

Conference Report: The Society's Spring Conference, April 2002

by Jeremy Burchardt

The Society's annual Spring conference, organised by Prof. Alun Howkins, was held from 8–10 April at the University of Sussex's Institute of Development Studies, a grade 1 listed building with windows by John Piper. In this attractive setting, the 56 people on the conference list enjoyed a wide range of stimulating papers.

The first of these, by Prof. John Beckett, Prof. Michael Turner and Dr Bethanie Afton, was on the topical subject of 'Agricultural sustainability'. Adapting the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability, Beckett, Turner and Afton argued that sustainable farming was farming which met the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the generations which followed. They outlined a model of three overlapping dimensions of agricultural sustainability: the ecological and environmental, economic and ethical. Case studies of two farming systems followed: the Midlands three field rotation and the Wessex eight course, demonstrating that both were surprisingly sustainable ecologically although perhaps less so economically. Each of the three dimensions of sustainability was interconnected, and if one was moved, the others would be correspondingly dislocated. Economic pressures, exacerbated by the Napoleonic Wars, undermined the environmental sustainability of the open field system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The paper concluded with the suggestion that the Foot and Mouth outbreak of 2001 raised the question of whether the sustainability of agriculture and of the countryside could still be identified with each other.

After dinner, Prof. Brian Short gave a paper with the piquant title "Landscape for a tired and smoke-dried citizen": agrarian and environmental conflict in Victorian Sussex'. This appropriately local theme was illustrated with slides of the various different landscape types characteristic of Sussex, many of which we were to pass through on the conference excursion on the following day. Prof. Short drew a contrast between the coastal fringe (consisting of the coastal plain itself, the South Downs and a mixed area to the north of the Downs) and

the Weald (divided into the heavy clays of the Low Weald and the mixed sands and clays of the High Weald). The four major agricultural developments of the Victorian era were the spread of hop-growing (by 1874 Sussex accounted for 25 per cent of English production), the development of the Sussex breed of cattle and the increase of chicken-cramming and of dairying in the west of the county and on the Weald respectively. Rural Sussex depopulated in the mid-nineteenth century but by the end of the century preservation-minded middle-class incomers with very different cultural expectations from the agricultural inhabitants were becoming a feature of some areas. Ashdown Forest and other areas of common and heath in the Weald were the principal *locus* of conflict between farming and conservation interests. Prof. Short reminded us, in conclusion, that this conflict continued: in Wealden Sussex struggling small farmers could, to this day, be found alongside wealthy incomers with four-wheel drive vehicles.

Dr David Stead began proceedings on Tuesday morning with a paper on 'Crops and contracts: land tenure in England, c. 1700–1850', which addressed the question of why fixed rents were so dominant in English agriculture in this period as opposed to the alternatives of cultivation by the owner, the employment of a salaried manager or a sharecropping contract. Dr Stead argued that the only economic assumption which correctly predicted fixed rent tenancies was that landowners were risk averse. This may have been because maintaining their social and political standing committed them to high fixed costs. Farmers were prepared to assume risk because landowners charged them a low rent – in effect a risk premium.

After coffee Professor Robert Allen gave a paper the title of which ('Innovation and decision-making in the open fields') was belied by its impressive breadth of coverage, ranging across European economic history from the late middle ages to the nineteenth century. Prof. Allen argued that the traditional account of agricultural progress – that improving landlords enclosed land and

amalgamated farms, leading to a rise in output and productivity and increased food and labour supplies for the urban economy – should be turned on its head. Economic modelling suggested that enclosure contributed little to English agricultural productivity, whereas urbanization was crucial. Exports of new draperies in the early modern period stimulated intense expansion in south-east England and from the seventeenth century London wages increasingly left the incomes of small (mainly open-field) farmers behind. The motivating factor for the agricultural revolution, Prof. Allen argued, was that small farmers wanted to close this gap. High wage economies such as early modern England's generate greater incentives to find labour-saving technology: growth was successful because wages were high, rather than the other way around.

