

Conference Report: 'Rural Society and the Poor' Winter Conference 1991

By JOAN THIRSK

THE Society held its regular winter conference in London on December 7, 1991, in collaboration with the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers. It attracted over fifty people, and on a frosty day, when some attenders had travelled in cold trains, it generated a welcome, convivial warmth, and stimulated lively discussion. The main theme of the meeting was 'Rural Society and the Poor', but in the event three out of the four papers, and much of the discussion, centred on the work, the sources of livelihood, and the social classification of small husbandmen and labourers. Dr Christine Hallas's paper on 'The Poor and Upland Communities: a Study of the North Yorkshire Dales in the nineteenth Century' kept most closely to the conference theme, and demonstrated how varied were the causes of poverty, the timing of crises, and the scale of necessary poor relief in Swaledale and Wensleydale. The differing geographical situation of the two dales, and the presence of lead in Swaledale and lower Wensleydale, but not in upper Wensleydale, explained much of the varied experience, and led her to divide the two dales into three regions with three separate histories. Wensleydale, and especially Upper Wensleydale, was affected by agrarian cycles of distress whereas Swaledale was more disturbed by depressions in the lead industry. So the periods of worst distress did not usually coincide in all three regions, though they did in the 1820s. Although a number of unions to set up workhouses were formed under Gilbert's Act, relieving the poor in this way cost more than outdoor relief, so numbers lodged in them were kept to a minimum. Outdoor relief was more appropriate, tiding over temporary difficulties, as in Swaledale where leadminers sometimes waited three or six months for payment for their labour. Some outwork, like knitting, eased poverty, but migration, as far as America, was a significant solution in the long-term, especially as leadmining declined in Swaledale, and in Upper Wensleydale no work offered apart from farming. Migration gradually showed its eroding effects on the total population of the area. Dr Hoyle asked about the role of schools, which were seen in the early

modern period as preparing the young for migration. Dr Hallas welcomed this suggestion for further investigation.

Dr Paul Glennie gave the first paper of the day on 'Early Modern English Labourers: Work, Income, Consumption'. His interest in labourers had been prompted by observations in Hertfordshire (published in articles in *Ag Hist Rev*, 36, 1988) which had shown more labour-intensive work being required on farms in the period, 1550-1700, and had set him wondering about its effect on the work, the range of skills, and the living standards of labourers. He had now used probate inventories, and farm and wage accounts in several English counties, as scattered as Hertfordshire, Worcestershire, Nottinghamshire, and Yorkshire, to extract all possible information. He separated labourers from cottage farmers, who were included in Professor Everitt's chapter on labourers in volume IV of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*. Not much discussion took place after this paper on the validity of this firm distinction, though it arose in the course of other papers. But by confining his analysis strictly to labourers, so-styled in inventories and farm accounts, Dr Glennie was able to show certain clear trends in the period between 1540 and 1790. Labourers' ownership of cows, and their dairying activities steadily declined as did their participation in by-employments. They owned a dwindling number and range of working tools, at a time when the farm equipment, including labouring tools, of farmers was steadily increasing. Dr Glennie saw in this trend evidence that the work opportunities of labourers were severely narrowed, since their lack of tools prevented them offering their labour to a number of different farmers, while the limited range of their tools implied a narrowing of their skills. Evidence of less varied tools is sometimes viewed by historians as a sign of increasing specialization, and hence of a higher level of skill achieved in fewer operations, but Dr Glennie regarded it here as a clue to the deteriorating opportunities for labourers. Much other evidence was adduced, to which this summary cannot do justice, suggesting that labourers steadily came to depend for subsistence on wages and little else, and that their household possessions were meagre. They

included none of the up-to-date consumer goods which artisans, comparable with them in status in the towns, acquired. Dr Glennie's work is still in progress. He will explore more elements in a labouring family's resources in future. In diagrammatic form he showed their full range, including, of course, the labour of wife and children.

