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Rural History (2023), **34**, 55–73
doi:10.1017/S095679332200022X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Success to the Shropshire Chamber of Agriculture':[1] a reappraisal of the role of chambers of agriculture in Britain during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries

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Abstract

The central and associated county or district chambers of agriculture have attracted little attention from historians. Their origins have been attributed to the perceived lack of a national coordinating body for agriculture highlighted by the 1865–7 cattle plague. This article based on the records of the Shropshire Chamber of Agriculture, newspapers and printed histories reconsiders their role. Members were initially drawn from landowning society and larger tenant farmers, although membership widened with the growth of rival organisations. Activities included lectures, talks and debates on agricultural subjects, visits to farms, factories and the county agricultural college and farm institute, dinners and social occasions at which those interested in agriculture could meet. By foregrounding the people and politics of the chambers of agriculture, it is argued they need to be incorporated more fully into the historiography of agricultural and rural politics of Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Introduction

During the nineteenth century the commutation of tithes, the enclosure of common land and the Corn Laws, eventually repealed in 1846, were major political issues in Britain. The next twenty years were a period of agricultural prosperity – the years 1853 to the end of 1862 being described as 'the golden age of English agriculture'.[2] However despite the existence of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE), and local farmers clubs and agricultural societies, the 1865–7 cattle plague highlighted that those with agricultural interests lacked effective, organised political representation. The government response was seemingly considered insufficient to deal with the ramifications of the cattle plague, as well as other diseases like foot and mouth disease, pleuro-pneumonia, rabies and sheep pox.[3] It was felt that landowners, farmers, politicians, the government – especially the department responsible for agriculture – and the wider public needed educating about cattle diseases with chambers providing a suitable forum for this. The power and influence of the landed interest was declining and farmers, the vast majority of whom were tenants, viewed the administrative and political response to the plague as incompetent.[4] What was needed was compulsory regulation to stop the importing of foreign cattle instead of restrictions on the movement of livestock within a specific area which was detrimental to the livestock trade. There was, therefore, a need for the lobbying of the Veterinary Department, government and Parliament so the views of agriculturalists could be effectively communicated.

Prominent figures, including the agriculturalist and politician Clare Sewall Read (1826–1905), sought to represent the interest of farmers, particularly tenant farmers, by acting as the driving

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S095679332200022X Published online by Cambridge University Press

force behind the establishment of the Central Chamber and associated county or district chambers of agriculture from 1865.[5] Farmers' views were not being taken into consideration as Charles Clay's letters referring to the forming of a 'Farmers' League' or 'Central Chamber of Agriculture' illustrate. He regarded the duties of the organisation being 'to take charge of measures in the Houses of Parliament, and before the Government, calculated to benefit agriculture, as well as to modify any movement detrimental to that important interest'.[6] Chambers were perceived to be different from farmers clubs and agricultural societies in that they provided a forum where the economic and political aspects of agriculture could be debated in a more rigorous way and between peers.

While the Board of Agriculture had been established in 1793 in response to the challenges posed to Britain's food supply as a result of the outbreak of war, it was not a government department, but had been founded by Royal Charter and was financed by a parliamentary grant of £3,000.[7] Funding had been withdrawn in 1820 and efforts to support it through voluntary subscription proved unsuccessful, activities ceasing in 1822. Consequently there was a lack of a coherent national body to represent the interests of agriculture. The first chamber of agriculture was founded in Scotland in 1864 and this may have inspired Clay.[8] Given the apparent need it was decided to establish the Central Chamber of Agriculture along with associated county or district chambers. Landowners and farmers joined the county and district chambers which sent representatives to the Central Chamber. Rural Members of Parliament (MPs), particularly those dependent on the votes of agriculturalists, joined the Central Chamber, which was originally conceived as a political lobby, although they were often reluctant to adhere to chamber policy.[9]

Goddard has examined the role of agricultural societies and associations whether national, regional, county, district or local, which served a range of educational, social, political or commercial purposes.[10] The history of the RASE, which was established in 1838 and published its own journal, held meetings and organised the Royal Agricultural Show has been studied in depth. Members of such societies tended to be those progressive farmers interested in agricultural science and agronomy and prominent landowners.[11] The chambers of agriculture have received scant attention from agricultural, rural or political historians and are only been briefly mentioned in classic works of English agrarian history. Lord Ernle's (1851–1937) seminal work on the history of English agriculture makes only one reference to the chambers of agriculture in the context of tenant right; he wrote 'the foundation of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture in 1866 gave strength and cohesion to the opinion of agriculturists.'[12] General surveys have considered the Central Chamber's function relative to the wider context of the agrarian politics of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[13]

Indeed, the only existing studies of the Central Chamber are contemporary accounts produced by Sir Alfred Herbert Henry Matthews (1870–1958), who served as secretary from 1901 until 1927 when he was made a life member (Figure 1), and W. P. Jeffcock covering the years 1865–1915 and 1915–35, respectively.[14] There is no recent research into the chambers of agriculture. In his study of chambers of commerce, Bennett included local agricultural societies and farming clubs that emerged from the late eighteenth century and were unique in representing an individual sector, being forerunners of the chambers of agriculture.[15] There were attempts to develop a national coordinating organisation to act as a means of representing the agricultural response to counter the activities of the anti-corn law league which represented the interests of industry, but this was of limited success. It was not until 1865 that the Central Chamber of Agriculture was formed, competing with the chambers of commerce while the country pursued a free trade policy.[16]

Why then have the chambers of agriculture been under researched? The most obvious reason is due to the paucity of documentary evidence. The records of the Central Chamber do not appear to have survived, although copies of its journals and annual publications can be found at specialist libraries and occasionally in estate collections held by county record offices and archives.[17] Potentially more useful are the minute books, attendance registers and newspaper reports of

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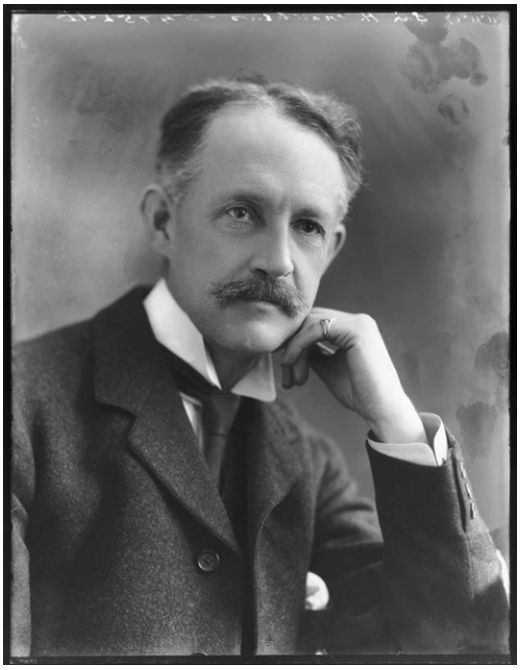

