

Conference Report: The Society's Spring Conference, Edinburgh, April 2004

by Barbara Linsley

The Society's Spring Conference was held from 5–7 April at the University of Edinburgh's Pollock Halls. Around 50 delegates attended, many of whom were resident. The site was pleasant – especially to one who grew up around the South Downs but has since moved to Norfolk! Salisbury Crag, an extinct volcano in Holyrood Park, could be seen looming behind the buildings to the east. St Leonard's Hall, where the conference itself took place, was built in 1869 for Thomas Nelson. It later became a Red Cross hospital and a school – one wonders what the pupils made of the highly ornate carved and panelled ceiling in the St Trinians room where the nine papers were presented.

The opening paper by Professor Robert Dodgson was entitled 'Beyond the clearances: livestock farming in the Scottish Highlands, 1580–1880'. Using data showing rents in kind due for Highland farms he argued that until 1700 and beyond, the numbers of cattle, sheep and other stock in a township were more closely related to the amount of available arable than the extent of grazing. Farmers kept stock primarily to manure their arable and stock spent most of their time on lower ground and could only be put out on the hills for two or three months in the year. Discussing dairying and the veal trade, as well as sheep and cattle grazing, he reckoned that the proportion of different kinds of animals on the farm before 1700 was not geared to a significant trade in store cattle, and that the big expansion in Highland cattle trading took place in the eighteenth century. Even then, traditional production methods remained little changed. It was not until the clearances and expansion of sheep numbers that stock densities on the hill rose significantly. Sheep grazing initially improved the upland pastures by reducing the amount of heather, but by the end of the nineteenth century changing management systems had resulted in their degradation.

Professor John Beckett then led a lively discussion on 'Research funding opportunities in rural and

agricultural history'. He emphasised that monies available through the RELU (Rural Economy and Land Use) programme and DEFRA would go to projects which were inter-disciplinary, preferably incorporating the natural sciences. Funding bodies were favouring policy-driven research which was relevant to their current themes. Professor Beckett thought that inter-disciplinarity posed a problem for historians as it was difficult to find research partners in other subjects. Unlike the EU, the ESRC does not facilitate this. It was suggested that historians should be tailoring their research projects specifically to the criteria set by the funding bodies. However, several delegates believed this to be costly with no guarantee of success. Others thought the ESRC would continue to fund economic and social history projects through a responsive mode, but Professor Beckett was not sure how long this would continue.

After dinner in the John MacIntyre Centre, where vegetarian haggis was on offer, Dr Susanna Wade Martins gave a presentation on "The most fruitful spot in Britain" (1798): East Lothian and agricultural change' as a precursor to the excursion organised for the following day. Based on work for the Scottish Farms Survey, Dr Wade Martins described the highly successful East Lothian agriculture. Recognised as being excellent in the sixteenth century, by the mid-nineteenth East Lothian farming was a model for the world and continued to be at the forefront of agriculture into the twentieth century. Similarities could be seen between East Lothian farming and that of Norfolk – another highly successful east coast agricultural region. Dr Wade Martins illustrated the prosperity of agriculture in East Lothian in the nineteenth century with a series of slides showing some of the farm buildings dating from the period of high farming. The use of machinery increased, with threshing machines being driven by steam engines. Many of the farms had tall chimneys for this purpose which reinforced the impression of large scale 'food factories'.

Tuesday morning was the New Researchers' session. Catherine Douglas gave the first paper on 'Enclosure in Scotland'. She is looking at the differences between Scottish and English enclosure. An economic historian supervised by Professor Robert Allen, Douglas gave a detailed explanation of her methodology. Breaking down her demand equation to show how she was estimating agricultural output in the long run, she showed an increase in consumption over the nineteenth century. Her lowland rural budget, using a mixed bundle of goods, gave calorific values – a useful guide to whether or not her estimates are plausible. As well as her own data, she is drawing on Sinclair's *Statistical Accounts of Scotland*, and hopes to use the rent differentials between open and closed parishes to obtain output and productivity figures. Reliable total factor productivity is particularly hard to obtain, as several delegates pointed out, especially for Scotland as much of the data is combined with the English.

Mark Rothery was unable to join us but copies of his paper 'The social transformation of a "traditional" elite in modern England; the landed gentry of Devon, Hertfordshire and Lincolnshire, c. 1870–1939' based on his thesis, were available. The paper looked specifically at marriage and the gentry family. He concluded that although gentry families shared an identity of economic and cultural interests with other landowners, they also shared and cultivated socio-cultural links with other 'gentlemen' of the upper middling type. He suggests it was in the balance between these two social identities that the real 'rise and decline' occurred. The landed gentry adapted and adopted the values and attitudes of new elite groups and were thus able to significantly shape modern society.

The final paper in this session was my own, entitled 'Homes for Heroes. Housing legislation and its effect on working class housing in rural Norfolk, 1918–39'. Based on two chapters of my thesis, I aimed to show how Norfolk's rural authorities rose to the challenge set them by a government which set unrealistic housing targets, removed all controls from the building and building materials industries, and finally cut the funding which had only been in place for two years. This was hardly sufficient time for local authorities' plans to get off the drawing boards. Norfolk's RDCs didn't complete anywhere near the number of houses agreed in their schemes under the 1919 Act, but then neither did local authorities – urban as well as rural – nationwide. Norfolk had a high proportion of agricultural workers who were notoriously low paid and found it almost impossible to compete in a rural housing market where better paid workers could take the best of the limited accommodation.

