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Above – Horse & Hounds see page 2

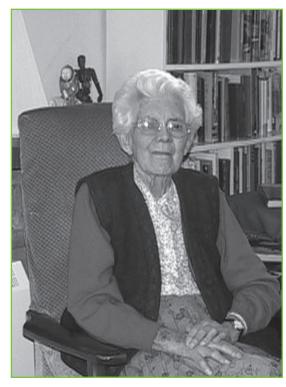
Marie Hartley celebrates her 100th birthday

Marie Hartley, the well-known author, wood engraver and painter, celebrated her 100th birthday on 25th September, 2005. She is best known for her books on Yorkshire which she produced, first, in collaboration with Ella Pontefract (1897–1945) and later, with Joan Ingilby (1911–2000).

Her publications record both the history of parts of her native Yorkshire, largely through oral sources, life and traditions in more recent times. Marie has over 30 books and countless paintings and wood engravings to her name. Her final books were produced when she was in her early 90s. Throughout her working life, Marie, had compiled a photographic record of fast-disappearing rural traditions and, with her co-authors, had collected farming and other local artefacts. By the 1970s the collection comprised 382 items. Marie and Joan offered this to the County Council and eventually it formed the core of the Dales Countryside Museum in Hawes, upper Wensleydale.

The publication of *Yorkshire Village* in 1953 brought Marie and Joan recognition within the academic community and assisted in raising the status of local history from something that had been regarded as somewhat antiquarian to a discipline worthy of serious study. Their books were always well reviewed in academic journals and, indeed, Professor Maurice Beresford in his review of *Yorkshire Village* observed that, without claiming to write economic history Marie and Joan had succeeded in doing exactly that.

Marie and Joan's contribution to historical research has also received formal recognition from the academic community with the award of honorary degrees by the Universities of Leeds (1968), York (1986) and the Open University (1999). Perhaps even more prestigious was their receipt of the rarely awarded Silver Medal of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society in 1993. In



1997, they were accorded even wider recognition with the award of the MBE.

Marie remains active and lively. She celebrated her 100th birthday in the Yorkshire Dales village of Askrigg, her home since the 1930s. Not surprisingly, she had well over a hundred cards, including, of course, one from the Queen. Over fifty friends and neighbours were invited to celebrate her birthday at a tea party held in the village hall. The following week she attended the opening, by Lord Crathorne, Lord Lieutenant of North Yorkshire, of a retrospective exhibition of all aspects of her work at the Dales Countryside Museum in Hawes. Appropriately, she received a birthday letter from Prince Charles in which he wrote: 'Thanks to you, the history and timeless beauty of the Dales will be recorded for ever'. Marie's remarkable life and work richly deserve the tributes that have flowed to mark her hundredth year.

Christine Hallas

Dr Joan Thirsk, one of the foremost agricultural historians and a previous president of the British Agricultural History Society, wrote in her tribute published in A Favoured Land in 1994:

In the last fifty years, our understanding and appreciation of local agricultural history has been transformed, and among the writers who have deepened our perceptions, Ella Pontefract, Marie Hartley, and Joan Ingilby stand out before all others for their pioneering work in the 1930s and the constancy of their endeavours up to the present day.

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The economic and social history of rural France, 1800-2000: a review of recent research

Nadine Vivier (born 1949) studied history in Paris X-Nanterre, She obtained her doctorate in 1987 with a thesis on the rural communities of the Briancon area (in the French Alps), 1714-1914. Since then she has been working on commons in France (second thesis 1998) and collective properties in western Europe (2003). Since 1998, as a professor of economic and social history and as vicechair of the Association d'Histoire des Societies Rurales, she has developed comparative studies and meetings about rural European societies, including joint conferences with the BAHS, the most recent in September 2005 in Canterbury. Recently she has published two books: Rurlalite française et

britannique, histoire

Presses universitaires

de Rennes, 2005, and

Les societies rurales

(1830-1930), France,

Allemagne, Espagne

et Italie Belin Sup.

