JOAN THIRSK

Irene Joan Thirsk
1922–2013

Joan Thirsk was the leading British early modern agrarian historian in the latter part of the twentieth century.[1] She used a range of previously neglected sources to develop ideas about regional differences, the environmental and social roots of agricultural practices and techniques, the ideas and attitudes which influenced change and custom in the countryside, and the growth of rural industry and a wider consumer driven economy. In addition to promoting new interpretations in her own work, she encouraged and nurtured the progress of her subject by playing an important part in the foundation of the British Agricultural History Society and the publication of the multi-volume *Agrarian History of England and Wales*. She appreciated the contribution of disciplines other than her own, such as folklore, literature and archaeology, and she reached out beyond the academic world to the large community of local and amateur historians.

Joan Watkins was born on 19 June 1922 to parents living in north London, who were supportive but had no academic background. William Watkins, her father, trained as a leather worker, but was appointed after the First World War as the steward of a club in central London.[2] Her mother, Daisy, who had French ancestors, had worked as a dressmaker, and from her the young Joan acquired needlework skills.[3] From Primrose Hill Primary she went in 1933 to Camden School, where she was inspired by the history teaching and in particular the lessons of Miss Bell, a student at the

[1] She was always known as Joan.
[2] Information from James (Jimmy) Thirsk, her husband.
[3] Information from David and Pat Hey.

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XIV, 573–596.

London School of Economics (LSE) from before 1914, who awakened her interest in economic history.[4] She was also attracted to the type of history which emphasised people and personalities: she read C. V. Wedgwood's biographies of early modern political figures and the historical fiction of Margaret Irwin. History was not her initial choice of subject for her degree, however, perhaps because she feared that at university it would consist of impersonal and dry surveys of movements and trends, towards which she later expressed a strong antipathy.[5] She had an aptitude for modern languages, and was drawn to study German and French. While still at school, having been awarded a London County Council scholarship to acquire language skills abroad, she found herself on 3 September 1939 in Berne, and made the journey back to London with some difficulty. In the following two years Camden School was relocated in a succession of East Midland towns: Uppingham, Grantham and Stamford, where Joan cycled around a part of the country that would later play an important role in her professional life.[6] She chose languages as her university subject and in 1941 embarked on a degree in German and French (with some Spanish) at Westfield College in the University of London. She had applied to women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, but while they could offer a place, this did not come with financial support. In any case she found herself in Oxford because Westfield moved to the safety of St Peter's Hall (now St Peter's College).

After their first year, wartime students were offered a choice: to continue with their degree, on condition that they became school teachers or interrupt their studies by making themselves available for national service. Joan did not wish to teach, so she enrolled in 1942 in the ATS (women's Auxiliary Territorial Service) attached to the Intelligence Corps. After a period of training (including a course in signals and communications at Beaumanor in Leicestershire) she was posted to Bletchley Park (Buckinghamshire). There she eventually rose to the rank of subaltern.[7] Until the 1990s Joan would refer enigmatically to her war service with the phrase 'when I was in the army', but after a long interval many other inmates of Bletchley Park felt that they were no longer bound by the Official Secrets Act and a growing number spoke about their work in breaking codes and reading enemy radio messages. Joan's husband has

[4] Joan Thirsk, 'Nature versus nurture', *History Workshop Journal*, 47 (1999), 273–7.
[5] Ibid.
[6] James Thirsk, *Bletchley Park. An Inmate's Story* (Hadlow, 2008), pp. 57–8. We are grateful to Helen Wallace for showing us a copy of this book.
[7] Ibid.

joined those who have written books about the whole extraordinary episode.[8] She remained quite reticent about her wartime years, but we know from her husband's book that she worked in the Fusion Room as part of a team which studied decrypted German messages in order to reconstruct the location and strength of the German army throughout Europe and for a time in North Africa.

In the unique environment of Bletchley academics, mathematicians, students (such as Joan) who had acquired language skills, archivists and librarians all contributed to a huge exercise in the accumulation and interpretation of data. They needed to squeeze the last drop of meaning from terse and sometimes fragmentary documents, which was excellent training for a historian. Many of those at Bletchley leaned towards the left. Joan had already encountered left-wing politics at Oxford in 1941, where she had attended meetings of the Labour Club. Prominent members were such lively anti-establishment intellectuals as Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and Iris Murdoch, and a future FBA, the medieval historian James Holt.[9] Joan became involved in discussions among her colleagues at Bletchley about the need for an allied invasion of occupied Europe which would relieve the pressure on the Red Army, and she remembered almost sixty years later visiting Collett's bookshop in London to buy pamphlets supporting the 'second front' campaign.[10] She also pursued her historical interest, and in particular remembered the profound effect of R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* in its Penguin edition which she read and reread, appreciating the interweaving of religion with economic and social themes.[11] Bletchley was a social as well as an intellectual community, where lifelong friendships were formed, and not a few marriages. Joan met Jimmy Thirsk, a librarian in civilian life, in 1944 (he was analysing intercepted enemy radio traffic in hut 6) and they were married in September 1945.

Her war service completed, Joan Thirsk, as she was now called, resumed her degree at Westfield, but she changed her course from languages to history. She later gave practical explanations for the conversion, such as the difficulty of developing her proficiency in the spoken language in Germany when that country lay in ruins, but the combination of experiences at Bletchley must have convinced her of the importance of a sub-

[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Thirsk, 'Nature versus nurture'.
[11] Ibid.

ject in which she had already developed an interest at Camden School. As an undergraduate at Westfield she was taught by Rosalind Hill and Nicolai Rubinstein. She again encountered economic history, attending lectures by Mary Stocks, the Principal of the College, and wished to pursue that branch of the subject when she graduated with a first in 1947. She was awarded a grant for a doctorate, but was expected to find a supervisor and topic; after advice at the Institute of Historical Research she approached R. H. Tawney at LSE, and he agreed to supervise her research.[12]

Tawney suggested as a thesis subject the sale of the land of delinquents (that is, royalists) in the period 1646–56, which she duly completed in exactly three years in 1950. The subject was an important one, as the transfer of land, from the royal and church estates as well as from the property of royalists, amounted to the greatest upheaval in English landholding after the dissolution of the monasteries. Royalist critics saw the whole process as serving the selfish interests of the parliamentary regime, and historians had noted that London merchants and officials of the Commonwealth were often beneficiaries. Thirsk found that many of the apparent purchasers acted as agents who sold the land to others. The former royalist owners were able to regain their lands at considerable expense. They might then dispose of some of their assets in order to pay off their debts, and a significant number of artisans, farmers and minor gentry leaseholders were able to buy the freehold.[13] After the Restoration the new regime found it difficult to reverse the sales, and a complex series of law suits and negotiations resolved some of the problems, rather than a single piece of legislation cancelling the sale and acquisition of land under the rule of Parliament.[14]

Joan's first employment after the completion of her thesis was an assistant lectureship in sociology at the LSE, but during that year (1950–1) her life was set on a new course by a fortunate combination of circumstances. During the last year of her thesis research she had been approached by W. G. Hoskins of the University College at Leicester who asked her to write the chapter on modern agrarian history for the newly resumed *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*. Her name as a potential author had been suggested by Tawney.[15] Meanwhile the University Grants

[12] Thirsk, 'Nature versus nurture'; Thirsk, *Bletchley Park*; and J. Chartres, James Thirsk, and J. Robinson, 'Joan Thirsk, FBA, 1922–2013', *Agricultural History Review*, 62 (2014), 151.

