

Conference Report:

The Society's Spring Conference 2000

by Peter Dewey

The Society's annual Spring Conference was held from 10–12 April at Bretton Hall, a college of the University of Leeds. A total of 51 participants (43 of them in residence) gathered for the stimulating fare which the conference invariably provides.

The first paper, given on the afternoon of arrival, was by Dr. David Brown, on 'New men of wealth and the purchase of land in the United Kingdom, 1780–1880'. This was an old subject given a new impetus. By the use of printed sources, especially the *Return of Owners of Land of 1873*, it was shown that between these dates it was possible to identify 1,435 new wealth buyers, each purchasing an estate of at least 1,000 acres – a turnover of about 20 per cent in the 100 years. The research showed that there was a sufficiency of purchasers to sustain the contemporary belief that Britain had an open elite.

The same evening saw the presentation of a paper by Prof. John Chartres on 'Eighteenth-century distilling, drink, and agriculture.' This explored the interrelationships between the drink trades and farming in the mid-eighteenth century. At that time, the trade probably used the produce of some 130,000 acres of farmland, devoted to growing barley and malt, and providing a useful demand for farmers. However, the distillers' demands represented a diminishing part of the whole market, so it could not be said that the trade was depriving the poor of their bread, as hostile contemporary pamphleteers alleged. But there may have been more truth in the allegations by pig breeders that the trade was depriving them of their pig feed, since a large part of the distillers' and brewers' waste was fed to their own herds, providing competition for farmers in the bacon market.

The first paper on the second day was by John Letts, an agricultural botanist of Reading University, who provided a fascinating account of how medieval thatched roofs can survive, and how this aids our understanding of medieval farming. In medieval Britain (or at least Devon, where most of the evidence came from), thatched roofs were replaced by adding successive layers of

straw, without stripping out the previous covering. The underlying layers of straw, with their attached grains (carbonised by the house fires when the house was still of the hall type) could be carbon dated. Medieval wheats tended to have small ears, but long stems (sometimes 6 feet high overall), and were cut high in the stem, providing long straw as an important by-product for fuel and thatching. The finds also included legume straw, and even the peas from the Frobisher expedition in Elizabethan times. The finds were now providing the basis for experimental cereal growing at Reading University, in order to investigate the evolution of cereal varieties over time.

Following coffee, there was a Symposium on *Women in Agriculture*, with papers by Dr. Nicola Verdon, Anne Meredith, and Dr Jane Whittle. Nicola Verdon explored the employment of women in nineteenth-century Britain, and emphasised the need to consider informal as well as formal patterns of women's work. While women's regular day labour did decline during the century, there was evidence that they were employed on a variety of piece-work tasks, and that these constituted a useful, although so far largely undocumented source of household income. The paper raised a variety of questions on the degree to which women's work remained widespread, the financial rewards to men and women, and the degree to which the sexual division of labour developed or changed as the century progressed.

Anne Meredith, in discussing the provision of training for women in horticulture, dairying and poultry-keeping from 1890 to 1939, pointed out the growing variety of training possibilities for women in this period, especially in horticulture, which had traditionally been a male preserve. There were colleges supported by government, private agricultural colleges (such as Aldersley Hall, Cheshire), and a pupil system. In horticulture, where training lasted at least two years, students could take a London External degree, or a Royal Horticultural Society qualification. In dairying, more work would be necessary to establish how gender boundaries operated.

Jane Whittle discussed the role of women in the production and marketing of the basic food stuffs of bread, cheese and ale in early modern rural England, deriving from her work on probate inventories. These showed dairy equipment to be more commonly found than that for brewing or baking, but in many cases the peasant household would be too poor to engage in any of these activities. There was better evidence in the case of ale, and it was probable that before the Black Death the majority of brewers were women, although thereafter the trade moved away from the household, became more concentrated regionally, and also more of a male province. This might have been the common experience in each of these trades, although further work would be necessary to investigate this.

Following lunch, there was a walking excursion to explore the extensive park (260 acres) of Bretton Hall, led by Cyril Pearce, a member of the academic staff of the college, and historian of the college and park, who provided an erudite commentary, along with an excellent printed guide to accompany the tour. The estate, which at one time had been in the Wentworth family for almost 400 years, yields copious evidence of grand-scale landscape planning (including two large lakes, formed by damming the River Dearne, and reputedly the remains of a wild animal zoo on one of the islands). The house and grounds stood as an impressive monument to the great age of landownership and servant-keeping (33 of them in 1829).

In the later afternoon, Dr. Simon Davis, of the Portuguese Institute of Archaeology, gave a fascinating paper on the application of zoo-archaeological evidence, and its application to agricultural history. By the use of bone measurements derived from archaeological sites over many centuries, suggestions could be made as to when sheep and cattle increased in size. Although there was evidence from a wide area of England, much of the best evidence came from the site of Launceston Castle, in Cornwall. It could be deduced that the rise in cattle and sheep sizes preceded the traditionally-dated Agricultural Revolution by several centuries, and pointed unmistakably to an increase in the size of cattle and sheep between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus the im-

provement in animal husbandry should be viewed as a long-term and gradual development originating in the fifteenth century, rather than a evolutionary one which occurred some time after 1760. This was followed by a reception, and the annual dinner of the Society.

On Wednesday, following the AGM of the Society, Prof. Richard Britnell spoke on 'Fields and Moorlands in County Durham before the Black Death.' His talk drew on research on the many (c.1400) extant charters, which describe field and farm boundaries, chiefly the 550 or so lay and ecclesiastical charters for the upland parish of Haswell, which had a population of c.2,000 in the thirteenth century. It was evident that independent farms were being created on the moorland outside the boundaries of villis probably by way of episcopal grants to the bishop's servants. Bishops were able also to dispose of common rights as part of the grants. The charters even allowed individual pieces of pasture to be identified. The field systems could be identified also, the most usual format being runrig. Altogether it was an impressive demonstration of what could be achieved by a careful reading of the charters, in conjunction with a knowledge of the landscape itself.

The final paper given by David Stead was entitled: 'The business of farming, c.1700-1850'. This was a questioning of how far one could measure the rise in productivity brought about by the Agricultural Revolution by looking at rises in the real level of farm rentals. That the one should be implied by the other was implicit in the economic theory of real rent. However, the theory may be a poor guide to the history. The market for farms was fairly uncompetitive, since it depended on enough applicants having the necessary experience and capital, and the adjustment mechanism for rents was too sticky and erratic to make rents reflect changes in farm productivity with the necessary accuracy. There was no guarantee that real rent was an accurate reflection of the productivity of farm land to the tenant.

The conference closed after lunch on Wednesday 12 April, with thanks expressed to the organisers of the conference (Prof. Chartres and Dr. Dewey), and to the conference staff at Bretton Hall for such an excellent few days.