

Conference Report

The Society's Spring Conference, 2018

by Henry French

The Society's 66th annual conference was held at the Cannington Centre of Bridgwater and Taunton College, which was formerly Cannington Agricultural College. The conference was housed in the brand new 'National College for Nuclear' facility, and the BAHS was the first organization to use it. The Society has never held its conference in a more secure location, nor have its conference attendees had to pass through so many security doors.

The Society's AGM commenced with a minute's silence in memory of Prof. Michael Thompson, and all that he contributed to the Society over six decades. The first paper of the conference was by Dr John Morgan (University of Manchester) on water management in seventeenth-century Britain. The paper noted that the symbolism of water changed between the early sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. Where early Reformation Biblical translators described paradise as marshy, boggy and unmanaged, their successors a century later assumed that it was a place of fertility and 'improvement', drained and managed carefully. Dr Morgan outlined some of the reasons for this change, and reviewed improvement literature in the period, with its emphasis on the use of alluvial deposits, described by reference to an extensive vocabulary of 'slimes' and 'slaws'. The paper then explained the local organization of water management at parish and manorial levels, showing how many such bodies were of medieval origin, and had evolved sophisticated systems of management, rating and principles of charging according to the benefits accrued. He also noted that the interest of the Crown after 1532, through the act to establish commissions of sewers, brought legal conflict. Common lawyers, such as Sir Edward Coke, contested the rights of commissions to override local custom, on the basis that their authority derived from the royal prerogative. This insight adds greater chronological and interpretative depth to the well-known contests

between Crown-appointed improvers and fen-dwellers in the mid-seventeenth century.

After water, came waste, specifically Rob Wilson-North's evening paper on the Knight family and their efforts to reclaim Exmoor Forest in the nineteenth century. The Knights were long-established Worcestershire iron-masters. They included luminaries such as the antiquarian, landscape designer and artistic connoisseur Richard Payne Knight. His nephew, John Knight, bought the royal forest at its public sale in the summer of 1818, for £50,000, ten times the size of the next highest bid. Knight had great plans for the forest, and set to work immediately, building canals, draining the ground, liming the soil, planting hedges, building roads, and starting a huge, but never-finished mansion. He spent lavishly, in anticipation of an inheritance that never came. Work stalled in the 1820s, and eventually Knight retreated to Italy, leaving his eldest son, Frederick Winn Knight, to turn the venture around. The outlines of this story were told by C. S. Orwin almost a century ago, but Rob Wilson-North revealed the discovery of a large cache of documents held by the last member of the family, which he has now secured. These detail the expenses, the hopes, dreams and delusions that lay behind this scheme to reclaim, tame and populate the last open, unsettled moorland 'wilderness' in southern England.

The conference 'New Researchers' session on Tuesday morning featured four papers, by Spike Gibbs (Cambridge), Imogene Dudley (Exeter), Phil Back (Sheffield) and Dilys Jones (Manchester). Spike Gibbs discussed the relationship between manorial and church officers and ideas of 'state incorporation' in the later medieval period. This thesis has been advanced to explain the increasing intervention of Tudor government into the organization of poor relief, local government and parochial religious practice. It has also been suggested that incorporation of village 'elites' into state-sanctioned governance broke apart

the rebellious 'host' among the late medieval peasantry. Gibbs' paper examined patterns of manorial and church office holding in Worfield, Salop., a huge 10,000-acre parish in the east of the county. He showed that although the governmental functions imposed by the Elizabethan government were new, they did not require or generate significant change in the profile, wealth and engagement of the more prosperous officers of the manor or the parish. Imogene Dudley detailed her research into the working lives of women in south-west England (a theme to which the conference returned on Wednesday), and the reasons why women appeared to be paid less than men for doing the same tasks. She outlined her findings from a study of wage labour on three seventeenth-century estates, Barrow Court in Somerset, Layhill in Devon and Herriard Park, Hants. Although female wage rates varied considerably in the three locations, each estate paid women less for the same tasks as men, usually half as much. While there was some evidence that married women may have worked fewer paid hours than unmarried women or men, the differences between married and unmarried women were not pronounced. All the evidence suggests that 'custom' dictated that women were paid at a lower rate than men for doing the same work. Phil Back told the sorry tale of Scotland's Country Parks, and provided the best pun of the conference. Country Parks were an invention of the 1960s, designed to accommodate that vanished breed, the touring motorist, and attract them away from more scenic 'beauty spots'. Their form was highly varied, because they tended to be designated using spare land possessed by district or urban councils. Common features included a car-park, toilet facilities, and oversight by countryside rangers, but they could be sited almost anywhere, and might contain anything from a few country walks to disused coal mines or a dry ski slope. One featured an ornamental garden on an island accessible only by ferry, a feature that enabled visitors to photograph ferries at the bottom of the garden. The problem with such facilities was a lack of co-ordination. Sites were proposed by councils from existing stocks of land, without the need to locate them near new housing developments or transport links. Designation rules remained unclear, and the scheme brought no significant financial benefits for councils or site development. It amounted to a missed opportunity to provide a quality-marker for rural visitor locations, or to locate recreational spaces near urban housing. Finally, Dilys Jones provided insights into the farming history and experiments of her grandfather, R. L. Jones of Penwenallt, Carmarthenshire, during and after the First World War. Jones was a forward-thinking farmer, a volunteer district valuation officer, agricultural