After coffee Professor Jan Bieleman gave a paper on 'Dutch cattle breeding and dairy farming, 1850–2000: an overview.' From 1850, the Netherlands saw an increase in demand from abroad for its farming products. This was facilitated by the standardisation and reorganisation of livestock farming. Herdbook Societies were started in the 1870s and three new types of cattle, the 'national three' were established and maintained until the 1970s. The state had an active agricultural policy providing dairy and cattle breeding consultants and encouraging farming in larger units. Factory scale units using steam power were similar in appearance to those of East Lothian. Artificial insemination was promoted in the 1930s to prevent disease and was most popular among the smaller farmers. Disease was eradicated by 1956 and farmers saw the potential for breeding. The use of sperm and embryos from the US led to the creation of Holstein-Friesian Black Pied cattle which, by the 1990s, formed the majority of Dutch livestock. From the 1950s there was an increase in the use of machinery for milking, grass cutting and silage production. However, the spectacular increases in production led to the EU introducing quotas in the 1980s and Dutch breeding strategies changed to fit this. After the introduction of quotas, the number of cows dropped back to 1960s levels. The Government, pushing intensification in the 1950s, '60s and '70s to keep farmers buoyant and promote a healthy rural society, was forced to backtrack in the 1980s and '90s.

After lunch the delegates embarked on an excursion to explore aspects of high farming in East Lothian organised by Dr Wade Martins. Two farms were visited, West Fenton Farm, North Berwick and Sunnyside Farm, East Linton. West Fenton was in the process of diversifying by converting the old farm buildings for residential use. Mrs Cunningham of Sunnyside and her son provided the delegates with tea and cake which was most generous and welcome. They were running the farm by themselves and demonstrated how the high farming buildings were unsuited to modern farming methods. Most of the buildings were used now for livery, a profitable enterprise as East Lothian has more riding horses than any other part of Scotland.

This was followed by the Society's AGM and annual dinner at which the outgoing President, Prof. David Hey, treated us to a rendition of the infamous monologue 'Albert and the Lion'. Thanks were given to Prof. Hey for his services to the Society and for his past recitations which will be sorely missed.

The first paper on Wednesday morning was Dr Heather Holmes, 'For the encouragement of agricultural improvement in Scotland in the 1780s: ownership of the agricultural books of David Young'. No relation to

Arthur, David Young promoted better farming through a developed system of agriculture based on practice and not just theory. Young undertook farming tours and published two books as a result, along with an agricultural pamphlet and a farmers' account book. These books were published by subscription and Dr Holme's paper analysed the subscription lists for them. Understandably, the agricultural community was by far the largest subscriber. Young had a large base of subscribing landowners most of whom came from eastern Scotland, especially Perthshire. The geographical spread of his other subscribers followed this pattern. Young played an active role in obtaining subscribers for his work and chose his publishers carefully. He had a large network of businesses promoting his books and ideas on improving agriculture.

Professor T. C. Smout then gave a paper on 'Scottish farmers and woods, 1600–1850'. He belied the myth that by the early modern period Scotland had no trees by stating that the most wooded areas, the Highlands, were the least visited. The three main types of woodland were pine, oak and birch. Tenant farmers used the woods primarily as pasture but also for building, tools, basket making and other crafts rather than fuel. Professor Smout argued that domestic stock replaced large native mammals whose grazing meant the woods had never been very dense. Open woods were preferred as this led to unobstructed growth of pasture. If resources were not scarce, the wood could be used for both grazing and timber products. Even where woods were enclosed to protect timber supplies they were still opened for seasonal

grazing. Changes occurred after 1600. Extremes of climate prevented trees from regenerating. The extermination of wolves before 1750, the last large predator, helped increase domestic stock which was furthered by a steady rise in population. By the end of the eighteenth century upland pasture was under pressure and becoming lost to heath. After the clearances sheep replaced cattle and were more destructive. There were also many more of them so long term regeneration of the woods was difficult.

The final paper of the conference was Dr Leigh Shaw-Taylor's account of 'The English peasantry in the eighteenth century: dead or dying?' Funded by the ESRC, Dr Shaw-Taylor is studying male occupational change and economic growth from 1750 to 1850 and attempting to pinpoint the transition from small family farms to large units supplied by waged labour. Prof. Robert Allen believed this to have happened in the eighteenth century but Dr Shaw-Taylor argued that the small peasant farmer declined much earlier and that agrarian capitalism was dominant by the mid-eighteenth century. To support this argument he is generating large occupational data sets for adult males – in reply to a question, no similar data for female workers is available – drawn from parish registers and militia lists. This data could be used to assess, in an approximate manner, the numbers of servants in husbandry employed.

Thanks were given to Dr John Broad and Dr Ewen Cameron for organising the conference, the success of which was apparent by the numbers of delegates who lingered in conversation after lunch, and to Dr Wade Martins for the excursion.