

Conference Report: The Society's Jubilee Spring Conference, April 2003

by John Veltom

After wriggling my way into that kernel of learning, King Alfred's College Winchester, I made my way the Society's Executive Committee's meeting which always precedes the first paper of the conference. As a final item of business on the agenda, our Chairman asked for someone to undertake writing the conference report for the *Review*. You could hear a pin drop, silence, as I suspect everyone present mentally rehearsed their reason for being unable to take on any extra work!¹ In a moment of weakness I said I would have a try and I am sorry to tell you that my offer was accepted!

So this report is going to be different to the usual! No immaculate prose will grace the page as does that from our usual chosen contributors. I am an amateur historian, 'Jack of all trades, master of none', who has spent 60 years – man and boy – on the 'shop floor' of agriculture, whose academic interest began when I joined the Society 23 years ago. This lack of credentials will appear obvious as you read on.²

One of the ways in which the BAHS wished to celebrate its Golden Jubilee was to organise an essay competition – entrants could choose their subject – for which there would be a cash prize for the winner and runner up. What better way to start the conference than by asking Dr David Stone (Corpus Christi Colleges, Oxford and Cambridge), the author of the winning essay, to speak to his subject 'The productivity and management and sheep in late medieval England'.³ Stone began by quoting from the work of M. J. Stephenson, showing how sheep numbers had increased after the Black Death and profits from wool became as high as 80 per cent of those received from arable. He noted a decline in fleece weights between 1370 and 1450, largely attributed to a succession of hard winters. Stone wished to argue however that the late medieval decline in fleece weights was

due to deliberate management decisions and cost-cutting. He reminded us that 'good hay, sweet hay hath no fellow' with which no livestock man would quarrel. It is well to remember when talking of hay and its effect on the health of the stock that eat it, that the seller is not necessarily after quality, he is wanting quantity! Hay that produces the heaviest crop is left longer to mature, is easier to make because there is less sap in it, but retains considerably less food value! Stone also made a point that peas and vetches were used as replacements for hay, which I found difficult to follow, the former would be an unlikely crop to make into hay, nor would it stand through to winter. Stone was quite right to stress that 'Human nature doesn't change much': care bestowed by the shepherd to his flock is the cornerstone of its consequent economic success be it 1350 or 2003. And a practical touch I enjoyed, Stone stressed that the owner of a sheep flock, be it 12 or 1200 animals, will be as cussed as any other farmer and have his own ideas on the best way to manage his flock.

After dinner Dr Roy Brigden (University of Reading) outlined the modern history of the John Lewis/Waitrose farm estate at Leckford which we were to visit on the morrow. He told us of John Spedan Lewis' purchase of the estate in 1928 with the intention of proving that farming could pay. He also wanted his estate employees to live in up-to-date farm cottages, have access to social, sporting and educational facilities and he initiated a profit-sharing scheme for them. The estate was also used at this time for work's holidays for the members of the Lewis partnership. John Spedan Lewis introduced modern equipment and methods to Leckford, for instance a combine rather than a binder. His enterprises included pigs, poultry, a dairy herd, a large arable acreage of cereals and fruit, all of which proved to be unprofitable, or

¹ [This is absolutely true. It is the only moment when no one talks in Executive Committee meetings. Editor.]

² [No it won't. Editor.]

³ This essay and Dr Nicola Verdon's both appeared in part one of this volume of the *Review*: above pp. 1–39.

if profitable one year, unprofitable the next. It was not until government aid through deficiency payments in the 1931 Wheat Act, and the formation of the Milk Marketing Board soon after, that some semblance of profit was introduced. Lewis found this hard to accept but the truth is that without the outbreak of war in 1939 and the subsequent rise in prices, the Leckford partnership might have failed.

The quality of the management that followed this turning point is well known in Hampshire farming circles. As Dr Brigden said, on our visit we would learn how the present management team under Mr Ben Gibbons has bough the estate bubbling into the twenty-first century.