surveyor and educator, and an early participant in scientific experiments conducted by Aberystwyth Research Station. Naturally, he kept meticulous accounts of milk production, livestock weights, labour costs, weekly income and expenditure and investment spending. He even noted the seasonal variations in the amount of milk required to produce a pound of butter. This close attention to farming practice and business enabled him to negotiate the enormous price fluctuations of the early 1920s. This archive will provide a uniquely detailed insight into the pastoral farming economy of post-war Wales.

Edmund Cannon's paper on wheat storage in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England provided two salutary lessons for agrarian historians. Firstly, Cannon showed in considerable detail that arable farmers in this period stored grain not just for months after harvest, but for a number of years, if necessary. He explained that wheat stacks provided dry, relatively rodent-resistant storage which enabled farmers routinely to store grain for 2-3 years after harvest, and sometimes longer. Contrary to contemporary and modern historical expectations, small-to-medium-sized farmers appear to have stored grain almost as often as larger farmers. There was some change after 1815, when farmers in his sample were more likely to store wheat for more than one year after harvest. Cannon could find no significant evidence that older wheat sold at lower prices. This raised a second, more troubling, point. His evidence from farm accounts suggested that, by the early nineteenth century, it was routine for farmers to sell direct to millers (often on long credit terms), rather than to take their crops to corn markets. The prices recorded in accounts varied much less than the week-to-week grain prices reported in the *London Gazette*. Cannon concluded that short-term market price variations might reflect the quality of grain exposed for sale, rather than changes in supply and demand – a thought to conjure with, when contemplating price-change and 'living-standard' series based on wheat prices.

The conference excursion was to the Somerset Museum of Rural Life in Glastonbury, a 45-minute coach ride from Bridgwater. The Museum reopened in June 2017 after a major refurbishment, and is based around the medieval tithe-barn of Glastonbury Abbey. Now surrounded by housing, the museum collection is displayed in the former Abbey Farm, a farmhouse re-built in the 1890s, and occupied until the 1970s by the Mapstone family. This is linked to a series of galleries depicting Somerset's diverse rural industries and crafts, social life and culture (notably film of County Agricultural shows), and much material

culture, notably cider production and consumption. The objects used in the displays originate primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but earlier periods are discussed in the information panels accompanying the displays. The museum also houses a poignant temporary exhibition about the experience of the First World War in rural Somerset. Conference attendees were given a very detailed, informative and engaging tour by the Museum's Assistant Visitor Services Manager, Mary Humphries.

The final day of the conference featured a joint presentation by Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood based on the findings of Prof. Whittle's Leverhulme Trust research project into women's work in early modern England. Mark Hailwood outlined the project's new methodology for the study of women's work. He noted that existing modern economic measures of women's labour-force participation or earnings tend only to include formally paid employment. Even recent estimates of England's historic GDP by Broadberry *et al.* assume that only 43 per cent of women's work was paid, but that almost all of men's work was paid. He suggested that such assumptions had led to gross understatements by economists and historians of women's economic contribution. This project had adopted Margaret Mead's concept of female labour-force activity, which attributed economic value to any female tasks that could be substituted by paid employment. The project was based on categorizing women's work-tasks as they were described in witness statements in the records of church courts, Quarter Sessions and coroners' inquests in five Southwest English counties (particularly Devon and Somerset) between 1550 and 1700. The results suggested that although women were more likely than men to describe or be described undertaking housework tasks, they were just as likely to be described as undertaking agrarian activity as housework, or commercial activity as childcare.

