RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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… and so to school, bell and coat of arms at Bawdeswell School, Norfolk (see page 7)

Oxen ploughing, 1952

In response to Ted Colin's recent article in Agricultural History Review ('The later-day history of the draught ox in England', Agricultural History Review 58, part two 2010 pp.191–216), Derek Pearce produced this splendid photograph and piece of oral evidence.

At a ploughing match in 1952, near Lechlade Gloucestershire, Ted Smith brought a pair of Lord Bathurst' oxen demonstrating their use for ploughing.

At that time I was Farm Manager for the Bathurst Estate at Tarlton Cirencester, and had got to know Ted very well. We often discussed the use of oxen and I recounted with him when in the early 1930's, I saw a full team of oxen ploughing near Cirencester. I was greatly interested to hear Ted talking to the bearded man in the photo with his tucker bag who was a Carter of sixty oxen before the 1939 war. They both related how they broke oxen into work and both compared the advantages of oxen over horses. I feel privileged to have been witness at that historic occasion.

And on a similar theme…

A recent acquisition at the Weald and Downland Museum is shown below.

These brass knobs have been identified as fitting on the end of ox horns when the animals were being trained for use in the field. A photograph held by the museum taken in Waldron, Sussex, shows them in use.

Photographs courtesy of Weald and Downland Museum

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Editor's note

In this issue there are two pieces written as short responses to articles in BAHS publications. This is an ideal function for *Rural History Today* so keep them coming in!

British Agricultural History Society

A la recherche du temps paysan– a response to Jean Michel Chevet

In response to Chevet's paper in A Common Agricultural Heritage (BAHS 2009) *Phillippe Planel recalls his memories of small-scale farming in 1950s France and England.*

Jean Michel Chevet can be congratulated for producing that rarity, a truly comparative study of French and British agriculture: *Reconsidering a rural myth: peasant France and Capitalist Britain (Chevet 2009).* Let the debate begin!

Chevet argues, through statistical analysis, that: "the supposed differences between agriculture in England and France are more a matter of nuance and degree than fundamental difference." (2009 p.40). He uses a series of late 19th century French and English statistics; a time where statistical series are more complete – though still not directly comparable. I will leave it to others to critique Chevet purely on his statistical analysis, which seems to be based on questionable assumptions, but will answer him from an experiential perspective: French rural life, even in the mid 20th century, still felt peasant dominated and British rural life at this time felt like it was dominated by capitalist farming. I will also throw in a few more recent statistics.

If Chevet is right and there is very little difference between the two countries, he has a lot of explaining to do in accounting for how different rural life appeared to be in the two countries even in the mid 20th century. I am from French peasant stock on my father's side and grew up in both rural France and rural England. Even from a child's perspective there were marked differences in the tenor of rural life in the two countries and arguably this was because French small farmers in the Drôme and the Alpes Maritimes (south-east France) were undercapitalised peasants working predominantly smaller holdings than the small farms in the Hampshire villages on the edge of the New Forest.

In the 1950's French villages were cash poor, and as a small boy I noticed these things. Whereas in England most people would give a small coin as a reward, the most one could expect in a French village was a piece of fruit or a few walnuts. Small boys also notice tractors, but there weren't many around on peasant farms in South East France at this time. There wasn't capital or available finance for tractors at Brette (Drôme) in the mid 1950's. I only started recording this sort of thing in the 1970s, but the picture of Eugene Terre ploughing along the contour with a mule – not an old farmer by any means, was taken as late as 1974 at Le Petit Paris, near St Nazaire le Desert. My father's relations at Brette, close by, had stopped using their mule by c197 0, but kept it just in case the tractor broke down. In the New Forest in the 1950's every small farm had its little grey Ferguson tractor.

