

Conference Report

The Society's Spring Conference, 2017

by Rebecca Ford

Members were greeted with daffodils, lambs, and even sunshine when they arrived at Plumpton College, near Lewes, for this year's Spring Conference. Organized by Dr Carl Griffin together with Professor Brian Short, it ran from 3 to 5 of April. The venue started life as a farm, created by the County Agricultural Committee in 1917, so it was appropriate that both animals and wartime farming were recurrent themes.

After the society's 65th annual general meeting, the conference began with 'Clare Leighton's depictions of rural England in the 1930s', a fascinating paper by Professor Clare Griffiths (Cardiff University), examining the intersections of art history and rural history through the work of one artist. In the paper, chaired by Dr Paul Brassley, we heard how Leighton (1898–1989) studied wood engraving – a medium which lends itself to nostalgic images – when it was enjoying something of a revival in England. She illustrated posters for the Empire Marketing Board and London Transport, as well as her own books. These included *The Farmer's Year: A Calendar of English Husbandry* (1933), highlighting aspects of agricultural labour, and *The Wood that Came Back* (1934), a children's 'ecological fable' that commented on the suburbanization of the countryside. London-born Leighton re-fashioned herself as a countrywoman. She moved to Buckinghamshire, building her own house at Monks Risborough in 1933. Professor Griffiths informed us that the house was demolished in 2013 after English Heritage failed to get it listed. Leighton later emigrated to New England, where she continued to explore her notions of the universality of rural life and work. Perhaps because her work is not consumed in galleries, Leighton is largely ignored by art historians. However, as Professor Griffiths demonstrated, this prolific author and artist warrants closer attention.

The next speaker was Dr Harvey Osborne (University of Suffolk) whose paper, 'John Bright's

Poacher, 1804–1891' occupied the difficult 'post-dinner, pre-bar' slot – particularly demanding on this occasion, as members had sampled a snooze-inducing meal of chicken pie followed by apple pie. However, he rose to the 'pastry challenge' with aplomb and all remained alert as he revealed the unlikely alliances formed in the mid-1840s when the debate over the repeal of the Corn Laws intersected with questions on the game laws, and the impact of game preservation on the economy and society of rural Britain. The paper, chaired by Dr Carl Griffin, focused on Frederick Gowing from Suffolk, the archetypal poacher-turned-gamekeeper. Boyhood assistant to the gamekeepers on the Sudbourne Estate, Gowing later emerges as a 'sailor'. This was probably a euphemism for 'smuggler', as he was working in the coastal trade off Snape – a lawless parish. After 1827, he ran a poaching network and was only rarely prosecuted. It was a lucrative business that boomed after 1831, when a game licensing system was introduced. This permitted an individual to be in possession of dead or live game and was a loophole Gowing gleefully exploited. In 1845, a Select Committee set up by the anti-Corn Law campaigner, John Bright, examined how protectionist game laws worked against tenant farmers, because the game damaged their crops. Gowing testified that farmers frequently turned a blind eye to poaching. He also revealed that landlords were complicit in a black market in live game, supplementing stocks at the end of the shooting season with birds, leverets and eggs sourced from poachers. Dr Osborne speculated that the campaigners never forgot his assistance, for a few years later Gowing is found working as a gamekeeper in Warwickshire on the Welcombe House estate – then owned by an Anti-Corn Law League campaigner and associate of one of the members of the Select Committee.