Figure 1. Portrait by Bassano Limited of Sir Alfred Herbert Henry Matthews, politician and agriculturalist (National Portrait Gallery x122987). © National Portrait Gallery, London.

county or district chambers which sometimes survive as is the case for Bedfordshire, Carmarthenshire, Cheshire, Cirencester, Lincolnshire, Shropshire and Norfolk.[18]

The lack of interest in the chambers can partly be explained by more recent historiographical trends. Social historians have increasingly approached the study of modern rural Britain from below being concerned with the experience of agricultural workers and grass roots politics.[19] By comparison, in the early years membership of the chambers tended to be dominated by more progressive landowners and larger tenant farmers who were more interested in agriculture as opposed to being rentiers. Relations with trade unions were not always cordial. Even towards the end of the nineteenth century, the 'role of the landed élite in representing agricultural interests in national politics remained essentially unchallenged', although clearly change was underway as their political power was eroded in the House of Commons, being superseded by those representing manufacturers and industrialists.[20] It also reflected the growing rural and urban divide in Britain.

Some landowners were not solely reliant on agricultural rents, but also derived income from industrial enterprises taking place on, or linked to, their estates. By the late nineteenth century increasingly, landowners were no longer interested in promoting agricultural innovation and had become essentially rentiers and enjoyed country sports like shooting and hunting.[21] Nevertheless they were interested in ensuring that their farms were tenanted by responsible farmers, thereby protecting their revenue. Magnanimous landowners may have thought it inappropriate to increase farm rents by squeezing long-established hardworking tenants who farmed according to conventions. From a political perspective the establishment of the chambers can also be interpreted as a response to unionism from the 1860s and an attempt to stem the declining influence of landowners economically, socially and politically, thereby maintaining the status quo.[22]

The short-lived nature of the chambers coupled with the lack of records has also deterred historians from researching them. Their early demise is usually attributed to the establishment of organisations with a similar remit. In 1893 the National Agricultural Union (NAU) was

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established by Lord Winchelsea (1851–98) with the aim of uniting landlords, tenant farmers and labourers, although Howkins argued this 'failed to attract any widespread support'.[23] Coincidentally prior to becoming secretary of the Central Chamber, Matthews had been involved with the NAU, becoming its organising secretary.[24] The chamber was also in competition with the Central Landowners Association now the Country Landowners' Association (CLA) and the National Farmers' Union (NFU) of England and Wales established in 1907 and 1908, respectively, and to a lesser extent the National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers (NUAW) formed in 1906.[25]

Nevertheless in the absence of any other organisation, the chambers of agriculture were the main political lobbying body for landowners and farmers in Britain. There were even calls for an independent agricultural party to be formed to represent agricultural and rural interests following a resolution put forward by the Staffordshire Chamber in 1907 to the Central Chamber, which was circulated among chambers.[26] This was supported by the majority of chambers, and in 1908 a resolution was adopted that an independent political agricultural party should be formed to strengthen the representation of agricultural constituencies and the debating of agricultural matters in Parliament, attracting much attention from politicians and the press.[27] Proposals stalled, although the idea was revived and in 1924 'The Rural Party' was formed with Matthews as honorary secretary, being widely reported in newspapers, although practical plans appear to have failed to materialise.[28] Hence Fisher astutely summed up that the Central Chamber

> declined slowly into obscurity with the tenurial alliance it embodied. As a lobby it had not done badly, in an unpromising political environment, in the half-century to 1914. Unrepresentative of farmers as a whole, criticised for its subservience to the landed elite, it yet had some appreciable achievements to its name. Above all, it fairly represented that larger farmer domination of English agriculture which has survived the political eclipse of landownership and the drastic decline in the numbers of farm workers.[29]

In line with the traditional interpretation of chambers of agriculture in Britain as relatively insignificant, being essentially an agricultural lobby, Van Molle has argued 'they lacked any official mandate and were in turn eclipsed by other private, farmers' organisations.'[30]

However an exploration of a case study of the Chamber of Agriculture in Shropshire, a largely agricultural county notwithstanding industrialisation in the eighteenth century, highlights the crucial role they played. In many respects, the activities of the Shropshire Chamber went far beyond simply a political lobby. The chamber's remit with regard to informal agricultural education is particularly relevant to comparative agricultural and rural historians concerned with institutions and knowledge networks. Discussion will examine the founding and membership of the chamber and how it engaged with political developments by responding to topical debates and campaigning on specific issues, for example, measures to control livestock disease and the provision of agricultural education. In addition, the wider educational and social activities of the chamber will be considered in the context of promoting agricultural science and professionalisation. The success of the Shropshire Chamber reflected not only its leading figures who promoted the chamber of agriculture movement nationally and locally, but also the significance of agriculture in the county's economy and society.

The Central Chamber of Agriculture

Before examining a case study of the Shropshire Chamber of Agriculture, it is necessary to outline when the Central Chamber of Agriculture was established and the leading figures involved in the movement. Given the apparent lack of a national movement with respect to agriculture, in 1865 landowners and farmers sought to represent their interests. At a meeting held in London on the

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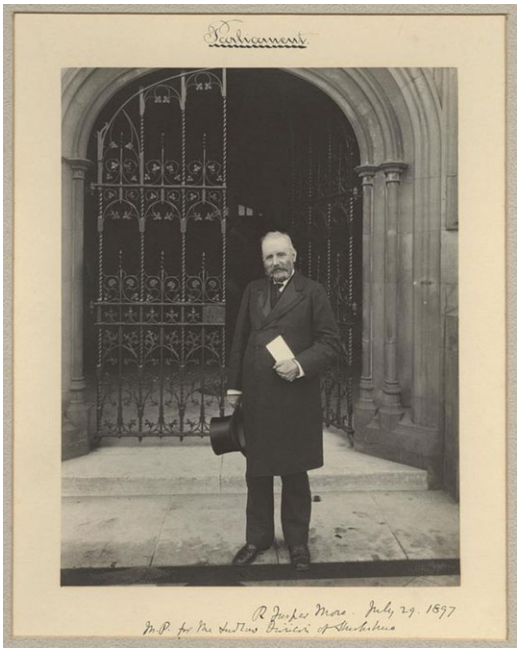

Figure 2. Platinum print of Robert Jasper More by Benjamin Stone, 29th July 1897 (National Portrait Gallery x32532). © National Portrait Gallery, London.