Recently, the East Devon Parishscapes Project interviewed older farmers and it emerges that mechanisation even on these mixed farms was very rapid and began before World War II. David Hurford (Colyton) recalls that whilst he knew everything there was to know about working with horses, his younger brother, born a crucial five years later, had no such knowledge (Planel 2010). Mechanisation is essentially about capital, crucial to capitalist farming; French peasants had very limited access to it. Peasants in the Drôme and the Alpes Maritimes were poor, as they were in Brittany, the Massif Central and other French regions. They lacked indoor toilets or running hot water – it was my mother who noticed this most. The New Forest small farmers weren't rich but they had

Eugene Terre ploughing along the contour with a mule, taken in 1974 at Le Petit Paris, near St Nazaire le Desert. Photo P. Planel.

more cash to spare and could begin to modernise. The only poor families I remember in Brook and Bramshaw were those of agricultural labourers, not farmers. There weren't any agricultural labourers in Brette, but there weren't any middle class people either. Much of the French countryside, away from Paris and the larger towns, was socially undifferentiated; there was only one class – the peasant farmers (apart from the school teacher and the priest) and their political sympathies were also far from middle class. There were fewer improving landlords and model farms, not to mention estate housing; fewer capitalist tenurial relations; less capitalist thinking. When modernisation came to post-war France it was led by the state and farmers' organisations. The proportion of freehold farms to rented farms is still very large in most of France. Between 1892 and 1929 there was actually no change in this proportion – 75% owner occupied, according to Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economique (INSEE) figures (Planel 2005, p. 79). French peasant farmers, unlike British small farmers, also had to deal with the intractable problems caused by partible inheritance; the fragmentation of co-terminus holdings, leaving a patchwork of fields distributed all over the commune. The government inspired 'remembrement' policy was, with difficulty, only implemented in the late 20th century and is still a bitter memory in some Drôme valleys.

Another characteristic of peasant society is self-sufficiency. Laurence Wylie charts this in his *Village in the Vaucluse*. As late as the 1950's many non-cultivars featured in the diet: mushrooms, pine seeds, corn salad, etc., and 'gibier' (game – rabbits, hares, thrushes, pigeons). Small but vital amounts of cash were raised from all kinds of minor harvests: walnuts, chestnuts, essential oil distillation, truffles, eau de vie, 'tilleul' (from lime flowers) – labour intensive non-mechanised work.

A pig was fattened up by each Brette peasant family until around 1970, fed on potato peelings and slops; goats were omnipresent. The animals had bells, creating the aural landscape or timbre typical of peasant society. French chroniclers despairingly referred to these farms as 'Noahs Arks' – as colourful and charming as they were unproductive. Very little of the above was recognisable in the New Forest, though one or two ancient rights, pannage and timber ('by hook or by crook'), for example, were still practiced (Planel 2003 p.79). The New Forest farmers had access to markets in nearby towns (Romsey, Ringwood) for the stock they ran on the Royal forest (as commoners) and their crops. Some of the New Forest farms were small, 50 acres (20 hectares), but they were not typical of British farms. Yet the average French farm size in 1955 was 14.2 hectares, and, more importantly, fully 66% of the 2,200,000 farms were below average size (Duby & Wallon 1976 vol.4; p.226).

A farming economy where 10 hectare (25 acres) farms are the norm, a size which Chevet is right as stating is the minimum amount needed for a family …" to be completely independent – defined as members of the household being able to get a living without going to work on another farm or taking up another kind of work" (2009, p.42), is surely a peasant economy.

Peasants or farmers? The author's paternal great grandparents at a wedding in the Dromein the late 19th century.

Much of France was like parts of Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th century. The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh writes of his early years as a farmer in *The Green Fool* (1938). The County Monaghan 25 acre farm was the basic family farm unit and the search for cash and capital a major preoccupation. Neither *The Green Fool,* or for that matter *Le Cheval d'Orgueil* (Pierre Jakez Helias 1975) – about peasants in Brittany, could have been written about small farmers in England. *Lark Rise to Candleford* concerns country folk but is not centred on small farmers. The French and British realities were very different, both in the late 19th century, where Chevet finds his misleading statistical evidence, through into the 20th century. If it feels, looks, sounds and tastes like peasant farming it probably is peasant farming!

