of the *Review*. The competition is open to all, with no restrictions on age, but essays from younger authors, and those employing new methodologies or exploring new areas of interest will be especially welcomed. Essays should be not longer than 10,000 words including footnotes and any appendices. They should be submitted in the house style of the *Review* and intending authors are asked to obtain a copy of the *Review's* 'Guidelines for contributors' from the editors or direct from the Society's web site at http://www.bahs.org.uk. The essays will be judged by a panel appointed by the Executive Committee of the Society. Three copies of each essay should be sent to the Secretary of the Society, Dr. P. E. Dewey, Department of History, Royal Holloway, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX. The author's names should not be on the title page, but on a separate detachable cover sheet. The latest date for the submission of essays is 30 September, 2002.

Appointments

Reading University has appointed Professor Richard Hoyle as Professor of Rural History and Director of the Rural History Centre from 1 September 2000.

Richard Hoyle is one of the leading economic and social historians of the younger generation with a particular specialism in rural history: he also researches and publishes in sixteenth-century British history. He is a graduate of Birmingham and Oxford (where he was a research fellow of Magdalen College Oxford, 1985-92). In 1993 he accepted a lectureship at the University of Central Lancashire, where he was promoted to Reader in 1996 and appointed the University's first Professor of History in 1998. Amongst other professional roles he is a past secretary of the British Agricultural History Society and is now editor of *Agricultural History Review*. He is a current member of the Research Grants Board of the ESRC. His publications include *The Estates of the English Crown 1558-1640* (CUP, 1992), *The Pilgrimage of Grace and the Politics of the 1530s* (OUP, 2001) and numerous articles on the economic, social and rural history of Britain, 1500-1750. Forthcoming books include studies of the Essex village of Earls Colne and studies of Pennine communities in northern England. In November 2000 he held a visiting Fellowship at the Huntington Library, California.

Other recent additions to the staff of the RHC include Nicola Verdon, who took up the post of Research Fellow in May and Richard Statham, newly appointed as Audience Development Officer in a 2.5 year HLF-funded project to develop new learning and access opportunities.

Contact Us

The editors of *Rural History Today* would be pleased to receive short articles about initiatives or current research in any area of rural history, together with press releases, notes and queries for publication, letters, notices of forthcoming conferences and meetings and so on. All correspondence should be addressed to *Rural History Today*, Rural History Centre, University of Reading, Whiteknights, PO Box 229, Reading, RG6 6AG, e.mail rhc@reading.ac.uk. Membership of the BAHS is open to all who support its aim of promoting the study of agricultural history and the history of rural economy and society. The annual subscription of £15.00 (£5.00 for registered students) for individuals entitles members to receive *Agricultural History Review*, *Rural History Today* and any other publications which appear during the subscription year. Membership enquiries should be directed to the Treasurer, BAHS, c/o Department of History, The University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ (e.mail BAHS@Exeter.ac.uk). Enquiries about other aspects of the society's work should be directed to the Society's secretary, c/o Department of History, Royal Holloway, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX, e.mail p.dewey@RHBNC.ac.uk Articles for submission to *Agricultural History Review* should be sent to Professor R. W. Hoyle at the Rural History Centre (as above). Details of all the Society's activities can be found at http://www.bahs.org.uk.

Conference Noticeboard

'A Man Outstanding in his Field?' The Social History of Farmers

A conference organised by the Rural History Centre, University of Reading
18th September 2001

This conference aims to redress a major deficiency in the literature of the British countryside - the lack of any systematic consideration of farmers as a social group. Whilst agricultural labourers and the aristocracy have been the subject of numerous monographs, we are still remarkably ignorant about the social group which played the central role in agricultural production - the farmers themselves. Although we know a great deal about the processes of production, prices, yields and output, there have been very few studies of farmers from a social as opposed to an economic point of view.

The papers in this conference will attempt to clarify our understanding of who farmers actually were, how they were represented and the complex and often painful relationship between the experience of farming and the way in which farmers have been perceived by other social groups.

