

British Agricultural History Society Spring Conference 2012

by Irene Haycock

This year's Spring Conference was held at Sparsholt College in the Winchester countryside, from 2 to 4 April. It was held to be a great success, combining intellectual stimulation from the high quality of the papers with good food and pleasant surroundings.

The conference opened with the 60th anniversary prize essay winner, Dr Johann Custodis, who presented his paper entitled 'Employing the enemy: the contribution of German and Italian Prisoner Of War workers to British agriculture during and after the Second World War', which has subsequently appeared in the *Review*. The paper addressed the question of 'Were POWs a contribution to agricultural productivity and did they contribute to the economy?' Custodis provided revised upward estimates of POW involvement in British agriculture. He argued that rather than economic liability they have hitherto been considered, POWs are a forgotten economic asset and, in particular, that their post-war contribution grew stronger after Italian repatriation when the POW workforce became solely Germanic. The government sought to maximize use of POW labour to help fill the chronic rural labour shortage, arising from mobilization and its slow abandonment. Children, women, students, Irish workers, and 'deferred retirements' were also called upon. POWs provided a mobile substitute for civilian labour and were set to work in the construction sector, building infrastructure in housing, industry and roads, notably Wembley Way for the London Olympic Games in 1948, as well as on the land.

In the evening, following a welcome meal, a round-table discussion was devoted to the subject 'Representing agricultural history in the media', with TV personalities, Peter Ginn (presenter and archaeologist) and Ruth Goodman (presenter and historian), who were part-way through the filming of *Wartime Farm*. Members of the production team from Lion TV, Naomi Benson (director) and David Upshal (executive producer), were also contributors, able to draw from

their experience in making the television series *Tales from the Green Valley*, *Victorian Farm*, and *Edwardian Farm*. The session was introduced and chaired by BAHS President, Professor Alun Howkins, an experienced TV hand.

The discussion addressed how to present 'real' history – as opposed to popular history and entertainment – which ultimately shapes the public perception of our discipline. The impressive viewing figures of 4.5 million people who enjoyed watching *Victorian Farm Christmas* in 2009, for example, reflect the recent interest in rural themes and factual programming. Peter Ginn explained how insightful understanding of the past came from both the archaeological record and the experiential record, as demonstrated by Ruth's role, in addition to written sources. Together the team strove for accuracy, which is the emphasis of their productions in looking at rural and social history. They employed reiterative learning for the period, and the layering-up of visual image, sound, the spoken word, and mood, but left the historiography to the academics.

On Tuesday morning James Bowen began the New Researchers session with 'The governance and management of common land in Shropshire from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries'. Bowen is investigating common waste as a type of common land, arguing that previous studies of common land and enclosure have largely focused on the open fields and common wastes of the lowland zone and large upland commons of the highland zone, at the expense of an appreciation of the full spectrum of commons. His paper concentrated on the impact of cottagers and encroachment in the manor of Prees, one of four case studies in Shropshire. Bowen highlighted the significance of manorial courts' regulation of the resources of common waste. Diverging interpretations have suggested that manorial regulation either favoured the rural poor, who claimed access on the basis of habitation or custom, or aimed to exclude those

without common right. He proposed a more holistic approach to synthesize these viewpoints. In Prees, manorial documents showed that, despite repeated orders preventing cottage construction and enclosure, such practices were in fact allowed. He concluded that manor courts remained an important form of local administration despite the rise of the parish, that the common wastes of Shropshire provided natural resources well beyond legal common right of pasture and that, where both the institution of manorial courts persisted and large areas of common land remained, there survived a parallel system of informal poor relief utilizing manorial resources.

Sarah Holland (Sheffield Hallam University) gave the second New Researchers paper on 'Contrasting rural communities – theories and places: the landscape of six villages in south Yorkshire in the mid nineteenth century'. Holland's doctoral research investigated the micro-histories of several Yorkshire parishes between 1840 and 1870 in the light of Dennis Mills's model of an open or closed paradigm of rural settlements, which he constructed on the basis of land ownership and predictions of their social and economic structure. Holland concluded from her sample of contrasting landscapes that it was evident that landownership did indeed influence rural settlement patterns, but only to a certain extent and not as the primary driver. She suggested that, in addition to landownership, the role of locational factors, topography, physical and natural determinants, and human agency should be considered in an open-minded approach to best broaden our understanding.

The last New Researcher's paper before coffee, 'Have we seen the historical demise of the farming community?', was presented by Jane Glover (Loughborough University). Glover has conducted a qualitative investigation into the erosion of the farming community by compiling interview data from oral narratives of change over time in the life histories of farming families. She examined the causes and effects of these changes through connections in wider social networks in the community, and in local and national organizations such as the YFC and NFU. She related elements of this change to the lower labour requirements in agriculture, a consequence of modernization and increased industrialization in the post-war period. Findings from her sample revealed that there was a greater sense of isolation amongst farmers than in previous years, resulting from reduced contact with fellow farmers and the wider community through structural change and cattle market closures. The changing composition of the rural population, the buying-up of small farms and the demise of the

Milk Marketing Board all contributed to a sense of community dilution. As a result farmers were becoming more reliant on family and their network of friends rather than the community as a whole.