What did French peasants and British small farmers themselves aspire to? French peasants have often actually been overtly anti-capitalist, French farming organisations representing the smaller farmers left of centre. This tradition is still represented today in the form of the Confederation Paysanne, which is both anti-capitalist and, responding to our own times, anti-globalisation. There is no equivalent in Great Britain. The NFU, a left of centre organisation? To find radicalism in rural areas, apart from the Highland crofters, we have to look at the history of rural trade unionism amongst agricultural labourers, not farmers, from the Tolpuddle martyrs (1834) to Joseph Arch's Farm Workers Union (1872). Is Chevet suggesting that French small farmers were deluded in their anti-capitalist sympathies and should have held NFU style aspirations?

Continued on the back page.

Farming for the New Britain: images of farmers in war and peace

Dr Clare Griffiths, senior Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Sheffield, describes her Research supported by the Sir John Higgs Fellowship at MERL

When Clare Griffiths started working on the changing reputation of British agriculture during and after the Second World War, she wanted it to be a project which was about more than how people spoke and wrote about farming. 'I wanted to understand how contemporaries imagined farms and, above all, how they saw the figure of the farmer'.

It began with a picture – or rather a group of black and white photographs, occupying a page of the Ministry of Information book *Land at War* (1945), a celebration of agriculture's contribution to the war effort. These four portraits show the agriculturist as hero, in the same documentary style that elevated the role of other anonymous individuals on the home front, from factory workers to firemen. Farming's contribution was certainly lauded at the time, and memories of the food production campaign continued to dominate public engagement with the topic of agriculture long into the post-war period. The propaganda surrounding agriculture's war had a powerful visual element, but amongst all the stirring publicity films and the official war art there are relatively few farmers to be seen. The big stories were about the dramas of heavy machinery deployed on the plough-up campaign and new elements in the agricultural workforce: the land girls, the school children and office workers who volunteered to bring in the harvests. By contrast with these novel elements, the farmer in wartime did not appear markedly different from the farmer in peace, and his ability to encapsulate a dynamic economic sector was compromised by other enduring cultural associations. Even in the midst of a crisis for the national food supply, accounts of agriculture tended to linger lovingly over romantic traditions and settings, and to sentimentalise farmers as embodiments of some older wisdom, rooted in the land.

As the farming industry itself was portrayed as increasingly go-ahead, scientific and efficient in the post-war period, presentations of the farmer in popular culture continued to embody these more traditional elements. But the modernity of new machinery, technology and business models in the 1950s did begin to rub off on the image of the farmer as well. Farmers were shown as younger, less hide-bound, and perhaps, in some ways, less

Evans Veterinary Products Advertisement, Farmers' Weekly 15th November 1946. (Courtesy of Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.)

definitively *rural*. Positive and enticing images of modern farming in children's books reached out to a new generation of potential recruits, suggesting that being a farmer could be a desirable, important – and potentially profitable – choice of occupation. All this was far from the image of farming in the 1930s. During and after the war, the status of farming in national life was perhaps as high as it has ever been– allowing for reinterpretations of the role and importance of farmers themselves.

The award of a Sir John Higgs Fellowship at MERL gave me an opportunity to track this history through visual images, using the full range of the museum's collections, from periodicals, photographic archives and documentary film, as well as the many and varied publications in the library. Farmers sometimes proved surprising elusive – even in publications for which they were the target audience. Photographs in the farming press tend to show us the farmer's gaze, rather than actual farmers. The pages of Farmer and Stock-breeder and Farmers Weekly illustrate how-to guides to ploughing and hedging, tractors operating in the field, or stock lined up for

judging. Where one finds pictures of the readers who were viewing all of this is in the commercial advertisements. And, from these, a definite stereotype of the farmer emerges. Whether as a mirror for the target consumer or as gentle caricature, the recurring image in the adverts in the 1940s and 1950s is of a man (almost without exception), dressed in sports jacket and trilby, and accompanied by the one prop above all others that seemed to symbolise the farmer: a pipe.

