

Conference Report: 'Farmers and Landowners'

Winter Conference 1990

By RICHARD PERREN

A day of dull weather was brightened when members of the society met in London for the sixteenth joint Winter Conference with the Institute of British Geographers' Historical Geography Research Group on Saturday 1 December at the institute of Historical Research. Including the four speakers, the conference eventually attracted well over fifty persons into the Local History Room of the institute to hear four excellent papers on the general theme of 'Farmers and Landowners'.

Papers were delivered in chronological order and the first of the morning was from a deceptively grey-suited Christopher Dyer (University of Birmingham) on 'Farmers and landlords in the middle ages: the origins of a partnership'. Using a variety of records, such as court rolls, tax payments, letter collections, and indentures, and concentrating on the west midlands, he detailed the salient features of the emergence of farmers as a specific occupational group from c 1400 onwards. He emphasized the profound social consequences that followed lords' decisions to transfer the management of demesne land from the hands of stewards to tenant farmers. Although initially tenants were seen as personal retainers, and some even given liveries, eventually their relationship with the lord became purely contractual and was regulated by a formal legal agreement – the indenture. As farmers came to supply up to forty per cent of the estate income, lords needed to modify these agreements to accommodate changing circumstances and allow farmers more freedom of action. From the point of view of farmers, this flexibility was particularly needed in the fifteenth century, which was a time of falling prices causing at times a pressing requirement for rents to be revised downwards. For the lord, who was often absent from the estate, choosing a good tenant was not an easy matter as he had no personal knowledge of applicants, but had to rely on the recommendations of stewards and letters from interested parties. For both sides, the best results were achieved where tolerant lords allowed enterprising farmers to respond to market demands, and where this allowed them to specialize in the

production of a particular range of crops. The eventual separation of the lords from the management of the land was mirrored by the separation of the farmers from the rest of the village community. The appearance of consolidated blocks of land encouraged the building of farmhouses out of the village, so emphasizing the social distinction between the farmers and the peasant community from which they had emerged.

The morning's second paper was from John Chapman (Portsmouth Polytechnic) on 'Land-ownership and enclosure: the impact of land sales'. He returned to the debate, initiated by Marx, over whether parliamentary enclosure was a land-grab whereby small owners lost out to the gentry and aristocracy. When enclosure took place, commissioners had certain expenses, particularly public costs like roads, which they could meet either by levying a rate on the owners or by selling part of the land to be enclosed. Using his ten-per-cent sample of enclosure awards, scattered over the whole country, he finds that out of the 545 awards in his sample, 141 used sales to defray expenses. These sales were regionally concentrated in Wales, Cumberland, the south-west, and the south-east of England. In Wales they accounted for 17 per cent of the land enclosed (c 125,000 acres) but in England only 3.5 per cent of the land was sold (c 250,000 acres). On the question of whether the land was bought by existing owners or by outsiders, he found that c 40 per cent went to outsiders in England, but c 76 per cent was bought by outsiders in Wales. In both countries these outsider buyers were not speculators from distant parts, nor were they large landowners. For the most part they were local people, and in Wales 75 per cent of them actually lived in the parish being enclosed. Descriptions of their occupations support G E Mingay's assertion that they were predominantly craftsmen, tradesmen, and labourers and not gentry or aristocracy. The amounts they bought were small, averaging nine acres in England and 36 acres in Wales, and the motive for their purchases seems to have been either for a source of pension or, as Dennis Mills

suggested, to have a small piece of accommodation land for personal or business use. But, whatever the reason for purchasing, Chapman stressed that the findings from his sample provided no support for the Marxist view that land sales by the enclosure commissioners were used to feed the territorial appetites of large landowners.

Because of late-returners from lunch, the afternoon session began somewhat after the scheduled time with Sarah Wilmot (University of Reading) speaking about 'Landlords, tenants, and the march of science 1770-1870'. She was able to trace the interest in science as a key to agricultural improvement back to the 1730s, but in the later eighteenth century its importance was underlined in the works of William Marshall and Arthur Young. In the post-1815 world of agricultural depression, enthusiasm for science waned in agricultural circles, only to revive in the 1840s when emphasis was placed on the theoretical works of Humphry Davy (*Elements of Agricultural Chemistry*), Justus von Leibig (*Organic Chemistry in its Relation to Agriculture*), and the empirical work of John Bennet Lawes, and Joseph Henry Gilbert. The literature of the 1840s to the end of the 1860s chronicles this progress. The proliferation of agricultural societies was one way in which this was emphasized, and another was the further growth of the agricultural book trade. Links between agricultural societies and professional scientists were particularly strong in Scotland, where the first chair of agricultural science had been founded at Edinburgh University in the 1790s. By the mid-nineteenth century one way of establishing a scientific career was by becoming a consultant to one of the agricultural societies. But the scientists of the 1850s tended, rather smugly, to discount the work of their predecessors and scornfully regarded the early nineteenth century as an age of alchemy in contrast to their own age of the modern chemist. Practical farmers were uniformly sceptical of the claims of both modern and early agricultural scientists. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries landlords were far more impressed by the pretensions of scientists than were their tenants, who remained intellectually and physically isolated from scientific developments of both ages.

With time pressing on, Michael Thompson delivered the final paper on 'Business élites and land purchases in the nineteenth century' to a diminishing

audience. He linked what he had to say to the views of R C Allen, who argues that land in Britain was always overpriced, even with built-in elements of income and capital appreciation, and those of Lawrence Stone and W D Rubinstein who find no evidence that it ever was overpriced. Instead, Stone says that there was a shortage of land because the old land-owning aristocracy would not release it, thus excluding the entry of newcomers into their ranks, whereas Rubinstein believes that the new men of wealth did not want to enter the landed élite. Thompson believes the demand for land, in large blocks, was always sufficient to keep its price above its strictly economic value. However, as prospective purchasers did not view the acquisition of this asset in purely economic terms, but often regarded it as a way of confirming a desired social position, he wondered just how strictly the concept of price could be applied to land. There was always a demand for land from men who had made money in business or commerce and had male heirs. But, having bought land, such men did not necessarily abandon the counting house for the country house, preferring instead to adopt a composite lifestyle by combining elements of both. Sometimes the newcomers had no aim of family permanence in the landed classes, perhaps just wishing to confirm a personal lifestyle, but then leaving their estates to be divided among sons and grandsons after their death. Such transient owners may have bought land as a form of insurance to hold for one generation only, or at least were not concerned that it might be re-sold at the next. Even though the amount becoming available was limited, there was no particular evidence of growing concentration of land in the nineteenth century, and that on offer was enough to satisfy demand. Entry into the landed élite was always possible, even though the wealth and acreages of parvenus did not come to match those of the really large old-established members of the landed aristocracy.

The conference concluded with a vote of thanks to the organizer, Peter Dewey, for the smooth efficiency with which he oversaw the whole proceedings and also to Dr Patrick K O'Brien, the Institute's Director, for allowing the use of the comfortable Local History Room for what all agreed to have been a most worthwhile day.