[13] J. Thirsk, 'The sales of Royalist Land during the Interregnum', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 5 (1952–3), 188–207. J. Thirsk refers to Joan Thirsk in this and all subsequent references.

[14] J. Thirsk, 'The restoration land settlement', *Journal of Modern History*, 26 (1954), 315–28.

[15] Information from Dr Robert Peberdy, from correspondence between Hoskins and Joan Thirsk.

Committee (UGC) had recommended that research in economic history should be awarded special funding, and this soon bore fruit. G. D. H. Cole suggested to Hoskins that he should apply for money on behalf of Leicester, and this provided sufficient to pay for a two-year 'senior post', with ample research expenses. The rather ambitious aim was ultimately to research such themes as land utilisation and population, emphasising the regional dimension, between 450 and 1800, but in the first two years the study was to be confined to Lincolnshire, leading to a larger scheme in the following five years.[16] Joan Thirsk was appointed to the post of Senior Research Fellow, to begin work in October 1951. She was employed in the relatively recently founded Department of English Local History, which Hoskins had persuaded the College to establish. This was a novel venture for an English university, and Leicester became well known for providing an institutional base for this specialism.

Joan's post between 1951 and 1965 was known in its first year in Leicester as the 'Agrarian Fellowship', and that was the theme on which her career was built. Why and how did agrarian history become her specialism? Her doctoral thesis was concerned with land ownership, and while she made something of the profits of the gentry from their management of their lands, she had not explored the agrarian dimension. She had little personal experience of the countryside, though a relative farmed in Yorkshire,[17] and it is likely that after studying acquisitive aristocrats she preferred to work on honest and productive peasants and farmers. She could read much about the subject in the flurry of publications on early modern farming that had appeared between the 1890s and 1914, including Tawney's inspiring *Agrarian Problem of the Sixteenth Century*. She also appreciated the literature on the late medieval countryside that had been published in the 1930s and 1940s (including works by Levett, Page, R. A. L. Smith and Hilton). Above all Hoskins had produced a series of pioneering articles on Leicestershire farming and farmers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some about particular villages but also ranging over the whole county, which showed the historical value of probate inventories of the period 1530–1700.[18] These valuations of possessions

[16] University of Leicester Centre for English Local History, H. P. R. Finberg Papers (hereafter Finberg Papers), FIN/8/2/4/22b : typescript by W. G. Hoskins, 24 September 1950.

[17] Autobiographical notes and correspondence kindly provided by James Thirsk.

[18] W. G. Hoskins, 'The Leicestershire farmer in the sixteenth century', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*, 22 (1944-5), 33–94; W. G. Hoskins, 'A short history of Gaulby and Frisby', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*, 22 (1944–5), 174–210; W. G. Hoskins, 'The Leicestershire farmer in the seventeenth century', *Agricultural History*, 25

compiled soon after death gave vivid snapshots of crops, animals, implements and buildings, and also indicated the contents of dwelling houses by listing furnishings and utensils room by room. Hoskins was also in the forefront of those using parish registers and various early counts of inhabitants in order to study population.[19] Thirsk gained from her personal contacts with Hoskins as well as from his writings, and his advice must have helped her when she embarked on her fellowship. They remained in friendly correspondence for the rest of his life (he died in 1991), but they were colleagues at Leicester for only a few months, as he took up the Readership in Economic History at Oxford early in 1952.

The fellowship at Leicester provided the young Joan Thirsk with an outstanding opportunity, and she plunged into the research work with enthusiasm and energy. After three years at Bletchley, she had spent six years learning her trade as a historian, and she acquired much knowledge and skill in the twelve months that it took to research and write *Fenland Farming in the Sixteenth Century*.[20] This was based on a large number of probate inventories (kept at Lincoln), and a mass of documents from the Public Record Office dealing mainly with drainage schemes. This primary evidence was convincingly interpreted in the light of historical and geographical publications of the previous half-century. The paper gave a comprehensive account of the Lincolnshire fenland, discussing population, settlement, territorial divisions and the use of land, with much information about crops and livestock. The paper is skilfully framed by reference to the comments of early modern observers about the hardships facing the fenland inhabitants, who appeared to outsiders to form a race apart struggling with a hostile environment. Objective evidence of wills and tax lists, however, revealed a wealthy population living on fertile soil, lush pastures and the valuable resources of the wetlands. Fenland society, which contained few gentlemen, was home to many prosperous yeomen.

H. P. R. Finberg, who had succeeded Hoskins as head of English Local History, had been a printer in his previous existence and he took pride and pleasure in beginning a new series of Occasional Papers based in the Leicester Department. He insisted that these publications should achieve a high standard both in their academic excellence and in the quality of their printing. The typescript of *Fenland Farming* was read and

(1951), 9–20.

[19] W. G. Hoskins, 'The population of an English village, 1086–1801', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*, 33 (1957), 15–35.

[20] J. Thirsk, *Fenland Farming in the Sixteenth Century*, University of Leicester Department of English Local History Occasional Paper, 3 (Leicester, 1953).

approved by Tawney, who was also persuaded to write a brief introduction.[21] Joan and Finberg came into frequent contact over technical matters, and she appreciated the trouble that he took to ensure that her publication made a mark. In the year that it appeared, 1953, she suggested after much correspondence in the previous months between 'Mr Finberg' and 'Mrs Thirsk' that he call her 'Joan'.[22]

The Lincolnshire work continued, and its progress is marked by a series of publications, including an article in the first volume of the new *Agricultural History Review* (edited by Finberg) on the Isle of Axholme.[23] This was an area of fenland in north Lincolnshire, analysed in much the same way as the district covered by *Fenland Farming.* The article notes the antipathy shown by William Dugdale to the stubborn and ignorant (as he saw it) opposition to drainage schemes mounted by the local peasants. Joan showed that the opponents of drainage had a point, as they were by no means poor and backward before 'improvement' and the drainage scheme did not achieve its objects. She was developing an idea which ran through her subsequent work, that ordinary country people were not stupid and unreasonably conservative. They had accumulated reserves of experience and wisdom, and deserved the respect of historians.