This idea of 'picturing the farmer' became an important theme for the temporary exhibition *Farming for the New Britain* which grew out of the research. Physical artefacts from the museum added another dimension, sometimes reinforcing the visual history, and sometimes opening up other stories entirely. The stores yielded up a stack of receipts from a farmer's desk, posters and metal trade signs, trophies and medals from agricultural shows, educational models of agricultural machinery, and a wonderful toy farm from the late 1940s, recently donated by the woman who played with it as a young girl.

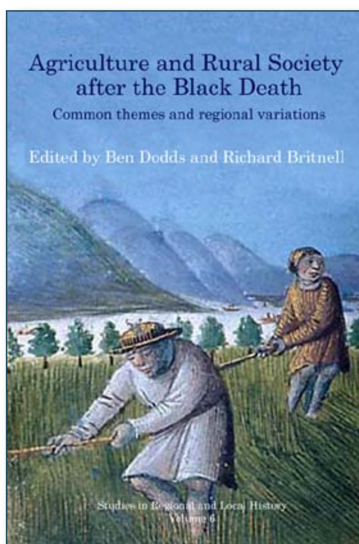
Some objects eluded us. There was a surprisingly extensive collection of pipes, and some rather smart breeches and tweed jackets. But ordinary working clothes are less likely to survive and make their way into a museum. 'No more that fifty years ago you could anywhere tell a "farmer's boy" from a factory worker as easily as from a soldier', the author Sidney Rogerson wrote in 1949. 'Now all are just rather grubby looking people, clad alike in dungarees and armed with spanners.' Many commentators remarked on this shift away from the classic garb of the British farmers towards the kind of clothing worn by mechanics. The adoption of the farming boilersuit was one aspect of this, but the 1940s and 1950s were also notable for the wider use of Wellington (or 'gum') boots, which soon became a commonplace feature of a farmer's outfit. Where now are the wellies of the 1950s? MERL has none in its collection…

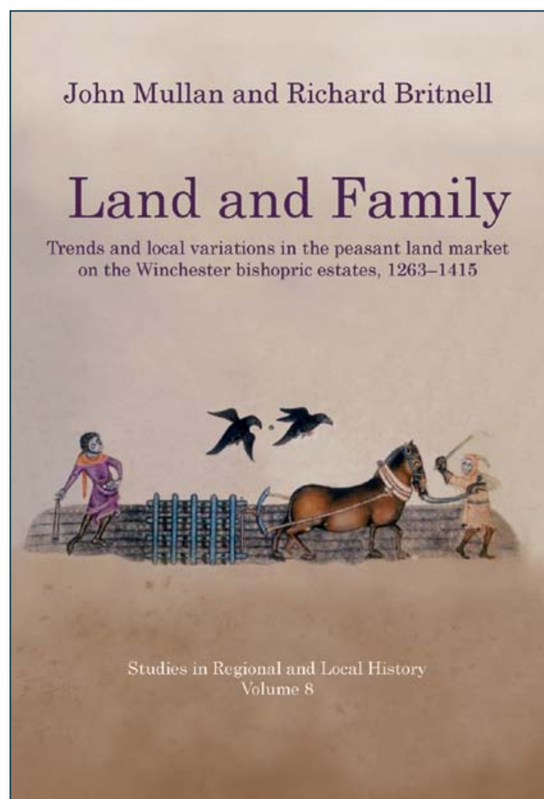
A focus on what farmers looked like – or were thought to look like– is about more than providing illustrations and documenting the social history. It can help to re-examine the place of farming in national life during a period in which support for the sector was identified as an economic priority and when the re-vitalisation of agriculture was embraced as a crucial part of the post-war 'New Britain'. The decades following the Second World War have been remembered mainly for the 'feather-bedding' of agriculture and for the triumph of a more intensive, less sustainable form of farming, so much decried by recent critics. The visual history of the period reminds us that there is another story: about an optimistic re-evaluation of an industry and the importance of those who worked within it. At a time when food security is once more on the political agenda, it is interesting to see how an earlier generation viewed the challenges, opportunities and responsibilities of farming to feed a nation in difficult economic times.