22nd June 1866 it was decided that a 'Chamber of Agriculture' should be established.[31] The first meeting of the Central Chamber was held on the 17th–18th July 1866, chaired by Mr Albert Pell (1820–1907) of Hazelbeach, Northamptonshire. A prominent agriculturalist and politician, he was a leading figure in the national campaign for the compulsory slaughter of animals when the cattle plague broke out in 1865, and was actively involved in debates about the poor law. He served as Conservative MP for South Leicestershire, 1868–85.[32] Mr Robert Jasper More (1836–1903) of Linley Hall near Bishops Castle, Shropshire was the vice chairman and the second chairman of the Central Chamber (Figure 2). A landowner, well-respected barrister and leading Liberal politician, he served as MP for Shropshire South, 1865–8 and later for Ludlow, 1885–1903, and was asked to become chairman 'because they knew him to be a tenant farmers' representative', but as it transpired he chose to be vice-chairman, becoming chairman in 1868.[33] He was also instrumental in the founding of the Shropshire Chamber. His sudden death in 1903 was widely reported; at the 1904 annual meeting of the Shropshire Chamber it was said that

> he was one of the originators of that Chamber of Agriculture, and was a constant and earnest attendant at all its discussions. He rendered them the greatest assistance in the consideration of all questions affecting pastoral industries, and few men were more conversant with them. He knew the requirements of agriculturalists, and his one aim was to enable them to obtain them.[34]

The object of the Central Chamber was 'to watch over the agricultural interests both in and out of Parliament, and take such actions thereon as may seem good for the advancement of agriculture.'[35] The first general meeting was arranged to coincide with the Smithfield Club Show. Chambers of agriculture, farmers' clubs and other bodies subscribed to the Central Chamber, each sending a member to represent them at council meetings; other members could attend for additional subscriptions. Early county chambers were established in Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, Warwick, the East and West Ridings of Yorkshire, Northumberland and Cumberland.[36] By the end of 1866 more than thirty chambers, farmers' clubs and other bodies

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had affiliated.[37] Subscriptions to the Central Chamber by associated chambers and societies increased to seventy-five in 1904, peaking at 108 in 1913, after which it declined to thirty-five in 1928, but increased again to forty-eight in the 1930s. There were also several hundred individuals, including more than one hundred MPs, who subscribed to the Central Chamber, although this number decreased from one hundred in 1908 to eighty in the following parliament.[38] This perhaps reflects the declining interest of MPs in agriculture. Notably, the Central Chamber successfully campaigned for the creation of the Board of Agriculture and the appointment of a Minister in 1888.[39]

The Shropshire Chamber of Agriculture

The Shropshire Chamber is an outstanding example of a county chamber that was one of the most successful. Its extensive records include a minute book of annual general and council meetings (1925–88), an attendance book for council and committee meetings (1914–20), which also includes newspaper cuttings with accounts of chamber meetings (1937–56), and a book of newspaper cuttings (1926–31).[40] An undated copy of the rules states that the chamber's object was 'the promotion and advancement of Agriculture'.[41] Two printed histories have been produced, the first written by the agricultural correspondent of the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* to mark the chamber's centenary, covering the period 1866–1966; the second extends the history up to 1986.[42] This collection of source material provides unique insight into the activities of a county chamber established in the nineteenth century that still continues today.

It is not surprising that a chamber of agriculture flourished in Shropshire. A large, rural county in the West Midlands that abuts the Welsh border to the west, it had a predominantly pastoral farming economy characterised by livestock rearing and dairying.[43] Hence in 1850–1 James Caird defined it as a 'grazing county' with high wages in the dairying and arable orientated north and eastern parts and lower wages to the west.[44] Shropshire and neighbouring counties namely Cheshire, Herefordshire and Staffordshire had been badly affected by the 1865–7 cattle plague.[45] Indeed, Thomas Duckham a well respected farmer, cattle breeder and Liberal politician, who was chairman of the Central Chamber of Agriculture in 1883, wrote to Rider Haggard that the 'Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture were the emanations of his brain, and that he had fought hard against cattle plague and other diseases', arguing for the appointment of a Minister of Agriculture.[46] Clearly the cattle plague had dramatically impacted on farmers who felt their agricultural interests needed to be better represented.

Founding, membership and organisation

On the 4th August 1866, a fortnight after the Central Chamber held its first meeting, a group of farmers and those interested in agriculture met at the George Hotel, Shrewsbury and decided to establish the Shropshire Chamber.[47] A detailed report of the meeting was published in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*.[48] Jasper More, a Shropshire MP and one of the founders of the Central Chamber, emphasised the need to study the politics of agriculture and argued at the inaugural meeting that the subject would become an increasingly important parliamentary issue. At the meeting, Mr John Meire of Brockton Hall declared that he 'could not think that Shropshire would be behind any county of England in energy or ability in furthering the cause of agriculture.'[49] He referred to the 1865–7 cattle plague that had already badly affected farmers in livestock rearing and dairying areas like Cheshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire.[50] Arguably the decline in agricultural prosperity was the underlying reason for the establishment of the chambers of agriculture with the cattle plague being the catalyst.

