

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1996

By JOHN CHAPMAN

SOUTH-WEST London maintained the recent tradition of the conference by providing pleasant spring weather for some fifty members who convened at the Whitelands College site of the Roehampton Institute from 1-3 April.

The conference opened with a highly topical paper by Dr Peter Atkins on the threat to human health from bovine tuberculosis from 1850 to 1950, and the measures taken to combat the disease. Obvious parallels with the current BSE scare emerged, notably the failure of the central government to react swiftly when the problem could have been dealt with relatively cheaply. Dr Atkins drew attention to the contrast with local authorities, such as Glasgow and Manchester, who instituted testing programmes and took powers to control infected animals in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. While this helped to eliminate the TB-infested cows kept in cramped urban conditions, it created problems with inspection as more milk was drawn from distant sources in other local authority areas. The fact that it took until 1937 to institute a national slaughter policy and until the 1960s before the whole country was effectively free of the disease served as a depressing reminder of the time which it can take for effective action against such diseases.

Dorian Gerhold provided an interesting background to the development of the Roehampton area, tracing its evolution from a rural village into a site for large houses and villas for a London-orientated population in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the village being progressively displaced to a new site to the south. Subsequent redevelopment in the twentieth century resulted in the demolition of most of these houses, though Roehampton Institute itself retains remnants.

Malcolm Thick examined Neates' House Gardens as an example of market gardening on London's fringes. He demonstrated the great increase in the area involved over the seventeenth century, and stressed the significance of the Thames-side location for both water supply and transport. This latter involved not merely the transport of produce to the city, but also the reverse flow of dung as fertilizer for the gardens. He noted the mixture of locals and incomers involved in the

enterprise, and speculated on the extent to which the high degree of skill acquired in gardening helped to stimulate developments in the conventional farming sector.

Dr Richard Hoyle presented the results of his investigations into Earls Colne, Essex. Starting with a reworking of Macfarlane's data, he offered a significantly different picture of the evolution of the parish to that of Macfarlane. Pointing to the fact that only 40 per cent of the parish was copyhold land, he traced the descent of all the copyholds from the mid-sixteenth century to 1750. Though a substantial proportion of copyhold land changed hands each decade, he found that some 30 per cent remained in the same family from 1650 to 1750, and he found no evidence of larger copyholders buying out smaller. Sales often took place on inheritance, with the heir frequently an absentee who presumably saw little value in retaining land which he did not wish to farm. The lords of the manor appear to have played little active part, neither investing in the estate nor buying land.

The symposium on 'Women in Agriculture' brought together three papers illustrating women as landholders, women as agricultural workers, and women as marketers of produce. Sylvia Seeliger demonstrated that, in spite of the constraints imposed by common law, women in fact formed a significant element amongst the landholders of Hampshire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Manorial courts were perfectly willing to accept women as customary tenants and the ecclesiastical courts protected widows' rights. Demographic constraints ensured a background level of female ownership, since descent via the female line was often inevitable if land was not to pass totally outside the family. Dr Judy Gielguid examined the operations of the bondage system in Northumberland, whereby male farm labourers were expected to recruit and pay a female labourer as part of their agreement with the farmer. The system can be traced for almost 300 years, to the middle years of the present century, though by about 1875 the bondagers were usually family members. Earlier, Dr Gielguid argued, they had been women with an unusual degree of independence, striking their own bargains

about terms and operating free of the family constraints normal at that time.

Dr Wendy Thwaites presented a picture of the role of women in agricultural marketing, with special reference to Oxfordshire. She drew attention to the traditional distinction between the male-dominated stock and corn selling and women's heavy involvement in the sales of such items as butter, cheese and eggs, pointing out that cottagers and gentlewomen were involved in the latter, as well as farmers' wives. Women's involvement greatly diminished after about 1750 as the items which they had traditionally sold direct in the markets gradually came to be handled by (overwhelmingly male) middlemen.

Dr Peter Edwards gallantly stepped in to replace

a speaker struck down by illness, and presented a paper on the evolution of landholding in Rushock. In contrast to the situation in Earls Colne, the lord, in the form of the lessee of the manor, took active steps to remove copyholders from the late sixteenth century onwards, and financial difficulties forced sales by freeholders in the mid-seventeenth. By the end of the century engrossing of holdings was well under way, and copyholds were effectively ended by 1776.

The formal proceedings ended with a visit to Young's brewery. The thanks of all concerned are due to Dr Peter Edwards and his colleagues from Roehampton Institute for their efforts in organizing a most enjoyable conference.