Andy Gritt and Richard Hoyle; *The Eighteenth-century Farmer as Individual: Richard Lathom and Peter Walkden*
Karen Sayer; *William Howitt and the Representation of the Farmer*
Paul Brassley; *The Professionalisation of Farmers?*
Clare Griffiths; *Farmers and the Labour Party*
Matthew Cragoe; *The Farmer in Wales*
Lynne Thompson; *The Young Farmers Clubs*
John Martin; *Farmers and the Second World War*

The cost of the conference, including registration fee, lunch and refreshments, is £40 (£25 for postgraduates). A booking form is included with this newsletter or may be found on the web at www.ruralhistory.org.uk. For more information, contact Dr. Jeremy Burchardt at j.f.burchardt@reading.ac.uk or the Rural History Centre (0118 931 8660).

Regeneration or Decline? The British Countryside between the Two World-Wars

A conference organised by the Interwar Rural History Research Group, Dartington Hall, Devon
9-10 January 2002.

Is the existing framework interpreting the interwar countryside adequate? Very little research has actually been done on rural Britain between 1918 and 1939 until recently, but now a new generation of scholars is challenging the traditional account. Much of the most exciting work has hitherto been done by non-historians, notably geographers, literary and cultural critics and sociologists. Research on landscape and on the cultural meanings with which the countryside was invested in these years has demonstrated the pivotal but ambiguous connection between rurality and rural identity. At the same time, work on neglected dimensions of interwar rural culture such as agricultural education for women or the early organic movement has indicated hitherto unsuspected areas of vitality in rural society in the 1920s and 1930s. Research currently in progress even seems set to challenge the foundation-stone of the narrative of depression - the supposition that agricultural output declined between the wars.

This will be the first conference of the recently-formed Interwar Rural History Research Group. Proposals for papers of approximately half an hour in length, accompanied by an abstract of up to 300 words, are welcomed on any aspect of the British countryside between the wars. Papers which focus on the question of decline versus regeneration (whether adopting a revisionist stance or reasserting the traditional framework) would be particularly welcome.

Proposals and abstracts should be sent to Lynne Thompson, Department of Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter, St. Luke's Campus, Heavitree Road, Exeter, EX1 2UR, e-mail

At the Society's Annual General Meeting held at Ambleside, Ted Collins stood down as President of the Society and was succeeded by Prof. David Hey. The conference photograph above shows Ted kneeling in the front row looking delighted to be released from the onerous burdens of office. We hope to catch David in a future conference photograph.

British Agricultural History Society Winter Conference: The Great Landowners in Rural Society

The British Agricultural History Society Winter Conference will be held at the Institute of Historical Research, 1 December 2001 with the following papers;

Dr. Phillipp Schofield; *Lordship and the emergence of a peasant land market on the estates of Bury St Edmunds, c.1050 - c.1300*

Dr. Henry French; *The trials of estate formation: the Harlackendens of Earls Colne, Essex, 1585-1729*

Dr. Richard Wilson; *The building activities of Greater Landowners, 1660-1880*

Dr. Roland Quinault; *The fall of the Grenvilles in perspective*

The cost of the conference will be £15 (with lunch) or £9 (without lunch). Bookings should be sent to Dr. John Broad, School of Arts and Humanities, University of North London, 166-220 Holloway Road, London, N7 8DB from whom further details are available. Cheques should be made payable to 'BAHS'.

Calls for Papers

The Spring Conference of the British Agricultural History Society will be held at the University of Sussex, 8-10 April 2002. Offers of papers should be directed to Dr. Peter Dewey, the Society's secretary.

Future RHC Conferences

Future Rural History Centre Conferences provisionally include:

September 2002; *Allotments and self-sufficiency: past, present and future*

September 2003; *British Farming post 1947*

September 2004; *Field sports in Britain, 1800-2000*

Any one working in these areas and interested in offering papers to the conferences should contact Dr. Jeremy Burchardt at j.f.burchardt@reading.ac.uk or the Rural History Centre (0118 931 8660).

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