

Conference Report

The Society's Spring Conference, 2016

by Catherine Glover

The Society held its 2016 Spring Conference at Wortley Hall, the stately home in South Yorkshire rebuilt by Sir Edward Wortley-Montagu in the 1740s and '50s and the seat of the Earls of Wharnccliffe until the Second World War, after which it was bought by a cooperative of trade union activists as an educational and holiday centre. It made a pleasant change for conference delegates to be able to eat, sleep, socialize and attend conference sessions all under the same roof, and not have to brave the early spring weather when moving from one activity to another. Some of the bedrooms were extremely commodious and delegates could speculate as to which illustrious trade unionists had formerly slept in them.

After the Society's 64th AGM, in recognition of the trade union connection, Nick Mansfield, of the University of Central Lancashire, opened the proceedings with an illustrated talk on 'Sites of rural labour: places, buildings and people, 1830–1930'. These included Owenite colonies, including the one at Queenswood, Hants, which bankrupted Owen; Chartist communities and the caves at Llangynidr in South Wales, where they were supposed to have made and stored pikes; non-conformist wayside Bethels; village Friendly Society halls and reading rooms; holiday camps and convalescent homes of the trades unions and the cooperative societies; the clubhouses of the Clarion movement; and the sites associated with the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

Unfortunately, what might have been an opportunity for past-president of the Society, David Hey, to welcome delegates to his home turf became a memorial meeting for David, who had, sadly, died a few weeks earlier. A regular at these conferences for many years, Professor Hey was greatly missed. In place of his scheduled talk on the Wortleys of Wortley Hall, on Monday evening Richard Hoyle stepped in, keeping us entertained while some of us were digesting a very heavy pudding, with a paper about a local man called Robin Hood,

dispelling the myth about him robbing the rich to feed the poor and suggesting that the fourteenth-century stories were an attempt to answer the question 'Who was Robin Hood?' about a man who only ever existed in the imagination.

The New Researchers session started with a fascinating account by Christoph Otte of the University of Edinburgh on 'The early medieval settlement landscape of Dumfriesshire – A case study of the parish of Lochmaben, c.600–1000 AD'. This work-in-progress paper introduced a methodological approach to studying the relation between settlement patterns and land use. The challenge of this county lies in the scarcity of contemporary written evidence, such as saints' lives and chronicles, and even more so in the lack of sources pertaining to agricultural arrangements, such as charters and other estate accounts. Therefore, the methodology employed a number of different disciplines, such as place-name studies, archaeology, agricultural population and land-use estimates, early modern estate maps and GIS spatial analysis.

The parish of Lochmaben was used as an exemplary case study due to its central role in the medieval lordship of Annandale. It was argued that the parish boundaries were particularly suited for creating comparable case studies within the county due to their possible connection with early medieval territorial boundaries or estates, as suggested by Glanville R. J. Jones and other scholars of the 'multiple estate' model.

The focus of the presentation was the question of how the hierarchy of a given settlement landscape, in the sense of possible estate centres and dependent settlements, could be explored without the availability of written evidence. The methodology involved three steps. Firstly, a detailed analysis of the place-name evidence was used to identify potentially early medieval settlements and farms within the parish. In a second step, eighteenth-century maps and estate plans were

used to reconstruct the agricultural landscape and land potential of the parish into a rough dichotomy of pastoral and arable lands. The population estimates of Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart were then applied to these soil capabilities to gauge the relative number of people who could be supported by each settlement based on its surrounding land. This agricultural dimension of settlement hierarchy was complemented in a third step, which explored the role of military and social, rather than agricultural, factors for the location and status of settlements. It was argued that a higher density of late prehistoric and early medieval fortifications in a given area reflected upon the investments which societies were prepared to make in that particular landscape, in terms of large-scale labour and cooperation. Since this paper presented work in progress, no final conclusions could be drawn, but within the parish of Lochmaben both the agricultural potential and the fortification density point to the focal settlements being on the eastern boundary, along the River Annan.

