

The Society's Winter Conference, 2017

by Paul Warde

This year's conference took place on 2 December at the Institute for Historical Research, with the theme of 'The Politics of the Countryside'. Four papers, as is traditional, ranged from the medieval period to the modern. The opening paper by Maika de Keyser of the University of Antwerp, 'Common challenges, different fates: failing commons and societal vulnerabilities in late medieval Breckland,' examined peasant politics over the long term through a comparison between the Campine region of Flanders, and the Brecklands of East Anglia. She began by noting a stark difference between continental and insular historiography; in Europe, the medieval period being seen as something of a golden age followed by declining peasant influence as the powers of autonomous institutions were eroded, while in England almost the reverse is the case. The late medieval and early modern periods are narrated as the escape from serfdom, the decline of the manor and rise of the parish. De Keyser's approach was to test both (admittedly simplistic) stories through a regional comparison to tease out similarities and differences. Both regions studied are economically marginal, had extensive commons and are renowned for problems of sand drift.

The Campine region suffered major sand drift in the ninth and tenth centuries, but subsequently, collective strategies of mitigation such as use of hedgerows and windbreaks arrested the trend until after 1750. Such management was absent in Breckland. Sand drift can now be dated by new techniques as to how long sand has been exposed to sunlight, and while there were probably earlier episodes of drift, they became especially pronounced from the seventeenth century. De Keyser argued that in the medieval Breckland, lords were largely rentiers and left direct management of the land to the peasantry, who were highly invested in the sheep-corn economy. Peasants had a strong interest in maintaining the landscape. However from the fifteenth century, with declining rents, lords moved into more direct exploitation, rigid foldcourse systems, and extensive rabbit warrening. These practices left vast

areas of exposed soil, prone to erosion and drift. At the same time they led to a gradual polarization of society and a whittling away of intermediary groups of tenants who had previously had a stake in the manorial court and more attentive land management. Legal efforts to restrain the activities of lords – as was also found by Nicola Whyte in Norfolk – failed in most cases and manorial reeves neglected their own duties.

In both the Campine and the Breckland, a degree of equality and commonality of interest were found to be essential for sound environmental management, while the desire to pursue revenue by those not directly vested in the land, or becoming too poor to survive otherwise, lead to degradation.

The second paper, by Elly Robson of the Institute for Historical Research and the University of Cambridge, examined a famous case of complex conflict between outside and local interests: the draining of Hatfield Chase in Yorkshire from the 1620s to the 1650s that preceded that of the Fens of Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. In 'Contested ground: agricultural improvement in Hatfield Level, 1625–1660', Robson's aim was to examine the responses and political thinking of tenants in regard to drainage operations and attempts at 'improvement'. However, the thinking behind opposition to such schemes is not found much in the printed word but must be discovered in and inferred from more localized and experiential objections.

Robson provided an account of the traditional Fens as a 'flexible taskscape,' an economy responding to seasonal inundations. She argued for scepticism about claims of the decline of the sewer courts and worsening conditions in the Fens. Rather, conflict and attempts at improvement were part of a more general rising tide of conflict between lords and tenants. With a strong emphasis on the virtues of tillage, improvers utilized discourses that saw traditional Fen practices as permitting 'water out of place'. In fact, Robson argues, the drainage of Hatfield Chase in the 1620s was more a redistribution than elimination of water, and as with

the more southerly fens led to further environmental problems.

Nevertheless, despite resistance to drainage being based on direct hydrological experience and economic interest, tenants ranged against these projects were constrained to make their case in the language of improvers, arguing in terms of rental value and benefits to the commonwealth. New faultlines appeared, as tenants also disputed the terms of division among themselves, with the issue not necessarily being objection to 'improvement' *per se*, but the desire for autonomy in managing the process. In many cases locals were able to turn experiential knowledge to their advantage, breaking banks and operating sluices so as to force incoming participants out. This was a struggle fought on many fronts, whether in direct altercations, through legal instruments, management of the land and water, and the movements of the cows as direct action. Robson elegantly described a complex story of reluctant adaptation, negotiation and resistance. Amid this she noted the importance of *ideas* to all the participants, an aspect somewhat neglected in the literature or treated somewhat glibly in regard to the commoners. Responses were not just practical but ideational, involving knowledge of land and different ideas of what was industrious.

