

THE Agricultural History Review

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Edited by H. P. R. FINBERG

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EDITORIAL

ANOTHER society? A new review? A review competing for attention with the spate of contemporary letterpress, and a society demanding, in these days of cruelly straitened incomes, yet another guinea? The venture might well seem foolhardy indeed; and when it was first mooted, there were many who shook their heads in dismal anticipation of failure. But those who believed that there was room and need for such a society spared no effort to bring it into being; and it seems that their faith is being rewarded. Already, within a few months of its foundation, the British Agricultural History Society counts two hundred members, and at the moment when this first issue of its journal goes to press, there is good hope that it will soon number many more.

Considering that agriculture is vital to our existence, it is remarkable how little we know about its history in detail. Our knowledge consists largely of the generalizations framed by the writers of textbooks in their laudable endeavour to make us acquainted with the 'average farm' or the 'typical village'. We accept the marked regional differences in present-day farming as part of its modern structure, but do we realize that such differences are not always due to modern specialization? The few regional studies which have dealt with local agriculture before the eighteenth century suggest that husbandry was formerly adapted even more rigorously to physical conditions than it is now. We are vaguely aware that the arrival of the first milk train in London about 1860 altered the whole pattern of the milk-producing industry and opened up a hitherto undreamt-of market for liquid milk. (Incidentally it was a day of ill omen for farmhouse butter and cheese.) But specialization is a good deal older than the second half of the nineteenth century. One might quote for example the well-established Middlesex strawberry-growing industry which was flourishing by the mid-eighteenth century; but it seems probable that specialized crop and stock production for the urban markets began much earlier, perhaps as early as the sixteenth century. The subject is one of many

that would repay investigation by scholars trained in historical research.

There are signs that our universities are aware of the need for detailed enquiry into the agricultural past. At Cambridge the Gilbey Lectureship in the History and Economics of Agriculture was endowed as long ago as 1896. At Reading, where from 1908 to 1912 one of the greatest living historians, F. M. Stenton, held a research fellowship in local history, the University has lately established a Museum of English Rural Life; and in the course of this last year it has taken the further important step of creating a lectureship in the history of agriculture. In 1947 the University College of Leicester made the pioneer move of setting up an independent department of English Local History, and in 1951 provided it with a senior research fellowship for the study of agrarian history.

Simultaneously with these moves by academic institutions there have been encouraging signs of a very general awakening of interest in the history of the countryside. Farmers, schoolmasters, craftsmen, and other country-dwellers, realizing the far-reaching nature of the changes brought about by the farming revolution of the mid-twentieth century, have made determined efforts to investigate and record the past. A number of conferences have been devoted to the subject; many local historical societies have been formed; and numerous exhibitions have stimulated people's interest in the history of their own village.

The British Agricultural History Society has been founded in order to bring together all who are interested in agriculture as a living and historical process. Historians, in studying the rural economy of past centuries, have all too frequently been handicapped by inadequate knowledge of practical husbandry. Farmers, who by the nature of their work are frequently in contact—sometimes in painful contact—with the problems of history, do not as a rule possess the scholarly equipment of the historian. Geographers, too, may be well advised to keep in touch with historians and agriculturists. There are many others whose work may give them an interest in rural history or who simply derive pleasure from studying it. We hope that the Society, through its meetings and this Review, will help to bring this wide field of interests together.

The frequency with which the Review is published must depend largely on the number of members. It is to be hoped that before long it will be possible to publish at least twice a year. The pattern of this issue will be substantially followed in the future. Our intention is that each issue shall contain a number of articles embodying original research in agricultural history, together with shorter notes and comments, a bibliography, and book reviews. The Editor will be glad to consider offers of material and also letters written for publica-

tion in these pages. However useful the Society's meetings may prove as a forum for discussion and a means of disseminating knowledge, we are well aware that the value of its contribution to the history of agriculture will be judged, in the last resort, by the quality of its published work.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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