In her publication on farming in Kesteven, the south-western division of Lincolnshire, she renewed her emphasis on the influence exerted by the environment over the farming system and social structure.[24] Each part of the district had its own history, depending on whether its inhabitants farmed on clay, limestone or the edge of the fen. Joan liked to write about individual people as well as general trends, but the main source for local study in her period, probate records, gave limited scope for a more human approach. In her work on Kesteven she came upon the early seventeenth-century accounts of prosperous gentry, the Hatcher family, who bought clothing and spices in London and planted an orchard with a variety of fruit trees, including peaches and nectarines. Consumerism and horticulture would figure in her later writings.

[21] Finberg Papers, FIN/6/P/28/ 5 and 7. Tawney wrote to Finberg that it was 'the best thing on the subject I've seen'.
[22] Finberg Papers, FIN/6/P/C/29/30b.
[23] J. Thirsk, 'The Isle of Axholme before Vermuyden', *Agricultural History Review*, 1 (1953), 16–28.
[24] J. Thirsk, 'Farming in Kesteven, 1540–1640', *Lincolnshire Architectural and Archaeological Society Reports and Papers*, new ser., 6 (1955), 37–53.

The succession of shorter publications on Lincolnshire culminated in the book *English Peasant Farming* which appeared in 1957.[25] It took each part of the county in turn and analysed its farming system and social structure in the sixteenth century, and then examined the changes that affected each region—the drainage of the fens, and the agricultural revolution on the clays and limestones. Change was traced through to 1870 for each region, and then a final chapter surveyed the whole county in the period up to 1914. A theme running through the book, as well as the crucial importance of regional differences, was the adaptability and resilience of country people in all parts of Lincolnshire. They resisted change which threatened their livelihood, but when faced with new circumstances they survived and even prospered by adopting different methods and practices. The book was about a single county, but its title implies a wider theme, and to underline its ambition to be developing ideas of more general significance it ends with a translation of a Russian poem in praise of peasants.

The work on Lincolnshire which had brought Joan Thirsk to Leicester did not absorb all of her energies in the early 1950s. She published two articles which derived from her doctoral thesis on land sales.[26] The invitation from Hoskins for her to contribute to the *Victoria County History* resulted in a substantial chapter published in 1954, in a volume containing surveys of the religious, political and agrarian history of the whole county.[27] The analysis followed much the same template as that used for Lincolnshire, though in the case of Leicestershire she was much aided by Hoskins's earlier writings. A particular theme was enclosure, and she found many examples of enclosure by agreement. *English Peasant Farming* contains many comparisons between Leicestershire and Lincolnshire, and it was clearly helpful to be able to make detailed comparisons between these adjacent counties.

As her work on agrarian history progressed she was extending her knowledge of sources, and contributed an article to the *Agricultural History Review* in 1955 perhaps at the suggestion of Finberg, the editor.[28] This helpful survey of the documents that were available, with some

[25] J. Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming: the Agrarian History of Lincolnshire from Tudor to Recent Times* (London, 1957).
[26] See Notes 13 and 14.
[27] J. Thirsk, 'The agricultural history of Leicestershire', in W. G. Hoskins and R. McKinley (eds.), *Victoria History of the County of Leicester*, 2 (London, 1954), pp. 199–264.
[28] J. Thirsk, 'The content and sources of English agrarian history after 1500', *Agricultural History Review*, 3 (1955), 66–79.

comments on problems encountered in their use, was an obvious benefit for fellow researchers, and especially for research students and non-professional historians. The enthusiastic editor of the new journal *The Amateur Historian* presumably persuaded Thirsk to contribute an essay on sources for the history of population, in which she pointed out that tax records, listings and bishops' visitations indicate numbers of people before the first national census of 1801.[29] These publications aimed at local historians can be connected with her talks to local societies or groups of history teachers around the country. She appreciated the wider interest in history, especially in local history, and was pleased to communicate with the general public.[30]

The next turning point for Joan Thirsk came in 1956 when a group of historians began planning the ambitious *Agrarian History of England and Wales* in many volumes, to be published by the Cambridge University Press.[31] Finberg as general editor in 1957 asked his colleague to take on the editing of the fourth volume covering the period 1500–1640. This would be a collaborative volume, but she planned to write the chapters which would establish a regional framework, and realised that this could not be done on the basis of printed records or the published conclusions of historians. She was applying to the whole country the method that she used in Lincolnshire of collecting samples of probate inventories from which the farming system could be mapped. The county record offices which had relatively recently been formed contained the material, and researchers would need to travel round the country making notes in standardised form. The Nuffield Foundation provided enough funds to employ two researchers for two years, and they (Alan Everitt and Margaret Midgley) regularly met Thirsk in dark corners of the British Museum (then housing the British Library) to compare notes.[32]

Why had regional differences come to occupy such a prominent place in Joan Thirsk's conception of the history of farming and the countryside? It was partly because of her distrust of history based on bland generalisations, usually in pursuit of some abstract theory such as Malthusian

[29] J. Thirsk, 'Sources of information on population', *The Amateur Historian*, 4 (1959), 129–32, 182–4.

[30] For example in 1959–60 she spoke to two branches of the Historical Association, and at Spalding and Stamford.

[31] J. Thirsk,' The British Agricultural History Society and the agrarian history of England and Wales: new projects in the 1950s', *Agricultural History Review,* 50 (2002), 155–63.

[32] A. Everitt, 'Joan Thirsk: a personal appreciation', in J. Chartres and D. Hey (eds.), *English Rural Society. Essays in Honour of Joan Thirsk* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 18–20.

crisis or climatic determinism. For her the history of the countryside ought to be specific and tied to particular times and places, so that all of the structures and influences could be seen to be interacting. In her pursuit of understanding regions she was in tune with the historical geographers and some archaeologists. It was becoming more acceptable among social and religious historians to concentrate their investigations on one village or district. When she asked the question 'why regions?' in a moment of introspection she gave the rather surprising answer that she had been influenced by traditions in German literature which she had read as a student in which writers located themselves in Westphalia or Silesia and reflected the culture of those places.[33] She welcomed moves that she detected to revive local cultures in England.

