

'Twenty-five Years On'

By JOHN HIGGS

"ANOTHER society? A new review? A review competing for attention with the spate of contemporary letterpress, and a society demanding, in these days of cruelly straitened incomes, yet another guinea? The venture might well seem foolhardy indeed; and when it was first mooted, there were many who shook their heads in dismal anticipation of failure. But those who believed that there was room and need for such a society spared no effort to bring it into being; and it seems that their faith is being rewarded. Already within a few months of its foundation, the British Agricultural History Society counts two hundred members, and at the moment when this first issue of its journal goes to press, there is good hope that it will soon number many more."

Thus opened the first—and indeed so far the only—Editorial of *THE AGRICULTURAL HISTORY REVIEW* which appeared in Volume 1 for 1953. The first twenty-five years have seen a steady, if not spectacular, increase in membership which now stands at about 800, a figure not to be compared with distinguished contemporaries such as the Economic History Society or the Royal Agricultural Society but comfortable enough to enable us to publish two issues of the *REVIEW* a year without raising the subscription to an unrealistic level.

It is difficult to know how to judge the success of a society other than from crude membership statistics, but one might hazard a guess that over the years influence, reputation, and respectability have also grown. The Society has numbered among its members the foremost agricultural historians of the day, its meetings, though never largely attended, have provided an important forum for discussion, its *Journal* has become an essential source for agricultural historians, not only in this country but in many countries abroad; and in a period during which agricultural history has become an established

subject in its own right the Society has helped many to gain a foot on the ladder. It has deliberately eschewed a popular approach to agricultural history which, perhaps, some in the early days hoped it might take. It has rather pursued a policy of sound historical scholarship but has always encouraged the non-historian who had a contribution to make.

In its domestic affairs the Society has led a largely tranquil and trouble-free life for there have been no notable scandals. Any historian delving in the fairly voluminous archives would find little on which to sharpen his sickle, other than the odd letter from R. H. Tawney explaining why his subscription was in arrears or that in 1961 the Treasurer and Secretary suppressed the disreputable fact that those attending the Annual Conference got free wine at the expense of the Society. Occasionally, a fragment of human feeling shines through the more formal exchanges of views between officers, as when the Editor writes to the Secretary: "Broadwater now have all the material for what I personally regard as the dullest issue of the A.H.R. that we have ever published. Owing to 'X's' excessive prolixity it runs to 64 pages without book reviews." Or simply, "Friday 18th is all right. . . Let me know if you would like to lunch on bread (home-baked) and cheese and beer (home-brewed) at Sheffield Terrace," which perhaps contains a crumb of comfort for the social historian in that by 1959 the Editor did not make his own cheese.

The origins of the Society go back about a year before its official founding. Memory of the occasion is somewhat blurred and the archives are totally silent on the subject. A meeting took place in a rather unpleasant draughty room in Holborn on a cold and wet spring morning in 1952. It had been convened by G. E. Fussell (later to be President of the B.A.H.S.), and was attended by a rather small handful of people. The main object of the meeting was to consider

the formation of an agricultural history society. In the event most of it was taken up by the late Jack Stratton, a distinguished Wiltshire farmer, seeking support for a new edition of T. H. Baker's *Records of the Seasons, Prices of Agricultural Produce, and Phenomena, Observed in the British Isles*, first published in 1883.

So anxious was Jack Stratton to achieve his ambition that he dominated the meeting almost to the exclusion of other discussion—reading long extracts from Baker, and returning to the relationship between farming and the weather every time any proposal was made. In the face of this endearing monologist progress towards the foundation of a society proved nearly as elusive as progress towards the re-editing of Baker. However, agreement was reached, more or less in the doorway, that a further meeting would be convened by Edgar Thomas and John Higgs of the University of Reading at a later date. Though it had no direct connection with the fortunes of the Society, a rewrite of Baker appeared in 1964 entitled *Seasons and Prices* by E. L. Jones.