Jane Whittle expanded these findings by focusing on women's agrarian employment, to examine the amount and significance of female participation in agriculture, the range of tasks and the impact of technology, and whether participation was different in arable and pastoral areas, and over the life-course. She explained the need to rebalance the sample of witness statements to account for women's under-representation. Thus corrected, the figures suggested that 37 per cent of agrarian tasks were undertaken by women, and agriculture itself comprised 20 per cent of female work tasks, about the same as housework. Women were found in most agrarian activities although mowing and ploughing were normally done by men (but these highly

seasonal tasks occupied only a small amount of their annual activities). Women were heavily represented in weeding, planting, soil preparation, winnowing grain, hay-raking, washing and sheering sheep, dairying, and pig husbandry. Milking and dairying were dominated by women, and there were almost no instances recorded of men milking or making butter. Adoption of the scythe probably reduced female participation in the grain and hay harvests, but this change featured more strongly in the eighteenth century. While a number of agrarian historians have suggested that pastoral agriculture offered more opportunities for female participation than arable husbandry, this study found that arable offered a greater variety of work-tasks for women, even if overall participation levels were similar. Married women tended to engage in lower amounts of field work than unmarried or widowed women, and animal husbandry and dairying was more commonly associated with younger, unmarried women. However, overall participation levels among married women were not substantially lower than unmarried women or widows, showing that female involvement in agriculture spanned the whole life-cycle and remained important in all forms of activity.

The final paper of the conference was delivered by the international guest speaker, Prof. Doug Hurt of Purdue University, Indiana. Prof. Hurt is a former editor of *Agricultural History*, the journal of the American Agricultural History Society, and his paper dealt with the unintended consequences of the 'green revolution' in agriculture after the Second World War, in a synoptic overview that brought together stories that are normally told separately. He surveyed the effects of improved crop varieties in Mexico, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In each instance, a rather idealistic technology-driven 'solution' to rural poverty and hunger had become ensnared in the machinations of governmental political interests, the policy preferences of international non-governmental agencies, the economic interests of large-scale food producers, and the weaknesses of infrastructure, transport, credit and marketing in developing countries. In Mexico, the efforts of US crop scientists to help peasant farmers during the Second World War were soon derailed by the Mexican government's political dependence on large landowners, desire for foreign exchange through wheat exports, and lack of interest in rural economic development. By the early 1990s, peasant farmers still had benefitted little from new plant technologies. The subsequent NAFTA trade agreement with USA and Canada swamped the Mexican market with cheap wheat, and created a \$2 billion deficit in agrarian products. South Asia (India and Pakistan) appeared to offer better prospects for

the 'green revolution' to make material improvements in peasant-farmers' lives. Political independence had conferred states with adequate national infrastructures, some developed irrigation, marketing and distribution systems, and crop-scientists able to harness this technology locally. The problem was that advocates of the new crop varieties adopted a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, making little allowance for soil quality, and lack of access to fertilisers or irrigation. Without these preconditions many improved wheat and rice variants performed worse than established varieties, and were usually more expensive. Subsistence farmers could not afford these crops, or access the requisite credit. Once again, larger, commercially oriented farmers benefited most, and so existing inequalities were entrenched by these changes. Prof. Hurt showed that the least successful application of the 'green revolution' was in Sub-Saharan Africa. Here existing infrastructure was least developed, access to credit was often minimal, governmental intervention was limited, and adverse weather, plant pathogens, and highly varied growing conditions often defeated new crop varieties. Again, crop scientists' initial assumptions were that development would create the conditions necessary to grow their crops effectively, rather than that their crops would sufficient foster development. Matrilineal inheritance patterns ensured that many peasant farms were owned by women, but they were frequently unable to secure credit to purchase new crop varieties, fertilizer or pay for irrigation schemes. African

governments were often more willing to use revenues to buy grain on international wholesale markets than to fund domestic agrarian development. The 'green revolution' was unable to overcome existing structural problems in these developing countries, and (in fact) exacerbated political, economic and social inequalities.

These papers brought together two enduring themes in agrarian history. The first is one explored repeatedly within the Society's publications, from Joan Thirsk onwards – on the rhetoric, aspirations and (sometimes illogical) hopes of agrarian improvers and reformers. The conference showed that this impulse has repeatedly overridden local interests and conventional wisdom, from the projectors of fenland drainage, the canal-building and upland arable schemes of the Knight family on Exmoor, to proponents of the 'green revolution'. The second theme is an even more elemental one in agrarian history – the desire to develop a better understanding of how the agrarian economy actually worked. This featured strongly in Edmund Cannon's paper exposing how much we misunderstand about grain storage and marketing, and even more so in the strand of papers that detailed the hidden, pervasive and taken-for-granted nature of women's work in early modern agriculture. Once again, although the conference illustrated that many of our historical fields are well-tended and highly productive, it also showed how much uncultivated terrain remains to be explored.