At the initial meeting, sixty people expressed an interest in joining the chamber. Gentlemen were asked to leave their names at the George Hotel, Shrewsbury, The Feathers Hotel, Ludlow and the Gaskell Arms Hotel, Much Wenlock and those interested in joining the Central Chamber were

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to contact Charles Clay or Jasper More.[51] More promoted the chamber at farmers' clubs and societies in the county, pre-dating the chamber, whose activities typically consisted of agricultural shows and meetings. Antecedents can also be found among anti-Corn Law organisations; for instance in Shropshire there was an Agricultural Protection Society.[52] An impression emerges that political developments in the eighteenth century, notably protectionism, the holding of farms by successive generations of families and sport, in particular hunting, had the effect of uniting landowners and tenants and fostering mutual respect.[53] By the end of its first year the Shropshire Chamber, the largest in the country (with nearly twice as many members as the average chamber), had 524 members, increasing to 612 the following year; nationally there were sixty-seven chambers with over 15,000 members.[54]

Members tended to be drawn from landowning society and larger tenant farmers who were the leading agriculturalists and whose interests it represented, although this changed over time. Their names can often be found in lists of nobility and gentry or farmers in trade directories; details about the chamber are also given.[55] A conference arranged by the Shropshire Chamber in 1892 to discuss the depressed state of agriculture, 'was attended by representatives of practically every county family and the leading farmers of Shropshire and a published list of these appearing in the "Shrewsbury Chronicle" reads like a blend of "Burke's Landed Gentry" and a telephone directory.'[56] In his study of English farm workers and local patriotism, Mansfield described the Shropshire Chamber as a 'gentleman's club'.[57] 'The success of Chambers of Agriculture, especially in Shropshire' was reported in *The Times* in 1868.[58] According to Sir Baldwin Leighton, 7th Baronet (1805–1871) of Loton Park, Alberbury near Shrewsbury who was MP for South Shropshire, 1859–65, a meeting of the chamber in 1869 was attended by a 'very large muster' of the 'most influential tenant farmers', but the following year the chamber's dinner at which Lord Bradford presided, was attended by many farmers, but only fifteen gentlemen, of which five were squires. He was of the view the chamber would be unpopular with landlords, encouraging bad feeling towards them.[59] Both More and Leighton campaigned politically as 'the Farmer's Friend'.[60]

In its early years the chairman was selected from Shropshire MPs. Mr George Tomline, MP for Shrewsbury (1813–1889), 1841–7 and 1852–68, first as a Conservative and later as a Liberal, joined as a member in 1866, presiding at the inaugural dinner.[61] More was chairman at the first meeting, but following his appointment as chairman of the Central Chamber in 1868, he was succeeded by the Earl of Powis and then by the Earl of Granville. The chamber's office was at Alfred Mansell and Company's offices on College Hill, Shrewsbury. Mr Alfred Mansell, a well-known local auctioneer, exporter of pedigree livestock and show judge was appointed secretary in September 1877, serving until his death in 1935.[62] He was also a member of the council of the RASE and secretary of several other organisations including the Shropshire Sheep Breeders Association and Flock Book Society and the Shropshire and West Midlands Agricultural Society.[63]

The chamber's work was promoted to members of farmers' clubs and societies in Shropshire and widely reported in the local newspapers. When the NFU was formed in 1907, the chamber embarked on a recruitment drive; some individuals belonged to both organisations. By 1911 the chamber had twenty-one life members, 345 annual members and eight independent agricultural societies, totalling 374, a slight increase on the previous year (366 in 1910). Membership increased to 409 in 1914 and 412 in 1916.[64] Given that membership was drawn from landowners and larger tenant farmers, it is rather surprising that the chamber developed links with trade unions. In 1920 the Agricultural Labourer's Union and Workers' Union, later the National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers (NUAW) affiliated with the Shropshire Chamber and joint meetings were held with the Shropshire branch of the NFU. The Shropshire Chamber was an active and dynamic organisation which sought to represent the interests of landowners, tenant farmers and agricultural workers alike. Mansfield has pointed out that even Billy (W. T.) Fielding, the NUAW county organiser for Shropshire, was involved with the chamber.[65] It may be speculated that the chamber developed links with trade unions in order to present a unified voice to lobby on behalf of landowners, tenant farmers and agricultural workers as well as bolster its membership.

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However, the Central Chamber was increasingly viewed as no longer representative being superseded by other organisations notably the NFU.[66] Furthermore the Joint Standing Committee of the CLA, NFU and the NUAW decided not to join the Central Chamber after the NFU refused. Several county and district chambers withdrew their subscriptions to the Central Chamber, which by 1926 was in financial trouble. Fluctuations in membership of the chambers may be seen to have corresponded with the changing fortunes of agriculture, membership declining during periods of agricultural depression when members sought to economise on their expenditure. Matthews, the secretary, 'offered to accept a reduction of £120 a year in his salary in view of the serious position of the Chambers' finances, on condition that corresponding assistance be given by the reduction of expenditure by the holding of five council meetings in the year instead of seven.'[67] His proposal was accepted by the council, but the following year he resigned.[68] When the Central Chamber was on the brink of collapse, the Shropshire Chamber passed a resolution calling for the appointment of a new secretary; it was hoped that 'every effort will be made to secure the best candidate available for the post by giving it as wide publicity as possible.'[69]

Nevertheless, in Shropshire at least the chamber appears to have still been an active body. In 1930 it was reported in *The Times* that the Shropshire Chamber was still 'vigorous and well supported'.[70] In 1932 it had 271 members, but it has been remarked 'though still lobbying parliament on agricultural matters, devoted more of its attention to organizing lectures'.[71] By the late 1930s, the chamber, like those elsewhere in the country, was coming under intense competition from the NFU. It was noted that the NFU was 'undoubtedly ... doing wonderful work and its importance to the prosperity of the industry is apparent', but there was still 'room for the Chamber, the work of which would be considerably enhanced by the attendance of members of the NFU at its most interesting meetings'.[72] The Shropshire Chamber continued to subscribe to the Central Chamber, which in 1941 met to discuss postwar agricultural policy.[73] In 1944 Lieutenant Colonel George Pollitt, an influential agricultural writer and president of the Shropshire Chamber, 'spoke of the usefulness of the Chamber as a meeting place for the Land Owner and the Farmer, and was of the opinion that the Chamber should be kept going in the meantime, with a view to increased activities after the end of the war, when the younger men returned.'[74] In his book published in 1942, Pollitt argued for the future expansion of the agriculture sector so the country could be self-sufficient in terms of food.[75] This had been informed by his experience of farming in Shropshire and his background as a research chemist and a director of a large industrial company. Pollitt of Harnage Grange, Cressage near Shrewsbury was appointed the Sheriff of Shropshire in 1945 indicating that he was an prominent figure in county society and his dynamic leadership appears to be one of the main reasons for the survival of the chamber.[76]

While membership had fallen to 108 by 1941, in 1945 Pollitt, then chairman, 'was of the opinion that a meeting place was wanted where the various interests connected with agriculture could get together and expresses their views'. Furthermore, he argued the NFU did not entirely replace the chamber, 'which should be a place where people could meet and discuss the broader interests of agriculture and keep alive always the interest in the increase of fertility and the development of the land as a whole'. He staunchly remarked: 'The Chamber should be there when the soldiers came back and we should not let it go down.'[77] Those who lived in towns and were interested in agriculture were allowed to join the chamber. It was acknowledged that wartime travelling restrictions had prevented members from attending meetings; if lectures were to be organised, they should be well advertised and open to non-members and the public.