Next day, Professor Brian Short chaired the first session, in which Dr Mark Gardner (Queen's

University Belfast) discussed 'The changing character of transhumance in early and later medieval England'. Defining it as 'a movement of animals over some distance according to a seasonal cycle in a recurring manner', Dr Gardner reflected on the practice and its contribution to the agrarian economy over the long term. Citing archaeological and landscape evidence, Dr Gardner identified three phases of transhumance – each having distinctive characteristics. It was certainly not always restricted to the uplands and had a social, as well as an agricultural dimension. In England it was a strategy of land use – the summer pastures not necessarily differing in quality to the winter ones. Transhumance facilitated nutrient transfer – allowing farmers to exploit distant resources and bring them back in the form of fattened animals, butter or cheese. It concentrated nutrients, in order to prepare the ground for cultivation or suppress tree growth in woodland. In later centuries its purpose might have been to preserve fodder around the home farm for winter. However, for the earlier period, when the population density was fairly low and there was less pressure on land, transhumance would have had the benefit of keeping animals away from arable crops without having to establish and maintain hedges and ditches. In some instances it also helped to define boundaries, through usage and occupation. Transhumance, he concluded, was a dynamic and far from peripheral practice.

The next scheduled speaker, Professor Louise Curth (University of Winchester), was unable to attend, so members were given a link to an online version of her paper on 'Brute beasts, health and illness in early modern England'. Dr Carl Griffin (University of Sussex) stepped into the breach with 'Topologies of Tenderness and Violence: Human-Animal Relations in Georgian England'. In the paper, chaired by Professor Henry French, he discussed the ways in which attitudes to animals changed as they became increasingly enclosed. The relationships were complex and, while concerns for animal welfare rose, there were many instances of targeted maiming. There was often an 'inversion of care' – a Sussex shepherd, for instance, cut the throats of 8 lambs to take revenge on his employer, while a boy killed 21 lambs with an iron bar after his master hit him. Dogs were frequently attacked – not only out of fear, but also to get at the privilege and status of their owner; guard dogs belonging to the clergy were often harmed. Capital and status were intertwined with attitudes to animals, as evidenced by John Boulton's painting of 'The Durham Ox' (1802), an uncomfortably oversized prize beast that is still memorialized on many a pub sign. The animal toured the country for six years and people paid to view it – prize animals such

as this, suggested Dr Griffin, gave the public a sense of connection to the working spaces of country life. Pigs, Cobbett's 'national animal' were profoundly linked to the lives of the rural poor and frequently treated with affection – until they were killed. The paper – and the pigs in particular – provoked much subsequent discussion.

After coffee and the welcome appearance of a plate of biscuits, Professor Cherisse Jones-Branch (Arkansas State University) gave a paper entitled, "'Training as Will Fit Them for Their Work": Jeanes Supervising Industrial Teachers in Rural Jim Crow Arkansas, 1909–1950'. Jeanes supervisors, who supported teachers, were funded by a \$1 million endowment left in 1907 by Pennsylvania Quaker Anna T. Jeanes to support rudimentary African-American education in the rural South. The fund was run by white administrators but most of the supervisors were black women, as they were considered to have a stronger work ethic and an ability to navigate the dangerous spaces in which they worked. In the paper, which was chaired by Dr Nicola Verdon, we heard that the Arkansas Department of Education was keen to raise educational standards – but not too high. They set up summer institutes to train black teachers to 'teach children to use their hands as well as their brains,' and 'spread knowledge of how to avoid disease'. The aim was to produce a more industrious, sanitary, moral and tractable agricultural labour force. However, Jeanes supervisors still managed to enrich rural African-American schools – improving facilities, disseminating birth control information, hosting TB clinics and even challenging food insecurity by building canneries and planting vegetables. Years before the Civil Rights movement, Jeanes supervisors used their creativity to help poor rural black people help themselves.

After a short presentation on LIBRAL (Library of Rural and Agricultural Literature) by Professor Richard Hoyle and web designer Catherine Glover, delegates left for the field trip to the Weald and Downland Museum, a 'living museum' near Chichester. This has 50 vernacular buildings from south-east England. They have been saved from destruction by being dismantled, conserved and rebuilt on the 40-acre site. Our visit focused on Bayleaf Farmstead, a timber-framed house from Chiddingstone, originally dating from c.1405–30. That evening, during the conference dinner, the first Joan Thirsk Memorial Prize was presented to Professor Peter Jones (University of Birmingham) by Joan's son, Martin Thirsk.