In her later years at Leicester Joan was writing materials for the fourth volume of the *Agrarian History*, and was occasionally publishing pieces of work which were connected to the great project. Her pamphlet on *Tudor Enclosures*, published in 1959 and intended to help school teachers and students, inevitably made much of regional differences, and the great variety of changes covered by the single term 'enclosure'.[34] From a national perspective enclosures imposed from above were not so numerous, but readers were invited to sympathise with the peasants of the east and south Midlands where oppressive enclosure was a real threat to their communities. Her essay on rural industry for the volume of essays in honour of her supervisor, R. H. Tawney, had a greater long-term impact.[35] It was based on the observation that rural industries, especially cloth-making and hand-knitting, were concentrated in farming regions such as north Wiltshire, southern Suffolk or west Yorkshire, where pastoralism played an important part. Often the density of population was encouraged by inheritance systems in which the land was divided, and although dairying was labour intensive, there were workers to spare who would hope to earn their living from industrial employment. The exploration of the rural roots of industry has been applied and developed in many parts of Europe and in different periods, and is still provoking lively debate.

In 1964 academic historians were surprised by the appearance of an article on common fields which was mainly concerned with the medieval

[33] Thirsk, 'Nature versus nurture'; R. Richardson, 'Regions and frontiers: Joan Thirsk, 1922–2013', *Southern History*, 36 (2014), 169–76.

[34] J. Thirsk, *Tudor Enclosures* , Historical Association Pamphlet, General Series (London, 1959).

[35] J. Thirsk, 'Industries in the countryside', in F. J. Fisher (ed.), *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England in Honour of Professor R.H. Tawney* (London, 1961), pp. 70–88.

period.[36] Joan's work on farming regions had given her many insights into the early modern operation and development of field systems, and she had been thinking about the roots of change. The orthodox view that common fields had been brought to England by the Germanic migrants of the fifth century was clearly unsatisfactory, and she proposed instead an evolutionary model, by which some common field systems did not emerge fully until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They were the product of population pressure, expansion of the arable and partible inheritance. This idea had come from Joan's reading of German geographers, whose ideas seemed to be applicable in England. The model had a great influence on the archaeological community, who saw that not just fields but also village settlements could have evolved in the same way, and the problem of village and common field origins is still a cause of controversy. This innovative article was the best example of a constant theme in her work, that is the insights that she gained from comparisons with the continent.

Joan Thirsk contributed to the voluntary organisations on which the academic community depends, and her reputation rose in consequence. She joined with Finberg in helping to found the Agricultural History Society after an initial meeting in 1952. She joined the committee of the fledgling society in 1953, and took over the editorship of the *Agricultural History Review* in 1964.[37] She welcomed the Society's links with the agricultural world in its early days, when farmers attended meetings, and there were also contacts with folklorists, geographers and other non-historians. The Economic History Society elected her on to its Council in 1955, and in the same year she was invited to join the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group (DMVRG—later the Medieval Settlement Research Group).[38] In 1956 she became a member of the editorial board of *Past and Present*, at that time an innovative journal run by left-wing historians who proclaimed its commitment to 'scientific history'. She may well have been recommended by Hilton, a fellow historian of agriculture. In none of these positions did she merely attend meetings: she compiled annual bibliographies to be published by the *Agricultural* and *Economic History Reviews*, served on the excavation subcommittee of the DMVRG and was active in commenting on typescripts submitted to *Past and Present*, on which her strong opinions did not always coincide with those of other board members.[39]

[36] J. Thirsk, 'The common fields', *Past and Present*, 29 (1964), 3–25.
[37] Thirsk, 'British Agricultural History Society'.
[38] *Annual Reports* of the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group.
[39] P. Slack, 'Joan Thirsk', *Past and Present*, 222 (2014), 3–7, especially p. 6.

Throughout her employment at Leicester she lived in London, and confined her visits to one day each week in term time. If her presence was needed for more than one day she arranged to stay with friends for a night. Her son and daughter were both born (in 1956 and 1958) during long vacations, and she cared for her children by employing a 'children's nurse' for some years, and by enlisting the help of her father who met the children after school. Consequently her commitments at Leicester were not interrupted, and her children regarded her as a constant presence at their London home. She taught an undergraduate special subject for the History Department on 'Tudor Economic and Social History'. Students appreciated that her teaching flowed from her research, and enjoyed her informality. She took a personal interest in individual students which could continue after graduation.[40] For Local History she occasionally gave lectures in the evenings and at summer schools, supervised some research students and gave administrative support to Finberg.[41] She sometimes met Finberg to deal with Leicester business at weekends, because he also lived in London.[42] She taught an adult education class for London University's extra-mural department.[43]

The long-distance commuting did not prevent her from making her presence felt at Leicester. She made friends with other members of staff, such as Olwen Hufton whom she met regularly for lunch.[44] The separate department of English Local History had a staff of two, but there were other scholars with knowledge of the subject from whom Thirsk could seek conversation and advice. In a footnote to her essay on rural industry she thanked Finberg, Hoskins, Everitt and Norman Scarfe (a lecturer in the History Department), all with Leicester connections. Only one non-Leicester adviser, Hilton, was acknowledged. More non-Leicester names appear in the first footnote of the common fields article, including Hilton, but Finberg had clearly played a very helpful role in commenting on successive drafts. English Local History with its small staff mainly engaged in research developed a culture that differed profoundly from the busy teaching environment of the History Department. Finberg's rather assertive style did not endear him to all of his colleagues, and this worked to Joan's disadvantage. Difficulties arose over her salary, because the original UGC

[40] Information from Professor Roger Richardson, who took the Special Subject in her last years in Leicester.
[41] Finberg Papers, FIN/6/2/31/28; FIN/8/2/45/47b; FIN/6/P/c/29/141.
[42] Finberg Papers FIN/6/P/28/2.
[43] Finberg Papers FIN/8/Z/45/39b.
[44] Information from Prof. Olwen Hufton and Prof. J. Mordaunt Crook.

grant expired after two years, and the university took over without feeling the need to give a research fellow the same increments as a lecturer. Gradually her pay increased, but she never received as much as Finberg thought she deserved. He held her in high regard, was anxious to retain her and mounted a campaign to promote her to reader, enlisting the support in 1963 of distinguished outsiders to the annoyance of the vice-chancellor. The application was refused in 1964, unless she took on more teaching, and in 1965 she was appointed to the Readership in Economic History at Oxford which Hoskins was vacating.[45] Finberg retired at this time, and Hoskins returned to Leicester to replace him.

