

British Agricultural History Society

Spring Conference 2014

by Carol Beardmore

The spring conference was organized by Dr Nicola Verdon and convened at the Federation of Women's Institutes' Denman College, near Abingdon. After afternoon tea, the conference was opened by Dr John Broad with a paper exploring 'Social housing in the English village before and after the New Poor Law', which concentrated on two periods, 1660–1834 and 1890–1930. He argued that the Old Poor Law gave every settled inhabitant the right to be housed and consequently magistrates frequently ordered parishes to build houses for the poorer residents. Initially the monies for these projects were raised from the rates or by borrowing against the parish rates. As a result, in the early nineteenth century, approximately 10 to 15 per cent of houses in the midlands were owned by the parish. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 forbade parishes from subsidizing housing and occupiers were required to pay for repairs and upkeep. Rural housing provision now lay with benevolent landowners and led to increasing complaints of overcrowding and insanitary conditions. Change was slow and it was not until after the First World War and Lloyd George's campaign of 'homes fit for heroes' that state-owned housing increased. He concluded that social housing in the countryside was not new but had a long history. The discussion afterwards was enlivened by Professor Howkins' reminiscence about how social differences in housing in East Sussex might be determined by the size and brand of the prams being pushed on the streets of Lewes.

Following the discussion the majority of delegates retired to the bar for refreshments before dinner, which was a lively affair owing to Denman College being fully booked. Agricultural historians, being of an independent nature, trickled into dinner in small groups, which meant some of us being served dessert before others had had their starters. However, the food was delicious and the conversation animated.

After dinner the conference was addressed by Dr

Kate Tiller, who explored the landscape history of 'Down and Dale', topical for the conference venue, as illustrated by the Vale of the White Horse. Dr Tiller examined the imprint of pre-history on the locality, which encompassed Uffington Castle and the Ridgeway. She suggested that myth, legend and landscape were intertwined and reflected in place names, for example Dragon Hill where St George was alleged to have slayed the dragon. The rich cache of surviving Anglo-Saxon charters for the Vale of the White Horse allows the historian to visualize the development of the landscape. Towns and abbeys in the area epitomize the historiography of the landscape. Place names ending in '-ey' reveal the efficiency of Abingdon Abbey's exploitation of the area's unique resources. The vale lacked a heavy density of landed magnates and Joan Thirsk used the locality to investigate and define broad regional characteristics. The area was made famous by James Betjeman's poetry as he used this particular landscape to illustrate the differences between vale and dale. After a spirited question and answer session delegates either moved to the bar to socialize or else to bed to prepare for an early start the following morning.

The conveyor-belt toaster at breakfast proved somewhat problematic. Either one had to accept anaemic toast or risk a second pass; this might result in either the perfect degree of browning, or cremation, and caused much amusement amongst the obviously talented WI cooks!

Tuesday morning started with the new researchers' section of the conference and the presentation of three papers. The first was given by Dr Susan Kilby, who examined 'Hidden peasant economies: how the other half lived in late medieval Lakenheath'. This paper essentially consisted of a case study of John de Wangford, probably the richest peasant in Lakenheath. Kilby suggested that it was unlikely that de Wangford earned a living purely through sheep farming. He held a reasonable quantity of freehold land and there is

evidence of a direct correlation between wealth and sheep farming. Other peasants were reliant on the fisheries for a living. Richard Lericok depleted the entire contents of one fishery and as a result ended up in court. Kilby concluded that in order to understand landscape and peasant economies it is necessary to look at occupations and incomes beyond farming and good arable land.

The second paper of the morning was my own which explored the 'The rural community through the eyes of the land agent on the Dorset and Somerset estate of the marquis of Anglesey: William Castleman and his sons, 1812–1854'.

The final paper of this section was given by Matthew Holmwood and was titled 'Understanding rural migration in late nineteenth-century England: taking research to a new level'. The speaker pointed out that this study formed part of his PhD and was a work in progress. After presenting the historiography of rural migration, Holmwood explained that in the past looking at individuals from a random data set often produced results that were too broad to be of worth historically. He argued that village sampling took the wider ideas down to the parish level and explained his new methodology and the reasoning behind his selection of villages and locations. For the study he had identified 36 villages in three counties, Sussex, Norfolk and Northumberland. He had transcribed 15,000 names from the censuses, establishing those who stayed at home and those who migrated. In this study he had not counted sons and daughters who migrated with their parents.

The next to address the conference was Dr David Stead who presented 'Agricultural policy lessons for Ireland from the hot, dry summer of 1976'. He suggested that throughout the twenty-first century drought is predicted to become more prevalent.

The ideas in his paper form an essential element of the debate surrounding risk management in farming and food security. The research is important because no one has ever undertaken a political economy study of Irish agriculture during 1976. As part of his research Stead investigated policy response with particular emphasis on the potato sector. During the crisis export restrictions had been placed on potatoes and steps taken to prevent smuggling. However he suggested the policy lessons for the future should not be determined by one case. One issue is that a balance needs to be achieved between the often-competing interests of farmers and consumers. Local authority water providers in Ireland were in the process of being merged into one utility and in the event of future droughts cohesive action could then be taken. Stead concluded that more research

was required into the impact of weather induced food price inflation particularly on low-income consumers in Ireland and other developed countries. The debate afterwards centred around whether history could have a role to play in guiding future agricultural policies.

