



The death of Sir John Higgs on 5 June 1986 marked the end of an era for the British Agricultural History Society, for John was not only the first Secretary of the Society (from 1952 to 1964) and a distinguished President (from 1974 to 1977) but he was also one of the leading spirits and organizers behind the formation of the Society. He will be sadly missed.

John Higgs had a remarkably varied and interesting career culminating in his appointment as Secretary and Keeper of the Records to the Duchy of Cornwall in 1980 and later as Acting Treasurer to the Prince of Wales' household. He died in harness still

introducing innovations and new ideas into the administration of the Duchy to which he had become devoted.

Born in Birmingham on 1 September 1923, the son of a successful manufacturer, who later developed agricultural interests, John was educated at Oundle School and Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he obtained his BA in agriculture in 1943. After wartime work with the National Institute of Agricultural Engineering's Farm Mechanisation Survey, he joined the Oxford University Agricultural Economics Research Institute as a research assistant in 1946, and remained there until 1948, when he moved to the University of Reading as a Lecturer in Farm Mechanisation. Now began a very creative period in his life. A visit to Denmark had stimulated his interest in the earlier history of farm technology and had led to an awareness of the urgent need to collect and record the fast-vanishing remains of the material culture, and when possible the social customs, of an older rural England, which was undergoing accelerated change. It was entirely due to his initiative that the Museum of English Rural Life was established at Reading University in 1951, although he got a good deal of support from colleagues like Prof Edgar Thomas (later to become the first Treasurer of the BAHS) and many others.

John became the first Keeper of the Museum and established its unique method of recording objects, which has been widely adopted and was used by Margaret Rule in her recent remarkable rescue of the sunken Tudor warship, the *Mary Rose*. His distinction was recognized in 1974-5 by his appointment as President of the International Association of Agricultural Museums. Almost coterminously with the foundation of the Museum John took part in the discussions in 1951 with George Fussell, W G Hoskins, H P R Finberg and others which led to the formation of the British

Agricultural History Society in 1952. Almost inevitably he was elected its first Secretary, and much of the Society's early success was due to his enthusiasm and energy, as well as his wide contacts in agricultural as well as academic circles: for John was already farming in Warwickshire at this time.

In 1952 he became Lecturer in the History of Agriculture at Reading and Warden of Whiteknights Hall, and remained at Reading, expanding his ever-widening range of interests until 1957, when he moved to a Lectureship in Agricultural Development at Oxford University. In 1961 he was elected Fellow and Estates Bursar of Exeter College, and remained associated with that College for the rest of his life.

During the 1960s his interests in rural social development widened to include Europe and the Third World and he began to work increasingly closely as a consultant with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) based in Rome, where he had a flat. In 1963 he directed the UN Study Group on Rural Social Development at Leicester University which gave rise to the book *People in the Countryside, Studies in Rural Social Development* which he edited in 1964. Consultancies in southern Italy, India, Libya, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Lebanon and Iraq followed in rapid succession and in 1971 John gave up most of his duties in Oxford and moved temporarily to Rome as Chief of the Agricultural Education and Extension Service of the Human Resources, Institutions and Agrarian Reform Division of the FAO. In 1974 he was promoted to be Deputy Director of the Division, and continued to be intensely active in consultancies and missions, working in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Jamaica, Mexico, Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, as well as maintaining his African and Near Eastern links.

While all this was going on he was also expanding his British farming interests with a large farm on the Oxfordshire Cotswolds

at Enstone and an even larger one in the Scottish borders at Arkleton in Dumfriesshire. In 1979 he was invited to join the Council of the Duchy of Cornwall, and in 1980 he succeeded to the Secretaryship. The numerous estates and villages included in the Duchy gave John an opportunity to try to put into practice some of the ideas which he held on the development of rural society. He always favoured a modern, progressive agriculture and recognized that this would lead to a reduction in the labour force; but he also struggled against rural depopulation, believing that wherever possible small industries and services should be established in villages in order to maintain population levels which could sustain a full social and cultural life in villages and small country towns. Several imaginative conversions of redundant Duchy farms into industrial and commercial workshops have gone far to give life to this idea. As further stimuli to these aims John founded the Arkleton Trust in 1978 to encourage new approaches to rural development and education; and also served as a trustee of the Ernest Cook Trust.

John published many reports and papers for the FAO on problems of agricultural development and structural reform, which are too lengthy to list here, but he will be remembered by agricultural historians for his book *The Land, A Visual History of the Land in Britain*, published in 1964, which pioneered the combination of illustrations and text to illuminate the course of agricultural history.

In 1986, he received the knighthood of the Royal Victorian Order from His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, with whom (in the words of his obituary in *The Times*) 'he worked in close harmony in the field of integrated rural development, conservation and land management. In the all-too-short space of five years his contribution to the Duchy of Cornwall was remarkable. His wise and able presence will be very greatly missed.'

MICHAEL HAVINDEN