

# Conference Report

## The Society's Winter Conference, 2016

by Paul Warde

This year's Winter conference was held in the familiar surroundings of the Institute for Historical Research in London. Entitled 'Muck into Gold' the theme was exchange and trade in agricultural goods, with papers treating with matters both domestic and international, and as usual, ranging from medieval times to the twentieth century.

First up was Dr James Davis of Queen's University Belfast, with his paper 'Travelling to Town: Medieval Peasants and the Sale of Agricultural Produce in Urban Markets'. This provided a thorough overview of the evidence for commercialization and the practices of trades brining agricultural produce into town markets. Medieval commercialization remains a widely debated topic, with the level of market integration and the choices available for sellers uncertain. Davis however considered most village markets to be largely for very localized, low-volume exchanges and offering only low returns. At least some farmers were prepared to go further afield to seek better prices, and by the end of the thirteenth century, actively pursue opportunities beyond their immediate locality, facilitated by widespread ownership of horses.

Once they got to town, what was their experience? Literary evidence provides rather caricatured sources in the absence of accounts or diaries, but nevertheless cultural stereotypes have their uses in granting us some measure of expectations: 'Valuable residues of contemporary beliefs and assumptions,' as Davis put it. Contemporary ballads and stories presented the traders that peasants met as avaricious and fraudulent, and the experience of larger cities like London being confusing for simple country folk. This might be seen however as evidence of asymmetries of information, rather than moral behaviour *per se*. Indeed, it might be argued that mistrust created habits of reliability on both sides (drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz). Davis also considered evidence for market regulation and

spatial controls on where trade took place, reckoning enforcement to have been low and barriers to exchange relatively insignificant. Towns like to encourage food provisioning and low prices. There is little evidence that lords coerced their peasants into using particular markets.

Nevertheless, literature and regulations point to a consistent concern with information, in the display of goods and preoccupations with adulteration, weights and measures, and allowing trade without interruption from hawkers or other stallholders. Here public authorities played a role in fostering exchange. But more direct evidence we have of repeated sales and credit relationships between buyers and sellers also highlights the interpersonal nature of market relationships and developing a sense of integrity to grease the wheels of trade.

The second paper by Professor Richard Hoyle took us to the early modern period and matters international. His paper, 'A tale of two countries and one sea: the North Sea grain trade c.1550–c.1750', aimed not only at the time-consuming labour of reconstructing the international grain trade, but considering as a context for moves towards agricultural improvement and enclosure at this time. The evidence base is not entirely satisfactory, as customs records do not report the *ports* at either end of a trade in detail, but nevertheless some digests and accounts of the customs records that were provided on request for particular matters of concern do contain considerably more detail.

The snapshots that the international trade permits give some highly suggestive pointers to the state of local agricultural economies. Norfolk is noted as an exporter from the early seventeenth century, and Hoyle considers that this situation of surplus may have changed little over time, arguing that ships returning from deliveries of Scottish salt were probably already carrying grain north in Elizabethan times. However

Scotland, still a land of famine in the 1690s, had turned this around to become an exporter by the eighteenth century, particularly to Ireland. Government interest in the grain trade increased after 1770 and we can get a richer and more differentiated regional picture, witnessing the appearance of buckwheat and Indian corn in trade, pointing to regional habits of production and consumption, and the rise of flour and meal in trade as processed products took up less cargo space and lowered transport costs.

From the late seventeenth century, a growing problem of overproduction in the more productive English regions forced a deregulation of export restraints and indeed corn bounties from 1672, a policy matched from 1695 in Scotland (which might also be read as evidence of using trade to stimulate general production). Nevertheless, the question of how output increased in different regions remains open, with the relative contribution of specialization, climate change, improved crop varieties, or price incentives as yet unclear. Nevertheless, a more detailed view of the trade is an important contribution to tracing this story in its complexity.

The third paper, by Sofia Henriques of Lund University, examined the mutual exchange between Britain and Denmark in her paper 'Fuelling the English Breakfast: hidden energy flows in the Anglo-Danish trade'. This was indeed the period when Denmark became famous as a supplier of bacon to English tables, as part of a much wider process of specialization and growth in international trade during the period of globalization from 1870–1914. Henriques examined the role of energy in this process of specialization, and especially the idea of coal-endowed countries (such as Britain) specializing in the production of energy-intensive manufacturing goods and others (such as Denmark) in the production of agricultural goods. Data was presented that quantifies the amount of energy embodied in traded goods; that is, rather than just examining the direct trade in energy (calories in coal or food), the full chain of production is taken into account to understand the total amount of energy required to produce the commodities finally traded. It turns out that Danish agricultural goods were not a low-energy product reliant on the land, but relatively energy-intensive. The transformations that occurred in Danish agriculture to meet the growing demand for breakfast foods in the UK required significant quantities of animal feed and coal, for which Denmark's trading position in proximity to both the coalfields of Britain, and processed animal feed exports in

continental Europe, was highly significant. Denmark has been a net importer of this 'hidden' energy, going into the production of traded goods in 1870 but as the trade grew rapidly up to the First World War actually becoming a net exporter of hidden energy to the UK by 1913. The story of energy-intensive manufactures and energy-light products of the land turns out not to hold in this case; and the paper demonstrated how agricultural exporters were not all of one kind on this period, as some relied on significant inputs of energy, long supply chains, and complex processing. Denmark achieved this high-input agriculture, in some ways a precursor to that found more widely in the second half of the twentieth century, both from an increase in its land productivity and through the import of coal, grain and fertilizers from abroad.

The final paper of the day came from Shane Hamilton of the University of York, 'Supermarkets to the World: Supply-Chain Capitalism and Modern Agribusiness,' Drawing on material to be published in his forthcoming book with Yale University Press, Hamilton examined the growth of multinational supermarkets after 1945, questioning the usefulness of theories focused on the 'internalization' of chains of production within the firm as a driver of new forms of organization. Instead, using a series of case studies covering countries from Venezuela to Yugoslavia, Hamilton argued that his concept of a Cold War 'Farms Race' offers a convincing explanation for the expansion of American-style supermarkets in the latter half of the twentieth century. American businessmen and foreign policymakers rhetorically framed the supermarket as a 'weapon' in the economic contests of the Cold War, engaging in ideological marketing of the lifestyles of the 'free world', both to the eastern block and the developing countries, as a tonic against revolutionary politics. In turn, the expansion of supermarkets (whether directly from American chains or through imitation) acted not merely as a vehicle for modernization of consumption patterns, but as machines for spurring industrialization of agriculture. Hamilton's paper highlighted the significance of management and firm organization as a factor in the economic and political transformations that shaped agriculture during the twentieth century. In particular, he emphasized the importance of examining retail-led changes to the supply-chain.

All the papers were accompanied by some lively discussion, and this year, there was particular appreciation too for the lunch. We thank all contributors and participants.