Joan's move was an inevitable consequence of her experiences at Leicester, and for Oxford she was an obvious and perhaps the only obvious candidate to replace Hoskins. She had powerful support from Finberg, who described her in his reference as being 'in the first flight of economic historians', producing 'magisterial' work, and probably also from M.M. Postan, who was the external member of the electoral board. As she said in her letter of application, in Leicester she had taught the documents on Tudor economic and social history which were the basis of the undergraduate paper in Oxford on which Hoskins had lectured; Volume IV of the *Agrarian History* was about to appear; and her interests were 'now turning towards the comparative history of agrarian communities in England and the rest of Europe', including the history of forest communities and 'the significance of customs of inheritance in England, France and Germany'. The electors can scarcely have hesitated before resolving to offer her the Readership, but it was on one condition, which they acknowledged to be 'very irregular' at that time. She must undertake 'to reside within ten miles of Oxford' so as to be 'readily available, particularly for consultation by colleagues and research students of the kind which is liable to arise at any time and at short notice'. Joan agreed. If she had not, the post would have gone to an internal Oxford candidate.[46]

Some members of the electoral board may have known about her commuting from London to Leicester, but the condition was primarily a reflection on Hoskins, who had lived in recent years in Exeter, disillusioned with Oxford partly because he had never been given a college fellowship. Unlike Hoskins, however, Joan was immediately offered fellowships by two of the women's colleges (which were especially pleased to recruit professorial

[45] Finberg Papers, FIN/8/2/41/1; FIN/8/Z/41/2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14.
[46] Oxford University Registry, UR 6/HER/1, file 2, 'Readership in Economic History 1951–67', papers relating to the 1965 election.

fellows): Lady Margaret Hall, where the chairman of the electoral board, Lucy Sutherland, was Principal; and St Hilda's, where the retiring Principal in 1965 was Kathleen Major.[47] Joan must have known Major, the great authority on the diocesan history of Lincoln,[48] and probably also, through the Economic History Society, Major's predecessor as Principal, Julia de Lacy Mann, the historian of the English textile industry. She chose St Hilda's, and met the University's residence requirement initially by renting a bedsitting room in the college, always known as 'Mrs Thirsk's room', and then by purchasing a terrace house close-by in St Clements. For nearly a decade the family remained in London, and only when Jimmy retired were they able to buy 'The Kilns' in Headington, once C. S. Lewis's house, and turn it from a dark bachelor residence into a comfortable home where Joan could enjoy to the full exercising her domestic skills, in cooking, sewing and knitting, and gardening, which sustained the family and incidentally informed much of her historical work.[49]

Joan's Oxford years were a period of remarkable historical productivity, much of it flowing from research already well under way, but some of it branching out in new and fertile directions. The foundations for what followed were prominently displayed in 1967, in Volume IV of the *Agrarian History*, on the period from 1500 to 1640.[50] Edited and much of it written by her, it was the first volume of the *Agrarian History* to appear, and a wholly original and path-breaking contribution to the social and economic history of its period. Her opening chapter on 'The farming regions of England' established their different characteristics and their sometimes shifting boundaries in detail and across the whole country for the first time. Her other chapters on farming techniques and enclosure and engrossing, and those by Peter Bowden on prices and by Alan Everitt on farm labourers and marketing, were all pieces of original scholarship

[47] Oxford University Registry, UR 6/HER/1, file 2, 'Readership in Economic History 1951–67', papers relating to the 1965 election, Note on Colleges interested. The new Principal of St Hilda's, Mary Bennett, chaired the college meeting on 6 October at which Joan was elected a Fellow (information from St Hilda's College Archive), but it is impossible to believe that Major had not been responsible for the original approach.

[48] On Major, see G. W. S. Barrow, 'Kathleen Major 1906–2000', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows I, Proceedings of the British Academy*, 115 (2002), 319–29.

[49] Information from Dr Margaret Rayner; Everitt, 'Joan Thirsk', pp. 24–5. Even when commuting between London and Oxford she had made clothes for the children, left casseroles for meals and baked three loaves at a time (two for the freezer), so that she seemed to her children to be 'at home more often than she wasn't': Robinson, 'Joan Thirsk FBA, 1922-2013', 152–3.

[50] J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, vol. 4: 1500–1640* (Cambridge, 1967).

which every historian of the period had to read, and which stimulated further inquiry by several hands.[51]

She followed up some of the themes herself, in essays for Festschriften for Finberg, which she edited, and for Hoskins and Julia Mann.[52] Her essay for Mann, on 'The fantastical folly of fashion', concerned the stocking knitting industry and drew on her practical experience, noting, for example, that the technique must have been introduced much earlier than the sixteenth century because 'the chain mail of medieval armour is, in fact, a knitted garter stitch'.[53] She also turned again to the history of inheritance patterns in an essay on younger sons in seventeenth-century England and in her contribution to a *Past and Present* publication on *Family and Inheritance* which she co-edited.[54] She welcomed and encouraged graduate students who wanted to take some of her subjects further, as their later publications, including the essays in the first Festschrift in her honour, amply testify.[55] They wrote about new crops, the Crown lands, widows and wills, and about horses and their importance in pre-industrial economies, a topic to which she drew attention in an influential Stenton lecture in 1978.[56] One of her graduate students, embarking on a subject less directly related to her own interests, nevertheless found her an ideal supervisor: 'She was content to let me burrow away, and see where it took me.' But she read and commented promptly on his work, suggested

[51] The chapter on farming techniques had to be written at short notice when the original contributor failed to deliver: Chartres, 'Joan Thirsk FBA, 1922–2013', 149.

[52] J. Thirsk, 'Seventeenth-century agriculture and social change', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *Land, Church and People: Essays Presented to Professor H. P. R. Finberg* (*Agricultural History Review*, 18, Supplement, 1970), pp. 148–77; J. Thirsk, 'New crops and their diffusion: tobacco-growing in seventeenth-century England', in C. W. Chalklin and M. A. Havinden (eds.), *Rural Change and Urban Growth, 1500–1800: Essays in English Regional History in Honour of W. G. Hoskins* (London, 1974), pp. 76–108—reprinted in J. Thirsk, *The Rural Economy of England: Collected Essays* (London, 1984), pp. 259–86; J. Thirsk, 'The fantastical folly of fashion: the English stocking knitting industry, 1500–1700', in N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting (eds.), *Textile History and Economic History: Essays in Honour of Miss Julia de Lacy Mann* (Manchester, 1973), pp. 50–73—reprinted in Thirsk, *Rural Economy*, pp. 235–57.

[53] Chartres and Hey, 'Introduction', in *English Rural Society*, p. 8.

[54] J. Thirsk, 'Younger sons in the seventeenth century', *History*, 54 (1969), 358–77, reprinted in Thirsk, *Rural Economy,* pp. 335–58; J. Thirsk, 'The European debate on customs of inheritance, 1500-1700' in J. Goody, J. Thirsk and E. P. Thompson (eds.), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 177–91—reprinted in Thirsk, *Rural Economy*, pp. 359–74.

