

Conference Report

The Society's Winter Conference, 2007

Approaches to the History of the Rural Landscape

by John Martin

An audience of more than fifty gathered at the Institute of Historical Research on a bright Saturday in December to listen to four entertaining and informative papers about the transformation of the rural landscape. First to go was Sam Turner whose paper on the Devon landscape was based on the database of historic landscape types which he had developed using GIS techniques, dividing the county into over 50,000 polygons. Using his own classification of landscape types – and in discussion he made important points about the problems of any standardised classification system for GIS use – he was able to map the whole of Devon. His major finding was that medieval strip fields systems had been widespread across Devon, covering some 40 per cent of the total area. Rough upland and woodland landscapes made up 17 per cent of the county, mainly in the north and west, while three per cent was composed of orchards, principally in the south and east. His database was then subjected to generalising software which, even after adjustment, derived regions that did not correlate to the Roberts landscape maps, or indeed to soil regions. Some landscapes showed that Bronze Age field systems remained important moulders of the landscape, while in the Tamar valley, modern mining activity was a dominant feature. Over 200 deserted medieval settlements had been noted. The biggest landscape change in Devon, as elsewhere, has been the modern destruction of field boundaries. The database is available online at www.devon.gov.uk/landscapes and Dr Turner referred readers to his book, *Ancient country. The historic character of rural Devon; a report on the Devon Historic Landscape Conservation project* published earlier in the year by the Devon Archaeological Society.

Following on from Dr Turner, Professor Tom Williamson (East Anglia) spoke on 'East Anglian meadows and water meadows, a long view'. Professor Williamson outlined the differences between meadows

which produced hay and grazing and water meadows which were irrigated by flooding in order to produce an early bite, enhance the hay crop and improve the quality of the sward. His illuminating talk analysed the long term increase in the areas of meadow land as well as explaining the reasons for marked regional variations in their incidence. His analysis stressed the many different forms of meadow management and showed that the most sophisticated types were evident in Wessex. Their popularity was explicable mainly in terms of the importance of livestock farming and other environmental considerations. He also provided a very pertinent critique of the debate about the woodland and Champion divide. His pleas for further research into an aspect of farming which has largely been ignored by conventional agricultural historians, who have concentrated primarily on the patterns of arable cropping, were persuasively made.

The afternoon sessions were launched by Professor Matthew Cragoe (Hertfordshire) and Dr Ian Waites (Lincoln) with their richly illustrated paper 'Perceptions of enclosure and the post-enclosure landscapes'. Professor Cragoe began by outlining the larger project which is funded under the AHRC landscapes initiative. Dr Waite then outlined how the landscape has been portrayed over the centuries and how the prevailing landscape genre had shaped the way we look at it. Based on a range of contemporary drawings, the paper examined a number of early attempts to portray the open landscape of the pre-enclosure era. Dealing initially with the early form of landscape portrayals in the first half of the eighteenth century, the 'prospect' view encompassed big images, where open fields were regarded as an integral and accepted part of the picture. As the tempo of agrarian change quickened, these were replaced by prints and drawings which focused more on the enclosed landscape, as well as on the need to record

what had been lost. By the early nineteenth century, artists had become more aware of the pre-enclosure tradition. In particular, Clare tended to idolise the pre-enclosure order. Agrarian changes, therefore, created a profound crisis and a deep sense of personal loss for artists of this genre. The paper illustrated that the loss of landscape was considerably more important than many of the early agricultural improvers had initially anticipated.

Finally, Professor David Jeremiah (Plymouth) gave his paper on 'Cars and the pleasures of the countryside: the weekend tour, rediscovery of the byways, popularising the beauty spots and the "See Britain First Campaigns"' provided an entertaining and well-illustrated tour of the changing role and impact of the motor car on the countryside. The paper explored the emergence of the car and showed how it had superseded the railway as the most important mode of transport. Attitudes were also influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement and the notion of the countryside and heritage as a cultural commodity. These early developments had been influenced by the desire for a pre-industrial landscape that had escaped the mechanical revolution. It was in this matrix that the issue of the motor car had to be placed. Even prior to the infamous Red Flag Act of 1896, the car had been perceived by some as a threat to the countryside

as a result of rural rallies and roadside advertisements. Its impact was ubiquitous and penetrated into every corner and aspect of rural life. By 1900 every reputable rural hostelry had to cater for cars by providing garage services and petrol in two-gallon cans. Car ownership was initially the exclusive preserve of the upper classes, but with increasing affluence, it filtered down to the more wealthy artisan classes. This was amply illustrated by a number of pertinent newspaper advertisements demonstrating how motoring became a leisure activity in its own right. Increased mobility liberated people from the railway timetable, allowing resulting in a significant increase in the number of country houses touring individuals could visit. As well as transforming postal services, the provision of garages played a key role in reviving the flagging blacksmith trade. The motor car had also become an important symbol of national identity, a process aided by the development of new roads. This was also aided by Shell's role in promoting the 'See Britain First' campaign of 1925.

The conference concluded with thanks to Dr John Broad, who deputised for Dr Jane Whittle, for his hard work in organising another most successful conference. Delegates were reminded that that the 2008 conference will revert to its more normal slot on the first Saturday in December.