

Conference Report: Winter Conference 2001 'The Great Landowners in Rural Society'

by Jane Whittle

This year's conference turned its attention to large landowners, returning to some old favourites: the great monastic landlords of the medieval period; the intensively studied parish of Earls Colne, Essex; eighteenth century country houses; and the notorious fall of the Grenville family in nineteenth century. The four papers illustrated the variety of perspectives from which landowners can be studied: the acquisition of landed estates, their role as landlords, and as employers in the construction of houses, and their fall from power due to indebtedness.

The theme of the first paper by Dr Phillipp Schofield of the University of Wales at Aberystwyth was the limits of lordly power in the period *c.* 1050 – *c.* 1300. Using the example of the Benedictine Abbey of Bury St Edmunds, Schofield examined the extent of landlord control over the tenant land market, arguing that even powerful manorial lords adapted to local circumstances and did not have a totally free hand in the way manors were administered. The Benedictines have a reputation as conservative and aggressive landlords, who burdened their unfree tenants with heavy, arbitrary exactions. The study of the peasant land market in the Bury manors of Hinderclay, Redgrave and Rickinghall, all in north Suffolk, show the limitations of lordship in the face of local custom and practice. Active land markets, especially in bond land, have been as seen as a sign of loose manorial administration. Yet these Suffolk manors had very active land markets in free and bond land from at least the early thirteenth century, when records begin. Comparison with Westminster Abbey manors in Essex suggest that Bury could have stamped out the market in bond land if they had wished to do so, but instead they tolerated the market, and raised a great deal of revenue from the entry fines charged each time a piece of bond land was transferred. As a source of income, fines rivalled rents. The pattern of land transfer on the Bury manors looks much the same as that on the manors of small lay lords in the same locality, such as Walsham le Willows. Thus it seems that manorial lords did not create or promote the market, but merely tolerated and regulated it. This

begs the question of what the origins of such a market were, especially as it is absent from manors in other parts of England. Schofield argued that the large numbers of free tenants in the region, a hangover from the Danish invasions, was a key factor. By definition, free tenants had the right to give and sell land and there is evidence they were doing so by the eleventh century. There was no rigorous distinction between free and unfree land and status until the twelfth century, so it is likely the active land market affected other types of tenants and tenures as well. When firm evidence first becomes available in the thirteenth the land market in unfree land was well established.

The second paper brought us into the early modern period and the 'trials of estate formation'. Dr Henry French of Exeter University used material from a larger project on the land market of Earls Colne to examine the fortunes of the Harlackenden family, who purchased the two manors of Earls Colne from the de Veres, Earls of Oxford, in the late sixteenth century. Previously employed as the Earl's surveyor, Roger Harlackenden was in a position to accurately assess the economic value of his purchases. However, this case shows how the transfer of landlordship, and the realisation of wealth from landed estates, was rarely devoid of social content and conflict. Increases in entry fines before the sale suggest that the de Veres had not abandoned attempts to administer their estates with some efficiency before the sale, although other assets such as water mills were clearly undervalued even in new leases. The Harlackendens, however, were more assiduous lords: they had only two manors and needed to make them pay. They increased entry fines, so that copyhold fines in the 1590s brought in more than twice the amount they had in the 1570s. Demesne farms were let at market rents, although difficulties in finding tenants with sufficient capital to farm the largest unit of 320 acres led to it being split into three or four smaller units, contrary to the engrossing tendencies of the day. There were other problems too: de Vere took Harlackenden to court in 1598 for alleged

fraud committed in the agreement to purchase the manors. The tenants were hostile to their new lord as well: they had hoped to purchase the manor collectively themselves from the de Vere's, so the Harlackendens had also thwarted their ambitions. With the shadowy backing of their old lord, the tenants proceeded to make a series of legal challenges over terms of tenure in the next thirty years, some of which they won. The constant flow of court cases between lord and tenant were a drain on the Harlackendens' resources, and the manors only ever yielded a modest income: the family never purchased another manor.

The papers by Schofield and French illustrated not only how landlords influenced the rural communities of their tenants, but how tenants and their behaviour influenced the actions of landlords. The third paper, by Professor Richard Wilson of the University of East Anglia, examined another sphere of interaction between landlords and the local community: the impact of country house building. It set the building of country houses in its social context, looking at how money was raised, and how it was spent on employment and materials. The construction of gentry houses allows social mobility via the medium of building to be observed in action. Even though the minor gentry had relatively small houses, they had to be of a certain style, and families stretched themselves financially to achieve this. Four country houses built for the middling or lesser gentry in late eighteenth century Norfolk and Suffolk were used as examples: Letton Hall, Gunthorpe Hall, Heacham Hall, and Henham Hall. Letton and Gunthorpe were both designed by the famous eighteenth century architect, John Soane. They were fashionable but relatively small and simple, brick-built houses. Built in 1784-9, Letton cost £6000 and was built by craftsmen recruited from Norwich. Gunthorpe, begun in 1789, was at the lowest end of the gentry market, costing only £3000, reusing bricks from the old house. Even at this price the owner, Charles Collier, did not settle his bill with Soane until 1800 – although it appears that Soane did not charge interest. Heacham was another house that was probably built relatively cheaply. Dating from 1774-8, it was in effect, a large extension dwarfing an earlier Norfolk farmhouse. Detailed building accounts show that bricks and lime were made on site and the workers were local. There was no evidence of an architect, but chimney pieces were bought from a top designer, and furniture purchased in London, to give a quality feel to the finished house. Henham was a grander house than the first three, and its cost was concomitantly higher: initially estimated at £12,000, the final cost was

actually £21,000. Built in the 1790s for Sir John Rous, later Earl of Stradbroke, it was designed by James Wyatt. The house cost seven times the rental value of the Rous estate, thus money received from an advantageous marriage was essential in allowing the plans to be carried out as intended. The house was built principally by day labour with 470 different men employed, although only 11 for the whole duration. Thirty of the men were from London, but the rest were local. Labour constituted 56 per cent of the cost, materials accounted for 35 per cent, and the remainder went on architects' fees. With the majority of the money invested in the project spent locally, this was surely a significant economic input in a period of sharp rural poverty.

The final contribution by Roland Quinault of the University of North London, re-examining the fall of the Grenville family, Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos. Their story illustrates what a minor element agriculture was in the fortunes of the most wealthy landowners by the nineteenth century. The fact the Grenvilles owned mostly farm land, with estates concentrated in Buckinghamshire, rather than land that could be exploited for urban development or mining, meant they could do little to raise their income from that source. Quinault argued that the fall of the family after 1822 was caused mainly by personal indebtedness, lost sources of political revenue following the Reform Act of 1832, and the expensive purchases of land in Buckinghamshire. However, despite the spectacular bankruptcy of the second Duke in 1848 with debts of £1.25 million, leading to the sale of property and goods, the decline of the family was gradual. The third Duke paid off some of the debts and retained the core of the families estates around Wotton and Stowe, as well as a measure of political influence. However, he had no male heir, and although his eldest daughter had four sons, she was widowed early and struggled financially; her eldest son was killed in the First World War, and the estate was finally sold in 1921. Thus the four papers nicely illustrate the changing roles of great landowners through the centuries: from powerful owners of servile tenants in the medieval period, to ambitious improvers of estates in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to ostentatious and self-conscious leaders of fashion in the late eighteenth, to a fading and increasingly peripheral element of British society in the late nineteenth century. Yet in none of the periods studied were they without problems: their power was always checked by assertive tenants, and their ambition for the display of status checked by limited revenues from the land.