A further meeting to launch the Society was held at the Science Museum on 25 September 1952, and this meeting was attended by 420 people—more by far than have ever attended any meeting of the Society since its foundation. This was really a very remarkable attendance figure which rather overwhelmed the organizers. What, may one ask, did all these people expect to gain from having an agricultural history society?—for comparatively few of them joined it when it came into being. The archives indicate a very wide range of interests represented; among them were large numbers of people from the agricultural industries, machinery manufacturers, seeds merchants, and so on. There was an equally large number from agricultural teaching institutions, agricultural societies, research stations, and the Ministry of Agriculture. There were representatives from many museums connected with agriculture, and more than a smattering of farmers; but historians with an interest in agricultural history (it is perhaps too early to speak of “agricultural historians”) were few in number.

A few people had come to oppose the idea of a society; some thought it would conflict with the Economic History Society, while others argued that founding a new society could only detract from existing ones, and in the prevailing economic climate the time was not ripe. The great majority of speakers, however, welcomed the idea and expressed support for it, and, possibly since at that stage in the Society's history support cost nothing, the meeting closed with overwhelming agreement to go ahead with the founding of a society.

Before the close of the meeting a Provisional Committee was elected to bring the Society into being. The Chairman was Sir James Scott Watson, then Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Agriculture, who played a decisive role in getting the Society launched. The Secretary was John Higgs, then Keeper of the Museum of English Rural Life at the University of Reading (thus starting a close association between the Museum and the Society which has continued ever since). The other members were Frank Atkinson, then Curator of the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle; G. E. Fussell, who even then was one of the best-known writers on agricultural history; Alexander Hay, then Secretary of the Association of Agriculture; Walter Minchinton, now Professor of Economic History at Exeter University; Francis Payne, then a Keeper at the Welsh Folk Museum; Edgar Thomas, then Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Reading; and Robert Trow-Smith, who was with *The Farmer and Stockbreeder*.

The Provisional Committee set to work to prepare a draft constitution and organize an inaugural meeting of the Society. At its first meeting at the Ministry of Agriculture in November 1952 it occupied itself with such weighty matters as how to convene a meeting of a society which did not exist. Did you ask people to join first, or did you hold an open meeting with sufficient meat on the menu to attract people to come and then hope to ensnare them? In the event it was agreed to hold an open meeting, and a press notice was drawn up inviting the attention of all those interested

in any aspect of rural history so as to cast the net as wide as possible.

The inaugural meeting of the Society was held in the Great Hall of Reading University on 13 April 1953, and was attended by just over one hundred people—less than the initial interest at the Science Museum might have indicated but the organizers were reasonably satisfied. The meeting was welcomed by the Vice-Chancellor of Reading University, J. F. (now Lord) Wolfenden. Sir James Scott Watson gave a paper on 'The Scope of Agricultural History', Sir Frank Stenton, a former Vice-Chancellor of Reading, spoke on 'The Manor in English History', and the day was rounded off with a visit to the Museum of English Rural Life which was not yet open to the public.

During the afternoon, at a business session, the Society was born. If memory serves, it was not an acrimonious occasion, and the distinguished cross-section of the community who had paid 10s. 6d. for registration costs and their lunch were well disposed towards the draft constitution which was quickly adopted after the insertion of a clause aimed at making the society as safe as possible from any predatory intentions of the Inland Revenue. Officers and an Executive Committee were duly elected, and some aspiring members stayed behind to pay their subscriptions before leaving Reading, thus saving the Society what some thought of as crippling postal charges.

The Executive met for the first time that day, and consisted of all the members of the Provisional Committee with six additions. John Cripps, now Chairman of the Countryside Commission, who was not present at the meeting and who declined to serve; Roger Dixey, then of the Agricultural Economics Research Institute at Oxford; Capt. E. N. Griffith, then Chairman of Rotary Hoes Ltd; Stuart Maxwell of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland; George Ordish, then of Plant Protection Ltd (who got the Society's early letterheads printed free and later became Chairman of the Executive); and Joan Thirsk, a research assistant at the University of Leicester, and since Editor of the Journal and now Chairman of the Execu-

tive Committee. Of that committee four members are either among the Officers or Committee today.