After these two highly stimulating but largely theoretical papers, Dr Margaret Yates demonstrated the virtues of a more traditional empirical approach with a deeply-researched paper on 'Between fact and fiction: Brinklow's "Complaynt" against rapacious landlords'. Brinklow was a Protestant polemicist and member of the Mercers' Company, who wanted to redistribute the wealth of the chantries to create a proto-socialist Godly Commonwealth, comparable to Thomas More's *Utopia*. He bitterly attacked the new owners of monastic lands, alleging that they had raised rents excessively. In this he was echoed by three other Protestant polemicists of the 1540s: Thomas Becon, Robert Wisdom and an anonymous London reformer writing in 1541 or 1542. These four polemicists also complained about the engrossing of farms but not, interestingly, about enclosure. However, Dr Yates demonstrated that in Brinklow's home county of Berkshire at least, rents and entry fines did not increase very much, other than in a few exceptional areas. Nor was the engrossing of farms a distinctive feature of the period. The complaint literature of the 1540s appears, then, to bear only a tangential relationship to the facts of economic change.

In the afternoon Mr Richard Harris, Director of the Weald and Downland Open-Air Museum, led an excursion to the Leconfield Estate, Petworth, to which Prof. Brian Short and Mr John Velton also contributed. The main focus of the excursion was a visit to Stag Park Farm, a model farm created by the improving third Earl of Egremont. An outstanding array of late eighteenth-century buildings survives, including a large threshing barn, a hay barn/engine house, loose boxes, stables, granary and farmhouse, together with cattle yards and a pond. The farm manager and gamekeeper described the changing relationship between farming and shooting on the estate: the latter was increasingly remunerative. Wholesale destruction of, for example, magpies and foxes went

hand-in-hand with the conservation of preferred kinds of species such as songbirds and rare bats.

After the excursion the Society's annual general meeting and the annual dinner took place. The first paper on Wednesday morning was Dr Edward Bujak's account of 'An aristocracy in decline, 1874–1914'. The Suffolk aristocracy invested heavily in agricultural improvement in the third quarter of the nineteenth century but by the 1880s only the continuing local social status conferred by landownership, rather than its economic or political benefits, made great estates in Suffolk marketable. The Suffolk aristocracy bitterly opposed early agricultural trade unionism: their earlier investment in cottages and allotments proved crucial in retaining the loyalty of labourers in closed parishes during the agricultural depression. This enabled landowners to gain election to new representative local bodies such as county, rural district and parish councils, which in turn encouraged middle-class incomers to behave socially and politically in ways which were consonant with aristocratic values.

Dr Tony Phillips then gave a paper on changes in agricultural land use and cropping in Shropshire between 1815 and 1850. Starting from Turner, Beckett and Afton's conclusion that the wheat acreage in England peaked in the early 1840s, Dr Phillips drew on the 1801 crop returns, the tithe files and the 1854 inquiry to show that at first sight Shropshire appeared to follow similar trends. However, there were problems with these sources – categories of land use and crops and units of recording were inconsistent and there was a only limited degree of correspondence between the sources used. Continuous runs of estate cropping books might, Dr Phillips argued, provide better data. Evidence from the Bridgewater, Powis and Sutherland estates showed that the wheat acreage increased very little in Shropshire after 1815. If agricultural output did rise in Shropshire in these years, this took place against much greater stability in cropping than has been assumed, bringing into greater prominence the productivity changes identified by Turner, Beckett and Afton.

The last paper of the morning and of the conference, Prof. David Hey's attractively-illustrated account of 'Farming dynasties: the yeomen and husbandmen of south-west Yorkshire', was based principally on surname evidence. Surnames were often strongly associated with particular areas: every county of England still has its own distinctive names despite the homogenisation that has taken place. Taking an example chosen not entirely at random, Prof. Hey explained that people with the surname 'Mingay' appear to share a common area of origin on the Suffolk-Norfolk border. 'Locative' names deriving from a single farmstead, hamlet or village constitute

about a quarter of all surnames. In south-west Yorkshire (Hallamshire), surname evidence demonstrates that farms stayed in the hands of the same families for several generations: even where the direct line of descent was broken, a vacant farm was often taken by someone from another branch of the same family. Many of these Hallamshire families were highly conscious of their genealogies. The prosperous yeomen of the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries, who were responsible for most of Hallamshire's many substantial early modern buildings, can in nearly every case be traced back to medieval yeomen families.

The conference closed after lunch with thanks expressed to Prof. Howkins, his assistant Christine Shepherd and the staff at the Institute of Development Studies for a stimulating and successful conference.