

British Agricultural History Society

Spring Conference 2013

by Jane Rowling

Askham Bryan College, near York, played host to another successful Spring Conference for the Society this year. Once again Dr Nicola Verdon organized a fantastic event, and managed to arrange a few sunny spells for us after an overwhelmingly wintry spring so far. The conference was well attended, with speakers on a wide range of topics, from medieval farm names in the Pennines to twentieth-century technical change in agriculture in south-west England, providing something of interest for everyone.

Monday's session began in the afternoon with a fascinating paper by Dr Philip Slavin from McGill University, Montreal, chaired by Prof. Christopher Dyer. The paper, titled 'Warfare, ecocide and economic development in the early fourteenth-century British Isles' explored the effects of both environmental and anthropogenic factors in the creation of subsistence crises, particularly during the unrest in northern England and Scotland throughout the reign of Edward I. Basing his research on tithe records, manorial accounts, and other textual sources, as well as detailed analysis of weather patterns, Dr Slavin painted a picture of a famine initiated by environmental factors in the form of extreme weather patterns, such as three back-to-back years of torrential rain in 1315–17, but exacerbated by the human factor of fourteenth-century warfare. This manifested particularly in acts of ecocide and zoocide, which devastated the landscape and had serious long-term economic consequences. The paper pointed to the fact that the patterns of environmental change and economic crises observed here were similar to those surrounding the origins of the First and Second Crusades, and the Nine Years War.

Following dinner, Dr Paul Brassley and Prof. Michael Winter (University of Exeter) presented a paper based on the Farm Management Survey in south-west England, entitled 'Technical change in agriculture 1935 to 1985: the evidence from south-west

England'. The University of Exeter's collection of almost 5000 Investigation Officers' field books, supported by extensive oral history work among surviving farmers, provided the main source material for this work. The session, chaired by Prof. Alun Howkins, explained the technical changes made by farmers in the South West, why these changes were made, and why change could not happen until the post-war period, as well as demonstrating Dr Brassley's prodigious memory for his source material. The majority of dairy farmers picked up by the study made the same kinds of technical changes, but at different times across the period 1935–85, leading to an industry characterized by specialization and intensification. The extent to which this was due to agricultural policy was debateable; the increase in grant aid was certainly an important factor, but, we learned, the change to artificial insemination instead of natural breeding allowed dairy farms to move from traditional breeds to higher-yielding, more specialized Friesian cattle; improvements in farm machinery in the post-war era allowed farmers to produce nutritious silage in a less labour-intensive way; and improvements in parlour design alongside electrification and relatively cheap fuel meant that farm buildings could become bigger and more specialized. We saw the consequences of this in the sudden decrease in numbers of pigs and poultry in the mid-1960s and 1970s, as capital constraints forced farms to 'get big or get out' to remain viable as businesses. The delegates were keen to know more about this research, and questions covered topics including farm building improvement and conversion, the effect of types of tenure on technical change, and to what extent the patterns explored here could be observed on a national scale.

Tuesday saw Prof. Richard Hoyle chairing a very interesting new researchers' session, with a focus on early modern rural England. Three papers were

presented during this session: John Gaisford from Birkbeck, University of London, on 'Enterprise in the Countryside: west Wiltshire, 1550 to 1600'; Juliet Gayton from the University of Exeter on 'Funds for farming? Rural copyholders and mortgages in Hampshire, 1645 to 1750'; and Irene Haycock from the University of Cambridge on 'Agrarian change and early industrial development in Staffordshire: parish case studies, 1650 to 1750'. First, John Gaisford took us to sixteenth-century west Wiltshire, to focus on entrepreneurial clothiers who achieved success in a period previously characterized as one of trade stagnation and decline. Using the individual examples of Thomas Webb and Edward Horton, the paper identified business enterprise as a key factor in explaining the economic changes which took place in Elizabethan west Wiltshire. This research trajectory has a great deal of potential for the future, and Mr Gaisford noted that key questions might include topics such as the impact of rich clothiers in west Wiltshire, the potential for conflict with the agrarian gentry, and the management of settlement patterns in relation to the fulling trade.

This was followed by Juliet Gayton, speaking on the subject of mortgages in the early modern period. Mortgages have previously been studied in medieval documents, but very little work has been done on the experiences of later customary tenants. The paper examined the effect of changes in usury laws on the rural credit system, in addition to looking at the impact of different types of customary tenure upon what tenants could do with their land. The research indicated that the mortgage was a key part of early modern rural life, involving borrowers and lenders right across the social scale. Surprisingly, few professional or non-local money-lenders could be found, with the vast majority of lenders living within ten miles of the borrower. This is clearly a fertile area for research, and the delegates were keen to know more, asking questions particularly about the evidence that mortgaging was a regular and accepted feature of early modern rural life, and does not appear to have been reserved for crisis management.

The final new researcher paper was Irene Haycock's study of Staffordshire parishes, concentrating on the representativeness of probate records as sources. The paper compared the parishes of Kingswinford and Trentham, using probate inventories, wills, burial records, hearth tax listings, and prerogative and consistory court records to conclude that the probate records over-represent agriculture as an occupation. The data extracted from all the sources together demonstrate that early modern Staffordshire was characterized by significant changes within parishes

across the period. It also showed differences between parishes, which could be attributed to the county's mineral distribution, and the influence of wealthy families, like the inhabitants of Trentham Hall. The use of statistical evidence in this paper, showing the different representations of the two parishes produced by different sources, very clearly demonstrated both the advantages and limitations of inventories as historical sources, and proved very interesting.

