

Conference Report

The Society's Spring Conference, 2015

by Rebecca Ford

Seasonal winds and showers greeted members arriving in North Wales for the annual Spring Conference, which was held at the University of Bangor from 30 March to 1 April. They provided a bracing start to a stimulating and sociable event, which had been meticulously organized by Dr Nicola Verdon. The conference was well attended and, with speakers covering topics from landownership in Snowdonia to dairy farming in Sweden, there was something to suit all interests.

After the Society's 63rd annual general meeting, proceedings began in earnest with a paper presented by Nia Powell (University of Bangor/Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates). Entitled 'Pastoral prosperity and the bankrolling of polite society in early modern Wales', the paper challenged received assumptions about Wales – and also gave us the opportunity to brush up on, if not perfect, our pronunciation of Welsh place names. In the session, chaired by Professor Richard Hoyle, she argued that it was too easy to see Wales as merely barren and unproductive. By the eighteenth century it was not hard to find evidence of wealth. This could be seen in the gentry who were able to adopt the ostentatious lifestyle of their English brethren; their estate management became increasingly commercial in its approach, indeed so much so that it generated complaints of rapacious landlordism. Rents were revised upwards in the 1780s.

Within the uplands, the inventory evidence revealed a scatter of rich pastoral farmers who, to judge from their furnishings, enjoyed a high standard of living. They were well integrated into national markets as both the sellers of cattle but also purchasers of household goods. Some tenant farmers were liquid enough to lend to their landlords. Dr Powell suggested that they were helped, over much of the eighteenth century, by a reluctance to increase rents. The wealth of Wales might not look impressive when displayed as wealth per acre or thousand acres, but when aggregated, it

gave a very different impression of eighteenth-century Welsh society.

After dinner, the Welsh theme continued with a fascinating paper by Frances Richardson (University of Oxford) exploring the complexities of the contested ownership and uses of 'The wastes and commons of Snowdonia'. The session, chaired by Dr James Bowen, focused on a case study of the Hundred of Nantconwy in south-east Caernarvonshire. This was recorded in the 1352 Record of Caernarvon (which detailed land holdings at the time of the English conquest of Gwynedd) as extending over 50,000 acres. It comprised a mix of bond, monastic and freehold land; after the conquest, bond lands were assimilated into English Crown demesne. However, there was uncertainty over the precise boundaries of Crown lands and, after Welsh gentry began to amass estates in the sixteenth century, disputes occurred with increasing frequency. Landowners, tenants and later the poor, encroached on Crown wastes, regarding them as 'no man's land'.

During the nineteenth century, the expansion of slate quarrying, as well as the popularity of grouse shooting and trout fishing, reinforced landowners' desire to assert their rights over the wastes. Richardson detailed various disputes and revealed how uncertainty over ownership often acted to the advantage of local people, who established smallholdings on the commons. The Crown regulated, rather than prevented, encroachment and from the 1860s adopted a policy of maintaining 'wastes as wastes'. Today, 5000 acres of 'waste' in the area is registered common land, owned by the National Trust.

Tuesday saw Professor Jane Whittle chairing the New Researchers' session, which began, rather appropriately, with a paper on seeds delivered by Elizabeth Scott (University of East Anglia). Entitled 'The nature of seeds: science and seed improvement, c.1560–1700', the paper drew on literary sources to compare scientific

knowledge of seeds in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the sixteenth century, the Aristotelian notion that plants could change species and that a masculine cosmic force was required for a seed to grow, still held sway. The literature of the period reflected this. Francis Bacon, we heard, claimed that seeds could theoretically be altered by man to produce different species. However, by the seventeenth century, authors were critically appraising and disputing his theories in horticultural publications. A fundamental change occurred in scientific thinking: the seed was now considered to contain a species-specific blueprint that controlled every phase of the plant's existence.

By the later seventeenth century, it was held that a seed contained all parts of the plant in embryonic form. Investigators, now aided by microscopes, noted that all seeds had a 'neb' from which the root emerged. This knowledge, explained Scott, was applied to agriculture by the improvers of the Hartlib circle, who produced sowing machines that allowed the root to make instant contact with the earth and so increase yield. These laid the basis for Jethro Tull's horse-drawn seed drill.

Then came my own paper "'Queen of cress': the place of women in watercress production, c.1860–1945', after which Jane Rowling (University of Leicester) took to the floor to speak about 'Boundaries, belonging and oral history: Lower Warfedale's farming community, 1914–1950'. The boundaries referred to were social as much as physical and material came from interviews Rowling conducted thanks to her position as a perceived 'insider'. The study focused on Otley auction mart, one of a diminishing number of livestock markets in England and a segregated space with its own rules and customs. It was also decidedly male, as evidenced by the sizeable urinal at its heart – proudly depicted on a nineteenth-century OS map. Today, we heard, the male toilets are still conveniently central, whilst those for women – not recorded by the OS until the 1960s – occupy a small site on the periphery.

Differing definitions of the 'local' were then illustrated by residents' sketch maps of the town, before the session concluded with a discussion of the importance of clothing and convention at the mart. The most important tradition to be observed, even today, is the awarding of 'luck money' – a small sum the vendor gives to the buyer as a gesture of confidence in the traded animal. The paper provoked much discussion amongst delegates, with questions covering the market's customs – as well as its conveniences.

