

Conference Report: 'Food Supply and Towns' Winter Conference, 1989

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Neither adverse weather nor the influenza epidemic, which laid low the organizer, were able to detract from a Winter Conference of remarkable quality, held at the Institute of Historical Research on 2 December 1989. For the fifteenth occasion since the Society began the conference in 1965, the Winter Conference was run jointly with the Institute of British Geographers' Historical Geography Research Group. The theme for 1989, 'Food Supply and Towns', provided four excellent contributions for the audience of sixty.

Two members of the new Centre for Metropolitan History at the University of London, James Galloway and Margaret Murphy, began the day with a joint paper, 'Feeding the City: London's food supply, 1250-1350 - a progress report', which presented early findings from the Centre's major research project on the capital's medieval networks of supply. Basing their comments on material drawn from a database founded upon analysis of manorial accounts and Inquisitions Post Mortem collected for ten south-eastern counties, they were able to suggest some startling patterns of variation in land value and usage and significantly to rescue the IPM from its rather shady reputation as a source. Very interesting spatial patterns of arable land value appeared to be emerging from an overall downward trend, 1275-1332: clusters of high-value arable were located in east Kent, the Thames Valley, and the Nene and Welland basins of Northamptonshire, all suggestive of transport factors and London's demand as their origin. A countervailing concentration of high meadow valuations was found in the south midlands and east Kent. Though only a foretaste of future conclusions, their paper promised much and clearly demanded that students of the early modern period recast their thoughts on the 'Fisher model' of London's innovative power.

'Feeding the industrial city: Manchester, 1780-1830', the second paper of the morning, provided a survey of the principal findings of the late Roger Scola's work through the medium of Professor Alan Armstrong (University of Kent). Though not quite complete at his untimely death, Scola's work represented one of the pioneer analyses of the food supply networks and distributive systems of a major industrializing city, aimed at contributing to the debate over standards of living and revising the perspectives of retail distribution which, when the research began in the 1960s, were still very limited.

Inevitably, in presenting the extensive findings of another, the paper was crowded with information, but made clear that Scola's posthumous book - to be published by Manchester University Press in 1991 - would represent a significant addition to our understanding. Armstrong outlined the broad results of Scola's work on two quite distinct aspects of the Manchester food supply: the scale and sources of food provision, running from meat and fish through dairy produce to cereals and potatoes, stressing the regional impact of urban growth; and the organization and structure of food distribution, focusing principally on markets, both retail and wholesale, and fixed shops. Scola's analysis of the fixed shop, its locational determinants, and its spatial and social distribution in thirty-seven districts of the Manchester conurbation remained innovatory. Many of Manchester's 'middle class' districts failed to develop their 'fair share' of food retailers, since the travel costs involved were devolved onto the household servants, while in the districts of lower social strata bakers and 'mere shopkeepers' were relatively rapidly distributed down the hierarchy of roads into the side and back streets.

Immediately after lunch, the third paper of the Conference, 'Adulterations and disease: the social consequences of milk consumption in nineteenth-century London', by Peter Atkins (University of Durham), provided a series of insights into the links between fresh milk and public health issues from the 1860s to the 1930s, and identified the many ways in which the depersonalization of London's milk supply opened the door to abuses. Dr Atkins demonstrated the manifold ways in which technical progress provided new and often increasingly hazardous ways of selling Londoners water as milk. Before 1872, it was estimated that 75 per cent of the capital's supply was cut with added water and reduced substantially in cream content: flour, starch, chalk, and liquefied calf brains provided alternative sources of texture and frothiness. The catalogue of horrors continued for the rest of the century, with colouring agents, such as the vegetable dye, anatto, and other additives widespread in use in the capital, though seeming less so in the provincial towns, with the poorer districts generally most vulnerable through the small-scale sales of the corner shops. 'Rich' Kensington provided an exception to this broad pattern. Some institutional monitoring of milk quality came from the scientific

department of the Inland Revenue, which effectively became a 'chemical court of appeal' in the milk business, but no formal standards were set until the beginning of the present century. Even then, milk remained an excellent medium for the growth of bacteria and dangerous pathogens, though the slime content of Manchester's milk was estimated to have fallen from twenty-six to twelve tons per annum by 1906. The extension of the radius of supply in the pre-war years probably led to deterioration in quality, especially for the poorer districts, with producers unrepentant: Atkins cited one Yorkshire farmer who commented that 'if the Almighty had intended that there should be no manure in the milk, then he would have placed the udder at the other end of the cow'. Disease problems associated with milk changed with the nature and structure of supply, with infantile and 'summer' diarrhoea being the principal long-term hazards from milk which, according to a Lambeth survey of 1903, could contain two million bacteria per cubic centimetre if purchased from a corner shop; and five million if bought from a street vendor. Milk was also directly associated with the rising trend of non-pulmonary tuberculosis from the 1870s, and remained a major risk in the 1930s, by which time railway tankers were able to generalize the risk through bulking. Dr Atkins also indicated two new data sources for agrarian historians to consider, the Inland Revenue scientific department, and the records of local medical officers of health, in what was a striking and polished paper.

In the unenviable last slot for the day, Martin Phillips (St David's University College, Lampeter) examined 'Divisions of labour in the sphere of exchange: an examination of the organization of food supply in nineteenth-century England', a study

in market systems centred upon his continuing researches on Plymouth. His study examined the generalized expectation of a trend towards increasing specialization and divisions of labour derived from the secondary literature, and raised sufficient deviations from the case-study of Plymouth to suggest the need for such models to be modified. The monthly cattle fairs or 'great markets' retained vitality in Devon and Cornwall well into the 1870s, and displayed less decline than some authorities have suggested; and the market traders of Plymouth in the 1850s were to an unexpected extent locked into fixed retail outlets in the villages of its hinterland. Phillips's study also raised questions of the linkages between markets, their traders, and patterns of unrest postulated by some scholars, and added the south-western dimension to our understanding of the local and private act processes for market improvement, rebuilding and reorganization. The conference thus ended as it had begun, with interim conclusions of current research, the final results of which will be read with considerable interest.

The day once more validated the decision, in the mid-1960s, to institute a one-day Winter Conference, and the long-term commitment of the Society and the Historical Geography Research Group to its success. The Winter Conference has consistently justified the early start in fog and frost for those of us coming from places distant from the capital. All those who attended in 1989 enjoyed a conference of considerable quality and variety, in the comfortable surroundings of the Institute of Historical Research, to whom all who attended are grateful. Sadly, Dr Peter Dewey, the organizer who had done so much to make the day successful, was ill, and thus unable to receive in person the thanks of us all.