After the war membership of the chamber declined and it struggled financially. Following the secretary's resignation, a special council meeting was convened in January 1947 to consider whether the chamber should continue in light of the growth of the NFU and CLA, 'which between them can afford adequate means for the treatment of all agricultural matters, both locally and at Whitehall and Westminster'. It was noted the chamber had succeeded in fulfilling the purpose for which it was founded eighty years ago.[78] However, the resolution calling for the chamber to be

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discontinued was defeated. To strengthen the chamber it was suggested at the annual meeting on the 25th January 1947 that related bodies, such as, the NUAW; the Shropshire federations of the Women's Institutes (WIs) and the Young Farmers' Club (YFC); the Shrewsbury and District Chamber of Commerce; Shrewsbury Borough Council, the Shrewsbury Butchers' Association; the NFU; the CLA and the Land Agents' Society should be asked to nominate a member to be co-opted onto the council.[79]

By the 1950s the Central Chamber's role in representing the agriculture industry had been superseded following competition with other organisations namely the NFU, CLA and the NUAW. The National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAAS) had also been established in 1946 undertaking educational and extension work.[80] It finally ended in 1959, its funds being donated to the NFU and CLA.[81] In the 1960s membership of the Shropshire Chamber declined further due to ageing membership and it made a substantial financial loss. However, in 1967, its centenary year, it was the only surviving county chamber formed in the nineteenth century that was 'entirely an educational and social organization'.[82] In 1976 the future of the chamber was again raised. While it was agreed its political role had ceased, it was thought that it could still play a role as a non-political organisation bringing together farmers and those interested in agriculture, for instance, auctioneers, land agents and those involved in agricultural education.[83] Members were asked if they wanted the chamber to continue with about two-thirds being in favour. The chamber survived and today is one of only two that exists in Britain, organising farm walks and visits.[84]

Livestock disease

Given that the 1865–7 cattle plague was the immediate catalyst for the establishment of the chamber of agriculture movement and that it had a significant impact on Shropshire, which was a notable dairying and livestock rearing area, it is not surprising that livestock disease was a significant concern of members of the Shropshire Chamber. Woods has shown how the views of farmers, veterinarians and the government towards livestock disease evolved during the twentieth century.[85] The chamber's preoccupation with livestock disease was apparent in 1924 when in conjunction with the NFU it submitted evidence to a Ministry of Agriculture committee, proposals being subsequently adopted by the Animal Health Division.[86] The Foot and Mouth Disease Packing Materials Order (1925) was discussed, the chamber expressing particular concern about the import of pig carcasses from Holland. They later expressed satisfaction with the introduction of a new order prohibiting the feeding of uncooked swill to pigs that contained or had been in contact with meat or bones. The chamber opposed the import of livestock from Argentina due to fears about disease and also tinned meat from the United States of America.

Livestock disease featured regularly in the chamber's programme. At a meeting at the Music Hall, Shrewsbury the director of the Bowman Remedy Company addressed a large number of farmers and stockbreeders about contagious abortion and its cure. In 1933 Professor S. H. Gaiger (1884–1934) of the University of Liverpool gave a lecture on contagious abortion in cows and in 1936 Professor Henry Dryerre (1881–1959) of the Royal (Dick) Veterinary College, Edinburgh (now the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies of the University of Edinburgh), lectured on the physiological requirements of farm stock and on sterility in farm animals in 1938.[87] At a meeting in 1939 the progress made in the eradication of cattle diseases in the United States was contrasted with Britain and it was minuted the council wished to 'draw attention to the regrettable lack of progress in the eradication of contagious cattle disease in this country'. It cited the slow progress made of the tuberculosis (TB) attested herd scheme, the lack of provisions in the Livestock Act (1937) to encourage the eradication of contagious abortion and the need for further research into mastitis and Johne's disease.[88] The chamber's resolutions were circulated to the Minister of Agriculture, the Minister of Health, local MPs, the central and associated county and district chambers, the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, the *Farmer's Weekly* and

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local newspapers. While in 1933 only a few hundred farmers were testing their cattle and retesting milk for tuberculosis, by 1937–8 the figure had increased to 23,000, although this accounted for less than one in five of producers.[89]

The issue of livestock disease continued to preoccupy the chamber. In 1940 it was resolved that given the prevalence of preventable cattle diseases especially in dairy herds, the availability of veterinarians and findings of veterinary research institutions, more radical steps should be taken to control and prevent contagious abortion, mastitis, TB and sterility. Leading figures, who recognised the importance of the organisation, lectured to the Shropshire Chamber. That year Professor Thomas Dalling (1892–1982) while Professor of Animal Pathology at the University of Cambridge (later Chief Veterinary Officer of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1948–52), lectured on the prevention of animal disease covering TB, Johne's disease, mastitis, contagious abortion and called for voluntary or compulsory vaccination.[90] NFU members were invited to attend. In 1942 a Ministry of Agriculture parasitologist based at Weybridge lectured on parasites and diseases of farm stock.

In 1944 there was a lecture on bovine abortion, which was infectious and extremely costly. It was recommended that all heifers should be vaccinated before they were eight months old and that a cow that aborted should be isolated for thirty days or until the result of a blood test was known. Following discussion with the NFU and other organisations, it was decided that the vaccination of calves should be compulsory and that contagious abortion be made a notifiable disease. In 1946, a public lecture on common diseases of farm livestock was given by Mr Harry W. Steele-Bodger, former President of the National Veterinary Medical Association.[91] Diseases continued to feature in the chamber's programme, a lecture on mastitis, a disease which Woods has shown was framed as a problematic in terms of milk production rather than animal health, being arranged for December 1953.[92] It has been pointed out that veterinary advisers tended to speak about the causes of diseases and how to prevent rather than cure them, so as not to detract from private veterinary practice.[93]

Other political issues

The Shropshire Chamber had a much broader remit than simply agriculture. It provided a forum to discuss other rural issues that featured in the national political discourse, for instance, the costs of education, poor relief, policing, the maintenance of lunatics and highways. During the late nineteenth century, the chamber enquired into the causes of agricultural depression from the early 1870s citing the 1865–7 cattle plague that had led to farmers going out of business; increasing foreign competition especially corn and meat imports; the reduction in crop and livestock prices; high local government rates; and the preservation of ground game. The latter had long attracted the criticism of the landed interest due to the damage rabbits and hares caused.[94] With the passing of the Ground Game Act (1880), tenant farmers were granted permission to kill rabbits and hares that were damaging their crops. A reduction in rents was deemed necessary with farms deteriorating due to successive bad seasons, the fall in prices caused by the emergence of foreign competition and ensuing agricultural depression and farmers being in rent arrears. By the end of the nineteenth century the decline in rents and rent arrears was impacting on landowners.