The New Researchers Session was followed by Prof. Joyce Burnette, from Wabash University, Indiana, presenting a paper on her work with farm accounts. The session, titled 'The farm labourer: a quantitative portrait, 1740 to 1850', was chaired by Dr Nicola Verdon. The paper analysed the wages, and employment patterns of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century day labourers to show the effects of age, gender, season, location, farm ownership type, farm output type, and whether labour was regular or seasonal on the incomes and lives of labourers, and the amount of labour on the farm. A series of graphs and charts clearly demonstrated the enormous differences these factors could have upon rural labour, and the use of interdisciplinary techniques made for a thought-provoking and thorough interrogation of the account book data. For example, despite the higher harvest premiums in south-east England, the North appeared to have a more seasonal wage pattern. This was explained through the ideas of elastic and inelastic supply, borrowed from economics. The work produced a great deal of interest among the delegates, and questions included the possibility of further disaggregation of the data and the visibility of imported harvest labour, as well as comments on the great variety of regional differences, and the fluidity of occupations and ideas of work.

Tuesday afternoon was dedicated to the field trip to Coulton Mill, Hovingham, near Pickering. The old mill, with attached house and a number of small outbuildings has recently been the subject of a *Restoration Home* programme for BBC2, and a follow-up programme was being filmed during our visit. The two-storey barn in which we were treated to a presentation on the restoration project and the history of the area had recently been re-roofed in the traditional lath and plaster, and had been filled with hay bales for seating. Natural England, which has been heavily involved with the restoration under the higher level stewardship scheme, plans to preserve the mill's unusual waterwheel, but sadly not to return it to working condition, as this would necessitate almost complete replacement of the mechanism. The talk covered the first mentions of the mill in medieval documents, and traced its development, placed in the wider context of Yorkshire's

monastic lands, into the twenty-first century, through its abandonment, dereliction, and purchase by the family currently residing in the house. We were able to look around the buildings, and follow the watercourse back into the surrounding woodlands, and an enjoyable visit was further improved by a mention of tea and biscuits, which prompted a polite but determined rush in the direction of the kitchen, and the gallon teapot which Heather, our hostess, produced. The day concluded with the Society's Annual General Meeting, drinks reception, and Annual Dinner.

Wednesday began a paper by Professor Michael Turner (University of Hull), 'The hidden history of "yeoman" survival in the twentieth century', chaired by John Broad. The paper used Prof. Robert Allen's use of the word 'yeoman' as a springboard for discussion, and revealed that the main sources, copyhold enfranchisements from the period 1841–1957, are far more extensive than previously thought, with around 5000 enfranchisements having been discovered in local archives in Yorkshire alone. This is especially significant as the county's enfranchisements are barely represented in the more visible sources in the National Archives and the British Parliamentary Papers. This hints at an enormous amount of hitherto unseen evidence regarding later copyhold agreements. More surprising still, Prof. Turner revealed that, despite the supposed ending of copyhold enfranchisements in 1925, he has uncovered them taking place until as late as 1962. Furthermore, from 9500 personnel across 7800 enfranchisements, six per cent, or 115 individuals, identified themselves as 'yeoman'. Beside Allen's suggestion that yeomen were copyholders of inheritance, copyholders for lives, and holders of leases for lives, this paper offered compelling evidence for the survival of the 'yeoman' into the twentieth century.

Dr Nicola Whyte chaired the next paper, Prof. Henry French (University of Exeter) speaking on the subject of 'No way back: poor relief and the agrarian labouring poor in England, 1760 to 1834: a case study'. This paper, based on the village of Terling in Essex, addressed the questions of how much money people received in poor relief, how this changed over time, why this change occurred, and what this poor relief was for. Traditional methods of calculating the amount of poor relief given, by determining total expenditure per head

from weekly pension amounts, are limited by the fact that they fail to include all recipients of relief, and the question of whether the social profile of recipients of weekly pensions differs from that of recipients of occasional relief. Instead, Prof. French has taken into account all weekly allowances, occasional payments, and additional payments in Terling, analysing over 143,000 payments to 1498 recipients, and matching payments to people to create a weekly breakdown of poor relief. This investigation revealed that poor relief was essential to able-bodied, working-age households, however, environmental and economic changes left the previously most independent social group, young, able-bodied, unmarried people, depending increasingly heavily upon relief from the parish. There was also evidence that women received relief much earlier in their lives than men, and that towards the latter part of the period, men began to attract higher amounts of relief, whilst households headed by women received significantly less from the parish.

The final paper of the conference was 'The medieval origins of south Pennine farms: the evidence from names', given by Prof. David Hey (of Dronfield Woodhouse), and chaired by Prof. John Chartres. The paper focused on Prof. Hey's native township of Thurlstone in the parish of Penistone. At first glance the evidence appears to suggest that this area, like many others in the South Pennines, has eighteenth- and nineteenth-century origins. However, the rebuilding of sites and the standardization of place-names over time and various editions of maps is potentially obscuring a much longer history. The evidence from farm names, supported by documentary evidence, landscape history, and archaeology indicates the area has much earlier origins, rooted in the medieval period. The paper was illustrated by photographs of the area under study, its farms, and its archaeological features. The questions and comments from the delegates focused on the evidence of regional variation provided by this paper, and there was a lively discussion about the consistencies and contrasts with other localities, and the possible reasons for these.

Prof. Chartres then took the opportunity to express thanks, on behalf of all the delegates, to Dr Nicola Verdon for a stimulating, enjoyable, and successful conference.