

Conference report:

The Society's Spring Conference, 6–8 April 2009

by Joe Barker

The Spring Conference met at the University of Northampton's Sunley Management Centre. An unexpectedly high attendance level meant that not all delegates were housed on site, with latecomers finding berths, as the President put it, in various 'hauls on the River Nene'. Following registration and tea, proceedings were initiated by Professor Richard Smith of the University of Cambridge, who presented a paper 'Assessing the relative efficacy of the English Old Poor Law: a rural perspective'. In this wide-ranging paper, Smith highlighted several ways in which the Old Poor Law ensured that England developed differently to continental Europe, particularly France. The Revolutionary government in France was amazed to learn that, in England, the per capita costs of poor relief were far higher in rural than in urban parishes; the reverse of the pattern found in France, where the provision of relief was essentially an urban phenomenon. Fascinating though this paper was, it will probably prove most memorable for the new 'yellow custard test', which will surely in future be applied to all maps.¹

It was then time for dinner, when it became clear that this year's conference had all it needed to prove a greater success than in other years. There was a bar, and it was open.

The difficult after dinner slot was shared by Professor Matthew Cragoe of the University of Sussex and Dr Briony McDonagh of the University of Hertfordshire, who kept the post-prandial audience alert with an introduction to 'Enclosure and the Northamptonshire rural landscape'. Cragoe gave us some exciting insights into the impact of enclosure on the Church of England. He argued that the commutation of tithes accompanying parliamentary enclosure diffused anticlericalism in the countryside in

two ways. First, by removing the regular confrontations between tithe-holding clergy and tithe-paying farmers – the source of much rural unrest – and, second, by endowing many clergyman with extensive landholdings, ensuring that their interests were closely entwined with those of their more substantial landholding or farming parishioners. McDonagh then looked in detail at some enclosures in Northamptonshire, focusing especially on those we were to visit on the next afternoon's field trip.

The following morning began with the new researchers' session. First, we heard Mary Carrick of the University of Hull, whose paper was entitled, 'Water and wood: aspects of water management in agriculture in the valley of the River Hull, c.1150 to the Dissolution'. This title did not do justice to the extent of the paper, which took us not only back to the Iron Age, but also across the Channel, where the Cistercian order was founded. This paper raised some exciting issues, providing a fascinating insight into the role of the Cistercians in spreading agricultural innovations, innovations that Carrick considers profound enough to constitute an agricultural revolution in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

We were then transported forward nearly 300 years and relocated to southern England by Samantha Shave of the University of Southampton, who spoke about 'Welfare provision under Gilbert's Act: the experience in southern England, 1782–c.1850'. Shave argued that although Gilbert's Act was only an enabling piece of legislation, it was far more widely adopted and significant than historians have allowed. In particular the ideas and methods advocated in Gilbert's Act were often adopted by parishes or unions of parishes without them specifically using Gilbert's legislation. It is pleasing

¹ A map of the country had been presented, in which areas were shaded in different colours, including yellow. The questioner was concerned that north-west England had been completely 'covered in custard', thus hiding several completely different 'puddings'. The speaker's defence was that the data had been aggregated.

to note that Shave had recognized the importance of the yellow custard test, and had incorporated a variant green custard methodology into her discussion of the geographic spread of Gilbert's Act parishes and unions.

The third paper was given by Abigail Hunt of the University of Lincoln, on 'The changing role of women as agricultural producers in twentieth-century Lincolnshire'. Hunt emphasized the important and varied roles that women have played in the county's agriculture: from the Women's Land Army of the First World War to the contemporary diversification of farming efforts, which include, we were assured, the making of ice cream. This paper was enlivened with the use of recordings of some of Hunt's interviewees. One of her female informants was able to confirm a suspicion I have long had – that washing-up is unlucky.

Following a restorative cup of coffee, Dr Ernst Langthaler of the Institute of Rural History, St Polten, Austria, kept us in the twentieth century with a paper entitled 'Seven long years in a short century: embedding the Nazi era in Austrian agricultural development, 1918–95'. Whilst saying that the Nazi regime did not mark a sharp break from earlier patterns of agricultural development, Langthaler did argue that many later twentieth-century developments were begun during the Nazi era: in particular, greater mechanization of agriculture and a focus on productivism. It was also interesting to see how farm sizes have grown in Austria through the twentieth century, although this was more of a post-war development than a direct result of Nazi policy.

After lunch we piled onto a coach and headed into the beautiful Northamptonshire countryside, the tranquillity of which was about to be disturbed by the arrival, in two of its villages, of 50 curious historians and a coach for which their streets had clearly not been designed. First we visited Pilton, from where we looked across the river at Lilford, before moving onto Wadenhoe, where we viewed the church and the adjacent motte and bailey. As well as seeing the two tiny parish churches we were treated to a discussion by Briony McDonagh and Professor Chris Dyer of the various man-made features over which we were walking. Having earned our refreshment we retired to the King's Head to help them continue their 25 year long celebration of the cream tea. We polished off all the scones, helped in no small part by several members who piled their plates high, whilst claiming that 'they are not all for me'. It was a lovely trip, and Briony McDonagh must be thanked and congratulated for organizing it.

The annual general meeting saw some important changes in the Executive Committee. Paul Brassley stood down as chairman; John Broad took his place, vacating the secretaryship, which was taken up by Nicola Verdon. The highlight of the delicious annual dinner was Professor John Chartres's presidential speech, in which we were introduced to the concept of Northamptonshire as a 'billowing' county, and reminded that it was the 270th anniversary of Dick Turpin's hanging.

Following the previous night's excesses, we were amply repaid for dragging ourselves out of bed the next morning by Dr Stephen Miles on of the University of Oxford, who gave a paper entitled 'Parks and communities in medieval England'. Miles on emphasized the negative impact that parks often had on local communities, which could lose prime arable land and vital areas of common, and even have their villages relocated. However, during questioning it emerged that there may have been some positive impacts of emparkment, as a well-maintained park ensured that crop-damaging deer were kept away from the village fields.

There was an exciting contrast between this and the next paper, by Dr Richard Follett of the University of Sussex. In his powerful 'Plantation economies in the American South: database design and southern US agricultural history', Follett introduced us to an enormous database, now available on the Internet, and the fascinating differences in the development of cotton and cane sugar agriculture in the southern United States. Of particular interest were the changes associated with the abolition of slavery, which in the cotton states led to the break-up of plantations and the adoption of a sharecropping system, whilst in Louisiana the sugar plantations survived with continuing use of gang labour.

In the final paper of the conference, Dr Clare Griffiths of the University of Sheffield spoke about 'Facing the future of farming: agriculture and the 1945 general election'. In this paper Griffiths looked at a much ignored feature of Labour's historic landslide victory: their degree of success in rural constituencies. She considered the significance of the continuing perception of a 'Great Betrayal' at the end of the First World War, when the farming community was not rewarded for its role in victory, and the fact that in 1945 the rural community feared another betrayal at the hands of a Conservative government.

The conference concluded with thanks to Dr John Broad for organizing another excellent conference. The next Spring Conference will be held in Durham on 29–31 March 2010.