

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1998

By CHRISTINE HALLAS

ONCE participants had managed to negotiate the winding roads of rural Shropshire and discovered the pleasant small campus with its unexpected bonus of a home farm providing produce for our meals, the conference settled into its usual format of comfortable excellence. Professor Woodward (Hull) whetted appetites with his paper on 'Straw, bracken and the Wicklow whale: the use of natural resources in post medieval England', he explored the opportunistic approach to resources in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain. He emphasized the importance of an economy that was goods and service rather than money based. He concluded by noting that while virtually every part of a stranded whale would have been used 400 years ago, today Britons 'will just go to gawp' and, failing to refloat the whale will leave the valuable resource to rot on the beach.

Dr Paul Stamper (English Heritage) provided a context for the conference field trip by using estates in Shropshire and adjoining counties to demonstrate the adoption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of extravagant designs drawn from such diverse architectural styles as Gothic, Palladian and Chinoiserie. His excellent slides showed how landscaped parks and gardens along with fowl houses and piggeries were part of display and a statement by the owners of their status. The Australian criminal in the form of the cattle rustler was the subject of the first lecture on Tuesday. Professor John Perkins (New South Wales) contested the accepted view of Australia's development in the nineteenth century being solely on the basis of sheep. He demonstrated the vitally important role of cattle (domesticated and feral) as the main provider of local food, a beast of burden, a provider of hide and a 'long grass muncher' to enable sheep to graze shorter grass. Through careful analysis of the different types of cattle thief Professor Perkins demonstrated the upward mobility of criminals. Cattle and cattle theft, he argued must be seen as a significant element in the development of the Australian economy.

Paul Booth, in the next paper, brought the audience back to England with his fascinating exploration of the inter-relationship between pastoral farming, leasing and social change in fourteenth-

century England. Dr Roger Dalton (Derby) built on the work of David Taylor and others to present his own researches into the development of the south Derbyshire cheese industry 1770-1870. By an analysis of newspapers, tithe records and MAF returns he showed how farmers, by progressively moving into dairying and particularly into cheese, were responsive to the country's changing demands. Dr Dalton adopted a livestock unit designation to identify the growth of the changing industry and through this method was able to demonstrate the increasing specialization of Derbyshire farmers. He concluded that as the result of a variety of factors, size of farms and dairy hands increased and productivity of cheese makers rose significantly. The afternoon was taken up with an interesting symposium on 'Farm production in England 1700-1914' led by Professors Becket and Turner and Dr Afton. The speakers identified the aims of their research project and gave a report on research findings to date. This resulted in a lively discussion about both the methodologies and the conclusions being drawn from the evidence.

The formal sessions of the day concluded with Professor van Zanden (Utrecht) giving the Chaloner Memorial Lecture on 'The paradox of the marken'. This fascinating paper explored the exploitation of the commons in eastern Netherlands by rural society. Professor Zanden demonstrated how, in order to protect this valuable resource, local communities sought to regulate the commons (marks) and make them sustainable. During the paper Professor Zanden drew interesting parallels with the British experience and pointed out that in both countries very little research has been undertaken on common rights and their development. As the paper progressed we were shown how regulations were established in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when original forests were threatened by over exploitation. Based on a moral economy these rules continued to control the activities of peasants until tensions increased in the sixteenth and seventeenth century with population expansion and the resultant serious exploitation. The situation was redeemed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with a balance being attained. Subsistence was enabled to continue paradoxically

because of the gradual commercialization of agriculture. However, by the nineteenth century attitudes were changing and after resistance from the peasants the marks were dissolved.

A splendid day of lectures was concluded by a well earned rest in the form of the Conference Reception and Annual Dinner. The only sad note of this occasions was the announcement of the retirement of our President, Dr Joan Thirsk. Earnest discussion and revelries continued late into the night when, having drunk the bar dry, some delegates reconvened in a common room to find out what happened to 'Albert and the Lion'.

The following morning started in sober manner with the Annual General Meeting but gathered apace when Leigh Shaw-Taylor extended Professor Zanden's topic by asking in his paper, 'Did labourers really have common pasture rights?' He took issue with the Hammond/Neeson thesis and by linking three types of document - claims to property; Land Tax assessment; and militia ballot lists for selected areas in Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire - proceeded to show that the

view that common rights were held extensively by labourers was not sustainable. The beneficiaries of common rights were farmers, artisans and people of similar wealth. The final paper of the conference was given by Andrew Gritt who examined 'Estate housing in south-west Lancashire 1750-1850'. He demonstrated how, due both to endogenous and exogenous factors rebuilding of estate houses in this part of Lancashire did not occur to any significant extent until the nineteenth century. As the paper progressed the complex linking of factors was clearly highlighted with the changing structure of farming, increased wealth in the area, the opening of Leeds/Liverpool canal, and a rise in social status of many owners being shown to be responsible for significant improvement in the provision of estate dwellings.

The final lunch of the conference was followed by an excursion to Leighton near Welshpool. The Spring Conference has always provided a forum for established scholars and new researchers and this year's offering followed the tradition. The excellent papers coupled with lively discussion made it a most enjoyable event.