

Conference Report:

The Society's Winter Conference, 2004

'Farming in upland Britain'

by Jane Whittle

British agricultural history tends to concentrate on the experience of southern and eastern England. This year's conference therefore made a refreshing change, with papers on Scotland, Wales, the Lake District and northern Pennines, and the Peak District, stretching in time from prehistory to the present day. Further variety was added by the wide range of research strategies the speakers brought to bear on the history of upland farming, from pollen analysis to oral history, not neglecting the more traditional study of documents such as manorial court rolls and Board of Agriculture reports. Nonetheless a number of common themes emerged, such as the causes of and responses to changes in upland farming systems, the need to regard the 'traditional' nature of farming practices with caution – although upland farming is often perceived as 'traditional' it has actually undergone significant changes over time – and the importance of understanding farmers' own motivations for adopting or ignoring new practices.

The integration of different research approaches was a strong theme in the first paper by Althea Davies of Stirling University on 'Farming systems and communities in the Scottish Highlands over the last 1000 years: case studies integrating pollen and historical evidence'. She discussed three case studies from upland Scotland which illustrated her own transition from being a paleo-ecologist, interested primarily in prehistory, to an environmental historian, working with historians and ecologists to integrate data from different disciplines. Central to her research was pollen analysis. Pollen sequences can provide long-term insights into the changing patterns and composition of vegetation, including changes in the distribution and availability of potential resources, and the impact of alterations in land management. However, although human impacts are visible, the people themselves are not. As a result, she

noted, pollen analysis data can sometimes appear rather dry and inaccessible to a wider audience. In addition, the reasons behind changes in land use can be misinterpreted without an understanding of the motivations (economic or otherwise) and perceptions of the people who lived in these landscapes. These can only come from other sources, principally documentary evidence. Davies found that there were challenges in integrating pollen analysis with documentary evidence: not all areas provide ideal records, either written or sedimentary. However, she noted that her experience of working in the more recent historical period allowed her to pose questions to historians which challenged both approaches, causing a review of ideas about how people lived and coped with conditions in upland landscapes, for instance in terms of responses to climate, economics and new technological ideas.

The second paper, on 'Manor courts and common land in upland northern England, 1450–1700', by Angus Winchester of Lancaster University demonstrated in more detail what historical documents, in this case court rolls, offer to those studying the management of upland farming. Focusing on two localities, the Lake District and the north Pennines, he explored the nature of common rights, and how their regulation in manorial courts changed over time under impact from population growth, which resulted both in the fragmentation of holdings and an increase in the landless population; and alterations to the farming system with increased enclosure, more flexibility in stock management and higher stocking levels. These changes put pressure on all three of the traditional common rights: the pasturing of stock, turbarry or peat digging for fuel, and estover, the collection of bracken, rushes and heather for a variety of purposes. In some ways the period 1450–1700 marked a heyday for the tenants' common rights. Medieval court

rolls demonstrate a predominant concern for protecting the lord's, rather than the tenants', rights, while after 1700 manorial courts declined and enclosure allowed private exploitation by farmers to replace the communal regulation of resources. During the interim period courts attempted to achieve a balancing act of claiming to uphold 'ancient custom' and maintaining 'good neighbourhood', that is, the management of commons in the interests of the tenantry as a whole rather than individuals, while at the same time accommodating the effects of enclosure and the increasingly large landless population. Despite their claims of upholding traditional practices, the 'paines' or by-laws recorded in court rolls do reflect change over time, such as a moving forward of the start of the closed season, increased control over stocking numbers, an abandonment of transhumance practices, and increasingly careful regulation of peat-digging to protect tenants' rights to fuel.

In his paper on 'Fatalistic conservatism or risk aversion? Upland farming in south-west Wales, 1650–1850', Diccon Cooper of Cambridge University reversed the theme from coping with change to explaining lack of change in a farming system. Contemporary comment, including Board of Agriculture reports, portray the uplands of south-west Wales in this period as blighted by conservative farmers who lacked the proper education to improve their techniques. To support this view, commentators cited evidence of farming methods including very low stocking ratios, poor crop management, an unwillingness to enclose, failure to improve grassland by the removal of stones, gorse and heather, and a reluctance to lime the soil. Cooper argued that while these accusations were partly true, and farming in this region was unproductive, the strategy of low investment, low productivity farming was a sensible choice in an area where high elevation and rainfall, thin soils, and a restricted growing season was always going to make farming difficult. Board of Agriculture Reports

made unfair comparisons with farming in lowland areas, where improvements paid off, and higher yields could be achieved. It was important to look at what was possible and sensible, rather than be led by the fashions of the day as such commentators had been.

The final contribution to the day, by Mark Riley of the University of St Andrews, also stressed the importance of understanding farmers' motivations for adopting, or ignoring, new methods, in this case looking particularly at the management of hay meadows and the adoption of silage. His paper on 'Farming in the post-war Peak District: possible lessons from agricultural history for nature conservation', utilised oral history to question farmers about the timing and choice of particular strategies adopted on their farms. He demonstrated how the intimate knowledge which farmers have of their farms and past practices can complement sparse documentary sources on hay meadow decline and change. Interviews with farmers reveal the often underplayed significance of 'community' and non-financial considerations on farming practice. Oral histories also challenge official narratives of the move from hay to silage production, again suggesting that failure to adopt new methods was not a sign of 'backwardness', but the result of more practical considerations. Riley's research demonstrated that although current conservation schemes claim to return to 'traditional' management practices, they are often introducing quite novel practices. Oral history, Riley argued, can make a valuable contribution to the evolution of future conservation strategies for the British countryside.

We might argue that a larger claim, that agricultural history has an important role to play in the conservation and management of the countryside, was supported by all four papers. Only by understanding the way in which farming systems in upland Britain have changed or stabilised over long periods of time and adapted to a variety of pressures, can we take a more informed position about how to tackle future challenges.