



Twenty-second Annual Conference

Wye College, 17 – 18 September 1994

## *“Long Live Kent!”*

— ARTHUR R. GOODBURN

EVERYTHING stops at the level crossing at Wye. The hustle and bustle of this world is brought to an abrupt halt by a red lamp and a heavy swing gate, just as it was more than fifty years ago when a young airman pedalled a push-bike (RAF issue) on the way to visit a land girl in jodhpurs and green jumper working at Wye College.

So, as time stood still, we stopped and watched. After an age, a peaceful age, the light train swept past and the aged gateman (I could have sworn that it was the very same gateman of fifty years ago) leisurely, almost reluctantly, ambled slowly across the lines, unlocked the great wooden gates and then slowly swung them open.

The Kent Federation of Amenity Societies' twenty-second Annual Conference at Wye fully complemented the reflective, tranquil state of mind into which we had been lured by this wait: two days of withdrawal from the world to reflect upon the many themes essential to ensure that Kent lived long into the future. Saturday morning, after arrival and welcoming coffee, gave us our first speaker, Mark Lintell, on the rôle of the Green Belt and introduced us to the new buzz-word 'sustainability'. John Llewellen then encouraged us to discuss "Agricultural Change and Diversification". We learned about "set-aside" land and the possibility of such land reverting to natural scrub. We were told that the individual farmer, faced with a fall in the price he received for his individual crop, still met this difficulty by increasing production so that his new income would not fall – of course even the layman not trained in Economics can quickly see that such a policy carried out by hundreds of individual farmers, can only lead to over-production and consequently further falls in the price (given no increase in demand).

After a ploughman's lunch we visited Parsonage Farm Rural Heritage Centre at Elham. Here we saw at first hand how one farmer is diversifying; leaving the growing of crops entirely out of his plan, at least for a large part of his farm. He has converted the old farmhouse, together with old farming equipment, into a living museum, including Victorian and most earlier breeds of livestock. This Rural Heritage Centre now attracts thousands of visitors including numerous parties of school-children who

122 can receive a living history lesson of how their forebears made a living. Most interesting! – and the farmer overcomes a financial crisis.

Dinner that evening was excellent and so was the talk by Dr Fred Lansberry on Kent Power Houses – nothing whatever to do with the generation of power by steam, water or nuclear devices but about the political and economic power exercised by the great country houses and estates of Kent throughout the centuries until their almost extinction in our own age. He referred repeatedly to the ‘Aristocracy and the Gentry’ and I showed my ignorance by asking him what was the difference between them!

Two other talks on the Saturday were about “Railways”, and my wife, who until that time had hardly recovered from the trance-like tranquillity experienced at the railway crossing, suddenly came to life again for she has a passionate interest in Railways. Bernard Gambrell brought us up-to-date with the Channel Rail Link and Jacqueline Elton told us of plans for a Central Railway Link with drive-on and drive-off facilities for all sizes of lorries and she also told us about supergauge (which I have always thought was something to do with the distance between the rails but which in fact turned out to be about the height of bridges and tunnels allowing the carrying of the biggest [highest] lorries on rail transporters) from Central England all the way to Paris and beyond. As far as my wife was concerned these railway discussions were the highlight of the conference.

Sunday’s programme was equally stimulating. Cocooned from the outside World, we turned away from every-day matters to consider long-term trends. What red-blooded male would not jump at the chance to attend a talk entitled “The French Model” perhaps with illustrations – especially when the speaker was to be Michèle Breuillard? But a second look at the programme showed the full title to be “Local Government – the French Model”. The excellence of the lecture far outweighed any initial disappointment when Madame Breuillard spoke of the legacy of Napoleonic reforms in Local Government and, by a comparative study of British and French Local Government systems, soon made us feel that we in Kent could well benefit if we followed the French model where the local inhabitants appear to have a much greater control (less interference from Central Government) than we do in this country.

A talk on “Towncentre Management and Planning” by John Peverley (the same John Peverley whose energetic work helped to save the Drop Redoubt at Dover from rubbish infill) also gave us much food for thought.

Caroline Simpson spoke of “Environmental Education” and of her experience at the centre in Canterbury.

At the end of the Conference one member of the audience voiced the opinion that this had been the best of the long line of Kent Federation Conferences and this view was heartily endorsed by those who had attended many of them. As newcomers my wife and I found it most enjoyable and stimulating, restful yet invigorating – we shall come again and certainly recommend it to all who have not yet enjoyed the tranquillity of Wye. ◇