

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1991

By CHRISTINE HALLAS

Delegates to the Society's Spring Conference at Chester arrived in anticipation of enjoying an interesting and varied intellectual menu. The sherry reception was one of many portents which augured well for the events of the following two days. The reception provided the occasion for the presentation of a festschrift, *Land Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920* for Gordon Mingay. The presentation was made by the co-editors, Jim Holderness and Michael Turner, and the publisher, Martin Sheppard. The excellent dinner which followed ensured that the tradition of starting the first evening's paper behind schedule would be retained. Dr Nick Higham's (University of Manchester) paper on 'Land use and settlement in early Cheshire: a local perspective' provided an omen for the following day's field trip. Dr Higham guided us through the intricacies of the meagre evidence and highlighted the problems of hunting for material. He noted the lack of nucleated villages, the changing sites of occupation, and the frustrating paucity of material on vaccaries. We commiserated with the archaeologists and were left wondering what there would be to see on the following afternoon's visit.

After the usual excitement of the Annual General Meeting we were again taken hunting, this time into deer forests. Miss Jean Birrell (University of Birmingham) presented a paper on 'A neglected forest resource? Deer and deer farming in medieval England' in which she posed several questions concerning the extent to which deer were being managed and farmed both in parkland and in less controlled environments. She noted that deer were carefully managed in a variety of ways, for example, cows suckled motherless fawns and additional fodder was put out during winter. In terms of the extent of the deer population, estimates could be made on the basis of the ideal ducal household in the fifteenth century being expected to consume 300 deer per annum. Despite this indication of a substantial deer population at that time the question still remained as to whether the activity of deer keepers could be referred to as farming. Perhaps a better description would be that of marshalling natural resources. Miss Birrell concluded her paper with a call for more research to be undertaken on this much neglected topic.

After coffee the subject of the paper ostensibly moved from animals to humans though, as Professor John Beckett (University of Nottingham) in his paper

'Marriage, inheritance and the rise of great estates: the Grenvilles of Stowe, 1710-1889' demonstrated, the distinction was occasionally blurred. The paper centred on two questions: by what means did a minor gentry family owning an estate of 3000 acres in 1700 enlarge its holding through marriage and inheritance to 60,000 acres in 1822 and, in the process, gain a dukedom; and how did such an estate, supposedly protected by entail, come to be broken up so that by 1848 only 10,000 acres remained? The answer to the former appears to have been a mixture of luck, judicious action, and prudence; and to the latter, lack of luck, gambling, and imprudence. The minutiae of the Grenville family activities in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were very complicated but essentially the family was fortunate in that each generation produced an heir who then proceeded to marry an heiress. When Professor Beckett addressed the second question he demonstrated how the decline of fortunes commenced with the antics of the profligate first Duke of Buckingham who mortgaged the whole estate between 1813 and 1822 and was continued by the gambling second Duke who persuaded his son to release the claims of entail. Fortunately, the Duke's wife (née Chandos) protected some of the estate by drawing up a clause forbidding the sale of any of her Chandos property unless the proceeds were used to buy estates in Buckinghamshire. By 1847 the financial situation was so dire that large portions of the estate were sold off culminating in the great sale at Stowe in 1848. The Duchess's clause allowing Chandos property to be sold was activated in 1850, when many of the financial problems had been resolved and repurchase of Stowe and Wootton could proceed. Professor Beckett concluded that settlement appears to have worked when circumventing one generation's misdeeds but, where two generations were intent upon dissipating the family assets, entail and other restrictions could not protect the estates.

The weather for the afternoon excursion was, for a change, bright if somewhat nippy. Although Tatton Park has been in constant habitation since 2500 BC, there were few remains to be found for the period 2500 BC and c1100 AD. As the afternoon progressed the hollows and bumps beneath our feet gained significance as Nick Higham took us through the ages; glancing at a sod and sand dam of a medieval

mill; noting the possible site of Old Tatton; looking over the expanse of thirteenth-century deer parks; pointing out hollow roads; surveying changing field and crop systems; and appreciating the movement of the park from wealth to poverty and back again as the centuries progressed. We inspected the great hall of the old manor and nearby barns pausing only for a quick afternoon tea before returning to Chester.