October 2005.

rurale comparee,

In the third of our contributions from agrarian historians on mainland Europe, Nadine Vivier from the University of Maine describes recent developments in French rural research which questions, among other things, the accepted view of the 'backwardness' of peasant farming. She calls for more comparitive studies and also more research on the 20th century.

After a period of crisis in the 1980s, French rural history has been extremely productive in the last fifteen years. The creation of the Association Histoire et Sociétés Rurales reflects this vitality.

An exceptional number of theses about rural France in the 19th century were completed between 1960 and 1980. They aimed at a 'histoire totale' grounded in economic history. The evolution of social structures and of political behaviours was predominantly explained by economic trends, until Maurice Agulhon's thesis which attributed the main significance to social causes. The traditionalism versus modernity issue was prevalent: theses presented the backwardness of the peasants and their resistance to change which penetrated the countryside only slowly. Marxist theory which denigrated the peasant class, influenced historians. They were also deeply impressed by the English agricultural model which has been seen since the 18th century as the only way towards a productive agriculture. All the countries, whatever their climate may be, were supposed to copy the Norfolk's system, and their results were compared to those of Norfolk, especially with regards to wheat production, cattle breeding and fodder plants.

From the 1990s onwards, rural history took advantage of the questioning of these stereotyped ideas. The main historiographical debate now concerns the behaviours of rural populations. The vision of backward peasants denying change fades away; the statements are more qualified, showing

the progress towards modernity, shedding light on the differences between regions. Trying to free themselves from this strict a priori, historians adopted a more critical attitude towards sources. It was no more acceptable to select the documents which could support the thesis. The entire corpus has to be used and submitted to a careful criticism in order to understand which motivations and which ideas, consciously or unconsciously influenced the authors. This proves to be a fruitful approach for a better understanding of the writings of the French administration, the authors of which were strangers to rural realities.

The main topics of today's research deal with the attitudes inside rural communities. Economy is studied much less for itself and more as an element to explain social evolution. Let us quote two examples, multiactiviy and landed property. Multiactivity in the countryside vanished progressively, weakened by competition from manufactured goods. Instead of considering its survival in certain regions as an archaism, studies try to understand how the craftsmen and the small-scale industries could adapt themselves to the market demand¹. Landed property and land tenure remain also a major issue, for they represented an access to voting right and a guarantee of economic independence. The land market and the inheritance transmission for private properties are scrutinized². Collective property and use rights subsisted during the 19th century and this was said to prove how much poor peasants held on to traditions, even when they only offered a miserable life. In addition to economic facts, a new approach to these struggles takes into account the role of politics. Two main reasons led to the refusal to agree to the demand of small peasants for a division of the commons; first the governments feared that division would renew interest in the Revolutionary laws and second, municipal councils, led by wealthy farmers who took advantage in

Footnotes

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- ² Béaur Gérard, Dessureault C. et Goy J., Familles, terre, marchés, PUR, 2004.
- ³ Vivier Nadine, *Propriété collective et identité communale*, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998.
- ⁴ see the debates in *Histoire et Sociétés rurales*, n°11, 1999. The synthesis of J-C. Farcy in *Les sociétés rurales*, Belin , 2005; Hubscher Ronald, *L'immigration dans les campagnes françaises*, 19e-20e s, Odile Jacob, 2005.
- 5 Ploux François, Guerres paysannes en Quercy. Violences, concertations et répression pénale dans les campagnes du Lot, 1810-1860, Paris, 2002.
- ⁶ Pécout Gilles, « La politisation des paysans », *Histoire et Sociétés rurales*, n°2, 1994, Guionnet Christine, *L'apprentissage de la politique moderne. Les élections municipales sous la monarchie de Juillet*, Paris, 1997; McPhee Peter, *The Politics of rural Life. Political Mobilization in the French Countryside*, 1846-1852, Oxford University Press, 1992.
- ⁷ for exemple, Boutry Philippe, *Prêtres et paroisses au pays du curé d'Ars*, Paris, 1986 ; Chanet Jean François, *L'école républicaine et les petites patries*, Paris, 1996.
- ⁸ Gavignaud Geneviève, La révolution rurale dans la France contemporaine, Paris, 1996.
- ⁹ Among the first volumes, Démier, Farcy, Sanz, Vivier, Zimmermann, Les sociétés rurales, Belin, 2005 and Moriceau Jean-Marc (dir.), Les campagnes en France, Allemagne, Espagne, Italie, Paris, Sedes-Colin, 2005.

collective pasture, claimed autonomy³.

