

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1995

By JOHN CHARTRES

SHEFFIELD put on its best display of spring sunshine for the duration of the conference, held at Ranmoor House, 10–12 April, thus diminishing, if not entirely banishing, organizer David Hey's reputation as snowfinder-general. The conference was an equal success in academic and social terms for the forty-one members who attended.

While the Spring Conference does not profess a theme, the recurrent element of the sessions at Sheffield was that of landholding, and, with a single exception, papers concentrated upon those who owned, rented, or farmed the land. The late Dr Paul Nunn (Sheffield Hallam University) opened the conference with his paper '“No fit subject for rural knowledge”? (W Marshall): The Wentworth–Woodhouse estate and agriculture in South Yorkshire during the Industrial Revolution', introducing his audience to some of the findings of more than twenty years work on one of the greatest estates of the country, one that provided the principal northern element of Sheffield's 'encircling by ermine'. The estate had been built principally before the accession of the second Marquis of Rockingham in 1750, the principal creator of the present great house, and was largely complete at his death in 1782. It had grown on a base of diversified and flexible agriculture, with a nest of surrounding urban markets, and as an integral bloc, much through the extensive acquisition of small parcels of land. From the 1780s, coal rather than farming was the principal motive of estate management policy, but financed much of the Fitzwilliams' paternalist policy towards farm tenants in the difficult years of the earlier nineteenth century. Shifting management options for an estate of around 18,000 acres (plus much more in London, North Yorkshire, Northamptonshire, and Ireland) provided an important case-study.

From this, Professor David Hey (University of Sheffield) introduced the characteristic industry of Sheffield, through Mr Ken Hawley, Sheffield tool historian and custodian of Wortley Forge, who presented his remarkable archive film covering the years from the 1930s, but much focused on the 1960s, in which the work processes and skills of many now dead edge-tool trades were recorded.

Mr Hawley's collection of Sheffield and foreign edge tools, now deposited with the university, represents a unique world-class holding, and awaits a possible home in a special gallery at the Mappin, and provided physical exhibits in support of the film record. BAHS members were wisely confined to examining these sickles, hay knives, and scythe blades, since, with a small number of exceptions, few had ever used them in earnest, and the risks attendant upon a practical test were thus avoided.

In the third session, the following morning, Ms Jane Whittle (University of Oxford) explored 'The Norfolk land market and inheritance patterns, c 1300–c 1600', through a series of case studies of manors, primarily focused upon Hevingham. Her detailed analysis of land transfers showed this as an area of small landholdings, but one that displayed a significant trend towards engrossment in the sixteenth century, and marked price differentials between large and small holdings. By the 1540s, holdings of less than 4 acres were selling proportionately at four times the price of the larger units. This polarization was superimposed onto an area in which active land markets had been extant from the later thirteenth century, and where the volume of transactions had increased strikingly from the 1380s, as tenants moved the throw off the yoke of serfdom. Family inheritance practices and the existence of bondage land appeared to have protected the position of the smallholder, even in the 'free' market after 1420, despite the culture of a flexible approach to landholding. Though Hevingham was rich and diverse as an area of farming, it was no great hotbed of agrarian capitalism, even in the sixteenth century, and Whittle's important long-term study echoed Tawney more directly than Robert Brenner in its findings.

Jeremy Burchardt (University of Reading), presented the final conventional paper, on 'The allotment movement and rural social relations, 1830–1845', which documented the spatial and temporal patterns of the creation of allotments, and sought to explain the results. Fewer than 10,000 were extant in 1835, rising strikingly to 100,000 in 1845, when the heaviest incidence lay in the southern and south-western counties, led by Somerset, but the majority of the 600,000 plots recorded in

1910 had been created after 1870. Political economists had opposed the movement, as retrograde and threatening to recreate the Irish problem, but more significant and effective opposition had come from those with more direct interests in the land, principally from farmers. Farmer hostility was apparent in the use of the vestry to restrict creations, in the charging of exorbitant prices for carting or manure, and appears to have been founded in an inchoate mix of fears of competition and the reduction of the labour incentive, of thefts to feed the cottage pig, whose manure was so critical to successful allotment cultivation, and of concern for social status, perceived as threatened by the uppity 'Johnny Farmers' of the allotments. To compound the problems, and to complete a splendid tour of the rural politics of the period, Chartists too opposed the movement, misrepresenting the Labourers' Friend Society as paternalist, and inimical to their own ideals of land settlement.

The final afternoon sessions were devoted to an important and stimulating symposium, 'Who were the farmers', led by Professors John Beckett and Michael Turner, and Dr Bethanie Afton, whose pre-circulated discussion paper argued that in wider concerns with output and society, rural historians may relatively have neglected to discuss the farmer. Around this theme there were, successively, short contributions from Turner himself, Professor Gordon Mingay, Dr John Hare, Professor Michael Thompson, Drs Alun Howkins, Ted Collins, Tony Phillips, Peter Dewey, Brian Short, and Charles Watkins, ranging in their coverage from wide methodological issues to specific source problems and opportunities. Contributions from the wider conference emphasized sampling problems in recent oral history approaches, and the significant omission of the early modern period from the 'platform', remedied by Professor Mark Overton's comments on the two million or so surviving probate inventories, of which half in some senses covered

'farmers'. Other delights in the wide-ranging if ultimately inconclusive collective discussion included two snippets from the 1941 Farm Survey returns, presented by Charles Watkins: the record of management deficiencies for one farmer tersely stated 'lack of ability'; and, from another part of a form, one record of 'other occupation', stated 'Foreign Secretary' [Anthony Eden]. The latter could not surprise members of this society: one of its former secretaries described himself on a dust-jacket as 'farming 500 acres in the Cotswolds as an antidote to academic life'. It did, however, raise definitional issues of 'farmers' that need to be resolved. The symposium usefully pointed up the key concerns of Howkins and others with the smallest 'land-users and entrepreneurs', the part-time, and hobby farmer, the 'true' farmer, both tenant and freeholder, and the 'horsiculturalist'. While the case of neglect was ultimately unproven, except perhaps terminologically, the rich potential of current and future research on 'farmers' was clearly established.

The conference concluded with its customary excursion, this time into the south-western part of Sheffield's ermine girdle, as David Hey led a walking visit through Chatsworth Park, beginning at Edensor, and including the shooting tower and reservoirs. Much to everyone's surprise and delight, the balmy weather continued unabated, and in a very well-prepared tour, all learned a great deal about Edensor old and new, and the development of the park. There was, however, widespread dismay to learn that the great landscape historian's cliché slide, of the 'remaining' cottage of old Edensor, was nothing of the kind, merely being the later residence of the foreman carpenter who was working on the new site. Despite this, the walking tour provided a memorable conclusion to an excellent conference, little blighted by the successive exhaustion of three pumps of draught beer in the Ranmoor House bar.