

The Oxford Farming Conference 2017  
By Caroline Trude – National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs

With the biggest political upset in a generation (Brexit) and an ever greater emphasis on food production working hand in hand with the environment, this year's Oxford Farming Conference would be one that would particularly stick in people's minds, especially mine as a first time scholar with kind sponsorship from the Worshipful Company of Farmers.

So what were the topics of debate on the menu for the conference?

### Starter

The focus of the week was 'Thrive or survive', and I think this was a fantastic topic to be discussing as the home of political powers will shift to Westminster and as an industry we have an opportunity to shape our future. The fringe events were a brilliant way of wetting the appetite for the week ahead. I attended the emerging leaders' event where the large panel of speakers discussed what they envisage the future of UK agriculture to be, mainly focusing on trade, labour and innovation. I moved on to the BASF talk which informed us about 'Crop protection regulatory threats and opportunities post Brexit'.



Before moving on to the scholars reception, I was very interested to attend the AHDB talk entitled 'Inspiring our farmers and growers to succeed in this rapidly changing world'. After hearing the exciting new structure and future plans of the organisation, I was delighted to speak to Jane King (CEO of AHDB) and Peter Kendall (Chairman of the AHDB Board) and we discussed what the National Federation of YFC could do to present to the Government what our future vision of agriculture would be and ways in which we can promote what the younger generation would like to see in a future British Agricultural Policy.

In the evening I was thrilled to have been asked to join The Oxford Farming Conference Chairman Martin Davies and sit on the top table during the Pre-Conference dinner at Keble College. Here I was able to discuss with other key industry leaders (such as Campbell Scott Agco Ltd and Caroline Miller OFC Director) their thoughts on global agriculture, key political issues and much more. I was fortunate enough to sit next to Calum Kerr (DEFRA Spokesman & Scottish National Party MP); we had an extensive conversation about subsidies, the British Tax payer's view on agriculture and his view on Brexit negotiations (perhaps some views he won't share in the media!).



Networking before dinner  
at Keble College

## Main Course

Wednesday morning started with a Barclays Bank breakfast and a talk from Oliver McEntyre, Barclays' National Agricultural Strategy Director. He mentioned that we are currently export €14.6 billion and importing €37.1 billion from food and drink alone, with the majority of these amounts being traded with our neighbours, the EU. After a quick cup of tea and some networking we were on to the official opening of the conference and the political sessions. Every chair in the main hall was taken with people eager to hear what The Right Honourable Andrea Leadsom MP, Secretary of State was to say about our industry. Quick to keep the audience on her side, she clearly emphasised the need to focus on our exports and 'grow and prosper like never before'. She stated that it was important to 'scrap unnecessary EU rules for example the three crop rule'. She announced that £160 million will be spent on Agritech strategy to invest into the future; however all of these statements were not enough to satisfy the room. When she was asked, 'when will an agricultural consultation be happening to enable satisfactory Brexit negotiations?' she simply replied... 'soon'!



The next panel on the stage was agricultural ministers or representatives from the four nations of Great Britain, George Eustice MP, Michelle McIlveen MLA, Lesley Griffiths AM and Calum Kurr MP. Here we heard more debate on what the future British Agricultural Policy would look like. The emphasis from this debate was that if farmers are to receive subsidies, they must be traceable for the British tax payer to see where their money has been invested. It was very encouraging to hear that over the four nations, the RPA had managed hit their targets and pay over 90% of farmers their single farm payment before the end of 2016 with some forward payments being paid in October 2016 to the farmers of Northern Ireland.

During the remainder of the day we had some very interesting speakers present to us. Konrad Brits, founder and CEO of Falcon Coffee, talked about breaking down the value chain and working with coffee farmers to change society's views from providing a commodity, to producing a very important product for society. Could this be something we could replicate in the UK?

As an audience, we also heard from Simon Sterling - Executive Director at MCA, Sarah Mackie - Food sourcing expert and Guy Watson - Farmer and founder of Riverfood organics. This was an excellent afternoon of speakers talking about consumers, their habits and what we can do as producers to best suit their needs. I learnt that consumers' habits have dramatically changed in the last 10 years.

For every 9 meals that are eaten in the UK, at least one of these is eaten out at a food establishment. The more alarming statistic I heard was 20% of all meals in the USA are eaten in a car. This made me think that as farmers and producers, we should be thinking more of innovative ways in which we can re-advertise our produce to make it more convenient and more appealing to our 'millennial' consumers.

After a stimulating question and answer session from the speakers, it was time for all the scholars to come together and have our own 'Thrive or survive interactive session'. It was fantastic to be joined by Guy Smith – Vice President of the NFU, Helen Woolley - Director General of the CLA and George Eustice MP. Here we discussed and debated what we thought British Agriculture could look like in 20 years time and what we thought were the most important things to focus upon moving into the future. It was fantastic to discuss our thoughts and ideas in front of such influential people. I was incredibly lucky to have George Eustice MP participating in our group. When he asked our group what we thought was more important, food exports or import substitution, I put my ideas forward and said I think the UK should be as self sufficient as possible. We should be able to produce food for our country and any surplus food we should be exporting. I explained that as the price of food increases, we could help to stabilise the price rise by sourcing the British public's food from the UK. This would mean the cost of getting food to the supermarkets would be no more expensive from the UK compared to importing produce from the other side of the world.



