

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1997

By RICHARD PERREN

THE society's annual residential Spring Conference for 1997 was held at the Langstone Campus, University of Portsmouth, between 7 and 9 April. There were fifty-six persons on the conference list, including conference organizer Dr John Chapman, assisted by Ms Sylvia Seeliger and Mr Chris Ellis, all from the University of Portsmouth.

The society tries to ensure the first paper of this conference is given by an eminent person in the subject; and the aim was undoubtedly achieved when Emeritus Professor Paul Harvey, of Durham, began his lecture on 'Demesne crops and tenant crops in medieval England' at 5.15 pm. The speaker explained that he had begun to collect data for this paper some ten years ago using a miscellany of demesne and tithe accounts, lay subsidies, and mulcture accounts, to investigate whether the mix of crops varied with the size of holdings and whether peasant farming produced larger or smaller yields than demesne agriculture. In the 1980s he had been unable to collect sufficient high quality data over long periods to answer these questions, so the audience eagerly awaited to hear how successful his search had been since then. Listeners were inevitably disappointed when he confessed he had made no additions to his set of data in the intervening decade, as it meant that answers to these questions were inevitably still unforthcoming. Instead, they had to content themselves with a rather familiar and pedestrian recital of the problems of collecting medieval data. The second paper of the first day was given by Professor Robert Malcomson of Queen's University Kingston on 'The cottage pig: a social history', delivered after dinner at 8.15 pm. This lively and interesting paper discussed the various aspects of the animal's importance to English rural labourers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. In addition to the important contribution which the pig made to the diet and income of the household, it also formed the focus for a significant part of the network of social relations between fellow pig-keeping cottagers within the village. In the lively discussion after the paper, it was revealed that cottage pigs were kept as late as the 1950s, which provided an opportunity for some

of the audience to supplement the usual comments and questions with personal reminiscences.

Since 1990 the society has made provision for new researchers to present short papers detailing their research, and on Tuesday morning two researchers were allowed to take advantage of this offer. Miss Helena Lim from the University of Bath gave a presentation on 'Agricultural societies and the premium system' and Miss Helen Speechley from the University of Exeter gave hers on 'Involvement of women and children in agriculture c 1750-1850, with special reference to Somerset'. During two highly professional deliveries, each lasting twenty minutes, the audience was given clear and interesting expositions of these two PhD topics, as well as an opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions that might possibly help. The whole exercise was extremely successful and it is hoped that other new researchers will come forward to make this a permanent feature of future conferences. They were followed by Dr Steve Hindle of the University of Warwick with a paper on 'Power, poor relief and social relations in Holland Fen, c 1600-1800'. He argued that concern over local power relationships should be extended into the study of poor relief and explained, using evidence of local vestry minute books, how the politics of poor relief were the politics of exclusion. As poor relief was the major item of parish expenditure and represented a transfer of resources from vestrymen, who were the more prosperous members of the parish, this body did all it could to prevent the parish being infiltrated by 'poor strangers'. In addition Dr Hindle provided a great wealth of statistical material to support his analysis, the most impressive of which was a time series of poor law expenditure covering a substantial part of two centuries. In the last of Tuesday morning's papers Mr Andrew Hann of the University of Exeter covered 'The impact of the market on an estate economy: Ditchley, 1680-1750'. On this estate in north-west Oxfordshire Mr Hann claimed to discern rents being paid by deliveries of grain, as well as wage labourers being paid in kind. But such payments were always mixed in with monetary payments, and money constituted the overwhelming proportion of transactions, thus undermining E P

Thompson's assertion of an overwhelming reliance on the moral economy in the early eighteenth century. In the discussion that followed there was some questioning as to how far the non-monetary transactions really were payments in kind, as grain delivered as rent was always ascribed some sort of cash value in the Ditchley rentals. Indeed, Mr Hann had produced a graph showing that these values tracked very closely the prices of grain delivered to Bear Quay, which was the main London grain market at that time. Also, payments of wages in kind were only significant around the years 1709-13 and these were years of short harvests and high prices, thus suggesting the estate was actively protecting certain workers from the rigours of the market.

After lunch there were two loosely related papers. Dr Tom Williamson of the University of East Anglia spoke on 'The "Agricultural Revolution" and the transformation of regional landscapes, 1700-1850'. In a wide-ranging paper, difficult to summarize but always willing to challenge both orthodox and novel interpretations, he emphasized the complementary nature of the process of technical change, drawing on examples mostly from East Anglia, but also stressing that agricultural regions are not single homogeneous zones. He was followed by Dr John Walton of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, with 'The innovation and diffusion of improved cereal varieties before hybridization'. This examined the motives behind the early improvers, their backgrounds and their relative successes with different varieties of wheat, barley, and oats. He also pointed out that the way grain markets operated in the United Kingdom gave farmers and seedsmen very little incentive to replace inferior varieties of light-weight grain with better quality varieties of heavier weights. Both papers provoked a spirited discussion from a wide variety of participants. The AGM of the society was held after tea, followed by a reception at 7.00 pm and an excellent conference dinner from 8.00 pm onwards.

The conference ended with two papers on Wednesday morning. In the first of these Professor John Sheail of the NERC Institute of Terrestrial Ecology examined "'Custodians of the rural workshop": post-war agriculture and the countryside'. This paper provided a fascinating insight into recent agricultural politics by detailing the shift in thinking over the twenty-five years before the Countryside

Act of 1968. At the start of the period both the Ministry of Agriculture and the Nature Conservancy believed that the improvement of agricultural productivity and rural conservation could be taken together, and had no reason to believe there could ever be conflict between the two aims. However, after the introduction of ploughing grants in 1952, conflicts began to emerge when attempts were made to plough up Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). After a number of celebrated cases during the 1950s and 1960s, including Cavenham Heath and Waddingham Common together with anxieties about the environmental effect of the uncontrolled use of agro-chemicals, an attempt was made to strike a balance between what had become two basically conflicting objectives. Thereafter the Ministry of Agriculture adopted a more accommodating attitude towards other interests in the countryside besides those of 'improvement'. The final paper by Dr Alastair Pearson of the University of Portsmouth on 'The use of GIS (geographical information systems) in investigations in rural history' was really a most impressive *tour de force*. For many of the audience this was their first encounter with this extremely powerful tool, designed to use disparate sources to study the process of historical geographical evolution. Although based on a particular case study, namely the parish of Newport in Pembrokeshire, Dr Pearson ably demonstrated how such a technique, which relies on the computer to analyse large volumes of data, can not only be applied to the study of other regions but also to a wide variety of historical problems. The questions and discussion that he provoked soon overran their allotted time, principally because the audience was eager to discover more about multi-level modelling.

At the conclusion of the questions to Dr Pearson's paper, Professor John Chartres, the new chairman of the executive committee, warmly thanked Dr Chapman and his assistants, as well as the staff of the Langstone Campus, for their friendly hospitality and for arranging what had been an extremely enjoyable and highly instructive conference. After lunch a number of attendees decided to take advantage of the fine weather that had been a feature of the entire conference and accepted the organizers' offer of a conducted visit to the Weald and Downland Museum at Singleton near Chichester.