

Conference Report:

The Society's Spring Conference, April 2006*

by Anne Meredith

The society travelled to the south west for its annual conference. Professor Mark Overton with Drs Henry French and Mark Rothery organised the conference, held from 3–5 April at the University of Exeter and supplied, in addition, beautiful spring weather. The grounds of the university were very attractive but it will be the views over the Devon countryside that will linger in people's memories.

Dr Ben Dodds, University of Durham opened the conference with a paper on 'Medieval agricultural production from tithe records'. In this paper Dr Dodds explained how tithe records for parishes in Durham and Hampshire were enabling him to investigate the responsiveness of farmers to changes in grain prices. It has generally been accepted that the medieval farmer, through cultural or economic considerations, was not responsive to market signals. However Dr Dodds showed that there was a relationship between changes in price and crops output, though the relationships were not clear cut. The paper moved onto considering some of the possible explanations for the changes in production. Dr Dodds concluded by stating that the medieval peasant farmer was in fact responsive to changes in the market but that there appeared to be constraints preventing him from maximizing his production.

After dinner Dr Paul Brassley, University of Plymouth, spoke on 'Theories of technical change and artificial insemination in pigs'. This paper – which, as befits an after dinner paper, had its lighter moments – did address serious questions in respect of the place of theory to the study of agricultural history. Dr Brassley outlined the development of pig artificial insemination (PAI) from the 1950s to the present day. His paper then explored various aspects of the development of PIA: techniques, authorities, discourses and media. In respect to authorities he

showed how the key players moved from scientists, through government authorities to professionals and finally to commercial breeding companies. He concluded the paper by asking how theory can assist the historian in his or her research and illustrated this by looking at how various theories assisted in the analysis of the forces at work in the development of PIA.

The second day of the conference opened with the New Researchers' Session. Clare Greener, University of Exeter, in her paper on 'Market gardening in nineteenth-century Devon' provided the only paper on Devon. Market gardens were in general small scale operations worked by family labour. This meant that Ms Greener had to consult a wide range of sources to identify market gardens and those who worked them, for instance trade directories, censuses, and landowners' records. Despite the fragmented nature of the sources, she was able to demonstrate the geographical distribution of market gardens in the county and also show the expansion of market gardening at the end of the nineteenth century. The question and answer session that followed this short paper clearly showed the wide ranging research that she had undertaken and the contribution her research makes to our knowledge and understanding of the development of horticulture.

The second new researcher's paper was given by Bill Shannon, University of Lancaster, who moved the session north to Lancashire as he examined 'Early modern reclamation and enclosure in the Lancashire mosslands'. Mr Shannon outlined his research on the enclosure of mossland using a case study for the area of Altcar/Downholland/Formby. He explained how at the close of the middle ages, landlords were beginning to 'approve' (enclose and reclaim) mosslands as they realised that the mosses could be of economic value. As the mosses had

* The author would like to thank all the speakers who gave her summaries or copies of their papers. Naturally any errors are the author's.

had previously had little value, their boundaries were often unclear. Mr Shannon used a contemporary map to illustrate this and to explain the dispute procedures land-lords had to follow to establish ownership of the land. The speaker pointed out that this meant that the land was enclosed well before parliamentary enclosure and that the records only potentially survive where there was a dispute over ownership. The conference appreciated the opportunity to examine contemporary maps and see how the landscape changed as a result of enclosure.

Professor Bruce Campbell, The Queen's University of Belfast, then gave a paper on 'Crop yields, environmental conditions, and historical change, 1270-1470'. In this paper Prof. Campbell reported on a project, primarily funded by the ESRC, to create a database will be created of data available on crop yields for the period 1270-1430. The project is drawing together existing and some new data sets so that composite information can be presented for the period. Prof. Campbell provided examples of his initial analysis and explored how the yield ratios reflected environmental factors. For example the great European famine of 1316-17 could be seen clearly in the grain yield records for Bolton Priory estate in the West Riding of Yorkshire. The author's interest in exogenous factors (such as weather, climate and disease) on crop yields means that the project will also explore the relationship between data collected by dendrologists (for example tree ring growth) and yields to investigate how weather impacted differentially on grain yields and tree growth.