After coffee, the recent conference tradition of hearing a distinguished speaker from continental Europe was continued. Professor Leen van Molle from the University of Leuven, Belgium, gave an explorative working paper entitled 'Women take the stage. Mapping education for rural women in Belgium in the long nineteenth century'. Belgium was one of the first countries to introduce education for rural women before the First World War, as many daughters from farming families were part of a rural exodus. Up till then agricultural science and technology across both Europe and North America had been male-dominated. Van Molle discussed two models of knowledge production and diffusion as a two-track policy. One model provided a professional education for farming women, teaching agricultural science and technology focused on dairying. Both mobile and fixed dairy schools were set-up with travelling advisors, courses on pastoral husbandry, the provision of handbooks on the use of tools, and the rationalization of time-keeping and profit. The second model was of the betterment of rural life, again using mobile and fixed schools to teach agricultural home economics. Women's Institutes were mobilized for this purpose. Knowledge was promulgated through formal networks of lectures, and concomitantly through informal networks comprising both strong and weak ties of kin and friend, neighbours and acquaintances. Van Molle performed a quantitative analysis to map gendered knowledge at the village level through an analysis of farming association reports from 1912–13.

Our annual field trip, which was kindly organized by Gavin Bowie, took us to two contrasting farms in the local vicinity, Chilbolton Down Farm and Hill Farm at Barton Stacey. Perhaps we would be spared a drenching this year? We were in the drought-stricken South after all. But spots of rain fell on us as we boarded the coach. The farm manager explained that Chilbolton (1800 acres) is a mixed farm enterprise, its varied husbandry offering greater financial security. They practise an unusual eight-year crop rotation, and boast a closed elite pedigree flock and a site of scientific interest sheltering rare plants and birds. Treated to a farm tour via tractor-trailer – and a brief shower of rain – the tour ended inside the walls of a cavernous four-bay grain store. The farm manager's parting words were that 'we could have brought some more rain!' Next stop was a delightful afternoon tea complete with home-produced hedgerow jam at the Boaz Project, Hill

Farm (500 acres). The Project caters for 48 members with special needs (12 per day), aged from 17 to 60. It focuses on sustainability and offers activities such as horticulture, market gardening, animal husbandry, and wood-working. The Project is inter-denominational and employs 3.5 people.

After an enjoyable conference dinner back at Sparsholt, Alun Howkins lead us in a round of singing.

The next morning John Hare (Winchester) presented: 'Seigniorial agriculture in the chalklands of medieval Wessex, c.1200 to c.1500'. Drawing upon evidence from pipe rolls and tithe returns, he compared developments in two manors in the Bishopric of Winchester and two from Winchester Cathedral Priory estate, which formed part of a broader examination of manors and villages in two contrasting landscape regions, the 'chalk and cheese' territory of Wiltshire and Hampshire. From around 1208–9, wheat featured strongly on all the estates, but the cropping of oats prevailed upon the poorer soils. Barley was important and became increasingly so in the late middle ages. Planned expansions were undertaken in sheep and barley production on new demesne lands in the Bishopric by 1283, but it was these estates that saw the greatest contraction in cultivation in the early fourteenth century. Agriculture in the Priory manors was considered to be at an earlier stage with smaller flocks. After the Black Death, rising prosperity fuelled a growing demand for meat, wool and cheese. Flock sizes were massive, and on the Priory estates there was a greater emphasis on pig-keeping. By 1400, leasing out of demesne lands was widespread, although cultivation by the landowners themselves continued later in the Bishopric. By the mid-fifteenth century, lords were leasing out both arable land and, notably, their demesne flocks. This lasted until c.1500 and, thereafter, direct management by lords ceased: the end of an era in this region.

The next speaker, Nicola Whyte (University of Exeter), presented an adapted version of a published paper.¹ In the conference paper, 'Tracing household memories in the early modern landscape', she discussed evidence gathered from oral testimonies of female deponents

at Westminster equity courts to discover the extent of gendered knowledge of landscape, custom, and rights to local resources. Her results challenge previous views by finding that women were pivotal actors who mediated the terms of customs and right through the informal transmission of knowledge and household memories.

The closing paper of the conference was given by Susannah Wade Martins (Norfolk) on 'Ploughboys or clerks: The battle over rural education'. Supported by English Heritage, her research aimed to fill a gap in the study of rural schools. A volunteer labour force worked on this project and constructed an architectural gazetteer of Norfolk schools by taking both internal and external photographs of schools and consulting over 450 school records. This allowed the portrayal of the changing attitudes to education between 1800 and 1950 as depicted in the actual buildings. Was education for children to achieve their potential, or was it for them to know and be contented in their place in society? Farmers were critical that children were being educated for urban employment, and supported the view that they should be kept in the country districts. The opposing view did not recognize a rural labour shortage, and claimed that children should be educated for town work. Wade Martins traced the development in rural education provision from the Church of England founding societies in the early nineteenth century, the National Schools which aimed for social control, and Dame Schools or private schools which saw education to be for the formation of character. By the 1870s, the religious societies were unable to offer sufficient provision, resulting in the setting up of Board Schools. By 1902, small village school boards could not raise sufficient finance to provide an integrated system and were taken over by the County Councils. Reports were published village-by-village revealing low standards, cramped conditions, and differential in the schooling of boys and girls. By 1929 criticisms were made of the disadvantages suffered in the education of rural children.

Our thanks go to Nicola Verdon for organizing this year's conference.

¹ 'Custodians of memory: women and custom in rural England c.1550–1700', *Culture and Social Hist.* 2 (2011), pp. 153–73