

Conference Report

The Society's Spring Conference, 2019

by Joshua Rhodes

The Society's 67th annual conference was held in the Jubilee Conference Centre at the University of Nottingham, 8 to 10 April 2019. The conference enjoyed a rich and varied programme, a direct reflection of the success of the Society's first 'call for papers', which had brought forth proposals on all aspects of rural history.

After afternoon tea and registration, the first session started with Dr Peter Larson (Florida), who posed an interesting exercise in counter-factual history through his exploration of the social and economic development of County Durham, 1349 to 1700. Larson questioned whether County Durham's development could have been more similar to the south east of England. Through the case study of the Halls family, Larson demonstrated how socio-economic development might (under the right conditions) have mirrored that enjoyed by the south east. Larson showed how the Halls successfully increased their holdings over time and rose through the ranks from peasants, to yeoman, and finally to gentry. This was a classic example of peasant engrossment taking place in the absence of a local lord but ultimately one that was not characteristic of County Durham more widely. Larson concluded that engrossment of farms did not occur on a large scale because of strictures placed on farm size through the persistence of tenurial institutions. In the second paper of the session, Dr Frances Richardson (Oxford) addressed the rise of landed estates in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Wales, with a focus on Nantconwy in Caernarfonshire. Continuing Larson's theme on farm engrossment, Richardson's central focus concerned estate 'builders' in the sixteenth century. She delineated three paths of estate building: long-term building over many generations, small estates (2300–4450 acres) over the shorter term, and unsuccessful estate builders. A key mechanism facilitating estate expansion was the exploitation of leases on crown land. Richardson argued that crown land was easier to exploit than other types of land in Wales because it did not come with any bond tenants, whose tenurial rights on other lands

limited owners' ability to exploit the land for profit via leasing. However, Richardson noted that not all estate builders successfully exploited all crown lands as some ancient native tenants achieved independence.

The Presidential Lecture, entitled 'The Rural Housing Revolution, 1550–1700', was delivered by Dr John Broad, who addressed the classic 'Great Rebuilding' debate through an analysis of the diffusion of building improvements across the social spectrum. To do so Broad employed a wide range of sources and methods, such as evidence from the Hearth Tax, probate inventories, and pictorial depictions of houses on maps. Broad argued for three phases in the housing revolution: first, the addition of chimneys, which were not new but their widespread adoption – by 1600 – was; in the second phase, from c.1580 to 1650, multi-storey houses became more common; lastly, after 1650 there was consolidation, infilling with bricks being widespread. The key exception to this trend was squatter homes, which were not subject to these improvements. The lecture was an exciting revival of an old debate and prompted much discussion at the dinner afterwards about the difficulties of identifying building improvements through indirect source material. In particular, debate focused on whether pictorial depictions of houses on maps were accurate reflections of key building improvements, such as chimneys and second storeys. At the end of a stimulating session, Dr Broad confirmed that he intended to synthesize these arguments in a monograph on rural housing in early modern England.

After dinner, Professor John Beckett (Nottingham) gave a talk on Laxton open-field village, the destination for this year's excursion. Having worked closely with farms at Laxton and on its history, Beckett explained the historical development of Laxton and what remains of the open fields today, describing how this village continues to operate, and outlining the continued role of the manorial court in managing the fields and crop

rotations in the twenty-first century. What remains of the open field system is a fraction of what once was there. In 1635, the open fields covered some 1,894 acres but the acreage now stands at 483. Beckett's presentation proved a perfect primer for the excursion the following day and made the trip even more enjoyable as we had the benefit of seeing how Laxton operated in theory before witnessing it first-hand.