The first paper the next morning was 'Plums, Potatoes and POWs: working with communities to explore the WWI rural home front in the West Midlands'. In the

paper, which was chaired by Professor Clare Griffiths, Professor Maggie Andrews (University of Worcester) discussed a collaborative WWI centenary project in Worcestershire and the issues involved in working with community groups. During WWI, the working classes and fighting forces consumed the bulk of their fruit in the form of jam – much of it made from plums grown around the market town of Pershore. Demand for labour in the market gardens led to high employment of children, travellers and POWs. Professor Andrews explained that the general public felt confident in contributing to research into food and worked with the team on events, exhibitions, recipe cards, tastings and the publication of a book. Although there were challenges involved in this type of research, she concluded that the group gained new skills and contributed valuable material, such as family diaries, to the project.

We were transported to the wild landscapes of nineteenth-century Sutherland for Dr Annie Tindley's (University of Newcastle) paper, 'The Land Agent in transnational context – new perspectives, new directions', chaired by Professor Richard Hoyle. Focusing on the Duke of Argyll's vast Sutherland territory – the largest landed estate in western Europe at the time – she discussed the role played by the 'factors' (land agents) and considered the impact their nationwide networks had on their work. Concentration of landownership into a small number of hands led to a similar concentration of estate administrators. Factors – generally recruited from outside the areas they managed – were men of immense social, political and economic influence – unpopular symbols of estate authority. This imposed an immense burden of responsibility. Their duties ranged from collecting rents and bookkeeping, to executing major estate improvements. Although extremely well paid, they were often lonely and isolated. They had to deal with the socio-economic impacts of agricultural depression and, later, tenant agitation for the reform of land tenure. It was no wonder that many turned to drink. In the paper Dr Tindley explained that rather than studying factors as diverse individuals, it was worth viewing them as members of a profession.

The conference concluded with the new researchers' session, chaired by Dr Carl Griffin. The first paper,

'Charcoal and wool: the role of woodland in the worsted revolution of West Yorkshire', came from Hywel Lewis (University of Bradford). In it, he unpicked the relationship between the specialist management of woodland in the South Pennines – used until the 1760s to produce charcoal for the iron industry – and the manufacture of worsted cloth. Worsted was first made in West Yorkshire in the 1690s and production increased throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wool was hand-straightened using metal combs heated by charcoal braziers and so, even when the iron industry switched to coke power, charcoal was still required. It was only in the 1840s, when wool combing was mechanized, that charcoal production ceased. Industrial demand, he concluded, was a significant force in shaping woodland management.

The second paper, by Felicity McWilliams (King's College London), "'They are slow, but they are very sure": the value of draught horses to British inter-war farming', looked at the distinctive status horses held on farms. Despite the drive for efficiency often thought to typify inter-war agriculture, horses were not immediately replaced by tractors. She discussed the emotional bond many farmers had with their horses, which they viewed as co-workers and trusty friends. Tractors might have ploughed faster, but many felt that horses created straighter furrows. Even by the end of the 1930s they still significantly outnumbered tractors.

The final speaker was Thomas Webb (University of Liverpool), who gave a lively paper entitled 'Revisiting the Women's Land Army with the animal in mind: Land Girls, cattle and their tactile encounters, 1930–1945'. The introduction of urban land girls to rural spaces was seen by many as sexually threatening, so a state-led narrative reconstructed physical farm work as feminine and moral. Some land girls underwent strength training to enable them to carry out 'male' tasks such as leading bulls and escorting herds beyond the farm gate, while posters were produced suggesting that training could remove their stereotypical fear of cattle – their close encounters with the animals providing rural rejuvenation. And so the conference ended and delegates dispersed, intellectually rejuvenated – if slightly heavier than when they arrived.