Plant Protection Ltd Advertisement, Farmers' Weekly 10th January 1947. (Courtesy of Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.)

▶ *The exhibition, 'Farming for the New Britain: images of farmers in war and peace' was on display at MERL from September to December 2010. A virtual version of the exhibition will be available through the museum's website in the autumn.* **www.merl.org.uk**

Have you got any historic wellies?





PUBLICATIONS

Wide ranging publications from the University of Hertfordshire

University of Hertfordshire Press published its first title in 1995, since when it has expanded into a wide variety of fields; including rural history.

It started as an offshoot of the technologically advanced 'learning resources centre' at the University but gradually specialist subject areas evolved, including scholarly books on gypsies and travellers, theatre history and, of course, history – particularly local population studies and English local history. It also joined forces with the Hertfordshire Association for Local History in 2001 to publish books on Hertfordshire history (of which the *Historical Atlas of Hertfordshire* is the latest).

Of particular interest to agricultural and rural historians will be the forthcoming volume from the series *Studies in Regional and Local History.* This is *A Prospering Society: Wiltshire in the later Middle Ages* by John Hare, which explores the influence of landscape and population on the agriculture of that great cloth-producing county.

Out of the Hay and Into the Hops by Celia Cordle won the inaugural Hasted Prize awarded by Kent Archaeological Society and is a detailed study of hop cultivation in Wealden Kent and hop marketing in Southwark from 1744 up to 2000.

The Press have published two books co-authored by the distinguished historian Richard Britnell, both with a focus on rural history: *Land and Family: Trends and local variations in the peasant land market on the Winchester bishopric estates, 1263–1415* (with John Mullan) and *Agriculture and Rural Society after the Black Death: Common themes and regional variations* (with Ben Dodds).

Very recently *Thorps in a Changing Landscape* (by Paul Cullen *et al*) appeared in the series of shorter monographs, *Explorations in Local and Regional History*; this takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of early medieval settlement in England and draws some important conclusions about changes in farming during this period.

In June 2011 the Press will publish *New Directions in Local History since Hoskins*, edited by Christopher Dyer *et al.* This lively book marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of W. G. Hoskins' *Local History in England* and 'showcases' the extraordinary diversity of local history studies as it has evolved today, stimulating debates about the nature of the subject, its present health and the directions it will take in the next half century.

▶ *To see the whole range of UH Press titles, please visit* **www.herts.ac.uk/uhpress**

Schools in the countryside

Susanna Wade Martins describes a research project being under-taken in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia, Norwich.

Primary school education has undergone a revolution in the last ten years with whiteboards, the internet and learning programmes based on computers replacing more traditional systems. Both school buildings, often dating back to the early 1800s and teaching aims and methods have changed radically.

Up to now recent research interests have concentrated on urban education, but a project, funded by English Heritage and based in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia is looking at rural education in Norfolk from c.1800 to c.1950 and hopes to rectify this situation. Increasing interest in this field is reflected in the course being run by Oxford University Continuing Education on the Victorian Village School (see back page 'Conference Events'). Whilst the Norfolk starting point is the 400 or so school buildings that existed in the county up to the second world war, the resulting publication will make wide use of documentary and printed sources such as school log and text books to answer such questions as the aims of rural education and how far these differed from those in urban schools. Were standards lower in the countryside and how much opposition was there to schooling from both parents and employers, particularly before 1918? How fast did attitudes change?