The chamber forwarded evidence to the Royal Commission on the Depressed Condition of the Agricultural Interests (1894–7). Mr Lander represented the chamber appearing as a witness, commenting on the Agricultural Holdings Act (1884), the sale of imported meat and the sale of cattle by live-weight.[95] Along with the Shropshire and West Midlands Agricultural Society, founded in 1875, the chamber supported the holding of the Royal Agricultural Show, also known as The Royal which was held at Shrewsbury in 1884.[96] In January 1893 More proposed a resolution that approved the establishment of a NAU as suggested by Lord Winchilsea, but it was strongly opposed by members who argued 'that the existing chambers of agriculture be extended and popularized . . . it would be most undesirable to break up the existing organizations such as their own

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chamber of agriculture, which had been most useful.'[97] Despite this initial reluctance the chamber agreed that 'in order to secure the success of a National Agricultural Union, combining the co-operation of all classes connected with the land, the existing Chambers and other agricultural societies should identify themselves with the movement.'[98] It discussed whether a provisional county branch of the union should be formed with other farmers' clubs and societies including Burwarton and District Farmers' Club, Much Wenlock Farmers' Club, Pattingham Agricultural Society, Ludlow Agricultural Society, Whitchurch Dairy Farmers' Association and Marshbrook Agricultural Society. However, it was decided not to join the union, and consequently Mr W. Clement Tabor of Ellesmere resigned in 1893 because they had not joined the union that sought to represent all those involved in agriculture.[99]

During the First World War the chamber patriotically supported the work of the County War Agricultural Executive Committee (CWAEC), encouraging the committee to promote the ploughing up of grassland in order to increase the production of wheat, oats and potatoes. They also suggested organising farm labour by guaranteeing permanent roles for skilled men, utilising prisoners of war (POWs) and also women with previous milking experience.[100] After the war the issue of agricultural labour arose, the chamber objecting to a proposal to increase wages by 6s 6d per week. It tried to cooperate with the Shrewsbury branch of the NFU regarding working hours during the summer and winter. In the 1930s the chamber became more interested in milk production, making efforts to increase the consumption of fresh milk.[101] As a predominantly pastoral area where milk production was expanding rapidly especially in north Shropshire, it is not surprising that the chamber was interested in developments in dairy farming that were relevant to the interests of its members.[102] The chamber approved the principles of the Agricultural Marketing Bill, 1933 and the following year Professor Arthur Wilfred Ashby (1886–1953) of University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, a leading agricultural economist, gave a lecture on the milk industry under the milk marketing scheme.[103] The chamber was also concerned with developments in the pig industry as a marketing scheme for pigs was also introduced.[104]

With the onset of the Second World War, the chamber actively supported the national effort to increase domestic food production, which it argued would fail unless the farmer was paid a price commensurate with costs.[105] The chamber was critical of MPs representing agricultural constituencies for not articulating the views of bodies like the chambers in the House of Commons. Hence in 1940 the council of the Shropshire Chamber passed the resolution 'that the national effort to increase home food production as a war measure is handicapped by a regrettable lack of understanding of the problem both in the Ministries of Food and of Agriculture.'[106] It called upon Shropshire MPs to bring to the government's attention the views expressed by representative agricultural bodies in their constituencies.[107] There was much discussion about the ploughing-up campaign.[108] While wartime policy focused on increasing the acreage of the main arable crops such as wheat and potatoes, the chamber wanted a more progressive approach that increased yields of the existing arable acreage, for instance, by making greater use of artificial fertilisers.[109] Although the annual visit to Harper Adams was cancelled in 1941, in August 1942 members attended a demonstration at the college organised by the CWAEC and visits continued during wartime.[110]

The chamber remained focused on scrutinising political developments. In September 1943 it discussed future agricultural policy, following Robert S. Hudson (1886–1957), the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries' statement that he was precluded from talking about postwar policy.[111] The chamber concurred with the many critics of the government who emphasised the need for a national long-term agricultural policy. It supported the recommendations of the Hot Springs International Food Convention in 1943, which it argued should be implemented in Britain, maximising output from the land. It also emphasised the need for the ratio between costs and selling prices of agricultural products to be stabilised for at least a decade after the end of the war, thereby seeking to provide long-term stability for the agriculture sector.[112] There was clearly concern that once the war ended, the wartime guaranteed price system would be dismantled as it had following the end of the First World War. By this time, however, the political role of the chamber appears to

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have been waning and its focus shifted to providing informal agricultural educational and social activities. Nevertheless it continued to attract high-profile speakers such as Sir Michael Franklin, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, 1983–7, who spoke at one of its annual luncheons in the 1980s.[113]

Agricultural education

A major issue that the Central and Shropshire Chambers championed was the provision of formal agricultural education. At the annual meeting in 1872 members of the Shropshire Chamber discussed 'The State and Means of Education for Farmers' Sons in connexion with the Educational Endowments existing in this County', a resolution being passed and a committee established.[114] In 1879 the need for agricultural education for farmers' sons was reiterated. They suggested that teachers should be encouraged to train in agricultural science, with a committee established to promote the subject.[115] The chamber advocated the need for formal agricultural education nationally. They discussed the Report of the Paget Commission set up by the government in 1887 to examine agricultural and dairy schools or training in Britain, putting forward resolutions to the Central Chamber about agricultural education nationally as well as in the county. In 1890 a representative from the Shropshire Chamber joined a county council committee concerned with technical and agricultural education with the aim of obtaining a grant to provide instruction in dairying, botany, entomology, veterinary, chemistry and practical farm work.[116] It campaigned for dairy institutes to be established and for classes on agricultural topics to be held throughout Shropshire. Formal agricultural education developed in the early and mid-twentieth century. Harper Adams Agricultural College (now Harper Adams University) at Edgmond and the Shropshire Farm Institute (now Walford College) which opened in 1901 and 1949 respectively, offered courses in agricultural subjects and the county council's education committee arranged day and evening classes.[117]