An important theme of research focuses on social issues. The debate on the driving forces and the paths of rural migrations has been reopened⁴. The use of courts' sources in a regional context increases our knowledge of conflicts within the family, the community, or against the authority of the State⁵.

Politics also had a role to play in the countryside. Maurice Agulhon's hypothesis of the influence of bourgeoisie on peasants, its role of mediator in the introduction of political debates in the village (descente de la politique vers les masses), is in question. This leads to a renewed approach to political behaviours. Dwellers in the villages may have been aware of politics earlier than it has been said and they revealed it in various ways⁶.

Here are only briefly presented some of the more productive fields. The cultural life on the countryside was also addressed by historians but often classified under religious or cultural history⁷.

One of the challenges of research in rural history is now to widen its horizon and open it to international comparisons. Its past weakness has obviously been its main focus on the 19th century, leaving the study of the 20th century to sociologists and economists⁸. Those two directions, towards 20th century and comparative history should be the next decade's focus



for historians. The last one should be encouraged by the new text submitted at the French competitive examination of 'agregation' for 2006-07: about rural societies in France, Germany, Italy and Spain (1830–1930); it is necessary first to establish the current state of knowledge and then to build on this with new studies.⁹

This 19th century painting by Jules Breton entitled 'le soir'encapsulates the traditional view of the drudgery of peasant life.

Foxhunting: past, present and future

About the project

Leicestershire County Council's Heritage Services, in partnership with the Museum of Hunting Trust, have been awarded a major grant of £50,000 by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The award will fund a unique project entitled 'Foxhunting: past, present and future' which will record the impact of the Hunting Act from all points of view, as well as establish what artefacts are currently held in public and private collections across the region and targeted sources.

The information generated from the study into the past, present and future of foxhunting will be used to create a virtual exhibition about hunting and records will be made of peoples' memories, photographs and artefacts. The exhibition will offer an impartial account of how the hunting ban affects the region and illustrate an important time during the history of the East Midlands.

It is hoped that the project will engage with young people from across the region. Youngsters will be invited to interview a cross-section of people who hold varying views on foxhunting to help them develop an understanding of the cultural tradition. These interviews will then be used as educational material for local school children.

The 2004 Hunting with Dogs Act, which banned hunting foxes with hounds, represents a unique opportunity to reflect on the history and future of fox hunting practice and opposition in the region. It is equally important to record the impact on associated trades and the links to a range of other rural issues.

We would be very interested to hear of any current research relating to foxhunting, landscape, environment and associated trades and activities that you would be willing to share with us. In addition, please contact us if you are aware of any public or private collections that may be relevant in this context.

About the Museum

The former Carnegie Library was refurbished and opened by Leicestershire County Council in 1977 as the Melton Carnegie Museum.

In 1983 the National Museum of Hunting Trust was established. The hope was that since Melton was a world-renowned centre of hunting, the Melton building could eventually incorporate material on hunting.

The refurbishment of the building, costing some £500,000, was led by Keeper Jenny Dancey. It gave the opportunity to include a foxhunting display and was greatly celebrated at the re-opening in the speech of Baroness Mallalieu, QC, given on Friday, 3rd May 2002. The Museum is open seven days a week from 10am to 4pm and run by Jenny Dancey.

A NEW RESEARCH PROJECT

Carolyn Abel, Project
Coordinator, Foxhunting:
Past, Present, Future
describes a major research
project funded by the
Heritage Lottery Fund.

