

Postgraduate Research in Agricultural History in British Institutions of Higher Education: a Survey

By MICHAEL HAVINDEN

AT THE September 1985 meeting of the Executive Committee of the British Agricultural History Society it was suggested that it would be interesting to know whether the cuts in funding to institutions of higher education, which had commenced in 1981 had had any effects on research in agricultural history; and if so to determine what these effects had been. Accordingly I undertook to circulate the Institutions, and in consultation with the Treasurer, Dr E J T Collins, I designed a simple questionnaire which was sent to 50 Universities, 30 Polytechnics and 48 Agricultural Colleges and Agricultural Museums.

The questionnaires were sent out in December 1985 and asked six simple questions. They were deliberately kept brief to encourage busy lecturers to go to the trouble of filling them in and returning them. The first two questions asked how many students were undertaking research in agricultural history (or related areas) and how they were distributed amongst the age brackets 21-26, 27-32, 33-37 and over 37. The next two questions asked how many of the students were in receipt of grants, and the years in which they first registered for their research degrees. The next question asked whether the research was on British, or European agricultural history or on some other part of the world; and the final question asked for a division into chronological periods, as

between Ancient (to AD 400) Medieval (400-1500) Early Modern (1500-1750) and Modern (since 1750). These chronological divisions were necessarily arbitrary and did not fit all cases, but generally speaking the respondents did not have difficulty in assigning their students amongst these categories. The response to the questionnaires naturally varied. First, the institutional response was rather mixed, as may be seen in Table 1, where it is analysed into three categories.

The response from the universities was particularly gratifying at 66 per cent, especially as several universities sent responses from more than one department so that the total number of university responses was 48 from the 33 universities who replied; and consequently the total number of responses from all institutions was 73 — as opposed to the 58 responding institutions shown in Table 1. It is difficult to assess the significance of non-response. It is probable that the majority of non-responding institutions failed to reply for the simple reason that they had no students working on agricultural history, although this cannot be regarded as applying in all cases since fourteen agricultural colleges and six polytechnics without such students took the trouble to reply. Admittedly this was not very onerous for them.

Although the response from the universities was in general most encouraging there

TABLE 1
Institutional response

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number circulated</i>	<i>Number replying</i>	<i>% Replying</i>
Universities	50	33	66
Polytechnics	30	10	33
Agricultural Colleges, etc.	48	15	31
TOTALS	128	58	45

were a few which failed to reply in which I either know, or suspect, that some research in agricultural, or at least agrarian history, was being undertaken. These included Oxford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Swansea, Cardiff and the New University of Ulster. Thus the number of universities with no research students working on agricultural history was probably fewer than the seventeen implied by Table 1.

In all, 81 research students in agricultural history were identified, who were located in 27 institutions (47 per cent of those who replied). This left a disappointing group of 31 responding institutions (53 per cent of the total) where no research in agricultural history was being carried out. However, if we make some allowance for non-respondents who do have such students, it would probably be fair to say that the situation is not quite so depressing as these figures might imply. It is probably unrealistic to expect many agricultural colleges to be able to sustain research students in agricultural history, and their inclusion in the survey gives it an unnecessarily downward bias.

Polytechnics may be in a similar position, in that they are mostly located in towns, and this may give their research orientation a somewhat urban bias. This however cannot be the whole story since the four Polytechnics which recorded having research students working on various aspects of agrarian history, were all urban (Coventry, City of London, Oxford and Sunderland).

The distribution of the research students amongst types of Institution is shown in

Table 2, where they are also sub-divided into full-time and part-time groups.

The distribution between full-time and part-time research students can be regarded as heartening in one sense, because rather more than half the research students (56%) were full-time; and this result was perhaps unexpected. On the other hand the fact that as many as 44 per cent of the students were part-time could be interpreted as a sign that the cuts were biting. This fear is reinforced by the replies to the question about grants, which revealed that only 30 per cent of the research students (24 students) were, or had been, in receipt of grants (21 at universities and 3 at polytechnics) — leaving 70 per cent as self-financing, mostly on a part-time basis. It can however be taken as an encouraging sign that 57 research students were sufficiently interested in agricultural history to undertake postgraduate research at their own expense.

This pattern of part-time work was reflected in the age structure of the research students, of whom 53 per cent (43 students) were 27 years old or more, and 47 per cent (38 students) were under the age of 27 years at the time of the survey.

