

# Conference Report: Spring Conference 1989

By PETER DEWEY

The conference took place between 3–5 April, at Burwalls Conference Centre, Bristol. This was a splendid nineteenth-century mansion, located beside the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it turned out to have been at some time in the possession of the Wills family. It is now the conference centre of the University of Bristol (on a self-financing basis, as the official history of Burwalls hastened to assure us, the taxpayers).

After tea and the meeting of the executive committee, the conference began with the annual dinner. This was held in a dining room replete with olde worlde panelling, so with a bit of effort we could imagine ourselves to be Victorian commercial plutocrats. In his after-dinner remarks, Professor Mingay referred to the forthcoming 100th birthday of the doyen of British agricultural historians, George Fussell, and the Society agreed to send him a suitably refreshing present to mark the occasion.

After dinner, we were treated to a talk (plus slides) by Mr Edward Price, who farms Frocester Court Farm, Gloucestershire. This was by way of background to the visit to the farm which we were to make the next afternoon. In a remarkable lecture, Mr Edwards gave a full history of the 260-acre farm, in which he traced human occupation on the site continuously from Neolithic times by way of the Romans and the mediaeval church to the present. The investigations which generated this wealth of connected history had been performed by Mr Edwards or under his supervision, and were a great tribute to his self-taught mastery of a wide range of historical and archaeological techniques; they even included the excavation of (pre-Norman) ridge-and-furrow; a seam of the past so far neglected by the professionals.

On Tuesday morning, snow began to fall. The impression that we were living in a time-locked past increased, and was enhanced by the discovery that Burwalls lay within the boundaries of an Iron Age hill fort. The day began with the AGM of the Society. To the regret of the audience, Gordon Mingay announced that he was stepping down from the Presidency. Michael Thompson was nominated as his successor, and was duly elected. Then followed the first of the day's papers, by Christopher

Thornton. This was an examination of trends in mediaeval arable productivity on the Bishop of Winchester's demesne farm of Rimpton (on the Somerset/Dorset border). The main thesis thereby tested was that of Titow, who maintained that grain yields in the later mediaeval period were declining. This view was questioned by Mr Thornton, who showed that statistically the yield figures would not bear this interpretation, either before or after the Black Death. It seems that the more you look at mediaeval land management practices, the more sophisticated they appear.

After coffee, the Society was treated to a long view of agricultural productivity in the European past, by Mark Overton and Bruce Campbell. This did a lot to put the agrarian revolutions of Britain and Europe into an historical perspective, with much emphasis on the contribution of agricultural improvement to general economic growth. It also usefully pointed to the gaps in the historical record; if only the Winchester pipe rolls had persisted into the seventeenth century! To a twentieth-century specialist, they have a romantic ring which is somewhat absent from the annual agricultural statistics collected by MAFF.

In the afternoon, we made the excursion to Frocester Court Farm. The weather turned out to be cold and windy, punctuated by the occasional flurry of snow. En route, Joe Bettey, the conference organizer, kept us interested by describing the countryside flanking the M5, pointing out red deer and monuments, and explaining such arcane oddities as the origin of the name of a motorway service station. At Frocester, Mr Price showed us around his farm, which included a mediaeval barn and a variety of other historically interesting buildings, most of which seemed to have been restored or reroofed by Mr Price in the past two decades. Mr Price lived up to the reputation he had established on Monday evening, and amazed the members of the party with his knowledge of the site. The weather finally drove us into the village pub, where tea had been arranged. For a change, we were back at the conference centre with plenty of time to spare before dinner.

The paper after dinner that evening was by Professor David Smith, of the University of Maine.

Amongst his other distinctions, he is a climatologist, and a leading member of the H G Wells Society, having written an internationally acclaimed biography of Wells. His paper this evening reflected another aspect of his concern with affairs on this side of the Atlantic, for it was about the interest shown in nineteenth-century British farming techniques by contemporaries in the USA. He began by recalling that Sir John Sinclair had sent a copy of his survey of British agriculture to George Washington in 1794, demonstrated that the agricultural journals of New England were positively loaded with material on best-practice British farming, and traced some of the trans-Atlantic movements of agricultural journalists and pedigree livestock, all seemingly designed to bring British agricultural enlightenment to New England. This tale of apparently disinterested progressivism was somewhat undercut by his revelation that the mainspring of the whole endeavour was so to improve the prosperity of New England agriculture that the 'lads would be kept at home', ie encouraged to stay in New England rather than migrate westward. British listeners who had been feeling increasingly smug were jerked out of their complacency by being informed that by the 1880s the New Englanders were looking to Germany rather than Britain for the next lot of best practice to import. Still, it was a good run while it lasted.

On Wednesday morning, Mr Machin, Bristol University's resident tutor in Dorset, gave an illustrated lecture on the use of traditional farmhouses as historical evidence. He compared the building style and history of housing in the three Dorset settlements of Yetminster, Abbotsbury and Portisham. In Yetminster, the status striving of prosperous late-mediaeval and early modern freeholders produced some largish (three-bay), solid houses, some of which incorporated the latest in trendy detail; the round 'bullseye' windows popularized by Wren in his work at Hampton Court were quickly copied at Yetminster. In Abbotsbury, by way of contrast, the houses were small and of poor quality construction; this was explained as a consequence of the agricultural holdings being small and numerous, and of uncertain tenure. In due course, it became an 'open' village of bad housing, in which the (numerous) landlords were unwilling to invest in

property renovation. But in Portisham, the existence of very long leases (amounting virtually to freeholds) encouraged occupiers to invest in the improvement of their properties; the result was a standard of housing midway between that of Yetminster and Abbotsbury.

Mr Machin was followed by Celia Miller, of Alan Sutton Publishing, who examined womens' work in nineteenth-century Gloucestershire farming. This was a salutary lesson in what can be gleaned from original sources; whereas the population censuses showed women rapidly declining as farm workers after 1851, examination of farm accounts books showed this to be an over-simplistic picture; some identified women who did not appear in the census were clearly working on farms well into the later part of the century. Dr Miller suggested that farmers may have compensated for the decline in the number of female workers by employing the remaining females for a longer working year. This was a novel and very suggestive line of research, although it was evidently also a very labour-intensive one.

Finally, after coffee, Michael Wintle gave us something completely different, in the form of a paper on nineteenth-century Dutch agriculture. This served to open up the rather Britain-oriented nature of the conference so far. Placing Dutch agricultural development within the wider historical context, he showed how it had adapted to the changing nature of later nineteenth-century markets, within the limitations imposed by geography, drainage and soil endowment. He also made the interesting suggestion that in Holland, unlike in Britain, agriculture was not able to invest in other local enterprises, since its surplus funds were lost in unprofitable speculation in land deals; this reflected the continuing land-hunger in Dutch rural society.

After lunch, the conference dispersed. It was time to go; outside the dining room more snow was falling, and the suspension bridge had almost disappeared from view. Before we ceased to be *soi-disant* Victorian plutocrats and became characters in an Agatha Christie country-house detective story, we left, with many thanks for being organized and looked after so well by Joe Bettey, and the most helpful staff of the Burwalls Conference Centre.