The Reading meeting elected as first President of the Society Sir James Scott Watson, who served in that capacity until 1959. There have been six Presidents since: Sir Keith (now Lord) Murray, who was Chairman of the University Grants Committee; R. V. Lennard, Emeritus Reader in Economic History at the University of Oxford; H. P. R. Finberg, Professor of English Local History at the University of Leicester; G. E. Fussell, who may be said to have started it all; Professor W. G. Hoskins, Professor of English Local History at Leicester; and J. W. Y. Higgs.

Of Treasurers there have been two: Edgar Thomas, whose good-humoured Welsh wisdom often prevented the other Officers and the Executive Committee from lapsing into solecism, and whose experience as Secretary of the Agricultural Economics Society for twenty-five years was of enormous benefit to the Society in the early days; indeed the connection with the Agricultural Economics Society helped the B.A.H.S. in many ways. In 1964 he was succeeded by Andrew Jewell, Keeper of the Museum of English Rural Life at Reading, who remains in office today.

The first Secretary was John Higgs, who retired in 1964 and was replaced by the late T. W. Fletcher whose untimely illness led to his resignation in 1966. He was succeeded by Michael Havinden of the University of Exeter, who also still holds the office.

In some ways 1964 was a watershed year for the Society, for it not only lost the Treasurer and Secretary who had served it since the beginning but the Editor also announced that he would wish to retire in the next year or so. Herbert Finberg was appointed Editor by the Executive Committee shortly after the first Reading meeting. In selecting Finberg the Committee made a bold choice which was to have a profound impact on the development of the Society, on the standard of its publishing, and on his own thinking and directions in life. After a lifetime in publishing Finberg had gone

to Leicester in 1952 as Reader in English Local History. He brought to the creation of the REVIEW not only his profound experience in printing and typography but also a solid background of historical scholarship. He accepted the editorship with characteristic reluctance, but he then turned his energies to the creation of a REVIEW of such significant standards that it soon attracted attention on all sides. As Editor he was a hard taskmaster; printers, contributors, and secretaries sometimes opened his communications with fear in their breasts, even though a puckish good humour underlay his benevolent autocracy. He, more than any other single person, left his mark on the early years of the Society, and influenced its development even more widely than through its Journal. He retired from the Editorship in 1965, and the Society marked his seventieth birthday in 1970 by a special supplement to Volume 18 published in his honour, *Land, Church, and People*, edited by Joan Thirsk. When he died in 1974 the Society lost a wise friend and counsellor.

Herbert Finberg was succeeded as Editor by his former colleague Joan Thirsk, who was by now Reader in Economic History at Oxford, while she in turn was succeeded in 1972 by Gordon Mingay, Professor of Agrarian History in the University of Kent. Under successive Editors the REVIEW has maintained the high standards with which it began.

It would be tedious in the extreme to catalogue or categorize the articles printed in the REVIEW; they have been catholic in taste, range, and period. They number some which have since become classics in their own right. Mention must be made of two features which have appeared regularly in the REVIEW, and become indispensable. The first is the *List of Books and Articles on Agricultural History*, which first appeared in Volume 1, and the second is the catalogue of *Work in Progress*, which first made its appearance in Volume 3. By 1955 the Editor was already able to report that he was receiving more material than he could accommodate; in 1974 the present Editor reported that he was receiving thirty-six articles a year, and that he could only print ten, but he added that he still

lacked good articles on pre-nineteenth-century topics and short articles—it would seem that prolixity remains a vice.

The business affairs of the Society have always been conducted with a minimum of fuss and formality. Indeed, the minutes of both the Annual General Meetings and Executive make dull reading for the machinery gives the appearance of having worked well and smoothly. So smoothly, in fact, that without too fertile an imagination one might suspect a modicum of rigging... Editor to Secretary, 23 March 1960: "I enclose my sub. for the B.A.H.S., also a signed nomination form into which you can insert any names you like for the Committee." Occasionally the Committee was faced with weighty problems as in 1956, when the Chairman reported that "No mechanism exists for the removal of members who do not pay up."

