

Conference Report: Winter Conference 2013

‘Augmented Agriculture: Tools, Fuel and Traction in Farming’

On 7 December 2013, London’s Senate House hosted the annual Winter Conference of the BAHS. John Chartres opened the proceedings with some well-chosen words in memory of ‘the single most important individual in BAHS history’, Joan Thirsk, who had died suddenly in October. We observed a minute’s silence in memory of Dr Thirsk’s extraordinarily productive life.

This year the theme of the conference was chosen in honour of another stalwart of the Society and of economic and agricultural history, Ted Collins, with the focus of the day reflecting his long-term influence on and interest in technology and power in agriculture.

The first paper, presented by Jordan Claridge (University of East Anglia), was entitled ‘The Price of Progress? Skill Premiums and the Trade of Agricultural Horses in Medieval England’ and focused on the role of the demesne in the medieval horse trade. Claridge explained how, by studying manorial accounts for a sample era spanning the years 1290 to 1310, he had established that this trade was not only highly segmented, but also subject to regional variation. Work horses of the time were commonly referred to as ‘affers’ and ‘stotts’, and although ‘affers’ were most frequently mentioned in demesne records, ‘stotts’ were dominant in East Anglia. This, Claridge suggested, indicated less a difference in nomenclature but more a variation in the type of horse preferred.

There were also regional variations in the ways demesnes acquired new horses. Although animals were generally purchased at market, demesnes would also breed or rear a proportion themselves. Horses were also acquired as seigniorial perquisites (taken from tenants in payment of death duties, or confiscated if judged to be ‘strays or waifs’). Demesnes in the Midlands were most likely to breed their own horses, whilst those in the Thames basin and East Anglia preferred to purchase them. These latter areas used more horses in general, which Claridge attributed in part to the economic

dominance of London and the need for horsepower to transport goods to the city’s markets. Horses, he said, contributed directly to commercialization. There was some evidence that ‘cart horses’ were traded over a wider distance than ‘plough horses’, perhaps because they would be sold at the end of a journey.

In the next paper, ‘The history of the plantation hoe and why it never got written’ Chris Evans (University of South Wales) declared he had deliberately sought out the ‘dullest item possible’ to study. The session proved to be anything but dull, and revealed that this ostensibly unremarkable implement possessed a rich historic hinterland. Hoes were such an important tool on colonial plantations that, by the eighteenth century, manufacturers in Britain were producing a range of designs, adapted for different environments and tasks. This lucrative trade was dominated by the Crowley family of Tyne and Wear, who produced three main types of hoe designed for use in Virginia, the Carolinas and the Caribbean respectively. Their branded tools were so sought after that at one time they were producing over 11,600 a week. Yet despite this the plantation hoe, unlike the plough, has been almost erased from the historical record.

Evans explained that the reasons for this varied. In Virginia, for instance, tobacco farming necessitated the use of hoes. However, by the 1770s, growing this luxury crop for the British was perceived as degrading. In a desire for self-reliance, agriculture shifted to wheat production – which required the plough. The hoe, now imbued with negative connotations, was consigned to memory. In the Carolinas, rice cultivation gradually shifted from inland swamps to tidal plantations, which planters created by building dykes and embankments. The colonists celebrated their own engineering expertise, and in consequence their slaves’ labour with the hoe was forgotten. In the West Indies, planters began to advocate the use of the plough rather than the

hoe in the late eighteenth century, as it was considered less arduous to use and made them appear 'progressive' and more concerned for the welfare of their slaves – thus improving their increasingly unsavoury image back in Britain. Hoes could be made to order, and Evans ended the session by raising the intriguing possibility that the opinions of slaves might have influenced design.