Many aspects of this research and its methods are new. It represents a partnership between the Norfolk Historic Buildings Group, whose members are undertaking much of the field work recording the school buildings, the Norfolk Record Office and Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse Museum of Norfolk Rural Life. The buildings are indicating the amount both individuals, such as parsons and the landed gentry as well as at a later date, the local school boards and finally the county council were prepared to invest in buildings. Changes in school layout and design are evidence for the speed at which new ideas on teaching methods were reaching the countryside. The documentary research is being undertaken alongside the building work as well as where possible, interviews with those who remember school days before 1950. This interdisciplinary approach will result in a publication in an under-researched field and perhaps serve as a model for work in other regions.

The initial findings of the research will form a major exhibition in the long gallery at the Norfolk Record Office, opening on September 19th and running until the beginning of December. It will include objects such as text books, teaching aids, sewing samples and gardening implements from the Rural Life Museum, documentary sources from the Record Office and photographs of the whole range of buildings recorded by the team of volunteer recorders.

The small one-room church school at Billingford was built in the 1840s.

The U-plan Board school at Bracon Ash is typical of the 1870s, with ornate central entrance.The teacher's house forms one wing, the school room the other with a small class room in the centre.

Several tin schools were built in Norfolk. This one at Deopham was built in 1909 and replaced in 1929. (Courtesy of Philip Yaxley)

EVENTS NOTICEBOARD

BAHS Winter Conference

The BAHS Winter Conference will be held on Saturday 3rd December in the University of London Senate House, Malet Street.

The theme is Historical Perspectives of Food Security in Britain and Ireland. Further details on the BAHS website **www.bahs.org.uk**

Anglo-Saxon Woodlands: Wood-pasture and Woodland Crafts

Saturday 29 October 2011. A day school at Rewley House, Wellington Square, Oxford

Woodlands were an important element in the Anglo-Saxon rural economy, for pasturing livestock as well as providing the raw materials for making farm and household equipment. This day school, held in association with the Exploring Early Farming study group, will bring together the expertise of historians and insights from modern woodland management: Dr Della Hooke (Birmingham University) 'New views on Anglo-Saxon wood-pasture'; Dr Helen Read (Burnham Beeches NNR) 'Managing livestock in woodland today'; Dr Christopher Grocock (Bede's World and the Butser Ancient Farm Project) 'Anglo-Saxon woodland crafts'; and David Rees (Manager of the Oxfordshire Woodland Project) 'The practicalities of woodland management'.

▶ **www.conted.ox.ac.uk**

▶ *The Exploring Early Farming group hopes to arrange a field trip in connection with this day school. For further information contact Helen Bridge:* **helenmbridge@hotmail.com**

The Victorian Village School

Saturday 12 November 2011. A day school at Berkshire Record Office, 9 Coley Avenue, Reading

A practical day school on the village school in the nineteenth century and its records. By the end of the nineteenth century virtually every village had its school, and the records illustrate the difficulties of providing effective universal education in the countryside despite bad weather, sickness and the demands of the farming year. Workshop sessions led by Joan Dils and Dr Peter Durrant (Berkshire County Archivist) will provide opportunities for students to investigate Victorian schools for themselves using documents in the Berkshire Record Office.

▶ **www.conted.ox.ac.uk**

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The experiential basis of the present article has, of course, certain disadvantages; The Drôme was fairly typical of the very large peasant sector in France, though this may not have been universal in the way that capitalist farming has been for a long time in England. Also I have not been able to discuss, except in passing, the crucial question of waged agricultural labourers, a key aspect of capitalist farming; these were largely absent from my experience. Yet, I believe even my narrow angle snapshot suggests there were major differences between French and British agriculture. It is almost as if Chevet was trying, as an economic exercise de style, to establish that black can be proved to be white and white proved to be black.

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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.

Articles for the next issue should be sent by 30 November 2011 to Susanna Wade Martins, The Longhouse, Eastgate Street, North Elmham, Dereham, Norfolk NR20 5HD or preferably by email scwmartins@btinternet.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 Nicola Verdon, Department of History, Arts A, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN2 88H

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