

Conference Report

The Society's Winter Conference, 2006: 'Families and Farming'

by Jane Whittle

This year's Winter Conference explored the degree to which farming is not only an occupation for the main breadwinner, but for the whole family. With papers stretching from the medieval period to the twenty-first century, a strong theme of the married women's contribution to the farm emerged, Michael Winter's paper even going so far as to suggest that the recent withdrawal of wives from farm work had spelt the death of family farming.

The conference began with a paper by Jeremy Goldberg on 'Farming and the late medieval family economy: contextualising the "Tyrannical Husband"'. The 'Tyrannical Husband' is a fifteenth-century ballad which describes a husband and wife arguing about who does the most work in the farm and house, before agreeing to swap roles for day. Unfortunately, the second half of the story, describing the results of this experiment, does not survive (although as a member of the audience pointed out, in the pan-European folktale which bears many similarities to this ballad, the result is 'the cow on the roof' of the farmhouse after the husband fails to manage the farmyard tasks). Although the ballad presents a stylised version of farm work, for instance characterising the man's work solely as ploughing, failing to mention women's work in the fields, and exaggerating the household's degree of self-sufficiency, it does present a detailed list of the stereotypical forms of women's work in a farming household of this period. The wife not only did the everyday cooking, cleaning and child-care, but milked the cows, made butter and cheese, cared for the poultry, baked, brewed and made malt, and prepared, spun and wove woollen and linen cloth. Goldberg went on to use late medieval probate inventories to explore differences between rural and urban lifestyles and work patterns. Most of the household goods owned by rural individuals were either bedding or kitchen goods, leading to the

conclusion that peasant houses were primarily for eating and sleeping. Work and leisure activities were mostly carried on outside. In contrast, urban houses were the normal location for work and sociability. Goldberg concluded that the division of labour between men and women was more marked in rural households than in towns. The domestic location of urban work meant that women were more likely to be involved in men's work and trade, and led to a more egalitarian relationship between husband and wife.

Elizabeth Griffiths took a rather different perspective by examining the roles played by members of a gentry family in 'A family management team: the Le Stranges of Hunstanton, 1600–1650'. Like many gentry families in the early seventeenth century, the Le Stranges sought to increase their income and reduce costs; but unlike other substantial gentry, they did so by eschewing the employment of stewards to run their household and estate, taking on these roles themselves. Even more unusually, much of the management was done by Lady Alice le Strange, rather than by her husband Hamon. Their personal approach resulted in a wealth of documents, particularly household accounts, notebooks and estate records, which allow the family's activities to be reconstructed in some detail. Alice took over the household accounts from Hamon in 1610, eight years after their marriage, and then gradually expanded her activities until she was running the whole estate. Her activities left Hamon free to concentrate on the more public face of the household, defending legal cases, holding political offices, undertaking extensive building works, and fighting as a Royalist in the Civil War, as well as pursuing a variety of sporting and cultural interests. The family team was completed by the eldest son, Nicholas, who remained resident at Hunstanton with his parents after his marriage in 1630. His particular contribution was to

drain the coastal marshes around Hunstanton, which he did by combining the vision and learning of his father with the careful accounting practices of his mother.

The second half of the conference brought us up to the modern day with two papers on the twentieth century. The first, by Nicola Verdon, explored 'The farmer's home: farm women, family life and the British farming press, 1919-39'. For this study, she concentrated on two publications, *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, which had a circulation of 100,000 in 1914, and *Farmer's Weekly*, which began printing in 1934. An inspection of the contents of their 'home pages' provides an impression of the expected role and behaviour of farm women in the inter-war years. Verdon drew out three main themes. First, as we might expect, was an emphasis on domesticity and the skills of housewifery, with articles on cooking, dressmaking, spring-cleaning and childcare. Both publications aimed to raise the status of domestic work by emphasising women's important educational role within the family, and the value of economy and thrift. A second, less predictable theme, was to connect farming women with wider, modern world. Articles provided guidance on fashion for shopping in town, reports on Ideal Home Exhibitions, and encouraged women to be not only 'home-makers but citizens'. Finally, there were articles which promoted various income-generating activities. These included raising or keeping small animals; growing and marketing fruit and vegetables, or processed food such as jam or pies; and taking in guests or roadside catering. Although these were promoted as 'interests' and 'hobbies' and not full-time occupations, the farmer's wife was encouraged to have her own bank account in which to lodge the profits. There was also a concern to keep farmer's daughters within the farming economy, and counteract the lure of urban 'bright lights'. The farming press thus advocated college-based training in dairying, nursing and veterinary science, and advertised employment opportunities for young women on farms.

In the final paper Michael Winter considered 'Family farming in flux: reflections on fifty years of family farming research in British rural sociology'. He traced how the academic concern with the concept of 'family

farming' has mirrored the rise and fall of family farming in Britain between the 1950s and the present day. The idea of the British 'family farm' emerged in the 1950s, from a particular political and cultural juncture. Economically, increased mechanisation reduced the need for hired labour, leaving the family to run the farm. This trend was reflected in a new strand of literature based on first-hand experience of farming, either offering practical advice or autobiographical or semi-fictional accounts of running a farm. For instance, George Henderson's books argued that family farming was not only possible as an occupation for returning service-men, but profitable and *virtuous*. At about the same, the National Farmers' Union began to use 'family farming' in its rhetoric, emphasising its representation of a broad range of farming interests and not just large landowners. There were also anthropological studies, such as W.M. Williams' study of Ashworthy in Devon. Family farming in 1950s and 1960s Devon was characterised by small mixed farms. A shortage of labour and limited mechanisation meant that women often played a large role on these farms, for instance caring for livestock, and growing fruit and vegetables on a commercial scale. Children were also expected to contribute before and after their school day. Winter revisited Williams' study in the late 1970s and again in 2002, interviewing farmers about their experiences. While a great deal of continuity was evident between the 1950s and 1970s, the change since then has been rapid and substantial. Membership of the communal organisations such as the Methodist church and the NFU has declined, along with other social activities. The intensity of farming has increased, but profits have slumped. Women no longer worked much on the farm, in part because their income from jobs outside farming is needed to support the farm. Children have also been excluded from farm work by technological change. As a result, family farming is now dead in many respects.

This year's Winter Conference demonstrated that the work of family members has been a vital support of farming households for hundreds of years, and, in a different way, remains so today. It seems unlikely that it will ever be appropriate to think about farming without considering the role of the wider farming family.