

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1992

By JOHN R WALTON

FLORENCE Boot Hall, set amidst the green expanses of the Nottingham University campus, afforded a congenial venue for the 1992 Spring Conference. This year's meeting saw innovations in the number of papers and in their scheduling. But it was that traditional aspect of the conference programme, the field excursion, which in some senses occupied pride of place. Laxton, England's last open-field village, has long been held in affectionate regard by agricultural historians. In view of recent uncertainties concerning its future, and the part played by Professor John Beckett (University of Nottingham), this year's organizing secretary, in bringing Laxton and its problems to wider notice, Laxton was a highly appropriate, not to say inevitable conference theme and excursion destination.

The paper sessions followed a chronological trajectory from medieval to modern, beginning on the afternoon of 13 April with Professor Christopher Dyer (University of Birmingham) talking on 'Agrarian History 1042-1500: Where Do We Go From Here?'. Professor Dyer's point of departure was the recently-published Volumes II and III of the Cambridge Agrarian History of England and Wales. The speaker noted that these volumes proffered no 'big idea' analogous to that of the wood-pasture economy in Volume IV. Indeed, we appeared to have reached a stage where the excitement which once characterized the treatment and presentation of topics like the peasants' revolt, village desertion, or the golden age of labour had given way to an altogether more sober, circumspect and diffuse approach to the period and its themes. Although historians of medieval agrarian society and its institutions might now be united in favouring environmental as opposed to ethnic explanations, on other important matters, like the validity of the Postan thesis or the significance of declining seignorial power, there was no agreed position.

At risk of adding further to present pluralistic uncertainties, Professor Dyer outlined several new approaches which might appeal to any editor or editors minded to repeat the exercise at some future date. The list included closer attention to the productivity of pastoral farming, possible inter-

action with the practitioners of cliometrics, inclusion of material on popular mentality and culture, further consideration of response to market demand, a more rigorous approach to the identification of regional farming types, and possible inputs from environmental archaeology. The lack of prominence of these themes in the present volumes reflected the difficulty of incorporating the most recent thinking into large-scale collective studies with their unavoidably long gestation times.

After dinner, attention turned to Laxton, with Robin Mulholland, the agricultural estates manager for the Crown Estate Commissioners, presenting 'The Landlord's Viewpoint'. Mr Mulholland began with an outline of the history of the Crown Estate, and a survey of its present functions and activities. From this, it was clear that the Crown Estate's acquisition of Laxton following the Ministry of Agriculture's enforced sale in 1981 was not consistent with the Estate's statutorily-defined investment objectives, effective though it may have been in defusing criticism of the sale. Current management policies were designed to ensure the long-term viability of open-field farming, even though this would mean negligible returns to the landlord for at least as long as the present general crisis in farm incomes persisted. In effect, Laxton must remain a village of small farmers, since any further amalgamation would reduce the numbers involved in open-field farming and its institutions below the point where they were viable. With amalgamation within the open-fields ruled out, the Crown Estate had to suggest other means of boosting the household incomes of farmers. Some improvement might be achieved by replacing the current seeds course within the three-course rotation with oilseed rape, or by the increased intrusion of winter cereals into the spring cereals course. But income increases on the required scale demanded solutions which lay outside the detailed management of the open fields. Of the various possibilities, part-time farming was the solution most favoured by the landlord, although in a lively and extended discussion, members of the audience were prepared to argue the merits of a host of others.

Once the business of the Annual General Meeting had been tidied away, the following morning's proceedings began with a paper by David Hall of the Fenland Project on 'Recent Research on Midland Open Fields'. *Pace* Kerridge, the speaker was in no doubt that the greater proportion of Midland ridge-and-furrow was of medieval origin and represented a landscape survival of open-field agriculture. Although subsequent ploughing has sometimes rendered ridge and furrow itself indistinct, it has rarely obliterated the substantial earthworks built up by soil cleaned from the plough at the end of the strip. The resulting linear banks of earth define former furlong boundaries, enabling furlong maps to be constructed where no detailed maps otherwise survive. A sequence of slides, largely relating to Northamptonshire, demonstrated what was possible by combining field survey and documentary research. For township after township, the speaker provided detailed reconstructions of open-field arrangements. In general, what was most striking was the way individual systems had evolved without their early logic becoming wholly opaque. Regular tenurial cycles were common, the strips of any one tenant always being adjacent to those of the same neighbours throughout the fields; the number of lands in a furlong was often a multiple of the yardland rating for the vill; and the yardland rating could itself be related to the Domesday fiscal assessment.

Having contemplated the landscape of medieval Midland open field, the conference then turned its attention to some of the consequences of eighteenth-century enclosure. In her paper 'The Value of Common Right: the Eighteenth-Century Debate', Dr Jeanette Neeson (York University, Toronto) analysed hitherto neglected literary evidence which revealed that many of the late eighteenth century's great and famous had debated the arguments for and against the loss of common right. In disinterring this polemic, Dr Neeson emphasized that there was no disagreement about the consequences of enclosure: all accepted that enclosure turned commoners into labourers. The argument concerned the relative merits of each class. For defenders of the commons, like Richard Price, enclosure brought undesirable effects: the conversion of arable to pasture, the impoverishment of small farmers and commoners, and a diminishing supply of manpower. By contrast, advocates of enclosure, like John Howlett, saw the consequent increase in proletarianization and dependence as a boon. The destruction of the common-right economy brought to an end the indolence and want of deference to higher authority which access to the waste encouraged. However, it was Dr Neeson's view that the enthusiasts'

advocacy of the moral advantages of the new social order was rooted in an excessively narrow vision of the old commons-based society which they wished to see destroyed.