The second day started with two New Researchers' sessions. Eloise Kane (Bristol) considered hare hunting and class tension in the post-medieval English landscape. Kane noted that deer hunting was in decline by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that fox hunting emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She contended that the transitional period between deer and fox hunting was a popular period for hare hunting but that this pursuit had largely been overlooked in the literature. Using archaeological evidence, Kane identified hare warrens to locate hare hunting activity. The earliest evidence of a hare warren was one near Newmarket in 1603 and Kane has identified 35 warrens in total. Using GIS she showed that their location correlate strongly with chalk areas, and that warrens were placed near the edge of parks, which was important because it allowed hunting on open land beyond the park boundary. Gary Willis (Bristol) examined the impact of war industry on the agricultural landscape of Britain between 1936 and 1946. Adopting an explicitly environmental-history perspective, Willis discussed the erection of shadow factories, royal ordinance factories, and royal admiralty sites on agricultural land. Using documents from the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), Willis shows the lack of discussion about returning industrial sites back to their agricultural pre-war use.

In the second New Researchers' session, Iain Riddell (Leicester) examined farming in the Grampian region of Scotland. Riddell argued that farming in the area could not be understood without consideration of female workers and farmers. Employing an innovative methodology that combined social network analysis with longitudinal data on farmers in the region to 'map' women farmers onto the landscape, Riddell stressed the importance of farming knowledge passed down by women farmers. He also argued that changes in the names of farms or farmers over time give a misleading impression of a lack of continuity. He showed that although names may change, through careful reconstruction of familial ties, in many cases women (as wives and mothers) provided continuity across generations on particular farms. Their role has hitherto been overlooked owing to the practice of changing surnames upon marriage. The final new researcher's paper was delivered by Leonard Baker (Bristol) who took us to the south west

of England in the nineteenth century. Baker examined how landscape change intersected with ritual and protest. He drew on several case studies, including the Pimperne (Dorset) enclosure between 1809 to 1817 and disputes over the River Tone (Somerset) between 1827 to 1832. Baker demonstrated how the Pimperne enclosure was an interesting example of a dispute where farmers wanted to enclose the Down but their attempts to do so were resisted by landowners, who wished to protect hunting interests by arguing that deer continued to use it. Through detailed comparative analysis of his case studies, Baker argued that there was no single 'moral ecology' of the English landscape but 'moral ecologies'.

In the next session, Dr Joshua Rhodes (Cambridge) re-examined the issue of family farming in nineteenth-century England. Rhodes re-examined the role of family labour by considering the relationship between family dynamics and the employment of wage labour using a sample of household-level data on farm size and family and wage labour for 60,000 farmers covering 9.5 million acres from the 1851 census. He showed that the presence of working-age family members reduced the need to employ waged labourers. He also considered the supply of family labour through the lens of the life cycle, the demand for labour according to distance from urban centres and farmers' socio-economic status. He argued that accounts of the development of agrarian capitalism need to be more sensitive to determinants of wage labour other than market forces, casting doubt on the use of wage labour alone as a measure of capitalist farming. The second paper in the session was delivered by Adrián Gustavo Zarrilli (Buenos Aires), who addressed the expansion of the agricultural frontier in Argentina between 1980 and 2017. Zarrilli demonstrated the dramatic fall in the area of native forest in the twentieth century and the increase in soybean acreage since 1981. The huge expansion in soybean cultivation has been an incentive to engage in intensive deforestation and to expand the use of agrochemicals. As Zarrilli demonstrated through shocking video footage, the environmental impacts of deforestation have been substantial and in particular the burning of forests has released large quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

After lunch, we set out on the conference excursion to Laxton, led by Professor Beckett. After a lively sightseeing tour of the outskirts of Nottingham, engagingly narrated by Prof. Beckett, we reached the Laxton Visitor Centre, where we were handed over to one of the manorial tenants, who gave us a talk about how the open field system worked in the past, and how it works today, with the aid of a replica of the 1635 map held in the Bodleian Library. He then took us out to one of the three common fields, the one which is lying fallow this year, and we

walked up the side of his strip to the ridge. From here we could survey most of the field system (including the outlying areas which had been enclosed because the strips there were so far from the village), and a large heap of manure waiting to be spread over the field. Back in the village, the large number of farmhouses, with yards and farm buildings gave a noticeably different feel from that of most English villages, where the farms are generally away from the centre, among their own fields. The visit was rounded off by tea and biscuits provided by the our guide and his wife, in their farmhouse.