Tuesday morning's sessions began with an new researcher's session in which some of the younger members of the society had an opportunity to share their research. Celia Langley (University of Exeter) outlined her project on the farming families of north Cornwall over the past 150 years. One of her concerns was to establish what factors which allowed for the survival of these families: as well as deploying the familiar documentary sources she was making heavily use of oral history to reach many aspects of family life, such as mobility amongst farmers and the farm succession, which were otherwise unevindenced. Second to speak was Shirley Brook (University of Hull), whose doctoral project is on the 'Buildings of High Farming in Lincolnshire', some of which were visited by the Society in an excursion from its Caythorpe conference in March 1999. She outlined the scale of capital investment in buildings in the mid-nineteenth century, much of it financed by the Lands Improvement Company, illustrating her account with some of the buildings. The last of the trio was Martin Ayres (University of Leicester) who spoke on 'Copyholders, lifeholders and squatters on the waste: rural housing and the erosion of old cottage tenures in nineteenth-century Dorset'. He outlined the complexity of the older customary tenures found in the county and speculated on their significance for Dorset rural society.

The conference then heard two keynote speakers. Professor Chris Dyer (University of Leicester), talked on 'Fifty years behind the plough: how has our understanding of the medieval countryside changed?'. This dealt with many themes, and elaborated on how our perspective has changed in so many areas, the decline of belief in Postan's thesis being particularly significant. Whilst not dismissing lordship and serfdom, Dyer's medieval peasant had opportunities he could exploit. He may well have been oppressed by lordship: but he was also a petty entrepreneur.

Professor Doug Hurt (Iowa State University), Editor of our sister journal *Agricultural History* reflected on the writing of rural history in America. As his scholarly paper

will appear in the next issue of the *Review*, perhaps I might be excused from recording it here in detail. But there were striking similarities between the fortunes of the subject here and there, not least its origins in agricultural economics and shift towards rural history in recent years.

On the Tuesday afternoon we journeyed to Leckford, three miles north of Stockbridge. Whilst we were being welcomed by the Farms Manager, Mr Ben Gibbons I heard a heavy lorry start up. As I was listening to Mr Gibbons, it occurred to me that I had not seen any lorries around when we arrived, so I quickly retired from the audience, gathering speed as I went, to see not a lorry but our coach – on which we were to tour the estate – disappearing down the farm road. Fortunately our Secretary, John Broad, had his mobile phone at the ready to contact the coach company and effect a reversal of the driver's intent to return rapidly to Winchester!

Whilst all this was going on, Mr Gibbons was explaining the policy behind the apple enterprise. Cox's Orange Pippin was the main variety grown, an unusual choice for a chalk dominated soil. Eight hundred tons of apples could be held in a coldstore on site. After grading through a modern packhouse, these were released on a weekly basis to the shelves of Waitrose stores. As we waited for the errant coach, members took the opportunity to buy apples from the farm shop until the a cloud of dust signalled its return.

Our tour of the estate revealed the diversity of the farming operation. As we passed through the orchards it was clear that a vigorous policy of replanting was in hand to ensure that top quality fruit could be produced well into the future. There were extensive chicken-rearing units, each unit containing 1250 birds, with 12 groups in use at any one time and the thirteenth empty and being sterilised ready for the next batch. There is something inherently rural at the sight of white chickens foraging purposefully across young green grass even if restrained by a high electric fence to keep foxes out and chickens in. Passing the extensive mushroom sheds, we made for the dairy unit, a large conglomeration of cows with the necessary milking, feeding and resting area plus huge feed store bunkers now showing only the dregs of last winter's feed. Close-by there was a large milk processing plant for the Waitrose own label organic milk.

We passed through the villages of Longstock and Leckford where the River Test twists and turns through this beautiful valley. Our final stop was at the Longstock Park Water Garden which was apparently a favourite place with JSL when he was alive. On this pleasant sunny day in early April, it was easy to see why, although the most exciting show of wetland plants would occur later in the spring and summer.

