

Conference Report: 'Farming and the Farm Environment' Winter Conference 1995

By PAUL BRASSLEY

THE 1995 winter conference, held jointly with the Historical Geography Research Group of the Institute of British Geographers, took place on Saturday, 2 December at the Institute of Historical Research, London. The theme of 'Farming and the Farm Environment' meant, in this case, farm buildings, three papers being concerned with various aspects of nineteenth-century farm buildings, and one with the medieval period.

The medieval paper, by Dr Christopher Thornton (Victoria County History, Essex), on 'Manorial landscapes: investment in medieval farm buildings and agricultural change on the Bishop of Winchester's estates', took its customary place at the top of the batting order. Beginning with a short review of previous work, much of which appears to argue for low levels of landlord investment in working farm buildings, Dr Thornton examined in detail the various buildings erected at Rimpton (Somerset) in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Barns, stables, ox and cow byres, calf and sheep houses, a granary, a dovecot, a mill, and cart and wagon houses, in addition to domestic buildings, are among those which can be identified in the pipe rolls and other accounts in the records of the bishopric. There was also comparative material from several parishes in the hundred of Wargrave in Berkshire which demonstrated the effects of assarting and commercial activities on building developments. When the investment required for all this is examined it appears to be quite adequate to cope with the demands produced by the process of agricultural change, and more impressive, perhaps, than previous commentators have allowed.

Dr Tony Phillips (University of Keele), discussing 'Landlord investment in farm buildings in the second half of the nineteenth century – intentions and reality', argued that increasing arable productivity in this period demanded more farmyard manure, which in turn required new buildings. Since neither contemporary sources nor recent historical work are unanimous on the extent of new building, he turned to the records arising from the various Land Improvement Acts passed from the 1850s onwards. Data from several estates in various parts of the country reveal a reasonably constant relationship between loans made under the

terms of the acts and total capital investment, which suggests that it is possible to analyse the material from this source for both spatial and temporal variations in capital investment. This process reveals a concentration of capital investment in the mixed farming areas, which is probably not surprising, and a peak of investment in the period 1870–90, which is perhaps less predictable: investment in buildings, in other words, followed prosperity, rather than initiating it.

Dr Colum Giles (Royal Commission on Historic Monuments) presented a paper on 'Farm buildings and regional variations', based on the RCHM's recent survey of English farmsteads, which began by suggesting that farm buildings could be used as an historical source in their own right to provide evidence of changing farming systems. He then compared nineteenth-century farm buildings in west Berkshire and north Northumberland. In the former county, especially before 1850, the aisled, timber framed corn barn with its threshing floor was the biggest building in the farmyard, and little cattle accommodation was provided. In north Northumberland, where mechanization of threshing came earlier, cattle were more important, and farms were bigger, the corn barn was less dominant, and well integrated with open yards and hemels for cattle, root houses and feeding passages. Different buildings, in short, reflected different types of farming.

In her paper on 'Farm buildings as agricultural history', Dr Susanna Wade-Martins (University of East Anglia) also compared buildings in two different areas: Norfolk and Sutherland. She suggested that the increasing pressure to demolish nineteenth-century farm buildings which was evident from 1970 onwards produced several studies, which she characterized as an information-gathering phase. It was now possible to be more analytical, and use existing buildings as evidence for the extent of agricultural change and its effects on different social classes. Thus improved farming in Norfolk initially appeared to be a gentleman's occupation, and was associated with social status, with high farming principles then going down the social scale from the 1860s onwards. In Sutherland, in contrast, many farmsteads indicated a process of complete

rebuilding beginning in the early nineteenth century and financed by landlords intent on producing major changes in rural society.

Dr John Broad (University of North London) is to be congratulated, not only on organizing his first

winter conference with great efficiency, but also on finding a topic and speakers to attract an audience of over 60, many of them newcomers to the society's meetings, and all the more welcome for that.

Notes on Contributors

DR ALAN R H BAKER is University Lecturer in Geography and Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. An historical geographer whose early work was on medieval English (and especially Kentish) field systems, Dr Baker has for some years now focused his research upon the agricultural and social history and geography of rural France (and especially of Loir-et-Cher) during the nineteenth century.

PAUL BRASSLEY is a Senior Lecturer in Agricultural Policy and History in the Seale-Hayne Faculty of the University of Plymouth. His initial research interests were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but he has gradually transferred his allegiances to more recent periods. He has contributed to two volumes of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*.

DAVID EASTWOOD is Professor of Social History at the University of Wales Swansea, and has written extensively on Modern British social, political, and intellectual history. His *Governing Rural England. Tradition and Transformation in Local Government 1780-1840* was published by Oxford University Press in 1994, and his most recent book, *England*

1750-1850: Government and Community in the Provinces is in press with Macmillans.

MARK OVERTON is Professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Exeter. He has published widely on the agrarian history of England; most recently, *Agricultural Revolution in England: the Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850*, Cambridge, 1996. He is currently working on household economies in southern England, 1600-1750.

MICHAEL TURNER is Professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Hull; JOHN BECKETT is Professor of English Regional History at the University of Nottingham; and DR BETHANIE AFTON is a Research Fellow in Agrarian History at the University of Hull. Together they have completed a book on *Agricultural Rent in England, 1690-1914* which will be published shortly by Cambridge University Press, and with the support of the Leverhulme Trust they are researching for a book on *Farm production and output in England, 1700-1914*, the pilot for which is the substance of their current paper.