Fortified by lunch, the conference then set forth to Laxton. The weather promised no positive contribution to the pleasantness of the proceedings, which comprised three elements, of which participants were invited to choose two. Professor Michael Jones (University of Nottingham) provided guided tours of the motte and bailey and the church. John Severn, a local architect, Ken Shepherd, one of the Laxton farmers, and Graham Beaumont of the Nottinghamshire County Council Historic Buildings Division gave tours of the village and its buildings. And Professor John Beckett and Reg Rose (farmer and clerk to the Gaits and Commons), assisted by Edmund Rose as tractor driver, mounted guided tours of the West and Mill Fields from the back of a trailer thoughtfully furnished with bales and awning, the latter not wholly effective in keeping out the worst of the weather. A half-time tea break in the Dovecote Inn gave everyone an opportunity to dry out, and to talk to Colin Cree, Vaughan Godson, and the other Laxton farmers, who in general did not share their landlord's conviction that part-time farming was the solution to Laxton's problems. The visit ended with a tour of the museum currently being developed by Reg Rose in the outbuildings of Lilac Farm. Back in Nottingham, the day concluded with a sherry reception and the Annual Dinner. There being no evening paper session, Professor Michael Thompson, the retiring president of the Society, was induced to deliver a more extended and illuminating sequence of after-dinner anecdote than has been customary hitherto.

The last morning of the conference offered two papers. In 'Towards a National Rent Index', Professor Michael Turner and Bethanie Afton (University of Hull) gave a progress report on their ESRC-sponsored project, undertaken jointly with John Beckett, to develop an English rent index for the period 1690 to 1914. Michael Turner surveyed the information which was already available in print or in unpublished dissertations. Bethanie Afton then presented the results of her work on the 29 estate archives so far visited. Her diagrams, showing long-term trends in rent and arrears, and rent levels by region and farming type, hinted at the likely scope of the completed project. Discussion focused on the problems arising from the unanticipated level of beneficial and customary leaseholds, the implications of the general move towards more efficient accounting procedures *circa* 1730, and the weighting which may

be needed to produce an index suitable for national income accounting.

Finally, Dr Lionel Frost (La Trobe University, Melbourne) explored the open-ended theme of 'Modern World Agriculture as Future History'. Notwithstanding the recent decoupling of industrial and manufacturing growth from the growth of agricultural demand, and the general assumption among development economists that they had nothing to learn from history, Dr Frost suggested that several aspects of present world agriculture

would be of interest to future historians. These included the impact of the green revolution on Third World agriculture, protection in the developed countries, overurbanization in the Third World, and the environmental costs of intensive production. Perhaps the most provocative observation in a discussion which ranged far and wide was the thought that if food production was to become an increasingly insignificant function of farming, then agriculture in effect became agricultural history, no more.

Notes and Comments

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REQUESTS FOR HELP

As part of our service to readers, from the next issue (Vol 41, Part I) NOTES AND COMMENTS will include a section under this heading. This is designed for all members of the BAHS, but particularly those who are not attached to an academic institution. We hope this will provide assistance for two types of problem: firstly, those thinking of carrying out research and who have chosen a topic, but are not too sure where to begin, or want to know who else has worked on that particular subject; and secondly, those who are well into a project but need further information to fill in gaps, or require advice on methodology. From time to time we have published lists of research in progress, but as there are intervals of some time between their appearance it is hoped this spot will fill the gap where someone wants information in the short term. This service is open to all members and if you feel it would be of some help you are urged to send your name and address, along with your request, to the Secretary of the BAHS, Dr Richard Perren, Department of History, University of Aberdeen, Taylor Building, King's College, Old Aberdeen, AB9 2UB.

THE VETERINARY HISTORY SOCIETY

The Veterinary History Society was founded in 1962 to foster all aspects of veterinary history and

its membership is open to all and not confined to veterinary surgeons. In the 1970s the BAHS held a joint Winter Conference with the Veterinary History Society. It publishes its journal, *Veterinary History*, twice a year and is always pleased to consider historical articles on farm animals that have a veterinary content. Contributions to *Veterinary History* should be addressed to the editor, Mr Tony W Johnson BVSc, MRCVS, 140 Lovelace Drive, Pyrford, Woking, Surrey GU22 8RZ. Individual Membership of the Society is £6 a year and includes a subscription to *Veterinary History*. Subscriptions for non-members are £4 a year. Correspondence on membership and subscriptions should be addressed to Mr E Barbour-Hill, BVSc, MRCVS, Tan-y-Coed, High Street, Penlon, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 1PX.

OXFORD PEASANT STUDIES GROUP

An informal symposium on *transitions to rural capitalism in ancient medieval and modern societies* will be held in Oxford on 25 and 26 March 1993. If you are interested in attending and would like further information please write to Ralph Evans, 31 William Street, Oxford OX3 0ES.