

Rural History 2013 – A European Success Story

In mid August, while others may have been sunning themselves on the beach their thoughts far away from academic endeavour, 286 participants from all corners of the globe made their way to Bern to attend the first conference of the newly formed European Rural History Organisation (EURHO).

Liz Griffiths describes the 2013 first conference of the newly-formed European Rural History Organisation



An ornate farmhouse at the Ballenberg Open Air Museum

We were the guests of the equally youthful Swiss Rural History Society and its partner organisation Archives of Rural History. There was a real sense of a new beginning. For those of us who witnessed the birth of EURHO at Rural History 2010, organised by the British Agricultural History Society in Brighton, such a huge gathering so soon seemed improbable, but we did not appreciate the skill and determination of the committee set up at that time.

The officers appointed (President: Richard Hoyle, UK; Vice Presidents: Rosa Congost, Spain and Leen Van Molle, Belgium; Secretary: Ernst Langhaller, Austria; Treasurer: Peter Moser, Switzerland) reflect the rich development of European Rural History over the last few years. A distinct identity has emerged through comparative research, publications and the creation of networks promoting a European perspective, so much so that a fully fledged independent organisation was thought necessary. EURHO is the result of all this good work, and it is clearly here to stay. As Richard Hoyle announced in his address, not only have the committee agreed the next venue at Girona in 2015, but the one after at Leuven in 2017. We can safely report that rare occurrence, a European success story with the UK

playing an enthusiastic and leading role.

For the success of the conference, we owe much to the director, Peter Moser and the efforts of his scientific committee who were responsible for selecting 77 panels and fitting them into 11 sessions organised across 4 days. Each panel organiser selected the papers he or she wanted to include in their panel, a process which generated a total of 267 papers, an average of 3.5 per panel. Making a selection amongst these 7–8 parallel panels was no easy task, although we were assisted by the beautiful conference book which provided abstracts of the panels and papers. We also knew that if we missed a panel it was not disastrous as the vast majority of papers had been uploaded on to the website **www.ruralhistory2013.org**. This strategy facilitated the giving of short punchy papers and allowed ample time for questions and discussion.

My choice fell on colonial women, children in the countryside, rural elites, coastal marshes and wetland reclamation, negotiating conflict in rural society and anything to do with the creation and dissemination of knowledge but I missed enticing panels on agrarian technology, village culture, rural health, tourism and every aspect of alpiculture. Two panels on the open

fields of Europe also drew large audiences, while a series of panels on women in rural history proved equally popular. Whole swathes of papers escaped my attention, which I ruefully noted on the train journey home, but these can still be accessed on the website.

Alongside the agonies of selecting panels, we had the choice of 3 Keynote Sessions. The first, *Lost In Translations?* addressed the controversial issue that EURHO had adopted English as its working language. The principal concern was that the practical benefits of standardization ironed out subtle differences in meaning which had particular relevance in areas of rural history, like the Alps, which had no parallel in English speaking countries. This point was developed further in Session 2, *Rural History in Europe – Rural History in Switzerland* which explored the advances made over the last two decades. Session 3, *Films – a new Source in Rural History*, at 8 am on Thursday, eluded me as I was recovering from the excursion to the Emmentaler Show Dairy at Affoltern the night before, where we were treated to a deliciously cheesy supper with ham, eggs and potatoes, washed down with some very acceptable beer.

The other excursion, on the Tuesday evening, was to the famous Open Air Museum at Ballenberg. It is the only one in Switzerland and represents all the regions. Imagine the Wealden and Downland Museum multiplied by 5 – at least. The reconstructed wooden buildings are extraordinary. We saw a fraction of these, but they can all be viewed on their website, www.ballenberg.ch. Despite the late hour, craftsmen and women were on hand to show us how to split wooden roof tiles, burn lime, saw wood and make homes for bees in slices of logs. The gardens of the



Ballenberg Open Air Museum showing the making of wooden tiles for roofing.

buildings were particularly well cared for with flowers at the windows and parterres in front. In their premier farmhouse, we experimented with spinning wool which is hideously difficult, and weaving which is easier than you think. After that we had another scrumptious supper in the reconstructed inn, The Bear, before returning happily to Bern; we all agreed we could have done with another hour for each trip, perhaps even a whole afternoon? Alas, the Swiss are victims of their own success.

CONFERENCES

BAHS Spring Conference 2014

7–9 April

Denman College, Oxfordshire

The 2014 BAHS Spring Conference will take place at the WI Denman College from 7–9 April. In recognition of the venue, the conference will include a round-table panel on gender and rural organizations in the 20th century featuring papers on the Girls' Friendly Society (Dr Rebecca Andrew), the Young Farmers' Clubs (Dr Sian Rdwards) and the WI (Dr Rachel Ritchie). Also speaking will be Dr John Broad (on the history of social housing in the early modern and modern periods), Dr Chris Briggs (on Mortgages and the English Peasantry), Dr Briony McDonagh (on women's estate management in the 18th century) and Dr Jeremy Burchardt and Nicholas Haigh on country childhood in the 20th century. We will be joined by Dr David Stead from University College, Dublin, who will speak on the agricultural

policy lessons for Ireland of the hot dry summer of 1976 and by Dr Kate Tiller who will explore the history of 'White Horse' country. The conference will include a new researchers' session featuring papers on medieval peasant economies, land agency in the mid-19th century and rural migration in late Victorian England.

► Further details and booking forms from: Nicola Verdon n.verdon@shu.ac.uk

Rural History 2015

7–10 September, Girona, Spain

► Organised by the European Rural History Organisation

Weald and Downland Open Air Museum

7–8 June, Chichester, West Sussex

► Horses at War – Remembering World War One and World War Two.