

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1993

By DAN BYFORD

THIS year the Conference was held in the sylvan setting of Gregynog Hall, the residential centre of the University of Wales, in Powys 5-7 April. The programme provided was nicely balanced geographically, although it concentrated largely on the nineteenth century. In the one exception to this Professor Rees Davies and Dr Andrew Barrell (UW Aberystwyth) presented joint papers under the title of 'A Window into Medieval Welsh Society: the evidence of Court Rolls'.

Professor Davies explained that written evidence only became available in Wales after the Conquest of 1282 but that, although it tended to deal with Wales as if it were England, in the absence of Welsh documents it is invaluable. An ESRC grant has permitted the opening up of the huge series of rolls which exist for Dyffryn Clwyd from 1294-1654. These have a wider coverage than English rolls because there was no royal writ in the lordship. Such is the bulk of the rolls that the basis of the project has been making them available in machine readable form. In the companion paper Dr Barrell described the problems of making the material available with sufficient flexibility to permit a wide range of questions to be answered. Initially the periods 1340-1352 and 1389-1399 were chosen to make a full machine readable calendar in English because in these years the rolls are especially full and well preserved and deal with the times of the Black Death and the prelude to Owain Glyn Dwr's revolt respectively. The rolls contain details of many farming practices both pastoral and arable and of everyday life in a medieval marcher lordship.

In the second paper on Wales, Professor David Jones (UW Swansea) considered 'Crime in Nineteenth Century Wales: the Rural Experience'. He suggested that the notions of the innocent village and of the higher morality of Wales were destroyed by the Rebecca Riots. Yet late nineteenth-century statistics show Wales to be possibly the most law-abiding country in Europe. The Welsh crime rate was a third less than that of England, but although violent crime was rare the statistics give a false picture of the countryside, for much crime was hidden and unreported and there were many reasons why the crime figures were low. The Welsh rural police were few and sensitive

to accusations of malicious prosecution and they were often local men. Consequently cautions were frequent and instead of reporting crimes villagers often took the law into their own hands. Revenge was taken on offenders, they were shamed in chapel, their houses were attacked and they were ostracized. The *ceffyl pren* was used against social offenders such as wife beaters though it declined after 1860 in face of chapel and police hostility to it. Welsh courts tended to be tolerant even after they were anglicized by Peel and there were high acquittal rates in rural areas. In spite of much poverty even property crime declined in the late nineteenth century under the influence of the minister who often sat on the police committee, and the emphasis on respectability which lessened drunkenness, cruelty and profanity.

The first of two papers on British agriculture was by the Society's Treasurer, Dr E J T Collins (Reading University), who asked 'How "Golden" was the "Golden Age"? A re-assessment of the High Farming Period', and concluded that it was only Ratner's gold at best. Estimates of output and farmers' income led to the view that High Farming benefited farmers no more than it did landlords, the former growing by no more than 0.7 per cent per annum and the latter by c 0.8 per cent between c 1855 and 1875. The illusion of great improvement comes from increased prices as expanding demand met inelastic supply, and from the propaganda of free-traders led by Caird. Yield data show static hay yields and, from the late 1860s, declining grain yields. Dr Collins argued that by the 1860s many sectors were experiencing sharply diminishing marginal returns, especially corn growers. Among the reasons suggested for this were nitrogen overdose which caused excess straw growth and mildew, and consequent vulnerability to wet weather, and increased soil acidity due to the decline of liming. The increase in livestock production was also moderate, of the order of 1 per cent per annum from the 1850s. Dairy production rose in areas such as Cheshire and Somerset but may have declined elsewhere. Meat production grew modestly, the increase in beef (helped by Irish imports which made up 15 per cent of consumption), offset by a decline in sheep meat from the mid-60s, and neglect

of pigs and poultry. Dr Collins considered that the period 1835-55 saw the major expansion of physical output in British agriculture overall, whence it hit the buffers, and entered upon a prolonged phase of sluggish growth, reversed only after WW II.