The afternoon began with a paper by Carl Griffin of the University of Sussex, 'The making of the English labourer as a racial subject'. He began by asking what terms such as 'native' and 'race' really meant in the context of wider understandings of categorizing humans in late Georgian and Victorian times, and then opened up the question about the variety of forms this could take. One was to speak about the alleged ancient races of the British Isles, tracing labourers back to putative Anglo-Saxon origins. Yet this discourse, according to Griffin, tended to render the labourer invisible, a homogeneous part of a wider nation suffering under the Norman Yoke and suited to nationalist ideals.

Yet as labourers came to be seen as a social problem, another kind of discourse of race also can be found, and one that is insufficiently handled in analyses of class. This provided a more anthropological view of the rural labourer as a different kind of man, ignorant, lacking energy, and morosely dissatisfied with his lot and narrowly informed 'village politics are the only politics he cares to discuss' [John Beddoes]: caricatured by the stereotype of 'Hodge'. This was particularly characteristic of the south, home of the 'clodhopper', where various writers commented on the 'animality' of the labourer and compared his [sic] circumstances to those of the 'negro' slave. This was a discourse that frequently condemned and lamented

the condition of the labourer by arguing his lot was *worse* than slavery, but also found expression in a general perception of his degraded state. In turn, the labourer was identified as a distinct cultural group, a new subject for emergent ethnographic and folkloric studies undertaken by groups such as the Society of Antiquaries. Griffin provided a compelling view of the lack of work on these understandings of the labourer, and indeed in a literature dominated by class, which gives insufficient attention to the countryside. Categorizations of the rural field worker have to be understood in the light of wider arguments about race and origin at this time.

The final paper, 'Habitat protection, ideology and the state: the politics of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981' by Matthew Kelly of Northumbria University brought us to much more contemporary history. He noted the relative lack of detailed archival study of post-war environmental politics. The 1981 Act was, he argued, the most important conservation measure between the 1949 foundation of the Nature Conservancy and National Parks, and new reforms in the 1990s. The politics of the Act were shaped by, and exemplify, tensions between the Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF), Parks authorities, the Nature Conservancy, and the Countryside Commission. Kelly argues that we can understand such conflicts through the idea of the 'Nature State', how particular styles of agency and implementation create a nature state in the same sense as we can think about the welfare state.

Kelly focused in particular on arguments that National Park authorities should have the power to make conservation orders with a one-off compensation, protecting an area in perpetuity. This idea, promoted by the Porchester Report in Exmoor of 1977, was a significant break from the established pattern of conservation by voluntary agreement, and controversial when food security remained an important context in the 1970s. At the same time the idea of screening areas from interference brought conflict between ecology-minded conservationists, heritage-minded preservationists, and those interested in nature as amenity, who disliked loss of social access. Faultlines were also party-political, with Labour sponsoring a bill to this end in 1978, but the Conservatives aligned with farming interests and arguing that farmers had been custodians of the land and should not be subject to compulsion.

However within days of entering office in 1979 the new Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine committed to a much wider bill on Wildlife protection. His paper suggested a new category of the older Site of Special Scientific Interest (established in originally in 1949), permitting MAFF or the Department

of the Environment to ask for restraint on ploughing, and deny grant aid (subsidies) where there was no compliance. Local councils were enthusiastic about the possibilities of such regulation. The Act would be passed in 1981, its provisions for the protection of wildlife providing new roles for a wider set of voices determining what was 'imperilled' and deserved protection. At the same time, the possible restraint of agriculture through management agreements was matched by the idea that farmers might be paid for as providers of environmental services. In this regard, it demonstrated the limits of the reach of the state, and

the special conditions still enjoyed by landed interest. Kelly's paper gave a careful and nuanced overview of the complex arguments and forms of consultation that fed into the final Act.

The conference was rounded off by an innovation, a panel reflecting on issues of rural politics across the papers and periods, staffed by Chris Briggs (Cambridge), Briony MacDonagh (Hull) and Clare Griffiths (Cardiff). There was a lively discussion involving both them and participants from the floor. Thanks are to be extended to all who assisted with, and participated in, this year's Winter Conference.