Melton Carnegie Museum Thorpe End Melton Mowbray LE13 1RB

Tel: 01664 569946 Email: cabel@leics.gov.uk

NEWS FROM MERL

With the opening of the Reading Room on May 3rd 2005 and the exhibition building on July 5th, the new Museum was fully operational once more. A reception was held on November 14th to thank donors and supporters of this £11 million project. Lord Carrington, Chancellor of the University of Reading, presided.



Putting an early combine harvester through its paces in the 1930s. From the Silsoe collection.

A Rural Research Forum, chaired by Professor Michael Fulford, now meets under the MERL umbrella with the aim of bringing together from around the University all those engaged in research relating directly or indirectly to the Museum's collections in order to spark new work and new partnerships for mutual benefit. A related initiative has seen the creation of three MERL Research Fellowships tenable for a year and worth up to £10,000 each. Appointments were made in the summer from a very strong field and the three holders are: Dr Richard Bonser (University of Reading) for a project on 'The Changing Shape of the Chicken'; Dr Andrew Godley (University of Reading) for 'Scientists, Farmers and Retailers in Britain's Food Chain in the 20th Century'; and Dr Nicola Verdon (University of Sheffield Hallam) for 'Gendered Lives: the Changing Roles and Identities of Women Workers in Rural England, 1900-1950'.

Significant acquisitions recently have included the archive of engineering drawings from the steam engine builders Charles Burrell & Sons of Thetford and a large selection of material, including books, photographs and film from the Silsoe Research Institute, now closed, which had been involved with agricultural engineering since 1924.

CONFERENCE NOTICEBOARD

Historic Farm Buildings Group

15-17 September 2006

The annual Historic Farm Buildings Group Conference will be held from the 15th–17th September, 2006 and based at the Holiday Inn on the outskirts of Ipswich. Suffolk is well known for its wealth of timber-framed buildings set in beautiful countryside.

Saturday's outing will include a detailed study of the farms of one village and other sites in the Gipping valley to the north-west of Ipswich and on Sunday we will go to the southeast. We plan to include both typical and estate farms as well as some of the finest manorial sites in the county.

We will be introduced to the region is presentations by local experts and will hear from a local planning officer how he sees the future for these buildings as well as from DEFRA about their policies and the help they can offer. The conference will therefore be of interest to all those who take pleasure in farm buildings in general and are concerned for their future as well as those with a specific interest in East Anglian buildings.

The cost will be £190 to include accommodation to members and £210 for non-members.

An application form is available on the HFBG website: www.hfbg.org.uk or from the organiser scwmartins@hotmail.com

British Agricultural History Society

3-5 April 2006

The annual conference will be held at the University of Exeter from 3rd-5th April, 2006. The programme includes papers by Professor Nadine Vivier, Professor Mark Overton, Dr Ben Dodds and Dr Edward Bujak. There will be three 'new researchers' papers and a field trip into the Devon Countryside. Further details will be sent to members of the Society in January and also available on the Society's web page: www.bahs.org

Post-graduate students who are interested in attending should note that the Society has bursaries available to help with the cost. For more information, please contact j.broad@londonmet.ac.uk

Rethinking the rural: land and the nation in the 1920s and 1930s

Call for papers

The 1920s and 1930s were a key period in the emergence of new relationships between land and the nation.

Perhaps the most obvious unifying theme was the agricultural depression, one of the first truly global economic events, but one which produced very different reactions in different countries. Equally significant to the economic problems of farming, however, was the cultural rise of the countryside, which if arguably less universal nevertheless powerfully reconfigured the relationship between landscape and national identity in many countries. It was also an era in which new demands on land use for resources such as building land, water, wood and minerals, radically altered agricultural landscapes at the behest of urbanisation/ suburbanisation, industrialisation, and transport/ communications infrastructure, and these pressures and opportunities led to increasing state involvement in rural life.

