

The Rural History Database at the Rural History Centre, University of Reading

by Jeremy Burchardt

The Rural History Database is the most comprehensive specialist bibliography of rural history in existence, containing over 42,000 references. It is compiled by staff at the Rural History Centre in the University of Reading, and is due to be released in an on-line version available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.rdg.ac.uk/Instits/im/home.html> on 2 May 2000.

The bibliography initially developed as a by-product of the core collection and research functions of the Rural History Centre (or Institute of Agricultural History and Museum of English Rural Life as it then was). In 1970 it was decided that the bibliographical work already going on in the Institute should be formalized and centralized through the establishment of a Bibliographical Unit, the primary task of which would be to construct on a systematic basis as comprehensive a bibliography of rural history as was possible. At this stage the bibliography consisted solely of a set of related card indexes. But by the 1980s it was clear that information technology had made it possible to make bibliographical databases available electronically to the academic world at large. It was therefore decided that a computerised version of the bibliography should be developed. This was an ambitious undertaking in view of the Institute's limited resources, because it required not only a daunting quantity of data transfer, but also involved a steep learning curve for staff with little previous experience in this complex area. Raine Morgan was largely responsible for the conception and design of the database and, in the first few years, for data entry. Her determination and commitment to the project brought it to an advanced stage before her untimely death in 1996. Since then Janet Collett and others at the Centre have continued her work, to the point where it can now be made available to the public on-line.

The main strength of the Rural History Database is in British agrarian history, within which coverage is intended to be comprehensive. A broad definition of 'rural' has been adopted, building on the subject classification under which references were collected for the original card index. This consisted of eight primary

sections: landscape and environment, economy, agriculture, industry, rural society, transport and communications, histories and surveys and museology. The existence of sub-sections on economic theory, demography, health and medicine, politics and market towns indicates the wide definition of rural used in compiling the database. However, the majority of references relate more directly to agriculture, food, and rural economy and society.

The type of material included in the database is equally broad-ranging, with an emphasis on journal articles. Articles from over 1,500 journals are included. For the more important journals (such as the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, from which 1,400 articles have been extracted), coverage extends back to the date of first publication, often in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Less well-known journals have also been searched, with a bias towards articles written after 1940.

Other categories of material include books, collections of essays and articles, occasional publications and theses. Over 5,000 theses awarded degrees in this subject area world-wide since the 1870s are listed. Since the database is a bibliography of printed (secondary) works, manuscripts are excluded, but numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century printed contemporary works of historical value are referenced.

The database is continuously updated, but limitations on staff resources mean there is currently a backlog of about 5,000 references awaiting input. Many of these are however listed in the card indexes available for consultation by visitors to the Centre. It is anticipated that much of the backlog of more recent (1995-9) references will be cleared by the end of the year. Beyond this, future development plans include a project to identify post-1920 articles which although contemporary when written have since become of historical interest.

Five search methods are currently available to users: author, title, subject, keyword and series title (journal or book). All five methods permit the use of wildcards, Boolean operators and fuzzy matching. A thesaurus is

currently being developed in order to facilitate more accurate subject searching.

The main advantage of the Rural History Database is its coverage of British and Irish rural history, which is wider than any alternative on-line bibliography. Whilst databases such as BIDS-ISI and OCLC's ArticleFirst are based on an even wider range of journals, they do not include books and other non-journal references (and, unlike the Rural History Database, do not offer references to articles published before their dates of inception, respectively 1981 and 1992). Conversely, large library catalogues or compilations of catalogues such as the Library

of Congress or the OCLC WorldCat do not detail journal articles. Furthermore, the Rural History Database is confined to references to British and Irish rural history. So it does not suffer to the same extent from the problem of large numbers of unwanted and irrelevant hits when searching by author or title. The subject classification is also of course more refined and detailed than those used by non-specialist bibliographical databases. Historians of rural Britain and Ireland will obtain a larger list of relevant references more quickly by using the Rural History Database than by any other search strategy currently available.

Forthcoming Conferences

British Agricultural History Society Autumn Conference
Saturday 23 September 2000
Canterbury Christ Church College
Industries in the countryside

British Agricultural History Society Winter Conference
Saturday 2 December 2000
Institute of Historical Research, London
Livestock in the farming economy

Details of the society's conferences will be posted on the society's web site as soon as they become available and circulated to members during the summer.

The Society's Spring Conference, 2001, will be held at Ambleside, Cumbria, on 9–11 April. Offers of papers should be directed to the society's secretary, Dr Peter Dewey, by 31 August.

The Rural History Centre, University of Reading, announces an interdisciplinary conference, *The contested countryside*, to be held at the Centre on 18 September 2000.

Recent and ongoing debates about the British countryside have often suffered from a lack of historical perspective. Virtually all the issues raised, such as farm incomes, animal disease, hunting, rambling, agriculture and the environment, and urban attitudes to the countryside, have long and complex histories. The conference will explore these histories through short papers and discussion. Speakers will include Paul Brassley, Philip Conford, Graham Cox, Berkeley Hill, Alun Howkins and Simon Miller.

Details and a booking form are available from Dr Jeremy Burchardt, Rural History Centre, PO Box 229, Whiteknights, University of Reading, Reading, RG6 6AG, e.mail j.f.burchardt@reading.ac.uk.

Agricultural History Review

A journal of agricultural and rural history

Editors:

Prof. R. W. HOYLE (articles)
and Dr J. R. WALTON (reviews)

Agricultural History Review is published twice yearly by the British Agricultural History Society and issued to all members. The editors welcome contributions on any aspect of the history of agriculture, rural society and rural economy. Articles are normally expected to be about 8,000 words in length, but the editors are willing to consider longer papers on their merits. The *Review* also publishes occasional supplements. Proposals for supplements, which may be monographs or collections of essays about a common theme, should in the first instance be sent to the editors. All intending contributors are advised to first obtain a copy of the *Review's* 'Notes for Authors and Reviewers' from the editors. (This can also be found on the society's web page, <http://www.bahs.org.uk>.)

Articles, proposals for supplements or general editorial correspondence should be directed to Professor R. W. Hoyle at the Department of Historical and Critical Studies, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, PR1 2HE, e.mail R. Hoyle@uclan.ac.uk. From September 2000, the editorial address of the *Review* will be at the Rural History Centre, University of Reading, Whiteknights, PO Box 229, Reading RG6 6AG.

Books for review and completed reviews should be directed to Dr J. R. Walton, Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, SY23 3DB.

The society does not accept responsibility for the opinions expressed by contributors, or for the accidental loss of manuscripts, or for the return of manuscripts not accepted for publication.

Current and back copies of the *Review* and its supplements are available for purchase from the society's Exeter office (for whose address see the inside front cover). Single issues of the *Review* are £7.50 to members and £12.50 to non-members and agencies. The society's supplement, *Roots of Change*, is £17.50 post free to non-members and institutions: a discount is available to members and booksellers. Enquiries about advertising in the *Review*, or the insertion of fliers into the society's regular mailings to members, should also be addressed to the Exeter office.

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