This slightly gloomy picture is however a little brightened when the length at which the students had been at work is examined. Of the 81 research students at work during the survey period (which extended from about December 1985 to June 1986) no fewer than 50 (63 per cent) had commenced work in 1983 or after — that is they had been at work for less than three years, while only 37 per cent of the students had commenced their work more than three

TABLE 2
Distribution of Research Students by Institutional Type

	<i>Number of Institutions</i>	<i>Full-time Students</i>	<i>Part-time Students</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Universities	22	42	27	68	84.0
Polytechnics	4	3	9	12	14.8
Agricultural Colleges, etc.	1	1	—	1	1.2
	27	46(56%)	36(44%)	81	100

years before the survey was taken. This result was heartening and suggests that entry into research work may not have been too severely impeded by the cuts; but the lack of an earlier survey with which to compare this one, means that there can be no certainty about this: it is probable that considerably more research students were at work in the 1960s and 1970s, than in the early 1980s.

Another piece of information which the survey revealed was the type of academic department in which the students were working, but as agricultural history is an inter-disciplinary subject, which cuts across the traditional disciplines, this information is perhaps not very significant; but for what it is worth 43 of the 68 university postgraduates were working in History or Economic and Social History Departments (63 per cent) and 20 were working in Geography Departments (29 per cent). The remaining 5 students were in Economics or Agricultural Economics Departments (7 per cent). It was not possible to categorize the 13 students working in polytechnics and colleges.

The final piece of information revealed by the survey relates to the regions and chronological periods that the students were investigating. Not surprisingly the overwhelming majority were working on British agricultural history (74 students or 91 per cent) with only 7 students (9 per cent) working on other areas, nearly all of these being European. The sub-division into chronological periods of those working on British agricultural history is shown in Table 3.

That the modern period would predominate was always probable, but that its predominance should be so overwhelming with over 71 per cent of the students was perhaps a little surprising. That the ancient and medieval periods should have drawn forth a somewhat small interest was perhaps also not surprising, but that they should have together attracted nearly twice as many students as the early modern period was certainly unexpected. It would appear that the rich vein of the early modern period may be like a mine which has been overworked. It has attracted so much attention from distinguished scholars like

TABLE 3
Postgraduate Research in British Agricultural History
by Chronological periods

<i>Period</i>	<i>Number of postgraduates</i>	<i>%</i>
Ancient (prior to 400 AD)	2	2.7
Medieval (400-1500)	10	13.5
Early Modern (1500-1750)	7	9.5
Modern (post-1750)	53	71.6
Longer periods	2	2.7
	74	100

R H Tawney, W G Hoskins, Eric Kerridge, Eric Jones and many others; and latterly of course from Joan Thirsk and her team of co-authors of Volumes IV and V of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, covering the years 1500 to 1750, that aspiring young scholars may feel that it needs a long rest, and that we need time to digest the extensive researches of others before renewed efforts are devoted to the early modern period. If this is so, it would be a pity because, despite all the work that has been done, many of the most critical aspects of the period, such as the real incidence and causes of enclosure, the disappearance of the English peasantry, and the genesis and diffusion process of the manifold agricultural improvements of the time still elude our full understanding. The social history of the countryside in this period is another unclear area. There is still much work to be done on early modern agricultural history, and if this survey has done nothing else it has at least drawn attention to a research 'gap' which needs to be filled.

In sum, can any general conclusions be drawn from the survey? The fact that 81 postgraduate researchers in agricultural history were identified may be regarded as an encouraging sign, even though we do not know how it compares with earlier periods. Nor should the number 81 be taken as sacrosanct, since there is a suspicion that some respondents may not have fully

understood the questionnaire and have put down *all* their departmental research students, regardless of topic. On the other hand a possible overshoot in this connection might be offset against a number of research students who were not identified by the survey, either because their Institution was not circularized (some colleges of further education for instance) or because their institution did not reply to the questionnaire. With a bit of luck, these two figures may have cancelled each other out. The numbers of postgraduate research students may therefore be regarded as giving some cause for satisfaction, but certainly not for complacency.

The chronological distribution was more worrying, and it is to be hoped that the modern period may receive less emphasis in the future and that the early modern and medieval periods will attract greater attention.

Finally, while the universities seem to be sustaining a reasonable amount of research in the subject, there would appear to be considerable scope for expansion in the polytechnics and colleges. While these institutions clearly have even more serious funding problems than the universities (and no one should underestimate the difficulties they have to contend with) it is to be hoped that in future they may be able to steer a few more research students towards agricultural history.