

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1988

By JOHN BECKETT

Around Easter-time each year stalwarts of the British Agricultural History Society meet to deliberate on the latest findings and ideas about the subject. This year the gathering was at Plaxtole House, a residential hostel of the Norfolk College of Arts and Technology in King's Lynn, and it took place 6-8 April. 'A load of stuffed shirts' was what the young lady receptionist said she was expecting, unaware of the Society's annual efforts single handedly, and with or without EEC blessing, to promote sales of barley and hops. Fifty perennials, and not so perennials, gathered for the event – or at least forty-nine since one inadvertently turned up a day late – and as always this was an opportunity to meet old friends, and to make new ones, to watch the older generation even less able than last year to stay awake for the after dinner deliberations, and to listen to younger research students with new ideas and perspectives on agricultural history.

Two themes emerged from, rather than dominated, this year's conference: Norfolk, and 'margins'. The first of these is easier to explain than the second. Since we were gathered in Norfolk it was only natural to hear something of the county's agriculture. However, with the 'bucolic heroes' view of the agricultural revolution now firmly relegated to a distant backburner the Society was anxious to show its modern image and thus – whatever the regrets of a few sentimentalists – there was to be no visit to Holkham to see if Thomas William Coke was still singing his own praises, and no searching for 'Turnip' Townshend at Rainham. Susannah Wade-Martins, although an expert on the varied activities at Holkham, steered us well clear of the famous estate. She talked to us instead about the Norfolk Historic Farm Buildings Survey, a two-year community project which looked at 400 farms scattered across the county. One of those farms, Park Farm, Bylaugh, near Dereham, was where she took us for the obligatory field trip on the second afternoon of the conference.

The field trip is a vital part of the annual conference, and it is essential that it combines something serious (such as a farmstead) with something rather less mentally taxing – this year the Norfolk Museum of Rural Life – and something edible or drinkable. In the absence of the Society's preferred resort – a brewery – we took 'tea' at the Norfolk Museum, Gressenhall. Despite various blandishments from the organizer about returning to the coach, conferencees were not to be hurried, so it was left to the driver

to ensure that we were back in King's Lynn for dinner. Finally, the Norfolk connection was sustained by the final paper at the conference in which Alec Douet surveyed agricultural practice and its changes between 1921 and 1939, as well as discussing the development of agricultural education and advisory services in the county.

The 'margin' is more difficult to describe, but it kept reappearing from the moment Mark Bailey introduced it on the Thursday morning with a vigorous discussion of marginal land in medieval England. Too much emphasis on grain growing had, in his view, produced a one-sided view of the medieval economy, especially after the fourteenth-century crisis, in which the significance of alternative occupations – and the role of the ubiquitous rabbit – were too often overlooked. The use of marginal land reappeared with two papers on eighteenth-century landscape and aesthetics. Stephen Daniels and Charles Watkins discussed the work of Uvedale Price at Foxley in Herefordshire, and Susanne Seymour took us to two of those great estates on the sandlands of north Nottinghamshire, Clumber and Thoresby. Both papers suggested that while aesthetic considerations were important in the laying out and development of parks and woodlands, they have to be ranked alongside economic and social pressures. The conference seemed sceptical, but the ideas themselves were well worth considering.

Common rights in Northamptonshire brought us back to the margin on the Friday morning as Jean Neeson suggested that here in the eighteenth century were the small land occupiers – the peasantry – which a conspiracy of historians led by Chambers and Mingay had sought to suppress in their desire to lend support to Marx's account of the subject. In Dr Neeson's view these individuals were a significant group in the countryside tenaciously hanging on to their common rights. She suggested that they have been too easily overlooked by historians convinced that fully-fledged capitalist relationships had arrived in English rural society by the second half of the eighteenth century. Dr Neeson's argument partly hinged on the significance of enclosure, and this was the theme of Bridget Taylor's demographic, economic and agricultural survey of a number of Oxfordshire parishes. Her study suggested that the term 'enclosure' was often used to suggest a pivotal date for the history of a parish whereas in reality the process of enclosure may have been the result of long-term economic and social changes

which only a full study of the local society and economy could reveal.

Finally, fitting neither of these categories – although he did mention ‘margins’ at least once – came Dr Alun Howkins, who read a paper which was alternately serious and lighthearted on the cultural divisions between labouring men in the north and south during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even those who thought the thesis might lack a little weight could not fail to be impressed by the wealth of quotations from plough plays and other contemporary sources which made his talk one of the delights of the occasion.

The conference never fails to surprise. Poor Uvedale Price, we discovered, was thought by none other than William Marshall to be a ‘blockhead’. Coke’s improvements (the man had to come in somewhere) were described at one point in the proceedings as ‘a weeklong garden party with sheep’, and one poten-

tial heresy was presented to the conference with the suggestion that ‘the term enclosure could perhaps be dispensed with’. To these memorable suggestions was added the incontestable fact – at least to this reporter – that barley bread can be bought at Waitrose’s in Reading.

As usual with this conference there was fun, and there were serious moments, and by Friday lunchtime we had seen and heard this year’s offerings. After yet another meal designed for agricultural labourers rather than agricultural historians it was time to disband once again. With a new committee in place to look after the affairs of the society for the following year, and with grateful thanks to this year’s organizer Dr B A Holderness, we set off on our separate ways, resolved to meet up again next year on, or under, or somewhere near, Clifton suspension bridge in Bristol. Perhaps next year Alun Howkins will sing to us.

ANNOUNCEMENT-SUBSCRIPTION INCREASE

A motion was passed at the Annual General Meeting of the Society held on 7th April 1988 to raise the membership subscription to £10 with effect from 1 February 1989.

The Society’s Treasurer, Dr Collins, outlined the background to the increase. In rough terms, the annual cost of printing and distributing the *Review* is now £9000, of administering the Society £1200, and (up to 1989) repaying a debt of back postage owed to the University of Leeds, £1700. With a membership of about 900 each paying £5 per annum, the income from subscription covers less than 40 per cent of these costs. In the past, the difference has been made up principally by sales of journals and income from investments, but in recent years by progressively larger transfers from the now rapidly diminishing reserve balances. Under these circumstances the Executive Committee saw no alternative but to recommend to the Annual General Meeting that the subscription, which has been unchanged since 1977, be raised to £10. The higher subscription will allow the present size of the *Review* to be maintained, and a cumulative index and supplement on *Fenland Worker Peasants* to be published next year.