Rural historians have been slower than those in other fields to review prevailing assumptions about this period. In the last five years, however, the Interwar Rural History Research Group, an informal group of scholars in the UK, has attempted to remedy this defect, with conferences in 2002 and 2004. At the latter of these it became apparent that some of the most interesting questions about rural life in the 1920s and 1930s could only be answered from an international perspective. Hence this present call for papers.

The range of issues embraced by 'land and the nation' is very wide indeed, going to the heart of many of the central aspects of international economics, politics and representation in the 1920s and 1930s. Contributors are encouraged to put forward proposals that reflect their own interests. Amongst the questions that the conference is likely to addressare:

- Should we really see the 1920s and 1930s as an era of global agricultural depression, or is the situation elsewhere similar to that in the UK (where although farm incomes experienced a temporary trough, output and productivity rose markedly)?
- What role did literary and visual representations of the countryside play in establishing agricultural depression as a dominant trope? e.g. Farm Security Administration photographs of rural poverty in the rural South.

- To what extent were rural landscapes becoming increasingly central to national identity, as they undoubtedly were in the UK? Does the inverse relationship between the place of agriculture in the economy and the countryside in national identity posited for interwar Britain by, for example, Simon Miller, obtain more widely?
- How did contrasting experiences, memories and commemoration of the First World War affect the relationship between landscape and national identity between the wars?
- Why does the form taken by the rural idyll between the wars vary so widely, emphasising, for example, the settled 'countryside' in England but unpopulated 'wilderness' in the USA?
- What were the prevailing or dominant representations of rural people and how were such representations mobilised to promote or justify government policies?
- How similarly/differently did governments react to falling world food prices, what different forms did government intervention take, and how successful was intervention (a) in achieving domestic food security (b) in maintaining farm incomes?
- How did farmers react to the new role of the state? Was the emergence of the National Farmers Union in the UK paralleled by similar developments elsewhere? What accounts for the contrasting success with which agriculture mobilised politically in different countries?
- What was the nature of the relationship between rising incomes, leisure, the commodification of rural landscapes and the prominence of the rural in national identity? How did this relate to the emergence of an preservationist/environmentalist movement?
- How did political parties, including fascists, make use of images of the countryside between the wars?

The conference will be held at the Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, UK, in the first week of January, 2007.

Potential contributors are asked to send an abstract of c.300 words to Dr Jeremy Burchardt j.f.s.burchardt@rdg.ac.uk by 31st March 2006.

Dr Caitlin Adams, Witan International College, Reading

Paul Brassley, University of Plymouth Dr Jeremy Burchardt, University of Reading Dr Keith Grieves, Kingston University Dr Clare Griffiths, University of Sheffield

Dr Anne Meredith

Professor Keith Snell, University of Leicester Dr Lynne Thompson

Professor Mick Wallis, University of Leeds



SHORT NOTICES

- ▶ Dan Byford is looking for a good home for a complete run of Economic History Review from 1968 to 2002. Anyone interested should contact Dr D.Byford, 58 Station Road, Hatfield, Doncaster DN7 6DT Tel: 01302 841739
- ▶ Peter Sommer tells us that a DVD of the popular television lifestyle reconstruction of the lives of Welsh borderland farmers in the 17th century, **Tales from the Green Valley** is now available, price £24.99.

KINDRED BODIES

The Historic Farm Buildings Group

Andrew Patterson,
chairman of the
Historic farm
Buildings Group
describes the
development of the
group and its present
conservation and
the research and
research role.

For further details about the Historic Farm Buildings Group and how to join, see www.hfbg.org Ron Brunskill's Vernacular Architecture, published in 1971, was the foundation for much of the farm building survey work undertaken by institutions and individuals in subsequent years. By the 1980s sufficient work was underway to stimulate a national conference, and in 1985 the Historic Farm Buildings Group was formed.

The original membership was biased towards the agricultural museum and folk life sector, but also contained a significant number of individuals engaged in survey and research for private interest. Not least amongst these was Nigel Harvey, who had already published extensively on the subject, and established a national reputation for his work. He agreed to become the Chairman of the new Group.

