

Conference Report: 'Recent Work in East Anglian Agrarian History', Autumn Conference 1992

By R W HOYLE

The second of the Society's autumn conferences was held on 19 September at the University of East Anglia by the kind invitation of Dr Richard Wilson and the Centre of East Anglian Studies. Norfolk in particular and the eastern counties in general have always featured prominently in English agricultural history. Nonetheless, the papers presented served to challenge old and easy assumptions about the agriculture of these counties whilst revealing how much more there is to be discovered.

Bruce Campbell and Mark Overton opened the day's proceedings with a paper on 'The peculiarity of Norfolk agriculture'. Ranging widely between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the rather surprising conclusion was advanced that Norfolk agriculture was at its most distinctive (when compared to England as a whole) in the earlier than the later period. Indeed, the tithe returns of the 1840s suggest that yields in Norfolk were comparable with the English average, nor was Norfolk the first English county to undergo an agricultural revolution – for the moment that accolade belongs to Hertfordshire or perhaps Oxfordshire. In the early fourteenth century demesne farming in east Norfolk had developed into a remarkable system, distinguished by the elimination of fallows, the use of legumes, high seeding rates, and enormous labour inputs in manuring, weeding and folding. The difference between earlier and later practices was not cropping – that was broadly similar – but the size of the farming unit. But Campbell and Overton concluded by asking whether the final peculiarity of medieval east Norfolk was not simply agricultural, but also social and, in a glance towards future work, suggested that attention now needed to turn from agriculture to farmers.

The presentation by Tom Williamson and Susanna Wade Martins was a foretaste of research being conducted at the Centre of East Anglian Studies with the support of the ESRC on 'Landscape and agriculture in Norfolk and Suffolk, 1650–1879'. Where Campbell and Overton sought to generalize from sources – manorial accounts,

inventories – which covered the whole county, Williamson and Wade Martins proposed the complementary approach of working intensively on six or seven sample areas scattered over the two counties in an attempt to isolate regional differences. Contrary to recent opinion, their early findings suggested that changes in crop rotations were a major factor in productivity gains, with the elimination of fallows by the end of the seventeenth century and the adoption of convertible husbandry systems utilizing improved grasses. By the 1730s most of the improved rotations known by the end of the century were already being used. But early results were pointing to the patchiness of innovation. Single estates and even individual farms were turning out to have a great variety of types of landholding, from strips and foldcourse through to new several enclosures. 'Improved' and 'unimproved' landscapes co-existed in the eighteenth century and the agricultural revolution was a long, drawn-out affair, with some aspects of improvement being underway by the early eighteenth century with others, especially those which called upon landlord capital, only taking place towards the end of the century. The project promises much, if even to dispel ready generalization by dissolving everything down to microtopographies.

The afternoon session turned on topical issues of agricultural depression. Stephen Pam spoke on nineteenth-century Essex farming, from "Golden Age" to depression, 1850–1914'. At a time when price trends suggested that the advantage lay with livestock farming, Essex farmers were slow to move towards a mixed farming regime. The commitment to wheat was, however, logical given Essex soils, climate and transport difficulties, and on many Essex farms wheat production remained profitable even at the low prices of the 1890s. Livestock and dairy farming were not options to which every farmer could turn, the latter, for instance, requiring better water supplies than many farmers possessed, and access to rail heads. Pam spent some time discussing the particular contribution of Scottish migrant farmers to Essex farm-

ing in these years. Where they differed from local farmers was in their attitude to family labour and the low level of expectation they brought to living standards; but whilst their contribution was positive, it has also been exaggerated.

The paper showed how easy it was to criticize farmers for not adapting to changing price levels without appreciating the practical and institutional difficulties which prevented them from doing so. Alec Douie, on the responses to inter-war depression in Norfolk, looked at similar problems; but where Pam argued for continuities in Essex agriculture, Douie pointed to a comprehensive break with the past. Faced with falling arable prices, Norfolk farmers were forced to reject the rigid Norfolk system. Cash cropping was the key

to survival, and every shift in the rotation had to contribute. The introduction of sugar beet was described at length, but the transformation of arable farming, Douie suggested in a rather surprising turn, was due not to new crops but a rising standard of agricultural education. Norfolk farmers were poorly equipped to deal with problems thrown up by depression because they were not only dismally ill-educated agriculturally but highly sceptical of the concept that science could bring any aid to agriculture. Hence, there was no serious attempt to analyse existing practices; most regarded diversification merely as adjuncts to the main business of farming, expedients to meet the depression. The key to change was education.

Notes and Comments

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REQUESTS FOR HELP

As part of our service to readers 'Notes and Comments' now includes a section under this heading. This is designed for all members of the BAHS, but particularly those who are not attached to an academic institution. We hope this will provide assistance for two types of problem. First, those thinking of carrying out research and who have chosen a topic, but are not too sure where to begin, or want to know who else has worked on that particular subject. And secondly, those who are well into a project but need further information to fill in gaps, or require advice on methodology. From time to time we have published lists of research in progress, but as there are intervals of some time between their appearance, it is hoped this spot will fill the gap where someone wants information in the short term. This service is open to all members and if you feel it would be of some help you are urged to send your name and address, along with your request, to the Secretary of the BAHS, Dr Richard Perren, Department of History, University of Aberdeen,

Taylor Building, King's College, Old Aberdeen, AB9 2UB.

THE VETERINARY HISTORY SOCIETY

The Veterinary History Society was founded in 1962 to foster all aspects of veterinary history and its membership is open to all and not confined to veterinary surgeons. In the 1970s the BAHS held a joint Winter Conference with the Veterinary History Society. It publishes its journal, *Veterinary History*, twice a year and is always pleased to consider historical articles on farm animals that have a veterinary content. Contributions to *Veterinary History* should be addressed to the editor, Mr Tony W Johnson BVSc, MRCVS, 140 Lovelace Drive, Pyrford, Woking, Surrey GU22 8RZ. Individual Membership of the Society is £6 a year and includes a subscription to *Veterinary History*. Subscriptions for non-members are £4 a year. Correspondence on membership and subscriptions should be addressed to Mr E Barbour-Hill, BVSc, MRCVS, Tan-y-Coed, High Street, Penlong, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 1PX.