[55] Chartres and Hey, *English Rural Society*.

[56] J. Thirsk, *Horses in Early Modern England: For Service, for Pleasure, for Power* (Stenton Lecture, 11, Reading, 1978)—reprinted in Thirsk, *Rural Economy*, pp. 375–402. Cf. D. Roche, 'Equestrian culture in France from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries', *Past and Present*, 199 (May 2008), 113.

profitable new avenues for his research, and provided valuable introductions to scholars in Germany. She taught him 'how to write history that did not need to be over-emphatic to make its point', and 'about the importance of nurturing talent without imposing your own intellectual framework' when he became a university teacher himself.[57]

Joan's undergraduate teaching for the Further Subject in English Economic History 1485–1730 proved equally important in drawing her interests beyond narrowly agrarian history, if only indirectly. The syllabus for it lacked any collection of documentary sources for the seventeenth century like the three volumes edited by Tawney and Eileen Power on the sixteenth, and in 1969 she undertook to fill the gap, spending a rare period of sabbatical leave on the necessary research. The result, *Seventeenth-Century Economic Documents* (Oxford, 1972), edited with John Cooper, made Thirsk and Cooper names as familiar to generations of undergraduates as Tawney and Power had been, and proved as great a stimulus for later research. It led Joan herself to her second most influential contribution to the study of early modern England, after Volume IV of the *Agrarian History*.

In her Ford Lectures in 1975, published in 1978, on *Economic Policy and Projects: the Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England*, she explored the whole range of public and private projects, for new industries as well as crops, and the new tastes and demands they stimulated and met. In the first lecture she deliberately directed attention away from familiar aspects of industrial history whose importance, she told her largely male audience, had been defined 'by our menfolk'. 'Starch, needles, pins, cooking pots, kettles, frying pans, lace, soap, vinegar, stockings', she roundly declared, 'do not appear on their shopping lists, but they regularly appear on mine.'[58] Those were her subjects: the ways in which they were manufactured and marketed, what they revealed about the nature of economic innovation, and their impact on employment and productivity, and on family and national incomes. As in her earlier work, her focus was firmly on how ordinary men and women made a living in a mixed economy, but more directly now on how they consumed what they produced. Written without jargon, in her engagingly straightforward style, the book was a distinctive contribution to the history of what would now be called material culture, and it became the acknowledged starting point

[57] Professor Andrew Pettegree, email to Paul Slack, 12 February 2014.

[58] J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: the Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 22–3.

for many others who were later to write about patterns of consumption and consumer revolutions in early modern England.

Her reputation as a historian was now well and truly established, and not only in Britain, where she had been elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1974 and was a Royal Commissioner on Historical Monuments (England) from 1977 to 1986 and a member of the economic and social history committee of the Social Science Research Council from 1978 to 1982. She was elected a Foreign Member of the American Philosophical Society in 1982, and had many admirers in Japan, which she had visited in 1973. One of them, Yoko Miyoshi, whose research on the Suffolk village of Redgrave she encouraged, translated *Economic Policy and Projects* for a Japanese edition in 1984. But she found that her responsibilities as Reader in Oxford made it difficult to get away for a long period of sabbatical leave.[59] She often had seven or eight graduates to supervise at any one time, and was responsible for lectures and classes for undergraduates on her Further Subject. She served on the Modern History Faculty Board continuously for a decade in the 1970s and took her turn as an examiner for the BA for three years in succession. She came to resent the many calls on her time that were not central to her research and writing.

In a letter to the Principal of St Hilda's in 1973 about the forthcoming Festschrift for Julia Mann, she noted that Mann had been responsible for compiling the annual bibliography of economic history for the *Economic History Review* from its beginning in 1927 right through to 1948. She added a revealing comment. Such work was 'absolutely characteristic of the selflessness of innumerable women scholars. They are so often the ones who do the most laborious scholarly jobs that are finicky and often boring, and help others more than themselves.'[60] Although she had shed her own equivalent responsibilities to the Economic History Society and the Agricultural History Society in 1965,[61] her experience continued to make her acutely aware of the burdens which had fallen on women historians of her generation. It seems astonishing in retrospect that she was the only woman on the editorial board of *Past and Present* from her election to it in 1956 until Olwen Hufton and Judith Herrin joined in 1978; and if it had not been for Eleanora Carus-Wilson's continuing presence on the

[59] Oxford University Archives, FA 9/3/408, Thirsk letters, 1972.
[60] St Hilda's College Archive: Biography, Mann JdeL 9, 31 October 1973.
[61] Chartres and Hey, 'Introduction', in *English Rural Society*, p. 15.

Council of the Economic History Society, Joan would have been the only woman there from 1955 until 1974.[62]

She may also have felt undervalued in a history faculty where she had only a tiny office, was never appointed to a professorship and remained, even on the lecture list, plain Mrs Thirsk, since by Oxford convention doctorates from other universities were not normally reflected in such formal contexts. In the early 1980s, when the first wave of cuts in university funding seemed to remove any prospect of better support for faculty and postgraduate research, she took advantage of Oxford's new early retirement scheme and resigned her post six years early, in 1983, in order, as she said, 'to give more time to my research and writing'.[63] Her college, to which she remained warmly attached, immediately elected her an Honorary Fellow, and she embarked on a period of retirement which proved as productive, and personally more satisfying, than her Oxford years had been.

The Thirsks moved to a house in the courtyard at Hadlow Castle, in the Weald of Kent, which they had bought in 1954 and begun to use as a vacation retreat, along with a village house in southern Spain. Joan was able more often to travel abroad, often with Jimmy, and for longer periods. She visited Japan again,[64] contributed to conferences in the USA and had a productive year's research as Senior Mellon Fellow in the Humanities Centre in North Carolina in 1986–7. But their Hadlow house, updated and converted with characteristic Thirsk energy and ingenuity, was now the permanent base where they entertained visitors and where Joan was able to take root and dig, both literally and metaphorically, in her own garden.[65] She investigated agrarian improvements in the Weald, hinted at by Gervase Markham in the seventeenth century, and with the help of a local farmer and some hefty spade-work found hard evidence of them.[66] She worked on the documents, publishing a short history of Hadlow Castle for visitors to the Weald and editing, with other local historians and for scholars, an important newly discovered rental of Hadlow, copied in 1581 from an original of 1460.[67]

[62] Her position was similar in her Section of the Academy. Since C. V. Wedgwood did not attend its meetings, Joan was the only woman there from 1974 until 1992: British Academy archive: Joan Thirsk to the Secretary, 26 June 2003.