After dinner Professor Ann Kussmaul (York University, Toronto) presented some novel evidence on 'The world we have lost'. Professor Kussmaul's subject was rural communities prior to industrialization. She demonstrated that, due to hiring arrangements, marriages in arable eastern England generally took place in autumn, while in pastoral western England spring and summer nuptials were favoured. Those communities where no pattern could be identified probably already had a dual occupational structure of agricultural and industrial activities. Professor Kussmaul suggested that marriage totals could be used to provide a proxy of the occupied labour force because the occupation of grooms would drive the seasonality of marriage. This exercise produced evidence which demonstrated that between 1601 and 1801 the agricultural proportion of rural communities declined and conversely, there was a growth in the industrial proportion. The findings, Ann Kussmaul maintained, were consistent with the recent gradualist interpretation of industrialization and she suggested that the shift may be even longer and slower and be traced back to Domesday. Demonstrating its range the paper was followed by a plethora of questions from contributors representing a wide range of subject and period interest. Some contributors noted that the interpretation of the data raised many questions relating to parish size and the precise relationship between industrial and agricultural production in rural communities. After the formal part of the evening was closed discussion on this paper continued, initially around the overhead projector and later in the bar.

Memories of late-night partying were relegated to the background as on Wednesday morning Professor Marjorie McIntosh (University of Colorado) presented an analysis of 'Agricultural Change on the periphery of London: Havering, Essex 1460-1620'. Havering was ahead of its time and enjoyed several advantages in terms of location, land tenure and land use. Lack of tight manorial control resulted in tenants retaining profits and consolidating their position. The proximity to London had a major impact in terms of both land purchasers and markets for produce and this also affected tenure, size of holdings and servant

keeping. Professor McIntosh maintained that the recent theories of agricultural capitalism were not helpful in this context as close examination of the Havering material demonstrated that the theorists had not really understood the mechanism of agricultural change.

The penultimate paper on 'Farming in the Highlands and Islands prior to the Clearances' was presented by Professor Robert Dodgshon (University College of Wales, Aberystwyth). Until the eighteenth century farming in this region was dominated by the clan system. The chieftains were obsessed with the possession of food as a status symbol. It was this obsession, rather than an increasing population, that caused land pressure as communities sought to respond to the demands of their chieftain. The subsistence farmers who peopled these communities learned early the importance of manure. They balanced their winter stock capacity to the summer potential for grass which they sought to improve by exploiting manure production from sources additional to animals. There was an abundant labour force and Professor Dodgshon contended that, rather than a lack of response to innovation, a conscious decision was taken to continue using the higher yield-producing intensive labour inputs in the form of spade husbandry. Use of the plough was only adopted later when marginal lands were colonized.

The conference papers concluded with Dr Avner Offer (University of York) presenting an analysis of 'British perception of overseas agriculture in the nineteenth century'. Dr Offer commented that his interest in this subject was as an historian of political economy and his conclusions were drawn entirely from a study of contemporary commentators who had varying expertise in agriculture. He maintained that two points of view emerge: the macro perspective which concentrates upon world trade and migration, particularly that of the frontier settler; and the micro perspective which examines the continental peasant farmers. From these two perspectives the debate concerning peasant ownership versus the British landlord/tenant system developed. Dr Offer concluded his paper by drawing some parallels between the nineteenth-century debate and the recent Thatcherite approach. The discussion which ensued centred upon the different approaches to the topic taken by political economists and agricultural historians.

After a final lunch conference members departed with a sense of having intellectually and physically wine and dined to the full and with a promise to meet next spring at Nottingham and, among other activities, visit the open field village of Laxton.