Lunch provided an opportunity to admire the oxen depicted on the lavishly painted ceiling of room 349, the conference venue, as well to wonder at an imposing, if mysterious, sisal wall-hanging (depicting a bird of prey, it turned out, by the late Tadek Beutlich, a Polish artist). Proceedings then resumed, with Richard Hoyle reminding us of some of the achievements of the day's special guest, Ted Collins. Ted, a treasurer of the BAHS for over 15 years and a long-time Director of the Rural History Centre, had not only secured the future (and ultimately a new building) for the study of rural history at Reading, but also edited volume VII of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, amongst his many publications. Ted said a few words of thanks and recalled attending the first winter conference back in 1966. He mentioned how delighted he was to be a dedicatee of the recently published book, *The Farmer in England* (ed. Richard Hoyle, Ashgate, 2013), not least because several contributors had been his postgraduate students.

Tom Williamson (University of East Anglia) delivered the third paper of the day. Entitled 'Fuel Supply and Agriculture in Post-Medieval England', it had emerged, he said, from a disagreement he'd had with Paul Warde (the paper's co-author) about the timing of the transition from organic to fossil fuels. The paper, which argued for a regional approach, outlined the variety of organic fuels used in that period – not just wood, but also peat, gorse and furze. Peat, used on a large scale in the seventeenth century, was still providing fuel in the lowlands in the eighteenth century. On the Norfolk Broads, its extraction increased after enclosure and many parishes had 'fuel allotments' of peat. In Cornwall, by contrast, furze from the heath was commonly used as fuel.

Much fuel came from hedges and coppices and, as William Marshall noted in his surveys, mixed hedges and pollarded trees were still an important source of firewood in the late eighteenth century. The nature of hedges varied regionally, not only in the mixture of species grown, but also in appearance: in some areas hedges were like small woodlands, and could be 30–40 feet wide. By the mid-seventeenth century, coal was being used in many parts of the North and Midlands, though use was restricted to those able to afford its relatively high price. After 1750, when the costs of organic and fossil fuels levelled out across the country, coal was used more widely. It was generally transported

by boat, so its use was particularly observed in areas which were accessible by water. As the use of coal spread, organic fuels diminished in importance, hedges ceased to be the 'collieries of the countryside' and more land was given over to food production. Williamson ended by explaining how fireplace design provided a useful indicator of coal adoption, since coal burned better in small hearths than in large inglenook fireplaces. He suggested that a close reading of domestic architecture could provide valuable information in this field.

Karen Sayer (Leeds Trinity University) delivered the final paper, which was a suitably illuminating study of 'Electrification and the farm'. This, we learned, was a complex story. Until World War I, electricity was mainly supplied to cities and expansion into the countryside was slow: even by 1944 only 50 per cent of farms had electric lighting, much of which was produced by the farmers' own generators. A planned programme of rural electrification in 1953 meant that by 1960 around 80 per cent of farms were being served by public companies. However, although the arrival of electricity was to change the spaces of the farm and affect the design of new buildings, it was in the domestic sphere that it was first adopted. Lighting in cottages and farmhouses was the first priority, followed by the acquisition of labour-saving devices such as vacuum cleaners. One reason for this was a concern that, without modern amenities in their homes, agricultural workers would leave the land and seek alternative employment.

Adoption of the use of electricity in farming practice was slow and, as supply was often unreliable, farmers were reluctant to get rid of their own generators. Although electricity meant poultry could be kept indoors and cows could be milked by machine, farmers often continued to use generators, paraffin lamps and Calor gas to provide light and power. There were also concerns about the social cost of such devices, which were seen to be putting British labourers out of work. There were competing views of the value of electricity. Although it was promoted as 'modern' and progressive, many saw the march of pylons across the land as a threat to the countryside and a traditional way of life. Although electrification facilitated and allowed for mechanization, its adoption in agriculture was neither rapid nor linear, and until the 1970s it was in competition with other technologies. Questions on this paper, as all the others, could have continued for much longer than time allowed. Unfortunately illness had prevented the organizer, Paul Warde, from attending the conference, but all were grateful to him for arranging such an engaging programme.

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