[63] Oxford University Archives: FA 9/3/408, letter, 14 November 1982.

[64] See, for example, her *English Agrarian History before 1700: Some Current Themes of Research* (Rikkyo University, Tokyo, 1985), translated into Japanese by Prof. Kaoru Ugawa.

[65] Everitt, 'Joan Thirsk', pp. 25–6.

[66] Thirsk, 'Nature versus nurture', 277.

[67] *Hadlow Castle: a Short History* (Hadlow Historical Society, 1985); *Hadlow. Life, Land and People 1460–1600* (Kent Archaeological Society, Canterbury, 2007).

Her dedication to local history and encouragement to the historians who practised it, often outside universities and many of them women, was life-long. Giving her personal 'view of economic history' in 2001, she announced that although 'the aim of historians in the end is to see larger patterns of development', she was 'grateful to be a local, as well as an economic, historian'. It was only through collecting local details far and wide, 'like a squirrel', that she could feel confident 'in attributing motives and offering explanations' for large events.[68] One of her closest friends in Oxford and later was Mary Prior, widow of the philosopher Arthur Prior FBA. Joan had supervised her thesis on Fisher Row, the Oxford community of bargemen and boatmen, who included ancestors of her own supervisor, Tawney; and Prior said she had taught her how to 'generalise and think for myself in a field which is notoriously difficult'.[69] While still in Oxford, Joan had given strong support to the development of local history as part of the work of the Department for Continuing Education and to the foundation of the Oxfordshire Local History Association. She was later elected an Honorary Fellow of Kellogg College, the new college for mature part-time students, many of them pursuing the new university qualifications in local history which she warmly welcomed. She was always wholly at ease in the company of local and amateur historians and generous with help and advice.[70]

When she was appointed CBE in 1994 the citation appropriately referred to her services to 'local and regional history', but it did less than full justice to her achievements. In Joan's eyes the findings of local historians were the indispensable building blocks for all historical generalisations, which had to be arrived at with painstaking care and appropriate caution over time. That process marked her many publications after 1983. Volume V of the *Agrarian History* on the period 1640–1750, edited and partly written by her, appeared in two large separate parts in 1984–5.[71] She was able on this occasion to leave the account of farming regions to other authors (apart from her chapter on the south-west Midlands), and she was soon to summarise her findings on that whole topic in an indispensable

[68] J. Thirsk, 'My view of Economic History', in P. Hudson (ed.), *Living Economic and Social History* (Economic History Society, Glasgow, 2001), pp. 373–4.

[69] M. Prior, *Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen, and Canal Boatmen in Oxford, 1500–1900* (Oxford, 1982), p. ix.

[70] D. Hey and K. Tiller, 'Joan Thirsk (1922–2013): an appreciation', *The Local Historian*, 44 (1), Jan. 2014, 69–70.

[71] J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. 5: *1640–1750* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1984–5).

short guide for students, *Agricultural Regions and Agrarian History in England, 1500–1750*.[72] Her major contributions to Volume V were a chapter of nearly 100 pages on 'Agricultural policy: public debate and legislation', taking further themes on which she had written in Volume IV, and a shorter, highly original account of 'Agricultural innovations and their diffusion', which drew striking contrasts between the centuries before and after 1640. The later period was marked by a 'variety, diversity and unique specialisation' which she christened 'alternative agriculture', enjoying 'a flourishing life so long as traditional agriculture was depressed'.[73]

In 2000 the whole *Agrarian History*, of which she had been General Editor since 1974, was at last completed, in eight volumes, comprising eleven bound books and nearly 10,000 pages. It was a monumental editorial achievement, but only one of the many editorial projects, great and small, to which she dedicated time in retirement and which she saw through to completion. Another, very different in style though not in purpose, was an illustrated collection of essays on the English rural landscape over the centuries, intended for the general reader. It was designed, like Hoskins's celebrated *Making of the English Landscape* (1955), to 'set every intimate local inquiry in a larger frame' and 'give it place and significance in our national history'.[74] The book was typical of her interest in places, regions and the human impact on the countryside, which are also of concern to archaeologists and geographers, and through such work she was aiding communication across traditional disciplinary boundaries.

A book which combined local and national history, and which would attract readers outside the ranks of historians, occupied much of her time in retirement. This third major and lasting contribution to historical understanding expanded on one of the themes in Volume V of the *Agrarian History*. *Alternative Agriculture* proposed a new chronological framework for interpreting six centuries of English agrarian history by showing the importance of successive periods of depression in producing innovation. In writing about the present as well a long period of history,

[72] J. Thirsk, *Agricultural Regions and Agrarian History in England, 1500–1750* (Studies in Economic and Social History, London, 1987).

[73] J. Thirsk, 'Agricultural innovations and their diffusion', *The Agrarian History of England and Wales,* vol. 5: *1640–1750*, ii, *Agrarian Change* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 587–8. She had earlier noted a similar cycle in Suffolk in the l9th century: J. Thirsk with J. Imray, *Suffolk Farming in the Nineteenth Century* (Suffolk Records Society, I, 1958), pp. 17–18.

[74] *The English Rural Landscape* (Oxford, 2000), p. 14.

she remarked that she had had to 'overcome the practical difficulties of being, in one life-time, both a historian and a journalist'.[75]

In that book she also met the challenge of looking beyond England to comparable examples of the search for alternative husbandries from France, Germany, Spain and especially Holland. Thanks to her early familiarity with foreign authors, and perhaps to her French ancestry through her mother (née Frayer),[76] she had never been a narrowly insular historian, and one of her many honorary degrees came from Wageningen University in Holland where she had friends and collaborators.[77] She remained as interested as she had declared herself to be in 1965 in the comparative history of agrarian communities, and some of her essays were about the influence of foreigners and their writings on English agriculture.[78] Throughout her career she was a regular reviewer of publications in other languages, especially German, and her foreword to an English edition of Wilhelm Abel's history of agricultural fluctuations in Europe stressed 'England's debt to continental stimuli'. It also explained, admirably concisely and cogently, what made England distinctive. It was chiefly its social organisation which meant that the financial gains from improvements were 'far more widely dispersed among the rural farming classes', and therefore much more likely to stimulate increases in productivity.[79]

In late retirement her interests turned beyond Europe, to the global exchange of economic practices, products and ideas. In the foreword to another book, on horses in the Middle Ages, she remarked on the exchange of breeds between continents which had shaped equine history,[80] and as recently as 2009 she wrote to John Elliott that she was 'chasing Moorish influences on English horticulture in the sixteenth century' and hoping that her target did not turn out to be 'a wild hare'.[81] When presented with the second Festschrift in her honour, in 2004, she announced that she still

[75] J. Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture. A History from the Black Death to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1997), p. vi.