The final paper for the morning was presented by Professor Nadine Vivier, Université du Mans, who spoke on 'Debating the cadaster in France, 1790-1930: a project for land taxation, boundary definition, or mapping the state?'. In this paper Professor Vivier provided an overview of the cadastre from its inception as a land tax in the Duchy of Milan to its operation in inter-war France. As Professor Vivier explained, the cadaster could be examined from several angles: political, legal, financial and geographical. The impact of political change came through clearly in Prof. Vivier's paper. For example in 1807 it was decided that maps would be drawn up for each cadastre and registers created showing the parcels of land and who owned them. After Napoleon's fall in 1815 the political environment changed and the changing fortunes of the cadaster and its mapping could be seen in relation to political changes.

The conference excursion addressed the theme of diversification in response to the current farming crisis by visiting two farms of considerable historic interest in the Exe Valley. Aishe Farm, near Silverton, dates to the fifteenth century and in recent years has been extensively restored as a private house. Mr Andrew

Baker explained how the farm is cultivated according to new and traditional farming methods according to principles promoted by LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming). Across the valley at Fursdon, the excursion took tea in the coach house of the Fursdon Estate and met Mrs Katriona Fursdon who spoke about the difficulties of maintaining a small Devon estate of considerable antiquity and historical importance.

Next morning the conference resumed with a paper given by Dr Nicola Verdon, Sheffield Hallam University and Professor Alun Howkins titled 'Sustainable and adaptable: living-in farm service in southern and Midland England, 1850-1920'. This showed how farm service continued after 1850 contrary to the accepted view that it disappeared from these areas of England in contrast to the 'marginal' areas of the north and west of England and Scotland. The two speakers drew on their detailed analysis of census enumerators' books (from seven counties) and contemporary written material to clearly show the scale of its survival and how it responded to changes in agricultural and employment practices. For example, the growth in dairying from the mid-nineteenth century appeared to have encouraged the use of farm servants. The two speakers showed clearly how county level statistics obscured local variations and that the study of sub-regions showed a wide variety in the continuance of farm service into the twentieth century.

Professor Mark Overton, University of Exeter, in his paper 'By-employment in early modern England' drew the conference's attention to the 'models' of work in this period and how research on inventories undertaken by Prof. Overton and Dr Jane Whittle demonstrates that the empirical evidence does not always 'square' with the models. In the paper Professor Overton outlined the key models that are used to examine work, and then identified a series of issues that should be explored in relation to work in early modern England. For example the role that woman and indeed the household played in by-employment rather than concentrating solely on the role of men. The evidence from 8,000 inventories from Kent and Cornwall were then used to illustrate the wide range of activities that households engaged in (such as food processing and retailing) and explore the relationship between the various activities; farming was the activity most likely to be combined with another activity but not always. Another aspect that emerged from the inventories was the entrepreneurial activities of men with evidence that men were not adverse to diversification in their commercial activities. Professor Overton concluded that the purpose of a model was to identify the most important features of something. However in respect to work and by-employment he felt

that the models were failing to take account of the key features that emerged through the inventories.

Dr Edward Bujak, Harlaxton College, gave the final paper of the conference in which he explored 'Landowners, radicals and the land question in Victorian east Suffolk.' In this paper he highlighted the activities of John Tollemache who, in the 1840s, inherited a run-down estate (Hellingham) and proceeded to create a model estate complete with cottages, gardens and allotments. According to Dr Bujak, his style of landownership could be regarded as benevolent paternalism, with the cottages and the gardens encouraging industrious habits and attracting a good workforce. Tollemache took this one step further by offering to rent up to three acres of land to his workers. Dr Bujak at this point explored

the relationship that Tollemache – a neo conservative – had with the radical land reform movement which was campaigning for land reform so that agricultural labourers could have their own piece of land. It became clear from Dr Bujak's paper that Tollemache supported the voluntary provision of smallholding by landowners and he countenanced some compulsory powers as an incentive to 'persuade' landowners to make voluntary provision. This was in contrast to other land reformers such as Jesse Collings who wanted local authorities to be given compulsory purchase powers. It was a thought-provoking paper that raised questions and issues about reform at the end of the nineteenth century.

After lunch the conference, stimulated and enthused, dispersed and left the Devon sunshine!