Exciting Times in UK Agriculture

You would hardly be surprised to hear the Master Farmer say - What an exciting time to be in the farming world. Yes there are challenges, but yes I believe there are answers.

Everyone in the world seeks to eat, but we should never take our mind off the fact that, very simply, man has owed his existence to a six inch layer of topsoil, and to the fact that it rains.

We should never take our mind off the fact that there is no more land being made, and that the best land is in production already…..so the main game changer for the future, to achieve the food production that this world needs, has to be technology.

Today we have a modern operator out on the land. He – and it is increasingly she – will be computer savvy, technology savvy and a good communicator. He will have a great interest in “Precision farming” (NOT intensive farming – precision farming).

You have GPS in your car satnavs; we have GPS on tractors and combine harvesters that enable pinpoint accuracy of operation in the field with resulting reduction in time and in wastage of inputs.

This GPS also enables controlled traffic – whereby all machinery only travels on designated pathways up and down the field, minimising compaction in other parts of the field.

We have camera drones for crop inspection. We have sensors on tractors to interpret the density of crop canopy ahead of the tractor so that fertiliser, or plant health products, being applied can be adjusted accordingly.

 Field mapping programmes identify the better and the poorer parts of the fields, so allowing inputs to be adjusted.

There is so much science and potential in the area of Genetic Modification, as and when we are allowed to use it fully.

In the livestock world, pedometers on cattle monitor mobility; any significant change of daily movement pattern can infer illness, and therefore a drop in production. Smart ear tags, smart stomach boluses, again monitor animal health, through detecting changes in temperature, or food intake, or other essential indicators.

We have cows milked by robots. We have cows fed by robots – incredibly accurately.

Exciting times indeed.

But I have heard it said that “Technology has moved to such an extent that the human being has become a liability”.

How good it is, through our Livery, to be able to offer training and education opportunities to allow younger people in the industry to make the most of their careers.

One major factor affecting farming in the coming years will be Brexit. Back in February, we commissioned a report on the Agricultural Implications of Brexit.

One aspect the report identified was the importance and relevance of international trade to the industry. People tend to focus too much on farming subsidies, valuable though they may be. Trade is key; good and open trade agreements will be so important – not only for the produce that we need to export, but also for our various inputs too.

John Parker, when he was the farm manager on the Ragley Estate, wrote the following note in his Famers Weekly blog.

After harvest, the ground is cultivated with an American-owned/British built cultivator pulled by an American tractor. The seed for the next crop, which comes from a German plant breeder, is placed in the ground with a Swedish machine. The fields are then rolled with a set of British rolls.

German slug pellets may then be applied using a Japanese quad bike but with a British slug pelleter. The fields will then be sprayed with German herbicides, fungicides and maybe insecticides, using a British sprayer

Fertiliser will be applied to the crop by the American tractor but with a French fertiliser spreader. The phosphate has come from Africa, the potash from Russia and the nitrogen is made by a Norwegian company.

The farmer oversees his farm crops, traveling around in his Japanese truck and walking the fields in his French wellies.

The crop will eventually be harvested thanks to an American combine manufacturer who builds its combines in Germany – and of course, throughout the growing season, the crop will have received the great British weather.

Trade, both of inputs and of outputs, will be immensely important.

So in adapting to whatever the Brexit negotiations throw at us, in seeking to satisfy the expectations of the environmentalists, in taking the industry forward in the most efficient way and meeting the challenges of feeding an increasing number of people, we need top level operators………… individuals with good communication skills, good business sense and a good grasp of the latest technology. We need an ever-increasing skills base, and top level management.

Training and education is a massively important area where many of our Livery companies make such a great contribution; this is an area where we do, collectively, for so many people, “make a difference”. I think that, more than anything, from my year as Master, now very soon coming to an end, I will take away that strapline – that, through the activities of the Livery Companies, we make a difference.

May I invite you to stand just one more time for a toast to

“The Livery Companies of the City of London”.