

Conference Report: 'Rural Trade and Industry' Winter Conference 1992

By E J T COLLINS

A quiet early winter's day, overhung with rumours of bomb alerts at the main-line stations and extraordinary bargains in the pre-Christmas sales, enticed along some forty-odd members of the Society to the 17th annual meeting with the Institute of British Geographers, held at the Institute of Historical Research on 6 December, to hear four splendid papers on aspects of rural trade and industry from the mid-eighteenth century up to the Great War. The theme was a welcome one, partly because of its appeal to non-agricultural historians, but principally because, notwithstanding the large proportion of the rural workforce employed in non-agricultural occupations and the important role played by crafts and industries in sustaining and expanding the rural economy, the area has been thinly researched, a short-coming which the four speakers, each in their different ways, helped rectify.

The morning session began with a lively paper by Dr Jonathan Brown (University of Reading): 'The British agricultural machinery industry, 1850-1914'. It was concerned principally with production and marketing strategy in the later nineteenth century and the response of leading companies to declining markets at home and expanding opportunities overseas. By 1875, the industry was dominated by a handful of large steam engineering firms, either specialist manufacturers such as Marshall, Fowler, Garrett, and Clayton and Shuttleworth or, like Ransomes, general agricultural engineers with strong steam interests. For manufacturers of steam engines and barn machinery the chief limiting factor, almost from the outset, at any rate by 1860, had been the smallness of the home market. In the 1870s total numbers of engines in use in Britain may not have exceeded 20-25,000, while sales probably averaged fewer than 2000 units per annum. Even medium- and small-sized makers were obliged to look to exports to sustain, still more to expand, production. Leading companies were then exporting at least half their output and by 1900 nearer three-quarters - mainly to central and eastern Europe and the Empire. In 1907 steam engines and associated machinery accounted for c. 60 per cent of agricultural engineering output, of which over

two-thirds was sold abroad. The years immediately preceding the Great War, when a surge in exports coincided with a recovery in home demand, were especially prosperous. The late 1870s and early 1880s, on the other hand, were bad for exports as well as home business, resulting in numerous closures and obliging many smaller firms to switch from agricultural to general engineering, and from manufacturing to servicing, itself a significant development. The growth of exports, concluded Dr Brown, was not due to the Great Depression but, rather, was a High Farming strategy based on product specialization, and market-led. The relative narrowness of the British manufacturing base - the concentration on steam and barn machinery to the neglect of dairying and advanced harvesting equipment - proved, subsequently, in the inter-war period, the undoing of this highly successful nineteenth-century industry which, without the benefit of protection, had enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the home market up to the 1890s, and was a not unimportant source of foreign exchange earnings. There were questions afterwards about raw material supplies as a factor in the location of the industry in eastern England, product development, and economics of scale.

Dr Michael Sill's paper: 'An occupational geography of Northumberland in the mid-eighteenth century: some early findings from the 1762 Militia Lists', confirmed the usefulness of this little-known historical source whose possibilities as a spatial measure of economic activity in the statistically barren early Industrial Revolution period, had been pioneered by Dr Glennie. The parish lists survive for a small number of counties - Cheshire, Herts, Northants, and Northumberland - and parts of various others, and normally contain the names, occupations and place of residence of all adult males aged 18-50 (later 55) eligible for service as defined by the 1758 Militia Act. Excluded, though, are women together with occupational groups such as apprentices, and soldiers and sailors, and poor men with more than three (subsequently two or more) children. Nor do they list alternative occupations or distinguish between masters and employees. Dr Sill's analysis of the 1762 returns for Northumberland suggests

that about two-thirds of all parishes were then predominantly non-agricultural with over 50 per cent employed in other occupations – commonly over 25 per cent in crafts and trades, 4–8 per cent in domestic service, 4–10 per cent in general labouring and about 1 per cent in the professions. The importance of mining in this leading coal-producing country is confirmed. Both coal and lead mining, however, seemed geographically more widespread than previously believed, with clusters of mines in the lower carboniferous levels where coal was mined in shallow pits for sale in local towns or for lime burning. Lead mining was concentrated in the south-west where in 5 parishes it provided 35–95 per cent of employment. Rather surprising was the ubiquity and importance of weaving, and the low levels of manufacturing activity in market towns. Areas for further research included the correlation of the lists with the 1801 census to determine total populations, typological analysis of parishes, and more detailed work on agricultural employment. Questions afterwards centred on the thorny question of dual occupations.