In addition, the chamber expanded its educational activities, providing informal agricultural education through debates, lectures and visits, which were popular and well attended. They were advertised widely and reports were published in local newspapers, namely the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, the *Eddowes's Journal* and the *Wellington Journal*. Guest speakers addressed members about the latest developments in agriculture. But who were the individuals who addressed the Shropshire Chamber and why were they prepared to speak? Where were the meetings held and why? A notable speaker in the early years was Mr Robert William Hanbury (1845–1903), the President of the Board of Agriculture, 1900–03, who opened Harper Adams on the 26th September 1901.[118] The chamber continued to attract high-profile speakers. It had close links with Harper Adams and the Farm Institute, annual visits being arranged and lectures often given by staff members. For instance, Professor Percy Hedworth Foulkes (1871–1965), Principal of Harper Adams, 1900–22, lectured on root crops with members being encouraged to visit the college to view trials.[119] A lecture series began in 1911 covering practical subjects such as abortion in cattle, principles of manuring as well as a lecture at Harper Adams on 'Agricultural Education and its value to practical agriculture'.[120] Other lectures covered subjects including farm accounts, milk records (given by Alfred Mansell in 1913),[121] anthrax, land drainage, imported butter blending, the sale of eggs by weight, beef marketing schemes and serum treatment for swine fever.

In 1925 the chamber received correspondence from the Rothamsted Experimental Station at Harpenden, Hertfordshire informing them that their staff (Mr C. Heigham, Farm Director, Dr Keen and Mr H. V. Garner, the guide demonstrator) could give lectures on the growing and manuring of sugar beet and malting barley, how the cost of cultivation could be reduced and manuring. Another speaker offered to give an address on contagious abortion which was a major concern of dairy farmers.[122] At the chamber's annual meeting in 1925, Dr Charles Crowther (1876–1964), Principal of Harper Adams, 1922–44 gave an address on twenty years' progress in the application of science to farming, a summary of which was published in the *Shrewsbury*

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Chronicle.[123] He lectured to the chamber on several occasions about a wide range of subjects including tenant right valuations, feeding stuffs and the liming and chalking of soils. In following years there were lectures on some problems of rural schools presented by the Director of Education for Oxfordshire, the marketing of eggs given by a member of staff from the Ministry of Agriculture and a lecture on the YFC movement with regard to rural education by the organiser of the YFC. Professor Robert Stenhouse Williams, Research Professor in Dairy Bacteriology at the University of Reading and the first Director of National Institute for Research in Dairying, Shinfield, Reading, 1912–32 discussed the Milk and Dairies Order (1926) with discussion involving the County Medical Officer of Health and Medical Officer of Health for Shrewsbury.[124] The chamber clearly benefited from the expertise of staff at Harper Adams, but also attracted high-profile individuals from organisations with a national and international reputation, revealing the importance they attached to the Shropshire Chamber.

Members of other organisations attended chamber meetings. A meeting held at the Music Hall, Shrewsbury in 1927 at which the assistant secretary of the National Social Service outlined the Rural Community Council movement was attended by representatives of the NFU, the CLA, the county branch of the British Legion, the Shropshire WIs, the Salop (Shropshire) County Council (Higher Education Department and Agricultural Education Committee), Harper Adams and the County Agricultural Officer.[125] A market investigator of the Ministry of Agriculture addressed a meeting organised by the chamber and the Shropshire branch of the NFU at Shrewsbury speaking on the marketing of livestock. It was reported the chamber co-operated with the county branch of the NFU 'amicably and effectively.'[126] Members of the Shropshire Federation of WIs were invited to a lecture on the marketing of poultry and eggs by a member of staff from the Ministry of Agriculture.

Other lectures were arranged on the use of modern transport for agriculture, liming and rural electrification. Regarding the latter members were 'in general agreement that supply at a reasonable charge of electricity for lighting and power would be of incalculable benefit to agriculturalists, particularly as a means of reducing labour costs, etc.'.[127] Land drainage was another subject that had wide appeal as the landscape of the North Shropshire Plain and Severn Valley includes areas of former marshland and low-lying land close to the rivers Perry, Roden, Tern and Severn.[128] A lecture on land drainage attracted farmers, members of the CLA and the Surveyors Institution, who discussed the role of strine and river drainage boards. This coincided with the passing of the Land Drainage Act (1930), which resulted in the creation of internal drainage boards to manage the drainage of low-lying land. At a meeting, Professor R. G. White of the Department of Agriculture, University College of North Wales, Bangor gave a lecture on the improvement of livestock. Visits were also organised with sixty members visiting the open-air piggeries of the Earl of Dartmouth at Patshull Park and there was an annual visit to Harper Adams including before the Duke of York's visit in 1926 to open the National Institute of Poultry Husbandry (NIPH).[129]

Even during the 1930s the chamber continued to attract high-profile speakers with lectures being given by leading agriculturalists of national and international significance who clearly regarded the chamber in high esteem. Sir John Hammond (1889–1964) of the Animal Nutrition Institute, School of Agriculture at the University of Cambridge gave a lecture on beef production.[130] In 1932 the secretary was asked to arrange papers on the organisation of the pig industry, the breeding and management of pigs by Dr Charles Crowther, diseases of sheep by Dr Montgomerie of University College of North Wales, Bangor and the improvement of poor grass land by Professor George Stapledon (1882–1960) of University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.[131] In 1932 on an annual visit to Harper Adams, members viewed experiments led by Crowther and Professor Raymond T. Parkhurst, Director of the NIPH, 1927–32 and Mr W. E. Thompson, Farm Director. They toured crops including winter and spring wheat experiments, potato varieties and experiments, mangels or mangolds and swedes discussing different varieties and systems of manuring. Professor Parkhurst showed members around the NIPH.

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In 1937 there was a lecture about the construction of shippons by a retired official of the Ministry of Agriculture and the following year a lecture was given by a member of Harper Adams staff on combating inspect pests.[132] Annual visits to Harper Adams and debates about agricultural affairs were organised.

