

Conference Report

The Society's Winter Conference, 2015

'Occupations, work and gender in rural Britain, from the fourteenth to the twentieth century'

by Imogene Dudley

The annual Winter Conference was held at the familiar location of the Institute for Historical Research in London. The wide-reaching theme and a strong cast of speakers ensured a healthy turnout of members. The first paper, from Professor Richard Smith of the University of Cambridge, asked the question 'How agricultural was the employment structure of England in 1381?' After establishing that England was primarily agrarian, with only a minority urban population, the focus was on the accuracy of the data gathered for the 1381 poll tax. He reviewed the previous work of Clark (2013), who used the data from 335 villis in addition to Oxford and York, adding up to 26,000 people, and Broadberry *et al* (2015), who utilized information from 22 counties, amounting to 30,000 people in 892 villis. There are three primary issues with these sources, which were recognized by Clark and emphasized by Professor Smith. First, that the labelling of male occupations is problematic, with the term *filius* being especially vague; second, that only an extremely small minority of women were assigned an occupation, being more frequently referred to by their marital status, and third, the physical deterioration of the sources themselves. It was found that both men and women with known occupations worked in the categories of agriculture, industry (including mining) and service. The large urban share in the samples affected the findings considerably. The assignation of 'labourer', found to refer to 15 per cent of Broadberry's sample and 16 per cent of Clark's, is problematic: manual labour, certainly, but pertaining to which of the above categories?

One of Smith's criticisms of Broadberry *et al* was their assumption that women worked only 30 per cent

of the available days due to childcare and housewifely duties, an assumption derived from nineteenth-century census data. Professor Smith argued that this does not allow for single women or the economic reality of post-Black Death society. In the poll tax sources, the most common occupation for women was service, but this excludes the valuable economic labour (inside and outside the household) of the wives and daughters of the male taxpayers, work which was hidden by the nature of the data source. It was concluded that both studies failed to be cautious about the nature of the sources used, the poll taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381. All of these heavily underrepresented women and the hugely unpopular poll tax of 1381 saw significant evasion. The discrepancy is evident when the results of all three poll taxes are reviewed together. The designations of 'servant' and 'labourer' were used interchangeably and, in 1381 especially, there is a marked lack of young men and single women. In the future, these issues should be carefully considered, especially the absence of women and how to treat wives and daughters of farmers whose work was valuable but went unmentioned.

Second on the programme was Professor Jane Whittle of the University of Exeter. She gave a paper entitled 'So what is work exactly? Examining women's and men's work activities in early modern rural England'. It outlined the difficulties of determining a definition of work for the project she is currently undertaking with Dr Mark Hailwood. This is an exploration of women's waged work in early modern England in the rural south-west which is funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Professor Whittle described two main methodological issues which had to be surmounted. The first she

referred to as the 'domestic work' problem. Women's work has often been described as 'domestic'. This refers to the types of tasks typically undertaken by women (housework), the location of female labour (in the household) and the market orientation of women's work (goods produced for household use). The use of the term 'domestic' is unhelpful when related to early modern sources. Even 'domestic servants' cannot be found in pre-1700 records; instead, qualifiers such as 'best' or 'common' servant, or specializations such as 'dairymaid' and 'maltmaid' are used. The second main methodological issue was the 'boundaries of economy' problem. Historians have attempted to separate household work from economic production, where in reality this production boundary was hazy. The household was central to all means of production and not designated as a private and domestic sphere. Men would do unpaid work in the household and women rarely spent more than half their time on housework. There was no contemporary division – all work was done for the survival of the household. In 1923, Margaret Reid argued that if unpaid tasks – such as cooking, cleaning and childcare – could be performed for wages elsewhere, then they should be counted as work.

Professor Whittle then outlined the details of the project itself. It seeks to apply Reid's 'third party criterion' to England for the first time. It will illuminate women's work, more specifically the location, hours and commercial orientation, through examining church court depositions, quarter sessions examinations and coroner inquests. However, the issues faced by the project have been considerable: deciding what to include and exclude, setting up workable databases and widening its scope from incidental evidence to anything work related in the sources. It had been decided to exclude theft and legal related work, as these would be over represented due to the nature of the sources. Another exclusion is instances of people 'ordering', 'asking' or 'willing' someone to do work, unless this specifically involved time or travel, a decision of practicality rather than principle. Professor Whittle then presented preliminary results of the project. These have shown that most categories of work were performed by both sexes, although there was a gender division of labour within these categories. 'Domestic' work, as predicted, has been difficult to classify, as people were paid to do housework and products made in the home were sold elsewhere. Further details and updates on the project can be found on its website, earlymodernwomenswork.wordpress.com.