The other paper in the session, given by Joshua Rhodes of the University of Exeter, was on 'The development of agrarian capitalism in England from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries'. The debate on this topic has shifted in recent years from a focus on calculating farm sizes to measuring the extent to which English agrarian society had been proletarianized. Leigh Shaw-Taylor has provided a valuable contribution to the literature through his analysis of the ratio of farmers to wage labourers as a proxy with which to measure agrarian capitalism. Given this new focus on wage labour as a measure of agrarian capitalism we need to know more about what determined the employment of wage labour on farms. Above a certain size all farms needed wage labour but on 'smaller' farms the ratio between family and wage labour was more changeable. The paper considered some of the problems with using wage labour as an indication of agrarian capitalism through an analysis of some 1851 census data.

Rhodes demonstrated that the size of a farmer's family might determine the number of wage labourers he or she needed to employ. He did so by comparing the number of labourers employed on farms with the number of family members able to work on the farm. He found that farmers with larger families employed fewer labourers than small families did on farms of the same size. He suggested that the ratio of family to wage labourers on a farm was determined by a range of factors, only one of which might have been the number of children able to work on the farm. Other factors may have included the social status of the family and

the availability of off-farm work. Furthermore, the recourse to hiring wage labourers may have changed over the course of the family's life cycle. Rhodes argued that more research on farmers' decisions to employ wage labourers is needed.

After coffee, Sarah Carter from the University of Alberta broadened our horizons in her exposition of 'British Women Homesteaders, Farmers and Ranchers on the Canadian Prairies, 1880s-1920s'. In the late nineteenth century, British proponents of agriculture for women, emigration associations, colonial training schools, and imperially minded journalists advocated farming for 'gentlewomen' in the colonies, particularly Canada. A number of factors and causes intersected and overlapped to create modest momentum for this initiative, including alarm about the 'surplus' women of Britain, the opposition to women farmers or horticulturalists in the 'mother country,' and the fact that there had to be better options than housework to tempt British women to cross the Atlantic.

A significant number of British women farmed the Canadian prairies. The best known was Georgina Binnie-Clark of Fort Qu'Appelle Saskatchewan, who grew wheat, published two books about her experiences, and lectured widely in Canada and England about the opportunities for women agriculturalists to contribute to the 'spade-work of Empire'. But there were many other farmers and ranchers, including the famous (although short-lived) Isobel 'Jack' May, notorious for dressing in 'male attire'. The majority had to purchase land because single and married women were denied the free homestead grant of 160 acres available to any male. Widows with children were entitled to the homestead grant and there were many British widows who acquired and farmed large acreages. Single women obtained farms through purchasing South African scrip that entitled the owner to 320 acres of land (the 'scrip' was issued to veterans of the Boer war, as specified by the Volunteer Bounty Land Act), such as Lizzie Hillis, from Ireland. Lady Ernestine Hunt was an Alberta horse rancher, and Jean Laidlaw was a cattle rancher on land acquired from the Piikani First Nation.

But Canada proved an uncongenial environment for many of these farmers. The land laws discriminated against women, and British women spearheaded an unsuccessful and troubled campaign for the extension of the homestead grant exclusively to British women. There was persistent opposition to women as farmers and other obstacles and constraints. In prairie Canada, crafted as a colony of the British Empire, British women were to be exemplars of an idealized white femininity and were not to toil and sweat in the fields.

In the afternoon, we again assembled in the comfortable Library of Wortley Hall for a session dedicated to the memory of David Hey. Henry French recalled David's 'Myddle Years', during which he was seduced away from his own locality to writing a social and topographical history of the Shropshire parish recorded in the detailed account of its eighteenth-century resident, Richard Gough. Peter Edwards then brought us back to the West Riding and Wortley Hall via the connection between two men noted for horsemanship and horse breeding, William Cavendish, first duke of Newcastle (1592–1676) and Sir Francis Wortley (second baronet, c.1615–1665). A number of those present reminisced about David and discussed what made him such an individual historian.

Delegates spent the rest of the afternoon taking the air in the grounds of Wortley Hall, although we were disappointed that we never penetrated its secret garden, as staff failed to find the right key. The Annual Dinner was a pleasant affair, the pudding weighing not quite so heavily as it had the day before.