In the postwar period the chamber continued, despite declining membership, focusing on arranging educational and social activities. In the late 1940s it continued to arrange high-profile public lectures and talks on agricultural topics like beef production, artificial insemination (AI) (a talk being given by a staff member from the Cheswardine AI centre), infertility in dairy cattle, the impact of changes in the planning system on farmers, the benefits of horse versus tractor power, rural electrification and the profit motive in farming. Speakers included leading scientists from the Ministry of Agriculture and representatives of commercial companies like Boots and Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). Postwar legislation like the Agricultural Act (1947), the Town and Country Planning Act (1947), the River Boards Act (1948) and the Land Drainage Act (1961) were also debated.[133] In 1965 three lectures were held at Harper Adams on 'the part played by the press, radio and television in relation to the Agricultural Community'.[134] The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had began producing farming radio programmes before the Second World War; to aid postwar reconstruction they developed radio and television programmes, famously *The Archers*, to disseminate specialist farming knowledge.[135]

Annual visits to Harper Adams and the Farm Institute were popular and excursions within the county were arranged to farms and sites of general interest such as managed woodlands at Weston Park near Shifnal, Ironbridge power station, livestock rearing farms and those with pedigree herds of cattle, the sugar beet factory at Allscott, the maltings at Ditherington in Shrewsbury, W. H. Smith and Company's ironworks at Whitchurch, the rubber research station at Shawbury and the fire and police station headquarters in Shrewsbury. Visits further afield were also arranged including the Ferguson tractor factory at Coventry, Bibby's mills and farms at Liverpool, the oil refinery at Ellesmere Port, a maltings and brewery at Burton-on-Trent, a bacon factory at Brierley Hill, Imperial Chemical Industries' (ICI) salt mines at Winsford, Josiah Wedgewood and Sons Limited at Stoke-on-Trent and Brintons carpet factory at Kidderminster. They visited experimental farms: Boots farms at Nottingham, the Welsh Plant Breeding Station at Aberystwyth and the Rosemaund Experimental Farm at Preston Wynne near Hereford, as well as examples of improved marginal land and a hill farm scheme. Members expressed an interest in visiting the NAAS office at Wolverhampton or a farm where there were examples of silage and silos eligible for grant, a site where open cast coal mining land had been restored and a recommissioned mill.

The impact and effectiveness of chambers of agriculture: conclusions

This article has stressed the important role the chambers of agriculture in Britain played in representing the agriculture and rural interest and, in particular, the 'success' of the Shropshire Chamber, which the toast included in this article's title alludes to. Leading figures such as Clare Sewall Read, Charles Clay and Jasper More promoted the chambers of agriculture movement at national and county levels. It is important to recognise that chambers of agriculture in Britain were not top-down but rather bottom-up initiatives albeit introduced by landowners and larger tenant farmers and lacked government financial support, hence many later collapsed.[136] Their success depended on the activities of local members. Most significantly, they were outside the structure of government and did not have the formal responsibilities that chambers had in other countries. In Britain agriculture remained a free enterprise with minimal government intervention except during the war years. Even when the chambers were formed in the 1860s the country already lagged behind other European countries in terms of agricultural science and education.

By comparison, the Prussian chambers of agriculture, established in 1894 with financial support from the state, have been described as 'a novel kind of institution, combining a wide array of

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functions which since the early twentieth century have usually been delegated to separate organizations.'[137] They undertook experimental research, provided agricultural education and extension services and acted on behalf of the farming community in an official capacity making representations to the government.[138] The chambers were created with the intention of addressing issues that affected peasant farmers, while at the same time continuing to engage with owners of landed estates. As it has been concluded:

> the Prussian government's aim was to promote technical modernisation, secure peasant loyalty, and consolidate state control over policy without unduly antagonising the landowning aristocracy or *radically* undermining their control of agricultural institutions. While the chambers were research and extension institutes of a new and ambitious kind, therefore, the reform they embodied was a profoundly conservative one.[139]

Similarly in France, the chambers of agriculture ('les chambres d'agriculture') created in 1924 continue today as self-governing public bodies that are managed by farmers who are elected at local, regional and national levels. They represent farmers and provide services such as technical advice, training, experimentation and demonstrations.[140]

The heyday of chambers of agriculture in Britain appears to have been the period from their establishment in 1866 up until the First World War, although clearly their longevity varied. In some counties like Shropshire, chambers continued to provide a valued forum for farmers and agricultural and rural professionals even after the Central Chamber and most of the associated county or district chambers had ceased to exist. Membership of the Shropshire Chamber does appear to have been dominated by landowning society and larger tenant farmers particularly during the nineteenth century, perhaps reflecting an attempt to counter the diminishing influence of the landed interest. However, a wider membership was considered desirable in the twentieth century with collaboration with other organisations having similar aims and interests, including trades unions. Possible explanations for the survival of the Shropshire Chamber include the succession of effective dynamic leaders and members who remained committed to the chamber and the fundamental importance of agriculture in the county's rural economy. Furthermore, the willingness of leading agriculturalists, scientists, veterinarians and politicians to contribute to the chamber's programme implies it continued to be an organisation that was respected and valued.

While according to the prevailing historiography, the chambers may not have been particularly successful as a political lobby, the Shropshire Chamber appears to have played an arguably greater role in providing a forum for discussing developments concerning agriculture and drawing attention to important issues principally livestock disease and agricultural education.[141] The chamber's activities served a wider educational and social function, members benefiting from listening to speakers talk on a wide range of subjects including the findings of agricultural science and policy and visits provided the opportunity to view trials and new farming methods. Consequently, they should be viewed more broadly as institutions that were involved in the diffusion of agricultural and rural knowledge, an aspect that relates to the work of comparative rural historians interested in 'knowledge networks'.[142] Finally, in light of these findings, the role of the Central Chamber of Agriculture and other county and district chambers of agriculture in Britain deserves to be studied as they can significantly enhance our understanding of agricultural and rural politics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the circulation of agricultural knowledge.

Acknowledgements. This research was funded in part by the Wellcome Trust, Grant No. 209818/Z/17/Z. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright licence to any author accepted manuscript version arising from this submission. I would like to thank Professor John Martin for reading and commenting on drafts, Professor Carl Griffin, Editor of *Rural History* for his support, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S095679332200022X Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Cite this article: Bowen J P (2023). 'Success to the Shropshire Chamber of Agriculture': a reappraisal of the role of chambers of agriculture in Britain during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Rural History* **34**, 55–73. https://doi.org/10.1017/S095679332200022X

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