Following convention, we returned to the AGM and then the annual dinner before which Drs David Stone and Nicola Verdon, respectively winner and runner up of the essay competition, were presented with their cheques by our President, Professor Hey, amidst members' generous and prolonged applause. The annual dinner was enlivened by a special anniversary Presidential recitation of a certain verse narrative, with the conference contributing the refrains.⁴ At the later reminiscence session we welcomed one of the founders of the discipline, Professor Maurice Beresford, whose recollections brought alive some of the characters on whose endeavours this Society is based. Many others contributed anecdotes and the whole was enlivened by John Chartres' slides of past excursions.

For our first paper on Wednesday morning, Dr Peter Dewey took the rostrum to discuss 'The British Farm Tractor, 1932–2002: saviour of the agricultural machinery industry or cuckoo in the nest?'. He explained how Henry Ford, already an international car manufacturer, became known for his tractors after 5,000 were imported in 1917. Later, in 1932, he set up the Ford factory at Dagenham. By 1938 he had produced 18,000 tractors whose qualities and idiosyncrasies became known to many farmers of my generation through the war years and after. From 1946 more sophisticated machines entered the market. A fore-runner designed and built by Harry Ferguson had many unusual features, but I believe its most dramatic innovation was the use of hydraulics to carry the implement and at the same time to use its weight to improve traction. This system was eventually copied by all other tractor manufacturers and is still a vital part of modern tractor design. Dewey continued, nostalgically for me, by giving us a history of the various tractors made by firms, many of whom are now no longer in business: names like David Brown, International, Marshals, John Deere, Massey Harris. I don't think that there was a cuckoo in the nest for either farmer or manufacturer. But it is a good subject for debate!

The middle paper of the morning was presented by Professor Richard Hoyle (University of Reading) on 'Tenurial change and Chancery litigation in England,

1550–1640'. Hoyle dealt with this subject in his usual erudite way. He seems to be able to blend a series of complex legal changes into a comprehensible whole. He dealt first with the legal issues of tenure in the sixteenth century. Custom could be claimed by the tenants after only 30 or 40 years and then used to resist increases in fines. Hoyle made the point that court rolls could be made to prove almost anything! From his researches amongst the Chancery decrees, Hoyle showed us the distribution of different types of tenure: he displayed tables revealing unsuspected changes in the character of litigation. Cases were often brought by new gentry or a son who had recently taken over from his father and wanted to make tenurial changes.

To complete the conference we enjoyed Dr John Hare's (Peter Symond's College, Winchester) lecture on the 'Demesne agriculture in the chalk lands of medieval Hampshire' which appropriately took us back to where we had begun with Stone's paper on the first afternoon. The numbers of sheep on the Bishop and Prior of Winchester's downland manors were impressive: both had flocks of 20,000 sheep at different periods, with shepherds allotted 1000 to manage. The manure from these animals must have played an important part in maintaining the output of the arable crops on these poor, chalk soils.

I have spent the equivalent of twenty years of my working life amongst sheep. After Dr Hare's lecture I could picture my ancestors laid down with their flock at night with two or three hurdles under a wall for shelter, or, if they were lucky, in the sheepcote – in my day a shepherd's hut – at lambing time, waiting for the first light of dawn to reveal what ewes had lambed and if any needed help. Hang on a minute – perhaps my ancestors were also the type who spent too much time in the alehouse neglecting their duties and had to be fined by the manor court!

The conference closed with thanks expressed to all the speakers and to John Broad and Jean Morrin who handled domestic arrangements, not forgetting too the College staff who made our stay comfortable and enjoyable.⁵

⁴ [As Professor Hurt said in an e.mail to the editor: 'You have a great group, and I hope that I can attend another meeting in the future. Frankly, I'd like to hear the president's dinner speech again. Chalk it up to cultural differences, but I wasn't certain what was going on!

But it was great fun'.]

⁵. [Mr Veltom will surely be invited to memorialise our Spring Conferences again. Unless his nerve holds. Editor.]