On day three of the conference, Professor Christopher Dyer (Leicester) was the first speaker on a panel on perceptions of medieval agriculture. Dyer addressed popular perceptions of agricultural landscapes in the Middle Ages and posed the question of how regions were characterized. He encouraged critical reflection on the boundaries of the well-known concept of 'pays' in England. By using place names and the names of roads, such as 'Woodland Road', Dyer delineated contemporaries' perceptions of different types of landscape. He also used surnames in an attempt to identify mobility patterns and to assess whether individuals moved between 'pays'. Dyer concluded that people largely seem to have stayed within their own 'pays'. The second paper was delivered by Dr Matthew Blake (Leicester), who considered the sharing of the agricultural landscape with 'wild' animals in early medieval England. Using place-names from pre-Conquest charters, Blake asked whether these provided a means to investigate wild populations of animals, such as wild boar, hares, foxes, bees, and birds. The session was rounded off by Dr Susan Kilby (Nottingham), who spoke about peasant perceptions of the agrarian landscape in the later middle ages. Using Elton in Huntingdonshire as a case study, Kilby has used field names to assess people's relationship and perception of the landscape. A search of Elton's manorial accounts and rolls yielded 145 medieval field names, which enabled her to challenge the traditional classification of medieval field names between crops, enclosed land, and wetland. The key, Kilby argued, was to situate field names within the context of the Elton landscape. In doing so, she showed that field-names also demonstrated that individuals were applying key concepts of elemental and humoral theory to their management of land.

In the penultimate paper of the conference, Dr Kent Fedorowich (Bristol) discussed the Canadian Forestry Corps who were based in Devon during the First World War. He showed how Britain was heavily reliant on timber imports at the start of the war and that it was imperative to secure a more reliable supply.

He demonstrated how a decision was made to import specialized labour (rather than timber) from Canada to meet demand. Fedorowich showed the value of the specialist knowledge brought by the Canadian foresters, as they were charged with working with the largest and most complicated timbers. There were 36 timber camps in Devon, the largest number in the country, which also employed Portuguese workers and German POWs. Overall, between May 1916 and December 1918 Devon was responsible for 6.5 per cent of timber output.

The final paper of the conference was delivered by Professor Tim Soens (Antwerp). Soens considered the impact of cities on agriculture through an analysis of the relationship between Ghent and its surrounding rural regions in the late medieval period. He showed that Ghent had not always been reliant on a rural grain market. In the thirteenth century, many rents in the city were being paid in kind, which Soens argued provides evidence of food production within the city. But by the fourteenth century, this self-production had largely disappeared, and the city had become reliant on imports from rural grain markets. A key change over time, however, was the social distribution in the reliance on these imports. He demonstrated how sections of the urban population turned to purchasing land to achieve food security. Some 20 to 30 per cent of land in the rural hinterland of Ghent was owned by city dwellers before the Black Death but afterwards there was a significant shift in the social status of these owners. Soens demonstrated that there was a decline in the upper and lower sections of society who owned rural land and the emergence of a middle class who invested heavily in land. He argued that while a substantial number of the lease contracts for this land stipulated a cash rent, most were in fact paid in kind, and estimated that between 15 and 24 per cent of the population of Ghent was fed in this way, these processes having an important effect on food security. Reliance on the food market became more socially biased after the Black Death. Prior to the Black Death this had been an urban problem but after this period it disproportionately affected poorer sections of the urban population. The urban middle class had essentially achieved 'private' food security through their investment in land. The impact on agriculture was that it resulted in greater reciprocity between urban landowners and farms, and a decline in rent on leasehold lands between 1290 and 1570. In summary, Soens argued that this period was characterized by continuity in food flow, interregional trade, and urban demand, but that there were significant changes with respect to social relations of food production.