

Conference Report:

The Society's Winter Conference, 2003

'Retailing agricultural produce'

by Mark Rothery

This year's winter conference took place in Senate House, at the Institute of Historical Research, in Bloomsbury, London. The four papers, spanning a period from the thirteenth century to the present day, were all connected by the conference theme of 'Retailing agricultural produce'.

Proceedings began with a paper given by Dr James Davis, of Cambridge, entitled 'Middlemen, markets and the movement of agricultural produce, 1200–1500'. Dr Davis focused on the involvement of cornmongers in the movement of grain. Though previously neglected by historians, the frequency and location of cornmongers is crucial for an understanding of the extent and complexity of agricultural markets and, more generally, the relationship between rural and urban societies. Although ideas such as Central Place Theory and Market Circuits do fit the structure and nature of markets in counties such as Suffolk, they become problematic when applied to an analysis of cornmongers. Market circuits, whereby small markets in a locale or region were timed so as to allow movement and trade between them, were not friendly to middlemen involved in the grain trade. Problems associated with legal, moral and transport restrictions meant that cornmongers could not have made large profits and it seems likely that their involvement in village and small town markets was confined to periods of dearth. There were other ways in which grain could reach smaller urban centres, for example, through direct trade between landed estates and markets. Indeed, the expanded demesne farming and 'market strategies' on large estates in the thirteenth century favoured this. Overall, it was shown that, outside the advanced socio-economic forms found in London, the medieval grain trade was not very closely integrated into wider marketing systems.

The second paper: 'Licensed badgers and agricultural marketing, 1550–1750' given by Dr Wendy Thwaites carried the subject of middlemen and markets further into the early modern period, concentrating on the licensing of badgers by the local and central state. The main legislation, passed in 1552 and 1563, should not be seen as 'anti-middleman', as was the assumption in 1772 when the laws were repealed, but as a clear acceptance of their role and special status as lawful 'engrossers'. There were several relaxations and reinterpretations of these regulatory laws in later legislation that fixed the requirement of licenses according to prices, as occurred in 1663. Attention was drawn towards important regional variations in badgers and licensing. Local directives often differed from those originating from the centre, based as they were on local needs, types of agriculture and economic context. The term 'badger' was sometimes a generic one. In eighteenth-century Oxfordshire, it referred specifically to a corn dealer, whilst in Northamptonshire, between 1693 and 1710, those defined as badgers included oatmealmen, a maltman, higlers, poulterers, carriers, livestock drovers and jobbers. Account was also given to the effect of the demand created by larger and more central markets such as London and Oxford in the framing and enforcement of licensing regulations.

After lunch, Professor John Chartres, of Leeds, gave a wide-ranging discussion on the more structural and infra-structural aspects of the development of agricultural marketing: 'Urban and rural interactions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.' The few studies that have concentrated on both rural and urban society have emphasized the importance, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of the canals and the railways as crucial elements in the increased integration of

urban-rural networks. However, whilst the railways were of great significance later, longer-term incremental changes in an earlier period, such as turnpikes, river navigation, ports and coastal shipping, impacted far more substantially overall. 'Modest transport changes' and a series of 'systemic efficiency gains' led to disequilibriums. These, in turn, led to wider changes, such as a decline in levels of enthusiasm for regulating markets, the growth of more concentrated market towns based on agriculture, or 'primary centres', the development of a hierarchy of market towns as some rose over others within this more 'efficient' urban-rural network, and crop specialization in areas such as liquorice and specialized cheeses. At the centre of a number of trade networks through a system of trunk routes, rivers and ports, Leeds and Wakefield were examples of these 'primary centres' of agricultural retail where the 'North Sea and the Atlantic met'.

The final contribution, 'Selling food, selling images: farmers as retailers in a "post-productivist" countryside', given by Dr Rosie Cox and Dr Lewis Holloway, of Coventry University, examined developments in the contemporary economic relationships between agricultural producers and consumers. Whilst supermarkets continue to dominate the agricultural retail market, in recent years there has been a growth in the popularity of

more direct types of agricultural retail or 'alternative food networks', such as organic box schemes, farmers' markets and community supported agriculture. Demand factors in the development of these markets are associated with the perceived bad 'quality' of food and concerns over the environmental impact of the production and distribution of the food found in supermarket retailers. On the supply-side, the tough conditions under which farmers have been forced to operate recently and the associated increase in the scale of agricultural production, has forced many into 'multi-functional agriculture', either diversifying into tourism or more direct types of marketing that avoid costly economic relationships with the dominant supermarket chains. It was suggested that this reflects a shift from a 'productivist' ethos in agricultural production, where the emphasis is laid on quantity and output, to a 'post-productivist' ethos, which lays more stress on quality. It was concluded that the role of the farmer may be redefined within the context of diversification and new consumer attitudes.

The discussions ended with thanks expressed by the secretary, Dr John Broad, to Dr Jane Whittle, of Exeter, for organising the conference and to the speakers for their contributions. It was hoped that the annual conference in 2004 would be equally well attended.