

Conference Report

The Society's Winter Conference, 2018

by Paul Warde

The theme of 2018's Winter Conference, held at the Institute for Historical Research on Saturday 1 December, was 'Material Life in Rural Britain'. Over the span of the centuries covered, from late medieval times to the twentieth century, historians demonstrated the ingenious ways to get at this most solid yet elusive subject through both written and physical evidence.

The first paper, 'The possessions of English agriculturalists c.1370–c.1460', came from Chris Briggs of the University of Cambridge, delivering findings from a project combining a variety of historical and archaeological evidence to assess the material possessions of people between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. This covers a period when historians have generally considered there to have been a rise in peasant consumption, hygiene, decorum and comfort, and debated whether we can perceive a divergence between distinctly urban and rural material cultures. Briggs has used records of the possessions of around one thousand felons and suicides from the Court of Escheators, which were claimed by the crown, valued and sold. He presented a careful and critical assessment of the quality of the sample and practices of recording, which includes data from fifteen counties.

In this period possessions were, of course, meagre by later standards; a median of five items (or groups of items, such as animals) were recorded. No suggestion of a rise in living standards based on the value of material goods was found, and among the lists that contained agricultural items (75 per cent) there was no difference between townspeople and rural inhabitants. Items thought by Goldberg to be typically 'bourgeois', such as spoons, were extremely rare, and also possessed by yeomen. Generally less than a tenth enjoyed items such as tablecloths, towels, or napkins, and only a twentieth had pewter items, which had become common even among labourers by the sixteenth century. Intriguingly, with only a single exception, ewers and basins were absent north of the Trent! The evidence points to a

distinct difference with the findings from early modern inventories, where non-necessary items were common across the social order. Briggs' work suggests that in late medieval centuries the rural population did not invest in non-essential goods to any great extent, although they were not completely excluded.

Jon Stobart, from Manchester Metropolitan University, next took us to a milieu distinctly engaged in investing in non-necessary things, with his paper, 'Home comforts: material culture and well-being in the eighteenth-century country house'. This was an era when homeliness was emerging as a distinct and desirable style, characterized, in the words of Prince Picker-Muskau on Guy's Cliffe in Warwick in 1820, by an 'agreeable disorder', giving it a 'homelike air'. Stobart examined how ideals of convenience, physical ease, and emotional well-being interacted in both practice and the prescriptive writings of architects such as William Halfpenny (1747) and Roger North (1697). He drew attention to the sensual aspects of design and materiality – the importance of avoiding too much of a cold light, for a southerly aspect of rooms, and increasingly arguments for the separation of spaces for the public, guests, and privacy. Stobart argued that this was an era of more specialist zoning, differentiated space for guests, family or servants, and finds less of a preoccupation with display than is often thought. Heat was a key concern, with the introduction of expensive new stoves, but even so observers from Sweden found English houses cold (and English visitors to Sweden, the reverse). A changing preoccupation was not only the ownership of goods and furnishings, but their arrangement, as items such as sofas appeared and seating (or sites of seduction!) moved towards the centre of the room and a studied air of informality emerged.

In the afternoon Emma Griffin of the University of East Anglia took us into the nineteenth century, but an altogether different class, examining issues of allocation and access to goods and food through the lens of

a sample of 657 working-class biographies (predominately written by men). Her paper, "A whole kipper for Father, the other six of the family a half apiece": sharing resources in the Victorian family', demonstrated that despite the limitations of a selective sample and a lack of female voices – which become much more prominent only in archived oral histories that reach back to the 1880s – these writings provide vivid and significant insight into the life of households of a kind not easily captured in metrics such as real wages. She provided telling examples of people's experience, such as the preoccupation with who got to eat eggs, or how very poor individuals were still able to obtain food outside the home whether by odd jobs, theft, or charity.

Griffin's approach is systematic and uses quantification to illustrate the prevalence of behaviours within her sample, without claiming that the sample autobiographies were representative of a particular population. What she called 'good providers' among male household heads, sharing resources throughout the family, were the most prevalent group, but still a minority. The experience of death or serious illness within families was very widespread, found in half of the works. A large proportion of the households described were not 'nuclear' and for some period lacked a male breadwinner, whether through death or desertion (the latter often associated with illegitimacy). Work was often episodic. Farmworkers however appeared to have more consistent employment and indeed a higher proportion of 'good providers.' Thus, while urban wage rates were higher this did not translate clearly into higher well-being or fewer problems for families.

The final paper, 'Pools, grids and other metaphors: The place of rural energy users in twentieth-century Britain', was delivered by Vanessa Taylor of the University of Greenwich, examining the experience and imagining of rural electrification as the new technology spread out with varying speeds across the country between the 1920s and 1960s. Taylor argued for the importance of language, among other things, in shaping understanding and arguments of how electricity should be delivered and to whom. She examined how the

development of a national grid raised expectations of and appeals for connection that lead to rural people becoming a new kind of 'problem consumer', expensive to connect but assertive of an equality of treatment. In practice electrification proceeded in a piecemeal fashion, with consumers frequently not behaving as anticipated by managers of the system (and thought prone to use other fuels, or 'under-using' electricity), but alternatively reliant on their own generators. Taylor illustrated how, by the 1950s, after creation of regional electricity boards, 85 per cent of rural households had been connected, the rate often driven by a sense of obligation to citizens despite high costs – encouragement and support even extending in Highland Scotland to electric cookers being delivered to places with no road access!

Taylor showed a 1963 presentation of the 'three men who control the supply of electricity to the whole of Great Britain', but then went on to describe the much larger and more varied group of people who in practice shaped the use and encouraged the adoption of electrical supply. These included large numbers of women selling the benefits of becoming connected to gas or electricity network – even though women were themselves often denied the right to get credit or hire purchase before the early 1960s. Despite the apparent centralization of the National Grid, delivery and take-up was often localized, and was organized on a regional basis right up until privatization in the 1980s.

The day concluded with a panel and wider discussion of issues of rural material culture led by Jane Whittle (Exeter), Sara Pennell (Greenwich) and Karen Sayer (Leeds Trinity). A wide range of themes were covered, highlighting especially the value of direct engagement with material objects (and museums); whether distinctively rural materialities related to possessions or the way in which they were supplied; on the continuity of change as opposed to a model of time-specific 'consumer revolution'; regional variation; and being aware of the complex life-cycle of things and the way that they move between hands and households, not always through the market.