The formation of the Historic Farm Buildings Group also coincided with the major resurvey of buildings which English Heritage was undertaking. This particular agenda resulted in an increase in professional membership of the group, with an emphasis on those engaged on the re-listing exercise as well as those engaged as local authority conservation officers.

The focal point of this early membership was very much the survey and recording of buildings, for which access was of course an obvious requirement. For this reason the Group was very anxious not to engage in conservation or protection issues, feeling that this was likely to create a resistance from landowners leading to a restriction in access.

The Group's membership very quickly grew to about 200, and this audience was initially supplied with two newsletters each year. In 1987 the first in a series of annual Journals was produced, initially edited by Gerallt Nash of the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans, and then by Jeremy Lake from English Heritage.

The Journal was a platform for well researched academic articles, together with book reviews. The newsletters kept the membership aware of current work in the field, featured occasional short articles on particular buildings or issues, and provided an awareness of the activities of the membership. More recently the Journal and Newsletter have been combined in a twice-yearly Review containing short academic articles, book reviews and items of topical interest.

A conference is also organised each year which regularly attract an attendance of 50 delegates. A very successful conference to Holland in 2000 encouraged a further European excursion in 2004, this time to Italy. These two events, and an increasingly international membership, are beginning to bring home the scale of redundancy across Europe, as well as the lessons that can be learnt from the experiences from outside the UK.

Alongside the annual conferences, the Group began to consider additional targeted events to stimulate awareness and interest in Farm Buildings. In 1990 a conference was held in association with English Heritage and the Rural Development Commission, at which the Prince of Wales gave the keynote address. The conference proceedings – "Old Farm Buildings in a New Countryside – redundancy, conservation and conversion in the 1990s" were published soon after.

In 1994 a one-day conference organised in association with the Centre for Conservation Studies, University of York and the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England, stimulated considerable interest. The publication of the proceedings extended the audiences that the Group was managing to reach.

A third conference, 'Rural Regeneration; a sustainable future for farm building' was organised jointly with the Countryside and Community Research Unit at the University of Gloucestershire in 2002. Again, the proceedings have been published.

Early planning for this conference had been difficult, not least because most government departments, and many nongovernmental organisations had a complete blind spot when it came to the significant rural asset represented by the farmstead and the buildings within it. Nevertheless the presentations from Jane Brown, Director of Land Management and Planning at Defra, Sir Neil Cossons, Chairman of English Heritage, Ewen Cameron, Chairman of the Countryside Agency and Sir Edward Greenwell, President of the Country Landowners and Business Association, and Ben Gill, President of the National Farmers Union allowed a full range of stakeholder interest to be aired and explored.









From the 'cathedrals of medieval agriculture' to the industrial farms of Victorian 'high farming' – all are of interest to members of the HFBG

Through various government consultations, the HFBG has been able to air its opinions. Its submissions have carried a consistent theme based on two main contentions. Firstly, the paucity of information available on the stock of farm buildings within the UK and that lack of knowledge made it impossible to develop informed strategies and policies at the national level. The Group also consistently highlighted the wonder that chapter and verse could be quoted on the exact miles of hedgerows pulled out since the war, and that it was known exactly how many skylarks there were, but in contrast, no precise figure could be given on the number of farm buildings that existed, let alone what their condition might be.

The response to the 2002 conference encouraged the Historic Farm Buildings Group to initiate the formation of an Historic Farm Buildings Forum within which common interests and concerns could be discussed and hopefully resolved. Its diverse membership included representatives attending from the Ancient Monuments Society, Cadw, the Council for British Archaeology, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Country Land and Business Association, the Countryside Agency, the Department for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs, English Heritage, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, the National Trust, the Office of the Deputy Prime

Minister, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Discussion within the Forum has focused on shared areas of concern, and debate on mechanisms to address them. Increased awareness of the importance of farm buildings to our understanding and appreciation of our rural past is shown by the fact that their role has been highlighted in the latest Heritage Counts report by English Heritage (2005).

