

Conference Report: 'Farming in Adversity: Patterns of Response' Winter Conference 1996

By PETER DEWEY

AN audience of some forty gathered at the Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, London University, to consider the general theme of 'Farming in Adversity'. A medieval crisis was surveyed by Dr Phillipp Schofield (Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, Oxford) in his paper on the responses of the English peasantry to the subsistence crises of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Although national data are lacking, the population of England may have fallen by about 10 per cent as a result of the dearth of those years (especially 1315–22). Evidence of stress came in such things as the rise in the yield of merchet (marriage tax), as more bereaved spouses remarried, in some evidence of increased mobility (presumably an attempt to evade feudal exactions), and in some evidence of changes in agricultural technique and diet. There was also clear evidence of dearth in the form of high grain prices, and in the growth of distress sales of land. The possibility was raised that there was a large submerged impoverished group of peasants, who were further exploited by the slightly better-off peasants passing the burden of taxation on to their poorer peers. In sum, the peasantry survived these very lean years by a combination of self-preservation and self-promotion.

A slightly different type of adversity was faced by the subject of Dr Elizabeth Griffith's paper, William Windham, on his estates of Blickling and Felbrigg (Norfolk) in the 1670s. Against a background of low grain prices, which led to arrears of rent, ruined tenants, and made it hard to find reliable new ones, this landlord explored the possibilities of share-cropping or, as the contemporary description had it, 'letting to halves'. This device was less successful on the Felbrigg estate than at Blickling. In the former agreement, there was an absence of effective incentives for the tenant to maximize his efficiency; in the latter, the agreement worked more like a modern contract farming agreement than share-cropping, and the result was more satisfactory. But in neither case could it be said that share-cropping prevented fresh tenant failure. It was concluded that in difficult times share-cropping

eroded the position of both parties to the agreement, and the then-emerging system of landlord and tenant would provide clearer safeguards for the interests of both parties.

The paper by Professor Hugh Clout (University College London) examined the process of rebuilding the shattered farming systems of the ten French *départements* which were either invaded or formed part of the fighting zone during the First World War. The devastation was enormous, some 620 settlements being declared totally destroyed, and a further 1300 largely destroyed. Most of the damage had been to small settlements (though Reims lost 79 per cent of its properties). While state agencies did much emergency repair work in the few months after the war, there was never a concerted attempt by a specific ministry to effect complete reconstruction, although various newly-established state agencies did something to provide supplies of machinery and livestock until c 1922. Thereafter, work proceeded by a multiplicity of voluntary agencies – cooperatives, private agencies, and charities. Throughout, there was a fierce determination by the dispossessed and bereft farmers to restore things as they had been, so that the opportunity was not taken to reappportion the notoriously splintered French agricultural holdings. Reconstruction took almost ten years, and represented an enormous investment of public and private money. A final thought was that the reconstruction was almost too successful, in that little remained to remind visitors of the horrors of war, save the large military cemeteries.

The most recent type of adversity was provided by Dr Linda Merricks and Dr Alun Howkins (University of Sussex) in their examination of recent campaigns against the export of live animals from the UK. After Dr Merricks had considered some of the philosophical issues attendant on the question of animal welfare, Dr Howkins outlined the history of this movement, which could be traced back to the campaign against the export of live horses in the 1960s. More recently, the issue had come to the forefront of public discussion, fuelled by the enormous rise in exports in the 1980s; by 1992,

over a million sheep were being exported annually. The campaign was stiffened by an earlier victory on the unrelated question of raising calves for veal in small veal 'crates', whose use was eventually prohibited. On the export front, there was a victory in the form of the withdrawal of the P & O shipping company from the trade. The highlight of media attention came with the 'siege of Shoreham' early in 1995, when exporting was frustrated by hostile gatherings. Finally, some attention was given to analysing the reasons for the protests, and the

composition of the protesters. Using techniques derived from the work of Mass-Observation (whose archive is at Sussex University), it was suggested that they were overwhelmingly white, from south-eastern England, female, middle-class and in late middle age. Their motivation was self-avowedly the 'inhumanity' of the trade, reinforced with a certain amount of anthropomorphism.

The conference concluded with thanks to Dr John Broad for his hard work in organizing another most successful conference.