

Conference Report

The Society's Spring Conference, April 2005

by Elizabeth Griffiths

The Society's Spring conference, organized by our president, Professor Christopher Dyer, was held from 11–13 April at the University of Leicester. Magnificent Edwardian houses and towering cedars created a charming setting in which to enjoy a wide range of stimulating papers.

Dr Fernando Collantes, University of Zaragoza, Spain opened the proceedings with his paper, 'Marginal peasant communities and European industrialization, 1800–1900: a study in comparative trends'. He provided a fascinating comparative analysis of the economic evolution of upland communities of Switzerland, France, Italy and Spain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the start of industrialization, these communities were mainly composed of peasant families, combining small scale farming with non-agricultural activities. Industrialization brought three mechanisms into play which transformed these economies: tensions favouring farm specialization; the emergence of alternative employment in industry and services; and incentives for peasant migration into cities. But, as he showed, regions and countries reacted to these forces in different ways, at different times and with different outcomes. The Swiss Alps provided the best example of a seamless and successful transition to rural modernity, while change in Southern Spain and Italy was largely the by-product of demographic crisis. He agreed with questioners that political structures played a significant role: the Swiss cantons with their decentralized system enjoyed many advantages, while the Mediterranean mountains of Spain and Italy suffered from their historic poverty and geo-political isolation, as did the highlands of Scotland. Dr Collantes impressed the audience with his brilliant delivery in a foreign language, with few notes, using simultaneously Powerpoint and OHPs.

After supper, Professor Alan Everitt treated us to a portrait of Leicestershire society. A meticulously crafted paper delivered with just the aid of a microphone and a map, Professor Everitt described a region where town

and country had always been well integrated and at ease with itself. His memories stretched back to the 1960s, when Leicester inhabitants still holidayed in Skegness with the *Leicester Mercury* under their arm. But behind this modesty lay hidden depths: Leicestershire people were adept at making money and enjoyed the highest household income in Europe. This skill and creative force, he argued, stemmed from the native society of yeomen, craftsmen and tradesmen. Once they became the manufacturers and leading business families of the city, they retained their links with the countryside, often retreating to cottages in the Charnwood Forest. The network of village carriers, famously discovered by Everitt, cemented the links between town and country, collecting agricultural produce and delivering it for sale in the markets of Leicester. Many observed that the diversity of the local economy and the adaptability of its people survive today in Leicester's distinctive and successful multi-racial society.

After breakfast, Matt Tompkins (University of Leicester) began the New Researchers' Session with his paper on 'Small-scale piecemeal agricultural improvement by peasants in a south-east Midlands open field village, 1300–1600'. The village, Great Horwood, situated in Buckinghamshire on the northern claylands of the Vale of Aylesbury, was a nucleated settlement dominated by open field arable in the 1300s. Using a fine run of court rolls from New College Oxford, Mr Tompkins traced the conversion of the village to pasture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This process was achieved by piecemeal enclosure between 1440 and 1530, the adoption of grass leys in the open fields from the 1570s and a licence permitting tenants to enclose one acre each in 1574. By 1610 half the parish was laid down to pasture. This change had been accomplished not by large landowners, but small scale peasant farmers, who, operating within the open field system and benefiting from light seigniorial control, had effected their own 'agricultural revolution' in response to the demands for livestock and

dairying from the growing London market. Mr Tomkins wondered why, given the early initiatives, the village had 'festered' and made little further progress towards further enclosure until 1842. This point aroused much debate. Most agreed that the lack of activity should not be regarded as regression, rather that the villagers had reached an optimal situation by 1610.

At the other end of the social spectrum, Sarah Johnston (University of Nottingham) gave a paper on 'Estate improvement and the professionalization of land agents on the Egremont estates in Sussex and Yorkshire, 1770–1835'. She argued that the professionalization of land agents was an eighteenth-, rather than nineteenth-century phenomenon. Formal education may not have started until 1845, as F.M.L. Thompson observed, but agents offered distinctly professional services long before, albeit of a slightly different kind. The professional mix depended on the needs of individual landowners and the context of the time. George Wyndham, third earl of Egremont, for example, employed two solicitors in succession to manage his Sussex estate at Petworth between 1770 and 1835. They called themselves 'stewards', but were 'agents' in every sense of the word, as they handled legal disputes, issues around enclosure and land purchases, drew up estate accounts; managed political campaigns, and deputized for the Earl in sticky local situations. Their contribution to estate improvement was not to supervise the tenantry and disseminate agricultural information – this task was performed by a bailiff – but to navigate the legal and political changes that underpinned the process. There was general agreement that this aspect of the agent's role, as lightning conductor for his employer, has been underestimated.

Following this stimulating paper, Richard Glass (Anglia Polytechnic University) discussed 'Agricultural organizations, networking and the exchange of information in nineteenth century Suffolk'. Mr Glass argued that the dissemination of agricultural knowledge did not always depend on the landed classes; it was in fact a more egalitarian process with local farming clubs and societies playing a leading role. With the aid of maps and graphs, he showed that the incidence of these organizations, invariably clustered around market towns, owed their survival to the support of their non-agricultural membership. Meeting in the public houses, they highlighted the co-dependence of rural and urban communities. The nature of these organizations changed over time. They had declined in numbers by 1914 and become more specialized, focusing on improved livestock management and marketing through co-operatives, a reflection of the depressed years of the late nineteenth century. Today, few survive, having been

largely superseded by local newspapers, agricultural magazines and membership of national bodies like the NFU.