Whereas Dr Collins further tarnished the image of the 'Golden Age' Professor F M L Thompson, the Society's immediate past President, gave a paper on 'British Agriculture and the Industrial State, 1870-1914' which questioned many of the assumptions made on the responses of farmers to the depression of the subsequent period. After 1870 the agricultural sector was seen as stagnant. Some even believed that the economy would improve if agriculture disappeared. In fact agriculture's contribution to GNP was a growth of output of 10 per cent whilst the work force halved. This was achieved by abandoning fringe tasks, substituting horses for human labour and producing more on less land by targeting fertilizers - potash on potatoes, phosphates on roots. Although mechanization was slow, British agriculture was the most mechanized in Europe by 1914. Even pasture farmers increased their use of horses by 15 per cent by 1911 though they had, in milk production, a much more favourable market position than cereal farmers. Cereal farmers had to innovate vigorously to keep afloat even though rents fell by up to 25 per cent during the period. Farm incomes fell up to 1890 but were above 1870 levels by 1909. Labourers' wages increased by 30 per cent reflecting their increased skill and decreased numbers.

Professor Thompson's successor as Director of the Institute of Historical Research, Professor Patrick O'Brien, dealt with some similar themes over a longer period in a paper on 'Agrarian Fundamentalism and the Industrialization of Britain and France before 1914'. Backwardness in French industry in the nineteenth century is seen as directly related to agricultural backwardness, whereas Britain industrialised first because of agricultural progress. Professor O'Brien showed that labour productivity in agriculture might have been about the same in the two countries in 1700 and that it was probably much higher in France in 1500 and provided a much higher living standard in spite of the pessimistic views adopted by the *Annales* school. The French lead in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries diminished largely because of the growth of the British animal population after 1500. The elasticity of supply of fodder output was much higher in Britain and in the long run allowed for a higher rate of growth. In contrast, output in France increased roughly in line with labour inputs but the crucial point for industrialization was the ability to feed the towns with a decreasing work force and in Britain this was only achieved basically by

increasing the animal populations. By 1890 the manure available in Britain was three times that in France, and horse power, which made a decrease in human labour possible, was much higher. The French countryside was less able to increase fodder production and thus the new agricultural methods were more difficult to adopt. French soil was more acid and there was less lime and marl available to farmers. Furthermore the nature of French land-ownership and tenure also contributed to the inflexibility of French agriculture and its inability to transfer factors to industry and the towns.

In a second paper based on comparisons between societies, Professor Charles Withers, (Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education), spoke on comparative perspectives on rural social protest in Britain and Ireland with particular reference to Highland Scotland, Wales, and Ireland in the period 1840-1930. Professor Withers raised questions on the validity and methodology of comparative analyses and reviewed the difficulties of identifying single causal factors behind the anatomy, significance and explanation of protest. The Irish and Highland Land Wars were comparable features of the later nineteenth century but are not to be explained in the same way or understood as demonstrating similar forms of protest. He argued that it is for these reasons - of variety in cause, form, and explanation that such comparative analysis is rewarding yet fraught with difficulty.

The field excursion was to the Leighton hall estate, near Welshpool, where Dr Stephen Hughes of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales showed us the late nineteenth-century farm buildings and barn machinery installed by the Naylor, a Liverpool banking family. Our second visit was to the town of Montgomery, planted by Henry III but now very small and essentially Georgian. Dr Christopher Arnold (UW Aberystwyth) met us in the remains of the castle and vividly described to us its former power and grandeur and its relationship to the topography and defence system of the area.

In spite of the weather the expedition was enjoyable, and had the great advantage of short coach journeys which enabled us to return in good time to prepare for the excellent Society dinner and the after-dinner poem composed by Dr R J Moore-Colyer. The Conference was agreed to be a great success; all the papers were interesting and well delivered, their quality was amply attested by the vigour of the question period at the end of every paper. The Society's thanks are due to Dr David Howell of UW Swansea who arranged the venue and Dr John Walton of UW Aberystwyth who acted as local organizer, barman, and chief whip with efficiency and humour.