

Conference Report:

The Society's Spring Conference 2008

by Erin Gill

This year's spring conference was memorable for many reasons, but is likely to go down in the Society's history as the first (almost) teetotal conference. In addition to the usual stresses and strains of conference organisation, John Broad and John Beckett had to negotiate the unfortunate combination of thirsty delegates and firmly-drawn bar shutters on both nights of the conference! Leaving aside the question of alcohol (and its absence), the University of Nottingham campus proved an attractive environment, with miles of green lawn, blossoming trees and at least one owl screeching in the night.

Elizabeth Griffiths, University of Exeter, began proceedings with a paper questioning the dominance of the landlord-tenant system. Presenting evidence of frequent use by English farmers of 'alternative agreements' that involved the sharing of financial risk and reward, particularly during the first decades of the twentieth century, Griffiths argued that England's particular brand of share-farming – farming to halves – should not be viewed as an aspect of agriculture associated primarily with the late seventeenth century. Share-farming has continued, argued Griffiths, often as a 'hidden structure' behind a more visible landlord-tenant framework. If proof were needed that share-farming is back on the agenda, she reminded us of the 'fact' that *The Archers'* arch-capitalist, Brian Aldridge, has entered into a share-farming agreement with his children Debbie and Adam.

Following Elizabeth Griffiths' paper and the enthusiastic discussion that followed it, dinner was served. It was at this point that absence of alcohol became impossible not to notice. Sensing that action was required, the ever-resourceful Prof. Beckett set off for the off-licence.

With dinner over, Andrew Powers and Tim Medlock of the Forestry Commission offered a slide show and talk giving insights into the history and current priorities of the Commission as well as a broader look at the ways in

which arboriculture has often been a sister to agriculture. Powers touched on the threat to tree seedlings posed by rabbits – 'whenever we can, we shoot them' – which I trust was noted by John Martin. It was interesting to learn that, until the 1990s, the Commission was expected to achieve a three per cent return on any site it acquired, thereby ensuring continued proliferation of plantations of the most productive timber species, regardless of their impact on local ecology or landscape.

Following Powers' entertaining and thoughtful talk, many of us made our way to the Ancaster halls of residence, where the evidence of John Beckett's sprint to the off-licence was displayed, and with which Alun Howkins proved a highly capable barman.

The programme for Tuesday 1 April began with two papers from new researchers. Mark Dawson, University of Nottingham, examined the accounts of the Willoughby family in order to demonstrate the extent to which sixteenth century gentry estates were *not* self-sufficient in food production. In addition to purchasing luxury foods, such as wine and spices, the Willoughbys bought or received as gifts a considerable amount of meat, fish, poultry and eggs. The accounts also suggest that the family purchased cattle from markets as far away as a hundred miles. Although the Willoughby family produced a good deal of its own food, and sold its surplus grain, theirs was not a completely self-sufficient life.

My own paper was next, focusing on the early history of the organic campaigning organisation, The Soil Association, and the role played by 'New Age' religion in its early history. Considering first the significance of unconventional religious belief in the life of the Soil Association's founder and early leader, Lady Eve Balfour, I went on to argue that certain Spiritualist and New Age concepts appear to have been accepted by some key figures involved in the early Soil Association. This raises the question of how the early Soil Association and the

wider organic food and farming movement in Britain should be viewed by historians.

After the coffee break, Juan Pan-Montojo, from the Autonomous University of Madrid, gave a paper about agrarian policy and change in Spain from 1836. He described the way in which, following the end of Franco's regime, historians have reassessed established views of nineteenth-century Spanish agriculture. Long dismissed as having been a period when inefficient practices were maintained at the expense of innovation, Pan-Montojo outlined a revisionist perspective. Substantial extensive growth in agriculture was achieved during the nineteenth century in Spain, following annexation of millions of acres previously held in common by villagers or held by the church. Although Pan-Montojo's paper focused on the 'myth of nineteenth-century agricultural failure', he also discussed Franco's impact on rural Spain, particularly the way in which rapid urbanization led to a collapse of the agricultural sector in the mid-twentieth century. As co-editor of the journal *Historia Agraria*, Pan-Montojo also emphasized the academic revival that has taken place, not least in the field of history, since Franco's death. Where once there were about three academic journals devoted to history published in Spain, there are now more than fifty.

After lunch we embarked on our outing to Sherwood Forest. Our bus journey took us through suburban Nottingham, with John Beckett acting as tour guide and offering a surprisingly detailed history of the city's council estates. Once in the countryside, there were views of British pig farming as well as a rather dramatic example of 'live-action' soil erosion. Meeting up once again with Andrew Powers, Tim Medlock and others from the Forestry Commission, we saw first hand how large-scale conifer plantations can dominate a landscape. Traces of the Sherwood Forest's past were pointed out; these included boundary stones, an old meeting spot known as Hanger Hill and an area where veteran oaks are being protected and where regeneration of oak woodland is being attempted. There was no sign of Robin Hood, though, despite the most delicious cakes and tea served up *en plein air*.

Traffic congestion on the return journey to Nottingham gave John Beckett a further opportunity to pass on information about the history of the area's suburbs, prompting some to question whether they knew their own home cities and towns half as well as Beckett knows Nottingham. Back at the university, a hurried but enjoyable annual general meeting was conducted, with Nicola Verdon's election as next secretary of the British Agricultural History Society confirmed. At dinner John Chartres delighted his audience by recalling past

conference mishaps and adventures, alluding briefly to the question on many people's minds: was there an bar open nearby for those wishing to socialize after supper? The answer was yes, but only if we hurried.

The first paper of Wednesday morning was given by Sarah Webster, University of Hertfordshire, whose research focuses on the Earl of Egremont and his estate. Webster described Egremont's use of two London-based surveyors, John Claridge and William Smith, as advisers on agricultural and mineral resource issues. In particular, Smith's geological investigations contributed to his later achievement – a geological map of Britain. The role of such surveyors as metropolitan 'experts' prompted much discussion about whether their advice was really of much use to Egremont, compared to the advice likely to have been available from local professionals. Were these men akin to today's management consultants, eager to recommend the same solution to every client?

Turning to livestock, Ted Collins' paper examined the revival in the use of oxen in some parts of England from the late eighteenth century through the first half of the nineteenth. Acknowledging that England was the first nation in Europe to replace oxen with horses – a process that began before the sixteenth century and was completed by the mid-nineteenth – Collins argued that, nevertheless, a partial revival in the fortunes of the ox occurred in some parts of England and Wales. The South West, Welsh Marches and southern and central England experienced either a temporary increase in the number of oxen or a slowdown in a reduction in their numbers during the late eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Breeding played a role in this revival, with distinct breeds developed by 1820. Describing the nineteenth-century ox as 'a veritable racehorse compared to its predecessor', Collins argued that the ox returned to favour in some parts of England and Wales because it was, under certain conditions, 'the perfect work animal'.

The final paper of the conference was given by Umberto Arbarella, University of Sheffield, who emphasized the role played by livestock improvements, which began as early as the fourteenth century, in setting the stage for the agricultural revolution. The late medieval period saw greater changes to livestock management than has often been assumed, with zooarchaeological records demonstrating that significant genetic improvements in cattle were achieved during this period.

The conference ended after lunch, with thanks given to John Beckett and John Broad for putting together a stimulating and highly enjoyable 48 hours. I very much look forward to next year's event, which will be at Northampton. I'm happy to bring a bottle or two, if that's any help.