The morning ended with a most thought-provoking paper by Dr Bas van Bavel (University of Utrecht) on 'The emergence and organization of rural factor markets in the Low Countries, thirteenth-sixteenth centuries'. Agricultural development in the Netherlands has long been associated with the early growth of cities and urban markets, but this stimulus did not have a uniform affect on the countryside. Dr Bavel showed how four areas – Flanders, Drenthe, the Guelders River area and Central Holland – served cities in various combinations yet retained their regional divergencies. He attributed this to the uneven organization and evolution of rural factor markets: land, capital and labour. Access to these commodities varied depending on the social and cultural elements prevalent in each area from the high middle ages to the nineteenth century; this explained the different courses followed and the strong regional differences which still existed. He compared the survival of peasants of Flanders, Drenthe and central Holland with the large tenant farmers of the Guelders River area who emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Finally, he suggested that in England, with the exception of Norfolk which shared many features of the Low Countries notably its weak manorialism, the institutional forces were much more resistant to change. These points were debated hotly until the need for lunch intervened, but all welcomed the re-introduction of a socio-cultural dimension to our understanding of the development of the countryside.

In the afternoon, Professor Dyer led an excursion through 'Hoskin's Country' to Lamport Hall and Agricultural Museum. On the way we stopped at the deserted medieval village of Carlton Curlew, examined the ridge and furrow, the landscape of nucleation and the possible dating of abandonment, sensing we were following in the footsteps of historical giants. Lamport Hall, the ancestral home of the Ishams, long denuded of family and indigenous furnishings is a heroic example of restoration after occupation by the army in World War Two. The display of farm machinery impressed, with vintage tractors throbbing and stationary engines gurgling showing us quite clearly how the chaff cutters, root cleaners and threshers actually worked.

Next morning Drs Richard Jones and Mark Page (University of Leicester) gave their paper on 'Power and conflict in the medieval forest: some conclusions from Whittlewood'. Forests have a mystical attraction: they were symbols of royal power where kings could indulge their passion for hunting, ride roughshod over the interests of peasants and police the area with their officials,

punishing and fining poachers and miscreants. This 'landscape of authority' was shaped by the medieval forces of power and conflict. With the aid of a map of 1608, Dr Jones and Dr Page showed how the rival claims of hunting, farming and settlement were reconciled. Hunting was confined to parks and lawns where deer could be pursued unimpeded and away from crops, livestock and settlements: the king allowed minor lords to create their own parks under licence within the forest. Conflict between hunters and farmers reached a peak in the thirteenth century, as tenants clamoured for disafforestation to cultivate the land. In 1286 Edward I made concessions permitting assarting in discrete blocks abutting parks and woods. The pressure for settlements was accommodated by the creation of new manorial sites surrounded by cottages, tofts and enclosures. These sites, which flourished in areas of weak overlordship, can be identified from aerial photos. In forest communities the potential for conflict was ever present, but at Whitteewood the king, lords and peasants managed to strike a balance and live in relatively peaceful co-existence.

Professor Nick Goddard (Anglia Polytechnic University) followed with a paper on the politics of sewage disposal entitled 'Pestilential swamps? The environmental politics of Victorian sewage farming'. In theory, sewage farming met the mutual needs of town and country, agriculture and the environment, but in practice it was difficult to accomplish and generated intense controversy. This was the NIMBY issue of the Victorian era, which Professor Goddard guided us through explaining the various systems on offer and the opposition they encountered. Disposal by water carriage with discharge into rivers and the sea, was used mainly by country towns; large cities, with the greatest need, resisted such measures. Irrigation schemes, like the

Beddington sewage works at Croydon were fiercely opposed for the sickening smells and 'pestilential swamps' they created in suburban areas. Corporations, required by law from the 1840s to shift their sewage, found themselves in a political quagmire as they picked their way through vested interests, poor science and woolly environmentalism, a scenario familiar to all.

Finally, Kevin James (University of Guelph, Canada) gave us an insight into his doctoral research with a paper on 'Earning a Scottish wage: rural Irish households and migrant labour strategies, 1890–1914'. Long regarded as a negative and pernicious force undermining rural Irish households, Dr James invited us to consider migratory labour as a positive factor, which allowed Irish families to build up a portfolio of labour, avoid permanent migration and preserve their traditional lifestyles in the north-west of Ireland. A range of voluntary strategies were adopted to reduce risk and maintain income levels. Typically a household in Donegal in the 1890s might enjoy remittance payments from the USA, wages from migratory labour, sea fishing, weaving and sewing, and receipts from the sale of seaweed, peat and whisky. The migration season extended from June to November, when cottagers, male and female, left for work in the potato and fruit fields of Lowland Scotland where they earned up to 26s. a week, twice the wages of Donegal. Married women stayed at home, not delicately making lace in front of picture postcard cottages, but working as sweated labour in the shirt factories. Unromantic, but realistic and sustainable in a period when rural England suffered severe agricultural depression.

The conference closed after lunch with thanks expressed to Professor Dyer for a stimulating and successful conference held in the most attractive of surroundings.