Some of the Oxford Farming Conference Scholars 2017



The first day of the conference was celebrated by a wonderful dinner at Christ Church, however before we ate, we had to sing for our supper! Held at the world famous Oxford Union, was the annual Oxford Farming Conference debate, this year speaking about the farming family; 'This house believes the biggest threat to the family farm is the family itself'. Both sides of the debate were witty, informative and full of personal experience. Coming from a traditional farming family that share all trials and tribulations together, I was compelled to speak as a member of the house, supporting the opposition's case. I thoroughly enjoyed the debate from start to finish and was overwhelmed to be awarded the prize for the scholar with the best contribution to the debate. I wasn't surprised that the house voted in favour of the motion, however I think the debate made us appreciate what we do have and perhaps ways in which we can improve the grey area between our family life and our businesses.



Me, with my winning prize from the Oxford Union debate.

The second day of the conference was off with a bang when I witnessed, what I thought, was the best debate of the week. Discussing what would happen after CAP, the panel consisted of Minette Batters (NFU), Guy Poskitt (farmer), Dame Helen Ghosh (Director General of the National Trust) and the highly controversial George Monbiot (Journalist & Environmentalist). With such conflicting views, George Monbiot was quick to condemn the current CAP and any sort of subsidies to farmers, however both Minette and Guy were strong in arguing back that to ensure any sort of food security, there must be investments that farmers can claim to help them reinvest back into their business. When each member was asked if they could farm, where would it be, what would they farm and how would they make a profit, Guy and Minette said they would farm as they currently do, however George would farm clean water held in the environment and Dame Helen would farm beautiful land!!



The next session of the conference was titled 'The World's your market' and this was my favourite session. We heard from Tom Hind (Chief Strategy Officer at AHDB), Alison Capper (Hops Farmer) and Jack Hamilton (Mash Direct Ltd). They each spoke about their product and working with others to produce a brand or using the British brand to sell product abroad. Alison Capper really stuck in my mind as she clearly explained how the British hops industry was struggling. However, by joining with her fellow hops growers, they rebranded the British hops logo, pushed the logo to a wider market and repackaged the hops to make it easier for the consumer to buy and use, subsequently turning the industry around. Likewise Jack from Mash Direct spoke about the hints and tips used to push a very local product to a global market.

After some wonderful street food at lunch time and some networking, we were seated for the final session of the conference; 'Soil Saviours'. Professor Jane Rickson, John Geraghty (consultant) and Will Armitage (farmer) all spoke about the damage we are doing to some of our soil in the UK and globally. They stressed to us, that to be able to produce food we need to manage our soils. We need to ensure as little run off as possible and the ways in which we can farm nutrients and structure back into the ground.

To close the conference, the Patron Her Royal Highness Princess Anne spoke to the audience and summed up the main points from the past couple of days. The point that stuck in my mind was something mentioned earlier in the day 'farmers in the red won't look after the green'. I think that this is so true; a farmer in debt doesn't have the money to reduce their production and invest into environmental schemes. However, a farmer or producer that has a profitable business possibly has the opportunity to invest in options to enhance the ecological surroundings so food production and the environment can work together.



For all of us who stayed in Oxford that evening, we were treated to the Oxtail dinner at Worcester College. This was a wonderful way for scholars and directors to reflect on the debate and discussions of the past couple of days.

On Friday a few of us were treated to two excellent farm tours. The first was to an Arable farmer, James Price, who farms 680 hectares of wheat, barley, oats and oil seed rape. James spoke openly about diversifying away from farming to open a coffee shop in the local town. Here we were all

interviewed by BBC Radio 4 asking us of our views on the conference and the future of British agriculture (this was later aired on Farming today on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> January).



In the afternoon we visited David Christensen's family dairy farm with 620 cross bred cows. David spoke poignantly about how good labour is key to a successful business. I was fascinated to hear what David's thoughts were for the future of dairy farming. When I asked him what would be the next big challenge that farmers face, he agreed with the last session at the conference and said it would be soil health that would be the challenge for the future.

## Dessert

What a fantastic week and what a fantastic conference?! It was truly wonderful to be able to meet and network with so many other people that are involved in our industry. The key points that I have taken away are as follows:

- The environment and food production will need to be inextricably linked moving into the future for UK agriculture.
- If farmers are to receive payments in the future, they will most likely be environmentally focused. However, we must call them investments rather than subsidies.
- Traceability is key! Whether this is food related, so consumers can trace easily where their food has come from, or investment from the Tax payer, so they can see where their money has been spent; Traceability will be paramount, ensuring that UK agriculture can lead the way for provenance and confidence from our customers and consumers.
- We must build on the British brand both in the UK and when exporting abroad. There is a growing market for British produce as it is known globally to be exceptionally high quality. If we are to prosper outside of the European Union we must utilise this and grow where we can.

I am absolutely delighted to have been chosen to represent the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs and I am so grateful to the Worshipful Company of Farmers for sponsoring and allowing me to experience this fantastic conference. I have made some wonderful new contacts

within the industry and I have learnt a huge amount from this week. I hope that I will be able to do my part in our important industry and help British agriculture to THRIVE rather than just SURVIVE in the years ahead.

