

Conference Report: 'Crime in the Countryside' Winter Conference 1997

By JOHN R. WALTON

THE winter conference took place on Saturday 6 December at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. An audience numbering about 50 heard four papers which explored different facets of English rural crime from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In the first paper, Dr Isobel Harvey (Cambridge) considered 'Hunting, poaching and rural society in fifteenth-century England'. Hunting was a medieval passion which verged on a mania, and by the fifteenth century the deer, which had a high commercial value, was the animal of choice. Poaching had five underlying causes. Some poachers were hungry, while others poached for commercial gain. Peasants attempting to rid their land of destructive vermin represented a third category. Poaching was also an important feature of feuding between rival magnates. After the murder of the duke of Suffolk in 1450, the parks of his widow were repeatedly raided by followers of the duke of Norfolk. Last, the fifteenth century marked the beginning of the long history of poaching as a politically-motivated crime, a form of sedition articulated as an attack on a resource perceived as 'fair game'. Legislation designed to exclude a widening circle of the population from the right to hunt was an important source of grievance. But poaching and protest became closely identified in a more general sense. For example, the self-styled 'servants of the queen of the fairies' who in October 1450 attacked the deer in the duke of Buckingham's park at Penshurst, Kent included known insurgents.

Malcolm Gaskill (Anglia) then presented his paper 'Coining in the seventeenth century – a social crime?'. So far as its practitioners were concerned, coining was a victimless crime bringing returns far better than any legitimately gained by the drudgery of a normal working life: 'a better trade than selling potatoes' one enthusiast remarked, 'a better trade than hedging' according to another. With £25 per day possible for two counterfeiters working together, some coiners became social climbers, and others, like the Yorkshire coiner Thomas Lightowler, acquired a far-flung reputation as folk heroes. Appropriately, the state found that financial

inducements were the most effective means of persuading the populace to give evidence against coiners. Coining's two sub-disciplines, counterfeiting and clipping, differed in their demands. Those of plebian status found it difficult to acquire the privacy, space, and capital needed to run a successful counterfeiting operation, although in the northern counties they pooled their resources in gangs organized to circumvent these difficulties. By contrast, clipping, which required only unclipped coin and a pair of scissors, was widely practised. Life's most essential need, the preservation and reproduction of the domestic economy of the household, was achieved by fair means if possible, by foul if not. In response to a questioner, Dr Gaskill said that he considered the numerous Yorkshire examples quoted in his paper owed more to the survival of the northern circuit assize depositions than to anything else. By the 1690s, coining was a problem throughout the entire country.

In the first session after lunch, Peter King (Nene) spoke on 'Crime and the life-cycle experiences of the poor in eighteenth-century England'. As at present, crime had marked life-cycle associations, although historians have hitherto paid little attention to them. Each crime had a distinct age structure. The curve for burglars peaked at age range 18 to 19, and highway robbers in the early 20s. Those aged 60 and upwards scarcely appeared in the indictment rolls except as receivers. Overall, late adolescents and young adults made more court appearances than anyone else. There was a general reluctance on moral grounds to try child and young adolescent offenders, even after they had reached the age of criminal responsibility. Older offenders often escaped indictment where there was a strong possibility that their dependents would become a public charge if they were convicted. Given the pressures of their circumstances, adults with children probably offended more than the frequency of indictments against them suggests. Young adults enjoyed no similar immunities and were everyone's favoured targets. Thefts from masters by servants and apprentices, especially to enhance diet or social life, figured among the indictments with remarkable

frequency. During war periods, enlistment was an alternative to indictment, explaining the disappearance during those years of the normal young-adult peak in property offenders. Migration or flight was another alternative, with the runaway often committing additional crimes while on the run. In eighteenth-century Wiltshire, nearly half of all depositions were against itinerants or those more than five miles from home. Surviving vagrancy examinations relate to a skewed sample of the mobile poor, since the young were either moved on or put in the army without further ado. The speaker concluded with a plea that the history of property crime be more youth focused.

John Archer (Edgehill) then presented his paper, "'A reckless spirit of enterprise": poaching gangs and violence in nineteenth-century Lancashire'. The poaching war in Lancashire was more brutal than its counterpart in the southern counties. The county society of industrial Lancashire was still dominated by its rural élites, whose game estates were an easy target for nocturnal forays by poachers resident in the towns and cities. In general, Lancastrian farmers, constantly troubled by trespass and the theft of crops and stock, welcomed the

game laws, which brought a measure of surveillance by keepers. Poaching may have been a social crime, but most of Lancashire's poachers were not social criminals. Many had strings of convictions for other offences. They were motivated not by the pressing needs of subsistence but by the cash available for poached game in the towns. In the 1840s, a St Helens glassblower could double his weekly wage by selling seven pheasants. Before 1862, the game laws were only lightly enforced by a county constabulary anxious not to increase its unpopularity. However in 1842-3, the police were forced to resort to infiltration and plain-clothes detection to break a poaching gang known as the Long Company whose suspected crimes included murder. Some 28 of the gang of 40 have been traced by Dr Archer. Many were tied by blood or marriage. Fourteen were resident in Liverpool, others in industrialized villages. As Lord Sefton remarked, 'the burglars herd within the borough but commit their depredations without'.

The conference concluded by conveying its thanks to John Broad for his efforts in organizing another successful and enjoyable meeting.