

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1990

By DAVID HEY

On arriving at Trinity and All Saints' College at Horsforth, Leeds, we were greeted with the news that the organizer had fled to Nepal. There, she was no doubt able to practise the orienteering skills necessary to find one's way around the College. Some distinguished geographers were prominent amongst those who frequently got lost. Once found, the facilities were first class and the conference began with a reception and an excellent dinner. Speaking from below the salt, the President reminded the Principal of the College of his lapsed membership of the Society and proposed a toast in memory of George Fussell, who had enlivened many a previous conference.

The intellectual feast began with Colum Giles (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments), who gave a carefully-researched and well-illustrated paper on 'Rural Housing and the Economy: Calderdale, 1500-1900', in anticipation of the field trip for the following day. Upper Calderdale has a remarkable collection of vernacular buildings which can be used alongside a range of documentary sources as historical evidence. Probate inventories, valuations and hearth tax, land tax and census returns were pressed into service to illustrate landholding customs, farm sizes, agricultural practices and dual occupations. We were left to ponder the wider questions of why the large parish of Halifax, rather than other parts of the West Riding, should have emerged in the sixteenth century as a wonder of the age and whether we should dismiss partible inheritance as the cause of small farming units and turn instead to the idea that wealth generated by textiles permitted the reorganization of holdings in this way. Colum Giles concluded that the growth of rural industry in Calderdale was not a response to a desperate situation.

The following morning, after the excitement of an election at the AGM, medieval history was presented to us in a lively form by Jules Pretty (International Institute for Environment and Development), who spoke on 'Sustainable Agriculture in the Middle Ages: The English Manor'. He approached his subject from the perspective of low-yielding agricultural regimes in developing countries. As his paper has now appeared in the *Review*, it is unnecessary to summarize

it here. Members responded warmly to his emphasis on the varied opportunities for income generation and on the fine-tuned management of natural resources. A society that sustained itself but saw no growth reminded some of us of the BAHS.

In his paper on *Who profited from improving the Crown lands, 1603-40?* Dr Richard Hoyle (Magdalen College, Oxford) introduced us to the enormous amount of material in the Public Record Office on the sizeable but scattered estates of the biggest landowner in the country. Historians have long been interested in the sale and dispersal of Crown lands from the Dissolution onwards, but little research has been done on the management of these estates. He showed that commentators in government circles during the time of Salisbury knew a great deal about the circumstances of disafforestation. Norden, Manwood, Church and an anonymous author argued for the benefits that would accrue to commoners as well as to the Crown. Various disafforestation and drainage schemes were implemented over the next three decades, but the original ideals were cynically debased as priority was given to sales. The commoners were the greatest losers, the Crown benefited to a limited extent, many of the purchasers accepted allotments in lieu of existing debts, the lawyers reaped short-term rewards, but large profits were not available until the second generation made large-scale agricultural improvements. Dr Hoyle was thanked for opening up a subject which was clearly worthy of a sustained programme of research.

Appropriately clad for an afternoon on the Pennines, we drove to Norland township, where Colum Giles introduced us to a variety of farms and vernacular buildings. We began at Lower Old Hall, a hall-and-cross-wing house built in 1634 by a dyer, George Taylor. The lower wing was interpreted convincingly as the shop end. Internally, we were greeted by an astonishing display of decorative plasterwork. Just up the road at Fallingworth Hall, we saw a similar, though smaller, house of 1642, with later farm buildings now used for sheltering cattle. Our next stop was Bents Farm, a laithe-house of c.1800, a common building type on land newly-colonized upon parliamentary enclosure. Here a young farmer was

now faced with the problem of milk quotas. We then refreshed ourselves more than adequately at the Hobbit Inn before a brisk walk to the hamlet of Sowerby Croft. Dramatically sited above the Calder valley, the hamlet consists of fifteen cottages clustered around an early eighteenth-century house, laithe and gazebo that were built by a cloth dresser with a twenty-three acre holding. Towards the end of the eighteenth century eleven cottages were built next to the house; four more were added later. The 1841 census shows that they were occupied by woollen weavers, cotton weavers, bobbin winders and a dyer. We left as the snow began to swirl around us and as we gazed on the spectacular Pennine landscape, like Defoe before us, at last we began to perceive the reason for it all. Our thanks are due to Messrs Brooks, Halliday, White, Hill and Bilbo Baggins for allowing us to inspect their properties.

After a late dinner, the evening session was devoted to a discussion of the way forward for research into English farming during the period 1750–1850, now that volume VI of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* had appeared. Discussion centred on the striking differences of treatment between volume VI and the two previous volumes, notably the lack of chapters on regional farming systems and on buildings, also the concentration on printed rather than manuscript sources. This was largely a matter of editorial judgement, constrained by the availability and interests of contributors at the planning stage. *The Agrarian History* had been launched in 1958 and volumes had been planned before anyone knew what was going to be discovered. The General Editor, Dr Joan Thirsk, commented on the growth of interest in the social structure of regions and expressed the hope that some day a third part to volume V might treat such matters at length. Detailed local and regional studies were needed for the 1750–1850 period. Other speakers expressed disappointment that volume VI had not discussed the concept of an Agricultural Revolution, nor the relationship between agricultural and industrial growth. These were vital matters that should be addressed. Nevertheless, a volume that was 1215 pages long certainly covered a wide range of topics and provided a huge amount of useful information. Some of us thought that it was a healthy sign that we were still not satisfied and wished to build further on the achievements of the series as a whole.

The final morning began with a paper by Dr Michael Toch (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Clare Hall, Cambridge) on 'Ethics, norms and law in rural society: fifteenth-century Bavaria'. Using

the internal minutes of the manor court of a Bavarian monastery, from 1479 to 1493, he described the ways in which conflicts between lords and tenants were defused by face-saving devices and mediation. In carefully-defined times of need, the lord – 'out of mercy and without legal claim' – did not insist on the payment of arrears of rent. His reputation was based on honour as well as wealth; giving was also a way of possessing. Late fifteenth-century Bavaria was no longer feudal; the peasants did not need to take part in the 1525 insurrection because they had already made inroads into lordly power. Dr Toch's reconstruction of the *mentalité* of this local society portrayed a real world where emotions and conciliatory feelings were more important determinants of social behaviour than was the insistence on rights and dues. One conflict ended with the pronouncement: 'We have seen his simplicity and therefore out of mercy forgive him'.

In the second session Professor George Grantham (McGill University, Montreal) gave a technical paper on 'Some Implications of the Level of Agricultural Labour Productivity in Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century France'. Taking into account grain yields, days worked, the numbers involved in non-grain growing farming occupations, and the range of crops grown, he suggested that the proportion of the population required to feed the whole was less than had been assumed. He also addressed the question of how wide a space was required to provision a town, especially Paris. In the ensuing discussion many members felt that the paper was too theoretical and did not give enough consideration to factors such as wastage and the extent to which grain was actually consumed. We adjourned to increase our own consumption of agricultural products.

In the final session Dr Joanna Bourke (Emmanuel College, Cambridge) considered 'The Household Economy and Female Labour: Rural Ireland, 1890–1914'. She argued that the heightening of the sexual division of labour in this period was beneficial to women as a means of avoiding poverty. Paid female employment declined dramatically partly because women made a deliberate choice to do more household work. A radical improvement in housing standards and in diet required increased skills and more time in the home. The assumption of a welfare role within the household was a sensible strategy, except in the very poorest families, as agricultural productivity increased. It was a fine paper on which to finish the conference. We drank to absent friends and vowed to meet again next spring.