To celebrate our host organization, the Federation of Women's Institutes, in place of the usual Tuesday afternoon trip it had been decided instead to feature a panel session focusing on women in the countryside over time. The first paper was presented by Dr Rebecca Andrew and investigated 'The Girls' Friendly Society in the Lake District in the 1930s'. The Girls' Friendly Society was founded by Mrs Townsend in 1874 to protect and guide young country girls who moved into domestic service in the cities. The leaders had to belong to and regularly attend church while its members were young unmarried women, of virtuous character and epitomizing chastity. The leaders were mainly upper class and meetings held in their homes sharpened the social divide. Many of the girls attended because it provided a 'night out' and a break from their routine. Overall the aim of the movement was to promote moral fortitude. The countryside was seen as a strongly moral place and it was these morals the GFS sought to protect when the girls moved into more urban areas.

The second paper was presented by Dr Sian Edwards and surveyed 'Good wives and citizens: gender and the Young Farmers' Clubs in 1950s England'. This association was formed in the 1920s to prepare young people for their future on the land. Women had to be proficient at home and on the farm. During the 1950s these clubs received governmental funding which helped to provide vital training and opportunities for socialization. For rural women life as a wife and mother was almost unavoidable, but farming from world war two onwards was classed as a male occupation. However it was proposed that women remained important for rearing the next generation, and female classes included farm craft lessons and were closely related to productivity. The paper concluded that the rural housewife during this period was the lynch-pin of society.

Dr Rachel Ritchie presented the final paper of the afternoon entitled 'Rural life and fashionable dress in Post-War Britain'. It suggested that before the 1960s ideas of modernity within the countryside were rare. Barbour and 'wellies' were classed as rural chic but did not reflect what people actually wore. Home and Country typically portrayed an outdoor countryside setting that reflected the centrality of rural life. It recognized the problems rural women had in accessing shops. Kays catalogue advertised regularly in Home and Country, and the patterns contained the same

discourse used to describe fashion in upmarket magazines such as *Vogue*. Home dressmaking and knitting gave geographically isolated women access to fashion. Ritchie argued that the portrayal of the countryside in high-end magazines encouraged the idea that rural life was synonymous with fashion. Before supper delegates took the opportunity of walking in Denman's beautiful grounds to enjoy the early spring sunshine or partook of afternoon tea indoors.

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The second paper, 'The mistress of the estate is the best servant: women, property and estate management in the long eighteenth century', was presented by Dr Briony McDonagh. The proposition was that women owners have historically been ignored despite controlling around ten per cent of the land. The paper explored the theme by using a variety of women as examples and argued that women's involvement in estate management was illustrated in their account keeping. Elizabeth's Dryden's accounts were kept in her own hand and she continued this practice even after having a stroke. Elizabeth Somerset, fourth duchess of Beaufort, exerted considerable influence on both the management of the estate and its accounts and Mary Clarke managed both Chipley estate and its constituency. McDonagh argued that it should not be assumed that women left their estates to be run by male agents, many were personally involved in their daily

management and in pursuing improvements including enclosure. Women's clothing was impractical, particularly their shoes, which were not suitable for walking over their estates. Even with the issues surrounding impropriety women were clearly not confined just to the private domestic sphere and frequently proved very capable managers.

In the final paper of the conference, Dr Jeremy Burchardt and Nicholas Haigh examined 'Country childhood in twentieth-century England: perceptions and experiences'. John Creasey's collection at the Museum of English Rural Life had been used as the source for this research. It was suggested that the strength of this archive lay in its detailed first-hand accounts but weakened by its nostalgic retrospectiveness and patchy geographical coverage. Childhood emerged as a distinct phase of life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the paper maintained that childhood should be explored through a multi-disciplinary approach. During the early part of the twentieth century children's leisure time was usually spent outdoors. Children learnt through their activities, but boys were generally viewed as a destructive influence, hunting and carrying out acts of cruelty to animals and prone to bloodthirsty activities such as pig slaughters. This childhood was subject to gender interpretations. Conditions were frequently harsh and children subject to violence, smoking, sexual abuse, hunger, cold and poor nutrition. Children were often exploited and classed as a disposable form of labour for stone gathering, potato harvesting, and fruit picking. On a positive note village celebrations brought communities together, village characters and nicknames forged a sense of belonging, aided by a sense of collective fears, which might include gypsies, urban invaders, and spies from the next village. Childhood changed in the latter half of the twentieth century through car ownership, the growth of communications, village prosperity, mechanization, the impact of planning and heightened social issues. This paper created a lively question and answer session with many of the delegates querying whether the difference between urban and rural childhood were actually more blurred than this paper suggested.

The conference concluded after lunch and many thanks go once again to Dr Verdon for all her hard work in organizing another very successful conference.

