

Conference Report: Spring Conference 1994

By JOHN BROAD

SOME fifty-five members gathered at Trevelyan College, Durham from 11 to 13 April for this year's Spring Conference. The society was particularly pleased to welcome a good number of newcomers, including agronomists and geographers, colleagues from the Netherlands, and two working farmers. They heard papers which ranged from the medieval period to the late nineteenth century, covered local case studies and major themes such as the existence and timing of the agricultural revolution, and dealt with Scotland as well as England.

Dr Christine Hallas opened the proceedings with a regionally appropriate paper analysing trends in farm sizes, rents and land prices in the northern Yorkshire dales. Her paper skilfully differentiated trends in Swaledale, where agricultural fortunes mirrored the rise and fall of lead mining in the nineteenth century, upper Wensleydale, largely agricultural with sheep and dairying providing the main sources of income, and lower Wensleydale, where farming was more often combined with by-employments. A full discussion followed that highlighted the wide range of factors which influenced these trends: the isolation of the dales, their relatively self-contained land market, and the way in which land was seen as a safe hedge against economic fluctuations rather than a competitive investment were explored. Small land holdings persisted throughout the nineteenth century, particularly where there were dual occupations, while specialist farmers were shielded from the worst effects of the later nineteenth-century agricultural depression by the rise of a liquid milk market facilitated by the coming of the railway to Wensleydale in 1878.

After dinner Dr Mark Overton brought his audience face to face with the perennial problem of the definition and timing of the agricultural revolution. Some members of the audience were comforted to find the agricultural revolution firmly re-established in the period between 1750 and 1850. Mark Overton's findings made changes in output, linked to productivity improvements, central to his definition. On these criteria all sectors of agriculture were making substantially greater strides, particularly after 1800, than before, when technical and

organizational changes may have increased farm sizes and labour productivity, but without the substantial later increases in output on a national scale.

A new feature of the second day of the conference was its concentration on academic discussion, leaving the refreshing breezes of the Durham spring excursion to the Wednesday morning. Dr Bethanie Afton set us off with an optimistic view of the late nineteenth-century agricultural depression on the Hampshire Downs. She found that farmers were not nearly as cramped by detailed lease clauses as E L Jones had postulated, and that they adapted to new circumstances by changing to more sophisticated rotations including more grass and less roots, separate sainfoin leys and a capacity to incorporate catch crops that permitted 11 crops in 8 years. The underlying purpose was to increase the all-the-year round availability of several animal feeds for a system which was centred on the Hampshire Down sheep, whose large hardy, all weather and early lambing qualities made them ideal for the early lamb market, especially for the Christmas and Easter markets.

Paul Brassley followed with a re-appraisal of the role of agricultural science in England from 1850-1914. An entertaining dissection of the scale of efforts in this country compared the 100 agricultural students in late nineteenth-century England with the 3000 students and 400 university teachers in the USA. Low numbers of experimental stations, tiny numbers of scientists, and a government which believed British agriculture was dead and only needed a decent burial by 1902 and spent but £405 on research in 1905, matched the practical farmer's perception that science could not deal with their pest problems or overcome the production ceilings they reached in the 1860s. However, there were changes in the last part of the period with the expansion of some dozen or so experimental stations employing sixty-seven scientists, and the development of university departments of agriculture. The major success of British agricultural science in the period was its ability to publicize its efforts widely and successfully for posterity.

The afternoon session was devoted to a symposium on a medieval theme in which Dr Richard

Smith addressed the theme of the origins of the English manorial system and Dr Richard Britnell provided a counterpointing series of discussion points and comparisons. The mid-thirteenth century was pinpointed as the moment when manorial court rolls began to be made in large numbers, with rapid acceleration in the second half of the century. Much was made of the dynamic competition between the innovations in royal justice available nation-wide for the settlement of disputes, the emergence of lords' courts with written records, increasingly standardized procedures, and the use of juries and written evidence. This led to a fascinating discussion of the importance of these changes in developing rural literacy, in the establishment of a written basis to customary law, and its effects on social structure, security of land holding and the basis for agricultural innovation. There was general agreement on the success of the afternoon and the format of the symposium.

The final paper on a busy Tuesday came from Dr Alex Gibson who used Scottish annual price settings in the early modern period based on the county fiars to plot market integration and trading links. A clear exposition with excellent maps and

graphs showed the earlier integration of the east coast markets by 1700 disturbed by the expansion of Glasgow in the eighteenth century affecting not just the west coast trades but the synchronicity of east coast trades. The basic integration of the market was well illustrated, but the discussion highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the data, especially its wide temporal and geographical range, and the limitations of one annual fixed price as a basis for analysing fluctuations.

After an excellent conference dinner, and a wide range of late-evening discussions, a surprisingly large group of conference goers made their way next morning to the Beamish Museum where John Gall treated us to a preview of the new farm exhibit, based on a recreation of Durham farming in the 1820s as well as the existing home farm. These exciting developments, together with the training of teams of heavy horses, and a view of several old breeds of pigs, provided a worthwhile end to an enjoyable conference, admirably organized by Dr Mark Overton and his colleagues and helpers from the Universities of Durham and Newcastle.