It is very obvious from this account that the Historic Farm Buildings Group has come a long way from its thinking in the early 1980s. As an organisation it has consistently punched above its weight – a fact made possible by the willingness of a core of its membership to put in long hours in addition to their day jobs.

Still at the core of the Group's activity is the intellectual pursuit represented by surveying, and the diligent documentary research to support it. Historic research has now become a tool to guide designs for restoration and conversion of buildings. It also has the potential to provide the basic information against which policy and strategic decisions may be made. There is still a very long way to go before there is sufficient data available to make this claim fully, but the Group can be justly proud of the profile that farm buildings now have in the policy framework, and of their part in achieving this position.

STOP PRESS

We are sorry to have to report the death on December 15th, of Professor Maurice Beresford at the age of 85. Always an active member of the Society, he will be best remembered for his ground-breaking work on the English medieval landscape. An obituary will appear in the next volume of the Agricultural History Review.

A note from the editor

Rural History Today is published by the British Agricultural History Society. The editor will be pleased to receive short articles, press releases, notes and queries for publication. She would particularly like articles on European projects, kindred societies and news from museums, all of which she hopes will become regular features. Articles for the next issue should be sent by 30 May 2006 to Susanna Wade Martins, The Longhouse, Eastgate Street, North Elmham, Dereham, Norfolk NR205HD or preferably by email scwmartins@hotmail.com

Membership of the BAHS is open to all who support its aim of promoting the study of agricultural history and the history of rural economy and society. Membership enquries should be directed to the Treasurer, BAHS, c/o Dept. of History, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ. Enquiries about other aspects of the Society's work should be directed to the Secretary, Dr John Broad, Dept. Humanities, Arts and Languages, London Metropolitan University, 166-220 Holloway Road, London, N7 8DB Tel: 020 7753 5020 Fax: 020 7753 3159 j.broad@londonmet.ac.uk

News from Laxton

Prof. John Beckett, University of Nottingham, author of Laxton, *England's Last Open Field Village* (1989) provides an update on this unique Nottinghamshire village.

Laxton, the last open-field village with a fully functioning manor court, was taken over by the Crown Estates in 1981. They have invested considerable sums in the village, and are committed to maintaining the farming system as long as tenants can be found for the open field farms. Even so, in these difficult days for farming, there are considerable obstacles to be overcome, not the least of which is finding appropriate new tenants who will take on what are, in many cases, part-time farms, whilst also agreeing to be bound by the rules of the manor court. As a result of increasing worries among the farmers, the trustees of the Laxton Visitors' Centre invited Mr Chris Bourchier, the Crown Estates' Director of Rural Estates, to a meeting on the 21st October 2005 which I attended as one of the trustees. Five of the full-time farmers, and one of the small holders (who is also the parish clerk) were at the meeting.

Mr Bouchier assured the trustees of the

Crown Estates' commitment to the future of Laxton as an open field village, and he agreed to work with the agents, Carter Jonas, and the tenants, to find a way of handling the tenant situation. It was a positive meeting, and although Mr Bourchier was not to be drawn on questions about why Laxton farmers should be suffering financially when the Crown Estates made a revenue surplus of £184.8m for the year 2004-5, he did assure the farmers that they had the full support of their landlord for the future.

As a gesture of goodwill, Mr Bourchier offered to fund necessary improvements for disabled access to the Visitors' Centre, and on the same day Nottinghamshire County Council proposed that new interpretation boards should be prepared for the village in 2006. This was all good news, but Laxton is only just surviving. Some of the tenants are still hard at work in their 70s, partly because there is no obvious way of retiring given that they are tenants, and many of their fears surround the finding of new tenants who will accept the discipline of the open-field system. The Crown Estates have offered to help them find ways of increasing their incomes, but a good deal depends on what they are prepared to undertake. As ever, I shall retain a watching brief.



Aerial photograph showing the open fields of Laxton parish

(Cambridge University Collection of Air Photographs, Unit for Landscape Modelling)