

Conference Report: 'Social Relationships in the Countryside' Winter Conference

1994

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THE 1994 winter conference, held jointly with the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers, took place on Saturday, 3 December at the Institute of Historical Research, London. A varied diet of papers was on offer, the theme 'Social Relationships in the Countryside' imposing no serious constraints on content or treatment.

Dr Richard Smith (University of Cambridge), in a paper entitled 'Social and economic responses to dearth on three manors of the Abbots of St Alban and Bury St Edmunds, 1280-1322', presented the interim results of a continuing study of the consequences of subsistence deficiency during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. While historians in general have found it difficult to demonstrate that dearth was any more than an indirect cause of increased mortality, Dr Smith considered it unlikely that Livi-Bacci's interpretation of the historical demography of recent centuries, which sees subsistence and mortality as two largely unrelated variables, would hold good for the century before the Black Death. Mead Cain's explorations of land market activity in the village of Char Gopalpur, Bangladesh during the 1970s provided instructive parallels with events in similarly high-risk environments in medieval East Anglia. Distress land sales soared in dearth years, the numerous transactions between kin apparently testifying to the shortcomings of the extended family as a support mechanism. The paper ended with a plea for 'enthusiastic comparativists' to consider why the early fourteenth century was starvation-prone when the period of subsistence difficulty in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was not.

The paper by Dr Barry Harrison (University of Leeds), 'Housing and customary tenure in a Pennine valley: the parish of Grinton in Swaledale (North Yorkshire), 1620-1720', began by outlining the landholding and settlement history of the dale, laying particular emphasis on the pronounced population increase of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The earliest surviving vernacular building dates to 1634. This marked the beginning of a century or so of remarkable building activity, prompted in part by the tenants' attainment of

tenurial status almost equivalent to freehold. Most of the resulting houses are small, simple and uniform three-cell structures. Much discussion focused on the appropriate interpretation of several properties which apparently never had an agricultural function.

The lunch break was the occasion of a presentation to Dr Joan Thirsk in recognition of her recent award of the CBE for services to agrarian and local history. The formal conference programme then recommenced with Dr Roger Wells (University of Brighton) speaking on 'Mr William Cobbett, Captain Swing and King William IV'. Finding much to criticize and less to praise in the work of other students of the period, Dr Wells presented a detailed diagnosis of events in east Sussex and Kent, and especially in the town of Battle, during the years 1829 to 1831. Agricultural distress, pro-French meetings, Cobbett's lecture tour and his subsequent trial, incendiarism, Swing, and pro-Reform agitation were interconnected in this area to a degree hitherto unappreciated. As well as the principal players of the title, the *dramatis personae* included Treasury solicitor and government agent Moore, arsonists or alleged arsonists Goodman, Bushby and Inskip, and the Sussex bench as recipients of the King's Christmas hospitality.

In the last paper of the day, Dr Richard Smith (Royal Holloway) presented 'Two routes to crofting: Nordic and Gaelic Highlands compared'. Although similar in outward appearances, crofting in the west Highlands and western isles had quite a different history from its less well-known counterpart in Shetland. With no clan tradition, but a system of laird and tenant, Shetland crofting originated in the tenurial tradition which obliged all tenants to participate in the islands' export-oriented fishing economy. Intensification of the system during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to conditions reminiscent of the densely-populated mainland, and the critical attentions of the 1871 Truck Commission.

Dr Peter Dewey (Royal Holloway) was thanked for organizing another successful conference, his sixth and last before the responsibility passes to Dr John Broad (University of North London).