The Society was much helped in its very early days by a grant from the Association of Agriculture of fifteen guineas, which at that time was a princely sum. This early relationship, brought about by the presence of Sandy Hay on the Executive Committee, led to a very fruitful co-operation over the first ten years or so in the holding of joint conferences on a wide variety of themes. Indeed joint conferences with a range of societies have been an important side of B.A.H.S. activities.

The location of the annual conferences of the Society has ranged over a wide area of England from Devon to Durham; one has been held in Dublin. But it must be to the shame of a British Society that it has never met in Scotland or in Wales. In 1959 the Scottish members did in fact organize a joint meeting with the School of Scottish Studies which appears to have been a success. It is reported in the minutes of the Executive that the sum of £4 17s. 6d. profit from the Scottish Conference be earmarked for future Scottish conferences; so far as is known it remains earmarked.

In fact the collective wisdom of the Executive over the years has had an important impact on the development of studies in agricultural history. By its encouragement of young people to give papers, by organizing large numbers of con-

ferences, by sponsoring or obtaining sponsors for publications (such as *Essays in Agrarian History*, edited by W. E. Minchinton in 1968), and in numerous other ways.

An event of great importance to the Society was the announcement by Herbert Finberg in 1956 of his plan for a mammoth *Agrarian History of England Wales*, to be published by Cambridge University Press. The project certainly had its roots in Finberg's close relationship with the Society and its members. The project was outlined by Finberg in an article in Volume 4 of the A.H.R. for 1956, in which he wrote:

The initiative in this project comes from the Department of English Local History in the University College of Leicester. Many members of the British Agricultural History Society will be personally engaged in this enterprise and all will probably wish to be informed of its progress, for the Society brings together in its membership those historians, economists, and working farmers whose interest in agrarian history is most alert. The pages of this REVIEW, therefore, will naturally reflect from time to time our interest in the project. Indeed, the REVIEW provides an eminently suitable channel of communication, of discussion, and even at times of healthy controversy between those who will be working on the History. Therefore, without pledging the Society to give more than this degree of moral support, the Executive Committee has agreed that the project is one in which it may appropriately take a sympathetic interest.

The anticipated close relationship developed and continues: the first volume to be published, Volume IV (1500-1640), was edited by Joan Thirsk; the second, Volume I, ii (A.D. 43-1042), by Finberg himself; while of the two volumes now in preparation, Volume V (1640-1750) is also edited by Joan Thirsk, and Volume VI

(1750-1850) by John Higgs and Gordon Mingay.

And so the Society stands at the threshold of its second quarter-century. If the foregoing review appears to lack substance then it will be well to remember the words of Henry James: "It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature." Twenty-five years is, hopefully, a short period in the life of the Society, and it is difficult, if not wellnigh impossible, for one who has been so closely involved to stand back and assess with any degree of impartiality success and achievement. If some of the gallant 400 who attended the meeting at the Science Museum were disappointed then it may indicate that the Society has concerned itself with the grass-roots of agricultural history rather than with antiquarianism and curiosities; they may have found what they were seeking in the proliferation of steam rallies and vintage tractor shows rather than in the pages of the AGRICULTURAL HISTORY REVIEW.

For the Society, warts and all, appears to have created a genuine fellowship of those interested in agricultural history. Future historians may find it difficult not to conclude that it has had a very significant influence on the development of the subject in a critical period. A period that saw the creation of chairs and departments of agricultural history appearing in our universities, that saw a growing awareness among the general public of the historical contribution of agriculture to the economy and to the environment, and one in which 'purer' historians stopped looking down their noses and asking, "What exactly is agricultural history?" The founding members of the Society and those who came after them can be modestly pleased with their achievement; if in chronicling it this contribution has concerned itself too much with the minutiae and insufficiently with the broader vision then, with Macaulay, "I shall cheerfully bear the reproach of having descended below the dignity of history."