The New Researchers' session was followed by coffee, after which Dr Carin Martiin (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) discussed 'Swedish dairy farming: the parallel existence of two different

systems of production, 1890s–1960s'. Chaired by Dr Paul Brassley, the presentation revealed that, although commercial dairy production increased in Sweden in the late nineteenth century, it did not replace traditional systems. Milk production continued to be subsistence-oriented until the late 1940s. This was explained by the fact that small herds predominated and milk had to travel long distances to reach the dairy plants. In addition, farmers consumed much of their own milk. It was only the advent of wartime food regulation, easier transport and the strengthening of dairy co-operatives that led to increased commercialization.

Cattle tended to be poorly fed on subsistence units. A typical diet included hay and straw, together with *sörpa* – a 'soup' made from grain, leaves, lichen and moss. This was not only nutrient-poor but also hard to digest, resulting in lower milk yields. Life on the farm, we heard, was depicted by children in *The Milk Propaganda*, a farmers' journal of the 1930s. By the late 1940s, the parallel dairying systems had merged but the growing welfare state placed more importance on urban-industrial development than on smallholder dairy farming. The number of herds has now declined from approximately 270,000 to around 4500.

The field trip that afternoon took us to Hafod y Llan, a National Trust farm in the foothills of Mount Snowdon. A working farm, it is part of a larger estate purchased by the Trust in 1998 after a public appeal: £5 million was raised in 100 days, a handy £1 million coming from Sir Anthony Hopkins. We learned that they farm Welsh Black cattle and mountain sheep, work in partnership with organizations such as Wales Young Farmers, and generate most of their income by producing hydro-electric power. Welcome sunshine appeared for our farm tour in which we saw the power plant, a farmhouse being turned into a holiday cottage, the cattle shed and, rather unexpectedly, several alpacas. These have been introduced to deter foxes – a task they have accomplished with great success. Our visit ended with tea and excellent cakes at Caffi Gwynant, a converted early nineteenth-century chapel. Back in Bangor, we ended the day with a convivial conference dinner.

The next morning Dr Matthew Tompkins (University of Winchester) gave us a tantalizing glimpse of the research possibilities of digitization with a paper about 'The on-line 15th-century inquisitions post mortem database: a new tool for rural history'. The inquisitions post mortem (IPM) were the sworn inquiries of lands held at death by tenants of the crown. They provide information such as the value of lands, the manors owned, and how they were held. Since the monarch could take property if an heir was a minor, heirs were

named and had to produce proof of their age. In the session, chaired by Dr John Broad, we learned that 'Mapping the Medieval Countryside: Places, People, and Properties' a project to publish an online, searchable, English translation of IPMs, is nearing completion. Text covering the years 1399–1422 has been enhanced with, for instance, the addition of the names of around 40,000 IPM jurors. The project has enormous potential: incidence of plague can, for example, be traced through IPMs, which increased in number during the year 1420, peaking in August – a reflection of the seasonality of the disease. The digitized texts will be freely available at British History Online.

The next session was chaired by Dr Nicola Verdon and saw Dr Sarah Holland (Sheffield Hallam University) present a lively paper entitled: "Blooming lasses and lusty lads": a northern case study of farm service and hiring fairs in mid nineteenth century England'. Using Doncaster district for her case study, and drawing on information from local newspapers as well as the parliamentary commissions into agriculture, Holland discussed fluctuations in hiring patterns and wage demands, with buoyancy of hiring at Doncaster fairs (or 'Statutes') decreasing from the 1840s. The public nature of the event allowed workers to assert themselves and bargain for higher wages, but also created a gap between the most and least experienced. By the 1870s, girls for milking and dairying were able to demand as much as £10; those working in farmhouses could only expect £6–9.

Hiring fairs were not just economic places but also social spaces and, as such, became increasingly moralized. Objectors were mainly concerned about the way in which Statutes demoralized and commodified

farm servants, whilst also attracting 'disorderly persons'; newspapers frequently reported petty crimes and assaults. Holland revealed that the Doncaster clergy played a pioneering role in reforming hiring practice, establishing a register of farm servants in the 1840s in order to secure them work prior to the Statutes. This was later formalized in other areas with the establishment of register offices.

Professor Henry French chaired the final paper, 'English agricultural development, 1270–1870: reflections on new estimates of output and productivity', in which Professor Mark Overton spoke about the implications of his new work on calculating English and British GDP has for the story of the development of English agriculture. Drawing on his new book *British Economic Growth, 1270–1870*,¹ he began by explaining how they had measured GDP by estimating agricultural output, then moved on to discuss how these estimates were cross-checked against estimates of food consumption: i.e. by seeing whether sufficient calories were produced to feed the population. Assuming a mean daily requirement of 2000 calories per person, the study revealed that, given a choice, consumers preferred to get their calories from high-quality sources: bread made from wheat flour, rather than rye, for instance. Overton concluded by explaining the complexities of characterizing agricultural development in Malthusian or Smithian terms, after which an animated discussion ensued, with questions ranging from the effect the Act of Union had on output to the changing calorific output of bullocks. It was a stimulating end to an enjoyable conference and all were grateful to Dr Nicola Verdon for organizing the event.

¹ S. Broadberry, B. Campbell, A. Klein, M. Overton and B. van Leeuwen, *British Economic Growth, 1270–1870* (2015).