Dr Dennis Mills spoke on 'The Peasantry, the Poor, and Population Change in the Context of the Open/Closed Village Model'. Recent publications on open and closed villages, especially that of Sarah Banks in the *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser, XLI, 1988, and the book of Mick Reed and Roger Wells, *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880*, had given a new look to an old problem. But Dr Mills maintained that the more refined analysis of the distribution of landownership has much to offer towards an understanding of the long-term development of villages. He reviewed his own work on open and closed villages, which, by uncovering in more detail the distribution of land, had introduced a more sophisticated classification of villages, and he emphasized the value of the concept of open and closed villages to local historians, since it gave them a broader perspective when studying single places. Dr Mills then turned to current debates on the existence of a peasantry in England, maintaining that while their disappearance from the English scene might be affirmed nationally by the nineteenth century, they still existed regionally. Disagreement reigns on the correct definition of a peasant, but he upheld one that allowed the peasant to have a combination of different resources, even on occasion to become a risk-taking entrepreneur. This broader definition was supported in the next paper by Alun Howkins, who had recently attended discussions with Spanish historians whose peasantry rarely owned the land they cultivated, and who took it for granted that they worked seasonally or intermittently for wages. Dr Mills concluded his paper by discussing poor rates and the density of population in relation to open and closed villages, underlining the need for a more careful interpretation of the financial burden. Total costs per parish were misleading when populations varied so markedly. It was essential to compare rates per head, and, moreover, to explain them fully by identifying the role of lords and local vestries in determining the level of assistance given to the poor. Dr Short observed a change in Dr Mills's emphasis on this score. He had formerly focused attention exclusively on measuring the distribution of land, but he seemed now to be examining the quality of power. Dr Mills acknowledged the importance of both elements in the situation. Large landowners who

were non-resident, for example, left a vacuum which others had to fill. A seemingly closed parish could well show a system of poor relief determined not by an all-powerful lord (who did not reside), but by others in the community with a different viewpoint.

Dr Alun Howkins gave the last talk on 'The Intermediate Workforce: Peasants, Labourers and Farm Servants'. He was concerned to retrieve from obscurity a very large group of people standing outside the conventional nineteenth-century division of rural society into landlords, tenant farmers, and labourers. In the whole of Britain the peasant population was large, but it had come to be ignored by economic historians who centred their work on the growth of agricultural production and interested themselves in England alone. The agricultural statistics, in fact, showed a remarkably large percentage of cultivators working 50 acres and less: in some parts of Scotland they represented 90 per cent, in England as a whole 70 per cent, and in Ireland between 78 and 84 per cent. Such peasants produced some food for the market, exchanged goods and services with each other, and worked intermittently for wages. No narrow definition of 'peasant' represented reality accurately. Living-in farm servants, similarly, are said to have disappeared in the nineteenth century, but, in fact, large numbers still existed in certain areas of the country, receiving part, or the bulk, of their payment in kind. Dr Howkins then offered some rough calculations suggesting that in 1880 Britain still had some 800,000 peasant farmers and in 1871 some half a million farm servants. A lively discussion ensued on Dr Howkins's use of 50 acres as the limiting definition of a peasant. Dr Chapman noted that in pastoral areas, the 50-acre peasant often had access to hundreds of acres of common grazing. Dr Broad asked how regionally static was the clustering of peasantry. Dr Howkins favoured the notion of some movement in their local concentrations: fruit and vegetable growing in the later nineteenth century, for example, supported new groups of peasants through a speciality which was seized when opportunity offered.

The different papers generated ideas which, in fact, deepened understanding of all the problems under discussion. Most enduring in memory was the evidence of Britain's rich regional diversity, and the manifold influences at work upon all classes in the social structure. Warm thanks were given to Dr Dewey for organizing so efficiently and hospitably (with wine and sandwiches served for lunch on the spot) a stimulating day. The congenial surroundings were due to the kindness of another agrarian historian, the Director of the Institute of Historical Research.