

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1999

by PETER DEWEY

The Society's 1999 Spring Conference was held between 29 and 31 March at Caythorpe College, some ten miles north of Grantham in Lincolnshire. Some 40 participants took advantage of the excellent board and lodging provided at the college, and a half-dozen more attended for part of the conference.

The opening paper was delivered by Dr Melvyn Jones (Sheffield Hallam) on the County Wicklow estates of the Watson-Wentworth family, earls of Strafford, in the early eighteenth century. The earls were essentially absentees, resident on their South Yorkshire estates. Their management of their Irish estates was therefore delegated to stewards (about whom Jones told some rum stories) and the estates themselves were largely in the hands of Protestant middlemen. Drawing on a fine contemporary survey Jones was able to show that the best land was in the hands of Protestants, who often employed the Gaelic Irish as labourers. Catholic Irish farmers were predominantly found in the poorer highlands, land unfit for Protestants because it could not raise corn. The one aspect of the estates which was well run was its woods which contributed half the estate's income in the early eighteenth century.

Whilst some conference organisers have expressed fears that the conference would go to sleep after the Monday dinner unless offered strong intellectual stimulation, this conference took the bold step of offering post prandial fare in darkness. David Attfield, in conjunction with John Martin, introduced a unique collection of rural life films produced by David's uncle in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Dealing primarily with the Ashby Magna area of Leicestershire, these professionally made films gave an illuminating and original insight into rural society, wartime mobilisation and Home Guard Sunday. These were accompanied by a film encompassing the wartime mobilisation of the industrial labour force as part of the Dig for Victory campaign. The evening session provided a valuable opportunity for members of the audience to supplement their usual comments and questions with their own personal reminiscences.

Tuesday's proceedings opened with a paper by Dr Gary Moses on the subject of hiring fairs in the East

Riding of Yorkshire in 1850-75. The growth of fairs was opposed by the local clergy, since the fairs underpinned the system of farm service, which they viewed with suspicion, as tending to promote geographical labour mobility, and thus harmful to parochial and religious life. But the fairs were in fact a rational response by farmers to the needs of the labour market, and survived the clergy's opposition.

The next paper was 'Local custom, local conflict and the central courts, 1500-1550: Chancery, common law and copyhold revisited' by Prof. Harold Garrett-Goodyear of Mount Holyoke College (Massachusetts). Professor Garrett-Goodyear gave the conference a first account of his work on copyhold cases in the royal courts in the early sixteenth century. Copyholders were accustomed to plead their copyhold title in the royal courts by the early sixteenth century: he suggested that by 1509 it had been established that the royal courts were the appropriate location for the trial of both freehold and copyhold titles. It was even possible to find cases of manorial lords who offered custom as a justification for the eviction of copyhold tenants. The courts looked favourably on manorial custom and assimilated it to law, and by doing so, the character of lordship was transformed. The issues Garrett-Goodyear discussed were difficult but pivotal in their implications.

After coffee, Dr. Paul Warde spoke on 'Common Rights, Communes, and the Practice of Customary Law in Early Modern Germany', and examined the process of communal allocation of the products of woodlands in sixteenth and seventeenth century Württemberg. This process, regulated by communal associations and officials, was under pressure from a rising population, so that attempts were made to deny rights to some inhabitants of the villages (or allow them a discretionary access only) and the officials themselves exploited the system to secure a competitive edge over the non-officials. Warde showed how villages could be riven by disputes over access to timber and how disputes could be taken out of the community for settlement by higher authorities.

The first paper after lunch was delivered by Dr David

Stone on 'Farm management during the "crisis" of the early fourteenth century'. Dr Stone gave us the results of a detailed analysis of the demesne accounts of Hinderclay (Suffolk). He approached these by way of some thoughts on current views of the medieval economy as 'commercialised'. Hinderclay, he suggested, conformed to this model. The balance of crops was sensitive to the prices of the previous year, but whilst the manor showed an advanced use of legumes and manure, yields were not especially high. This, he suggested, was because the bailiffs deliberately economised on labour inputs, skimping on weeding. The picture was drawn of a demesne which, perhaps for reasons of relative market disadvantage, had established an equilibrium between labour inputs and outputs which was disinterested in maximising the latter. The implications of this for our understanding of yields was the subject of discussion.

Moving smartly to more recent history, Malcolm Baxter and Dr. John Martin compared the evolution of rationing and food control in Britain in the two World Wars. The 1914-18 experience emerged with less lustre than it is usually credited with, being shown to be a case of a laggard evolution of a partial and unscientific system. The experience of 1939-45 was also shown to evince errors in the wartime policy, which could be traced to failures in the peacetime planning process. It was suggested that policy could have benefited from relying less on production control, and more on rationing.

Last before dinner, Dr. David Brown drew attention to the case of Alstonfield (Staffordshire) which was a kind of winter haven for the many (properly licensed, and, he argued, industrious and useful) pedlars of the late eighteenth century. He used various methods to estimate the numbers of itinerants and their contribution to internal trade between 1690 and the end of the nineteenth century, and argued that peddling played a useful, if unquantifiable, part in English industrialisation. His paper was followed by a reception and the annual dinner of the Society, which was a great success.

On Wednesday, the proceedings began with the AGM of the Society. The paper following this was by Brian Short (Sussex), Charles Watkins (Nottingham), and John Martin (De Montfort) entitled: 'When committees roamed the land: state intervention in British agriculture,

1939-45'. This offered a critique of the organisation and rationale for the County War Agriculture Executive Committees which controlled agriculture during the Second World War. The speakers' continuing investigation into this crucially important topic raised major doubts about the conventional view of increases in productivity levels and the local social impact of the committees, and they are now working towards a major revisionist critique of wartime state intervention in farming, using newly-available documentary material. A lively and informative discussion ensued, primarily centred on the nature of the power wielded by the 'War Ags'.

The final paper, by Dr. Christine Hallas, on 'Rural Responses to Industrialisation: the North Yorkshire Pennines, 1750-1914' sought to move forward the debate on the role of the countryside in English industrialisation. In this region, the major economic activities were agriculture, lead mining, and textiles. It was shown that a flexible response to the demands of industrialisation was provided by the existence of dual occupations, migration and transport. On the whole, these upland regions were responsive to changing demand, and despite some painful shrinkage due to migration, local communities and economies were able to survive into the age of industry and urbanisation.

After lunch, some 20 people signed up for the field study/excursion, led by Dr. Dennis Mills and Mrs. Shirley Brook. A substantial study guide, which was a most useful preparation for the trip, had been distributed earlier in the conference. The journey allowed a view of the various types of landscape and agricultural systems to be seen locally, from heathland in the east to the fenland proper. A notable stop was at Scopwick, where the extensive late Victorian rebuilding of the farmstead owned by the Chaplin family was a tribute to the power of imagination and money to reclaim what was a previously a rather barren tract.

The conference was held to be successful with a succession of challenging and rewarding papers, all of which we look forward to receiving their apotheosis in print. Thanks were due to the local organiser, Dr John Martin of De Montfort University; to Dr Mills and Mrs Brook; and to the staff of Caythorpe for their excellent hospitality.