

Conference Report: 'Agriculture and the Landscape' Winter Conference 1993

By JOHN R. WALTON

THE conference, organized with his customary efficiency by Dr Peter Dewey (Royal Holloway, London) was held at the Institute of Historical Research on 4 December, 1993. The large audience reflected both the depth of general concern for agriculture's landscape impacts and the specific appeal of well-known speakers addressing topics central to their known areas of expertise.

Dr Oliver Rackham (University of Cambridge) began proceedings with a 'A History of Agriculture and Trees', a wide-ranging and well-illustrated presentation which explored the diverse contributions of trees to the agrarian economy, and thus showed how trees and agriculture have been integral rather than antithetical features within traditional landscapes. Shredding trees for animal browse was practised in the Neolithic, when lack of the iron tools needed to harvest a hay crop exacerbated fodder shortages, and continues to this day in areas like Norway and the Mediterranean where length of growing season or climatic factors place constraints on fodder availability. The widespread distribution globally of the wood-pasture landscape and its variants testifies to the value of timber and tree browse within contrasting agrarian economies.

Dr Della Hooke (Cheltenham and Gloucester College) spoke on 'Shadows of the Past: Relict Field Patterns in the Present-Day Landscape'. The paper drew upon documentary and field research undertaken in a large number of areas throughout England and Wales, notably the south-west peninsula, the west midlands, and north Wales, to convey the general message that, to those capable of decoding them, present landscapes offer numerous relicts of past agricultural activity, many of great antiquity, and some in quite inhospitable areas. Whilst recent deep-ploughing of the Wiltshire downlands has reduced a once-rich set of relict landscape features to mere crop marks, in most areas the tempo of destruction has been more relaxed. It seems likely

that many early medieval field patterns remain to be detected and reconstructed.

The afternoon session began with a paper by Dr Sarah Wilmot (Open University) on 'Agriculture and Pollution in Victorian Britain'. The paper offered three distinct themes. The effects of industrial pollution on agriculture were explored by reference both to existing published work and to new research, with suggestions made as to the distribution and severity of various forms of industrial pollution, especially ammonia and sulphur. The second part of the paper dealt with the effects of pollution from agriculture on water quality, drawing much of its data from the results of the Rothamstead experiments. At the time, the nutrient enrichment of water-courses was thought to have generally positive implications for aquatic life-forms. A third section analysed the Victorian obsession with the possibilities of using sewage as an agricultural input. Unsatisfactory results, at times hazardous to human health, did not prevent continuing advocacy of such practices by agricultural chemists and others.

In the final paper, Dr John Sheail (Institute of Terrestrial Ecology) spoke on 'Sustainable Agriculture: the UK Experience'. Arguing that concern for the environmental consequences of food production long predates the present outbreak of environmentalism, Dr Sheail traced environmental consciousness in the work of many authors published during the period 1870 to 1940, and took issue with Colin Duncan's recent attempts to paint the agriculture of the period as generally indifferent to conservation. Albert Pell's unease at the cost of the artificial fertility implicit in every waving field of wheat was shared by other, later authors. Sir George Stapledon's advocacy of an agricultural policy in which the needs of the land itself would serve as the basis of the land's future prosperity was not at odds with the thinking of the time.