After a buffet lunch, which afforded the opportunity to mingle and discuss the morning's

papers, the conference reconvened for two more talks in the afternoon. Dr Sebastian Keibek and Dr Leigh Shaw-Taylor, of the University of Cambridge, presented a highly empirical paper entitled 'The (male) occupational structure of rural England and Wales, 1381–1911'. This involved data and theories from a project currently being run by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, which is funded primarily by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Leverhulme Trust, the Isaac Newton Trust and the British Academy. The sources used are the 1377–81 poll taxes, sixteenth-century coroner's inquests, baptisms and censuses. These chart a modest change over the medieval period, with a small decline in agriculture and an increase in secondary and tertiary industries. The period 1650–1750 saw the masculinization of agriculture, with a modest diversification of the secondary sector and then a rapid labour-intensive shift to the secondary sector due to increased consumption. There was a similarity to Professor Smith's paper in the difficulty in attributing the occupational status of 'labourers'. The proportion of labourers working in agriculture declined from 84 per cent in the early nineteenth century to 73 per cent in 1851. This varied from county to county, ranging from 40 per cent to 90 per cent, with the highest in the south east and the lowest in Wales and the north, areas which possessed mainly small, family farms. Data from probate accounts are heavily biased and need to be calibrated with other local data such as parish registers to gain a more accurate picture. Farmers moved to less labour-intensive crops towards the end of the period whilst the tertiary sector grew in the nineteenth century. The paper's conclusions were that a focus was needed on regional patterns, rather than national, in addition to the interplay between regional specialization and British economic success.

The final paper of the conference was given by Dr Nicola Verdon of Sheffield Hallam University, on 'Gender, class and meanings of work in the Great War: the Women's War Agricultural Committees (WWACs).' Due to no contemporary attempt to centralize records, the social composition and work of these committees remain mostly unknown. They were initially formed in February 1916 to encourage young women to perform much needed agricultural labour instead of defecting to better paid industrial work, and there were 63 WWACs country-wide by the summer. However, they faced many challenges. They were sub-committees to the War Agricultural Committees, who could refuse to cooperate with their female counterparts. No official rules were issued, leaving the committees with freedom but also meaning that their success depended on the

efficiency of the women who ran them. Dr Verdon made the Bedfordshire committee her focus due to the extensive surviving records. It was led by well-known members of county society who already had extensive experience of volunteering and sitting on committees. There were many reasons an upper middle class woman would involve herself: not only was it often an extension of duties they already undertook, they also possessed the time, resources, social capital and the self-confidence to make a difference. In some instances both a husband and wife had seats on the relevant War Agricultural Committees. The WWAC divided the county into 15 districts, each with their own representative on the committee, and attempted to increase the numbers of female agricultural workers through demonstrations and recruitment drives. From 1917, the focus was on establishing and promoting the Women's Land Army, which initially had a slow uptake. Problems included finding suitable accommodation, negotiating between the landladies, farmers and workers, and the expense of training and housing the women. The Bedfordshire WWAC saw the welfare

of the women as a priority, attempting to oversee conditions and provide wholesome leisure activities. After the war was over, numbers of female agricultural workers decreased, which suggests that the majority did not view the work as transformative, although 60 women were kept on independently in the county. Overall, an exploration of the WWACs highlights the complexity of female agricultural employment on a local level, the difficulties in getting women to register and the practical issues in attempting to train, feed, house and supervise a women's land army.

The day concluded with an expression of thanks towards Dr Paul Warde for organizing the conference, in addition to a reminder that members can now pay online for events and publications. It was also announced that a prize has been established in the name of Joan Thirsk, whom many will remember with affection. This will be awarded annually by the society for the best book in British or Irish rural or agrarian history. Any donations towards the prize fund in Joan's memory are hugely welcomed, either via the website or a cheque to the Treasurer.