[76] Chartres and Hey, 'Introduction', p. 12.

[77] Hon. DAgric (1993). The others were from Leicester (1985), East Anglia (1990), Open University (1991), Kent (1993), Sussex (1994), Southampton (1999) and Greenwich (2001).

[78] J. Thirsk, 'Plough and pen: agricultural writers in the seventeenth century', in T. H. Aston, P. R. Coss, C. Dyer and J. Thirsk (eds.), *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R. H. Hilton* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 295–318; J. Thirsk, 'Making a fresh start: sixteenth-century agriculture and the classical inspiration', in M. Leslie and T. Raylor (eds.), *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England. Writing and the Land* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 15–34.

[79] W. Abel, *Agricultural Fluctuations in Europe from the Thirteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (London, 1980), pp. ix–x.

[80] A. Hyland, *The Horse in the Middle Ages* (Stroud, 1999), Foreword.

[81] Sir John Elliott, email to Paul Slack, 27 October 2013.

had so much left to do that she wanted to live to be 160.[82] Her final big book, published in 2007, fifty years after her first, was a history of food in early modern England, another topic in which she was a pioneer. It necessarily underlined the changes in food styles brought by changes in the direction of English overseas trade, and she reflected there, with undue modesty, on her whole research career: 'Over and over again, my searches among the archives have made me revise and refine my viewpoint, sometimes driving me to despair at my arrogance in ever claiming to generalise.'[83]

That instinctive, cautious and ultimately hugely creative empiricism marked all her work, and made it so influential within the historical profession and with a wider readership outside. There was a striking consistency of purpose, style and commitment throughout her career. In retirement she remained staunchly loyal to old friends, mentors and collaborators, such as Alan Everitt, Margaret Spufford, and Hoskins, whose papers she sorted when he moved into a care home towards the end of his life.[84] Although still intellectually adventurous, she also grew ever more conscious of the constraints within which women historians of her generation and earlier had worked. She wrote about some of them in one of her essays, and in 1995 she christened them 'history women' and formulated 'Thirsk's Law'. Women historians had always been prominent in new academic endeavours, but once the new ventures were established they became institutionalised: 'Then the formal structure hardens, the direction and the style as well, [and] always falls under the control of men.'[85]

She was not alone in observing how that had happened in the first half of her career,[86] and she was active in promoting the interests of female historians whenever she could in an effort to resist the trend. But she

[82] R. W. Hoyle, (ed.), *People, Landscape and Alternative Agriculture: Essays for Joan Thirsk* (British Agricultural History Society, Exeter, 2004); Richard Hoyle, email to Paul Slack, 13 February 2014.

[83] J. Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England: Phases, Fads, Fashions, 1500–1760* (London, 2007), p. ix. For similar reflections on her career, see the Preface to her collected essays, Thirsk, *Rural Economy*, pp. x–xi.

[84] She wrote a memoir of Everitt, J. Thirsk, 'Alan Milner Everitt 1926–2008', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows IX, Proceedings of the British Academy*, 166 (2010), 181–97; and a life of Hoskins in J. Thirsk, 'Hoskins, William George (1908–1992)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), vol. 28, pp. 242–4—http://www.oxfordndb.com/view/article/38631, accessed 7 April 2015.

[85] J. Thirsk, 'Foreword' in Mary Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society 1500-1800* (London, 1985), pp. 1–21; J. Thirsk, 'The history women', in M. O'Dowd and S. Wichert (eds.), *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society* (Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University Belfast, 1995), pp. 1–11; Hey and Tiller, 'Joan Thirsk', 70.

[86] See, for example, M. Berg, 'The first women economic historians', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), 320–1.

appears to have thought the process inevitable. In 1998 she undertook to index the names in the Kent Feet of Fines for Henry VIII's reign, when no one else would do it, and although she found the 'tedious exercise' instructive, admitted that she was 'conforming exactly to the female stereotype by so doing'.[87] In 2003 she thought the Academy still far too much of a 'men's club' and institutionally weaker in consequence,[88] and when the question of whether St Hilda's College should admit men became a matter of public debate in the same year, she wrote to *The Times* forcefully defending women's colleges. 'Whenever the sexes are mixed', she insisted again, 'the menfolk always finish up taking charge.' Women had 'their own style of management' and the newspaper's readers 'should find it instructive to observe the differences'.[89]

By then, however, the academic prospects for women were improving, though not before time, she would have pointed out, and not nearly fast enough. As for her 'history women', her own teaching and example had ensured that they would continue to be prominent in the kinds of local and economic history which she had established, and that many of them would work and write in her own style. It was not the least of her achievements, and all of them were made possible only by strict self-discipline and single-minded, sometimes ruthless, efficiency in the use of her time. She might well have observed, tartly but accurately, that few history men of her generation, in more comfortable and privileged positions, had accomplished anything like as much.

She died on 3 October 2013, after a short period of failing health. There was a memorial meeting to celebrate her life and work, with contributions from members of her family, in the Senate House, University of London, on 11 January 2014.[90] It was attended by more than a hundred of her pupils and friends, all testifying to the warmth of their affection and admiration for a remarkable historian.

CHRISTOPHER DYER
Fellow of the Academy
PAUL SLACK
Fellow of the Academy

[87] Liz Griffiths, 'Letters from Joan', *Rural History Today*, 26 (Feb. 2014), 1. For Joan's strident views on gender stereotypes, see also Thirsk, 'My view of Economic History', pp. 374–5.
[88] British Academy archive: letter to the Secretary, 26 June 2003; *Times Higher Education Supplement*, no. 1593, 13 June 2003, p. 4.
[89] *The Times*, 13 December 2003.
[90] Some of the remarks by Jimmy Thirsk and Joan's daughter, Jane Robinson, were published in Chartres, Thirsk, and Robinson, 'Joan Thirsk, FBA, 1922–2013', 150–4.

Note. We are grateful to Simon Bailey, Elizabeth Boardman, John Chartres, J. Mordaunt Crook, Sir John Elliott, Sheila Forbes, David and Pat Hey, Janet Howarth, Richard Hoyle, Olwen Hufton, Robert Peberdy, Andrew Pettegree, Margaret Rayner, Roger Richardson, Caroline Sampson, Kate Tiller and Helen Wallace for much help and advice, and especially to Joan's family, Jimmy Thirsk, and Jane her daughter.

There is a bibliography of Joan's publications up to 1989 in J. Chartres and D. Hey, (eds.), *English Rural Society 1500–1800. Essays in Honour of Joan Thirsk* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 369–82.