

Conference Report

The Society's Spring Conference 2001

by S. M. Stevens

The Society's Spring Conference was held on the 9–11 April at the Ambleside Campus of St Martin's College, Lancaster. The college was sited on a significant slope that exercised the calf muscles of well over fifty delegates. As might be expected, the cloud was down for most of the conference, but the real work went on indoors.

Dr John Walton (University of Wales, Aberystwyth), gave the opening paper entitled 'Absentee interests, title disputes and parliamentary enclosure'. Absentee ownership was rife in the eighteenth century. Individual owners tended to have nucleated estates whilst those belonging to corporations or institutions were often widely distributed. Institutions had little incentive to increase rents or enter the arena of capitalist landowners before 1750: frequently they had little idea of the value or composition of their property. Obstructive lessees were common. Walton's investigation of their role in parliamentary enclosure revealed how it did not necessarily redress the balance in their favour. Certainly the switch from beneficial leases to rack renting began with enclosure, but institutions often found it hard to maintain their interests during enclosure against their lessees and other neighbouring landowners.

After dinner, Professor Ted Collins (University of Reading), spoke on 'The farm power economy of England and Wales, 1840–1939'. This explored the relative merits of man, horse and steam power. Two and a half times more food was produced in 1850 than 1700 and this increased further between 1850–1939, but with half the workforce. Steam engines were forty per cent cheaper than horses and horses were ninety per cent cheaper than men. Animal power was under utilised but more enduring and cheaper than inanimate. The importance of the changing technology of power in rural economy was well made.

The first paper on Tuesday was given by Dr Harry Kitsikopoulos (New York University), on 'Convertible husbandry versus common fields: a model on the relative efficiency of medieval field systems'. The productivity of convertible husbandry versus common fields was analysed from 1250–1500. Two models of holdings, based

on data from real examples, were outlined. They proved the premise that common field output was higher than convertible husbandry in the pre-plague period. After the Black Death this situation was reversed. However, despite a reduction in tillage, there was an increase in yields. Mistakes in pre-plague managerial practices in, for example, managing leys may be reflected in the low yields. The soils and nitrogen levels were critical in individual manors.

Dr Paul Warde (Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge), then spoke on 'Subsistence, sales and the state: the peasant economy of early seventeenth century Württemberg'. This lecture discussed a survey made in August 1622 that recorded the resources of village households. It received returns from four districts with four hundred settlements representing a population of about 30,000 people and so offered a unique insight into the peasant economy of Central Europe. There was mainly a three course system of open fields with viticulture providing a cash income. The survey showed that more households grew and sold oats than spelt wheat. They stored grain for subsistence while institutions held reserves for time of need and were able to supply loans. The system of poor relief depressed the income of the larger, richer farmers. Sadly, there were no farm sizes to which to relate the survey data, but Warde introduced the conference to a superb source which made many of those present envious.

After coffee, Dr Leigh Shaw-Taylor (Jesus College, Cambridge), described 'Stock keeping and crop growing by the rural poor: the evidence of early eighteenth-century Northamptonshire probate inventories'. A sample of 423 inventories was analysed from 1700–1749 for animals, crops and total value. Occupations like labourer, shepherd, tailor, carpenter, weaver and baker were examined. Butchers and farmers were looked at separately. The results showed that half the labourers kept cows, less than a quarter kept pigs, likewise sheep, whilst one in ten had a horse. These were the labourers wealthy enough to leave probate inventories. Of the artisans, half kept cows, one third kept pigs and one in five kept a

horse. Sixty per cent of the bakers possessed horses. The favoured animal was the cow. Seventeen per cent of the labourers grew crops whilst 84 per cent of farmers grew crops. All those with a cow grew crops. Artisans were often bi-occupational. In the sample, no crops were grown by labourers in enclosed parishes while seventeen per cent grew crops in open field parishes. There appeared to be a disengagement from agriculture over time that may have produced substantial emiseration with a non-voluntary increase in specialisation.

Following lunch, Dr Michael Winstanley and Harvey Osborne (University of Lancaster) presented their paper on 'The strange decline of poaching in Victorian England: a regional analysis'. In the nineteenth century there was a decline in poaching from c. 12,000 to c. 6,000 cases. The period 1862-1907 was examined for both day and night poaching and its geographical distribution. The decline may have been helped by legislation in 1861 and 1862. There was a general decrease in crime against property and poaching peaks could be linked to depression and bad harvests. Increasing numbers of rural police was a factor, but Winstanley and Osborne also pointed out that from 1871-1911 there was an increase in the number of gamekeepers, especially in Norfolk and Suffolk. Their numbers decreased in the North, except in the areas of the grouse moors of Derbyshire and Northumberland. These regional patterns in the numbers of keepers helped explain the regional patterns of poaching. In the North prosecutions peaked in 1875 in the North, but in the South and East in 1885.

Dr Philip Conford (University of Reading) analysed 'The myth of neglect: responses to the early organic movement, 1925-50'. Far from being ignored in this period, the promoters of organic farming were seen as rivals, especially by the large artificial fertiliser producers like ICI and Fisons. The industrialists used their journals and advertisements to discredit organic farmers. They believed the future lay with the scientist, not with the mystic. The organic school of thought was reviewed in papers of all political shades and, from 1936-1948, it was discussed on the wireless. So whilst Dr Conford was able to demonstrate an awareness of the organic movement and its ideas, it had little money and was unable to influence government policy. The organic movement was not neglected, but it lost the battle against the advocates of large-scale, fertilizer-dependent farming.

The 49th Annual General Meeting was followed by the

annual reception and enjoyable conference dinner. On Wednesday morning there was a symposium entitled 'Accumulation and inheritance: Browne of Townend and the Cumbrian Statesman'. Professor Richard Hoyle (University of Reading), introduced 'Troutbeck and the Brownes'. The Browne family lived at Townend from the early sixteenth century to 1943. There existed a rich archive of title deeds, farming accounts and rentals, which was a remarkable survival for a relatively small 'yeoman' family, albeit one with interests in local office-holding, the law and malting as well as farming. They had demographic good fortune in that adult sons generally succeeded to their aged fathers, but longevity led to problems of delayed succession. Professor Hoyle offered an account of how this was handled.

Ms Linda McGhee (Universities of Reading and Central Lancashire), examined 'Age, quality and quantity: the accumulation of household goods by the Brownes' basing her work on the Brownes' accounts and inventories. The inventory analysis proved fascinating. Benjamin Browne (1664-1748) left a total of £97 of which £63 was household goods. His library of 142 books was valued at £2 2s. 0d. By title, 49 per cent were religious books, 35 per cent legal books with history, biography and works on conduct following. The books were acquired either locally or through his son in London. In all, 91 items of linen were meticulously listed and monogrammed. Four sheets were seventy-five years old. Generally the wooden spoons were replaced by silver in the 1730s. China was acquired but not often used, the pewter and wooden items being more enduring. In comparison with household goods of Midland yeomen farmers, the Brownes' goods were considerably richer, numerous and more valuable.

As all the National Trust's properties in the Lake District were closed as a precaution against Foot and Mouth, Mrs Susan Denyer of the National Trust gave a presentation on 'Townend and the Brownes'. Townend was a fine survival of vernacular architecture of the 'statesman' class in stone and slate. But Mrs Denyer was also able to show how far the house and its furnishings reflected the antiquarian tastes of the Brownes: it was not a typical 'statesmans' house at all.

The conference heard a series of papers of great range and consistently high interest. Professor Richard Hoyle and Dr Peter Dewey are to be congratulated for organising such a successful and enjoyable conference in a beautiful location.