The same analytical problems of specialization and definition of trades as between manufacturing and servicing, rural and urban, and scale of operation, reared up again after the luncheon interval, in the paper by Professor John Chartres (University of Leeds): 'Servants of agriculture: rural trades and crafts in the 18th and 19th centuries'. The central question was the effect on the rural industrial sector of the Industrial and Transport Revolutions and the growth of towns. The sole comprehensive statistical source, the occupational census returns from 1831, were analysed to show the relative importance of individual trades in employment terms. Thus numbers of wheelwrights were seen to have declined from the 1860s, of coopers from the 1870s, basket makers and saddlers from the 1890s, and carriers from the early 1900s, concurrent in most cases with a spatial shift from the countryside to the towns. A comparison between predominantly urban and rural registration districts in the East and West Ridings in 1851 revealed high concentrations of container makers in the urban centres and Hull, but a much more even distribution of saddlers and carriers and, surprisingly, a rural preponderance of smiths and wheelwrights, even though the latter were becoming increasingly concentrated in large urban workshops or, as at Beverley, in wagon factories. Occupational structures in later eighteenth-century Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, 1830s Norfolk and the North Riding, c 1880, were compared to suggest that over the period the retail trades grew relative to crafts and manufacturing. What Professor

Chartres termed his 'Thatcher Puzzle' – the fact that according to the 1891 census nearly half the workers in that trade resided in just four counties – exemplifies the definitional problems where a large part of the workforce was multi-occupational and trades exhibited widely varying degrees of specialization. A general problem was to reconcile the historical evidence with the conflicting ideology of reminiscence and rural idyllicism, out of which the 'craft tradition' was born.

Where the emphasis of the first paper, about agricultural machinery, had been on marketing, that of the last, by Professor Jennifer Tann (University of Birmingham): 'The adoption of roller milling in England, 1850–1914', was primarily technological. It told how, inside twenty-five years, there occurred in the milling industry a revolution in techniques, coupled with a dramatic increase in plant size and capacity, and a shift in location from inland centres to the ports. Millstones were replaced by steel or porcelain rollers, 'low-grinding' by 'gradual reduction', and 'batch' by 'continuous flow' systems. The transition from stone-grinding to fully integrated roller-milling was a complex process on account of the fact that the new systems offered numerous opportunities for experimentation and innovation by stages. In the mid-1880s there existed various hybrid and intermediate systems combining new and traditional methods. The first Hungarian roller mill, installed by Fisons of Ipswich in 1862, was used to 'hull' the grain which was then refined through stones. Many early roller systems were used for 'low-grinding'. Numbers of complete gradual reduction systems grew from 25–30 in 1882 to over 400 by 1890. Plant size increased until by 1907, 30–35 mills were estimated to produce about 30 per cent of all flour, paving the way for the structural reorganization of the industry between the wars. Questions centered upon engineering problems which may have influenced the design and construction of the rollers, and the extent to which technological and locational change were accelerated, or made possible, by the switch to imported hard wheats and demand by bakers for whiter, thriftier, flours. Where agricultural engineering had been 'export-led', roller milling was import-led, and in part a consequence of the Great Depression.

Warm thanks were given to Dr Dewey for his efficient organization, including the providing of a splendid buffet lunch, and to the Director of the Institute of Historical Research for his customary hospitality. Altogether a most stimulating day, seen through by the overwhelming majority of the original registrants up to the final whistle.