On the Wednesday morning, Jordan Claridge of the London School of Economics gave a paper on 'Entrepreneurialization and commercialization in the medieval English dairy industry, 1250–1450', which explored the emerging entrepreneurialization of the dairy industry in medieval England against a backdrop of changing economic conditions between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The expansion of pastoral agriculture, of which the dairy industry was a significant component, was a major catalyst for economic growth in England and across Europe. Beginning in the fourteenth century, the pastoral sector underwent long-term expansion and intensification, to the point where it accounted for 50 per cent of agricultural production by 1850, about double that of 1300. The paper examined the shift of dairy production from the seigneurial sector, where dairy herds were owned and managed by landlords as part of mixed demesne farming, to something more entrepreneurial, where dairy operations were leased to independent farmers. An examination of dairy leases from 1250 to 1450 reveals that leasing rates remained relatively static over a period of almost one hundred years despite dramatic year-on-year variations in the price of inputs like fodder and pasture, but also changes in the prices farmers could fetch at market for dairy products. Dairy leases, therefore, seem to have provided a steady income to lords at a rate palatable to peasants. Claridge found little evidence of increasing specialization or 'up-scaling' of dairy operations after the shift from seigneurial to entrepreneurial dairying. The sizes

of most dairy herds tended to be about 20 cows on seigneurial farms and remained the same when herds were leased. These small herd sizes may be indicative of limited capital investment in the industry which left most risk in the hands of the lord.

This was followed a paper by Paul Warde of the University of Cambridge, on 'Soil, sustainability, and the fate of empires, c.1750–1450'. His paper traced the emergence of the belief that society could be undermined by poor management of the soil, and discussed the application of these ideas to history in the nineteenth century. Warde presented an argument that such ideas only really became current with the development of new theories of the soil from the mid-eighteenth century, that they contained a 'vital', life-giving element, and the incorporation of this idea into circulatory theories of plant nutrition that required recycling, especially through manure. Even when agricultural chemistry was transformed – especially by Liebig and Boussingault – from the 1830s, these ideas were retained and increasingly used as an explanation for the fall of the Roman Empire and the apparent decline into sterility of other regions. The paper concluded by examining how these arguments moved across the Atlantic by the middle of the century to become part of debates about tariffs, westward colonization, and the over-taxing of the soil through supplying urban centres and exports; and hence led some to argue that American 'empire' too rested on care for the soil.

The proceedings were brought to a close with a paper by Anne Meredith on 'Women gardeners and the First World War'. This paper explored how the First World War impacted on a small number of middle-class women, complementing recent work by Bonnie White and Nicola Verdon on women and the Women's Land Army. These women had obtained a professional training in horticulture by attending one of the horticultural colleges or gardening schools established around the turn of the century. Like their sisters on the Prairies, they found opportunities were restricted, with, for example, employment in large private gardens being closed to them. However the war meant that experienced male gardeners were in short supply and so the trained woman gardener was reluctantly employed. Large private gardens employed trained women gardeners to replace head gardeners and journeymen with for example the gardens at Windsor Castle employing women from January 1916. Kew Gardens also employed women, with over 20 posts being filled by them. Nurseries and market gardens

also employed women, though the paper demonstrated that the evidence for this was fragmentary with it being difficult to identify the trained woman gardener as opposed to unskilled female labour. The final section of the paper looked at war work ranging from providing fruit and vegetables to a Red Cross hospital to service in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). The gardeners serving in the WAAC tended war cemeteries in France and the paper drew on oral evidence and college magazines to explore this area. The end of the war saw the pre-war employment status quo restored.

Women were 'let go' and the early 1920s were to be difficult years for the women gardener. However a few women were able to expand their expertise and so take advantage of the restricted employment opportunities open to them. The women working in horticulture and agriculture had demonstrated that they could replace men and when war loomed again, by August 1939, 30,000 women had already been enrolled in the Women's Land Army.

Delegates thanked Nicola Verdon for once again organizing a very satisfying and enjoyable conference.