

REPORT: Bob Nixon

The Worshipful Company of Farmers

The 22nd Challenge of Rural Leadership – 8-19th January 2018.

Duchy College Rural Business School in partnership with Plymouth University

Held at Dartington Hall, Totnes, Devon UK

Acknowledgements:

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Course overview and participants:

It’s been a privilege for myself and fellow Australian Nuffield Scholar Bernadette Mortensen to attend The 22nd Challenge of Rural Leadership Course (CRL). The historic Dartington Estate was a perfect venue; especially considering Western Australia was settled in 1829 some 440 years after Dartington Hall was built.

The majority of course participants came from across the UK including farm managers, Surveyors, Young Farmers, National Farmers Union and Natural England groups. Delegates got on extremely well, learning from each other and developing a strong bond that will last long into the future.



Photo: Delegates of the CRL 2018

It was an interesting time to participate in the course in the UK after the yes vote to Brexit and the uncertain impact this is going to have on obtaining foreign labour, regulation, subsidies, market access and potentially, a more volatile currency. Michael Gove the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has just stated that the current subsidy regime, which rewards land ownership, will be replaced by a scheme focussed on supporting the environment. Both of the above topics were keen discussion points throughout the course.

The first week focussed on the case study of a business; Riverford Organics. We analysed the business and presented recommendations for further business growth and improvement. The second week focussed on personal development to help manage our business and industry roles and become more effective leaders and community members.

Throughout the two weeks inspirational leaders presented from industry, farming business, medical, political and defence roles. We underwent media, radio and television training on the last day followed by the final awards formal dinner. The 'murder mystery' evening run by five actors in the Dartington Estate's historic buildings was a rather humorous highlight and break from what was an intensive two weeks.

Riverford Organics - The case study.

One of the course objectives was to critically evaluate alternative approaches to management and leadership among rural businesses. Riverford Organics was the business used for this exercise. Guy Watson, Founder & Chair and Rodja Buck, Chief Technical Officer showed the group through all aspects of their business including the financials. Riverford's main business is home delivery of organic vegetable boxes, with a turnover in excess of 50 million pound. It is a privately owned business currently in the process of transitioning to employee ownership succession. Riverford procures its fruit and vegetables from both Guy's farm and a grower cooperative. Guy's strong ethos around quality organic food, treating people fairly and his hesitation towards technological value and big business were strong business drivers and had to be taken into account when presenting recommendations.

We split into four groups covering aspects we deemed significant. My group handled Information Technology (IT). We developed a "Block Chain-Box Chain" to help with traceability and provenance through to the consumer. We added a QR code to the box linked to a YouTube video we produced of a meal made with the Riverford veg box.

The group presented a business strategy document to Riverford including a vision statement with key recommendations. This exercise really challenged the group, presenting ideas to what is an already incredibly successful business. In hindsight it was more about the process of working collaboratively, the ability to motivate and communicate within group settings and to encourage creativity. Guy and Rodja were impressed enough to announce they would present our ideas at their next board meeting.



Photo CRL delegates with Rodja Buck, Chief Technical Officer Riverford Organics (3rd from left).

Speakers 2018.

Richard Soffe – Director of Rural Business School and Course Director.
Geoff Kerr – Assistant Course Director
Peter Redstone - Management Consultant
Lord Matthew Taylor of Goss Moor – Liberal Democrat Politician UK
Bill Clarke – Chair Trewithen Dairy Cornwall
Professor Allan Buckwell – Agricultural Economist Wye College
Philip Lymbery – Chief Executive Compassion in World Farming
Dr Andrew Appleboam – Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital
Professor Mick Fuller – University of Plymouth
Rachel Vowles – Associate Director Northcott Theatre, Exeter
Dr Bryan Watters OBE – British Army & Director Cranfield Defence Leadership MSc.
Meurig Raymond MBE – President National Farmers Union
Lindsay Sinclair – CEO National Farmers Union
Jeff Welch – Media
Professor Matt Lobley – Farm succession
Howard Petch CBE – Leadership development
Caroline Drummond MBE – CEO of LEAF (Linking Environment & Farming)
Neil Parish MP
Adam Bedford – Regional Director NFU

A couple of personal highlights:

Bill Clarke from Trewithen Dairy, a Cornish Dairy processing company producing fresh milk, Cornish clotted cream, butter and yoghurt. Trewithen is a great family business that resonated with my family as two brothers (Bill's sons) work in partnership. Bill Clarke was one of life's gentleman and the type of leader I would like to become. Bill led by example with honesty and depth of character. My family was lucky enough to visit Bill and go through his business after the course.



Photo: with Bill Clarke, Chairman Trewithen Dairy, Lostwithiel, Cornwall UK

Meurig Raymond the President of the National Farmers Union spoke on the UK Ag sector and his successes' over a long period of time. Meurig spoke on the potential impact of Brexit, how farmers feel they need some business support to reduce volatility, aligning subsidies paid to deliver public good, and the importance of the election process to get a strong mandate to represent and lobby for your industry. Meurig started farming at 18 years of age and was given full control and the business chequebook. He comes across as a levelheaded leader with integrity and passion for his industry.

Part of becoming a good leader is learning how to deal and react appropriately with differing personalities and concepts. Philip Lymbery, CEO of Compassion in World Farming and author of 'Farmageddon: The true cost of cheap meat' and 'Dead Zone: where the wild things were' presented to the group. Philip is against industrial farming and intensive animal production. He evoked emotion from the group when he shared his opinions. Some of his comments included "that UK soils have 40 years left until depleted", and he described "harvesters with their tentacles out pillaging the land". I don't have a problem with differing opinions but found I reacted to his manner and delivery. Philip was there to challenge us.

One thing that really stood out whilst listening to the many accomplished leaders was that it's integrity, hard work and background research that gets you there and more importantly keeps you there. Lord Taylor a UK Liberal Democrat politician exemplified this.

Personal Development.

Peter Redstone a management consultant worked the group through leadership, business strategy, problem solving, communication and creative thinking sessions. These sessions were a focus throughout the course with the objective of increasing personal awareness and understanding of 'who we are' and 'why we act'. We underwent various psychometrics testing. This was a really interesting process for me having not undergone Myer Briggs personality typing, Occupational Assessment or IQ testing before. I'm now aware I'm a strong personality type with high expectations and a desire for change and challenges. I will need to be aware and be able to manage this when dealing with others going forward.

Howard Petch who was awarded a CBE, Commander of the British Empire, was a favourite of this and past courses. Howard spoke on the different aspects of leadership including being authentic, your ability to be emotionally intelligent and understand your effect on others. Howard had many quotes including 'its no good doing things right if you're not doing the right things' and 'we judge ourselves by our intent, we judge others on their output'.

Jeff Welch with a background in BBC and ITV radio and television broadcasting took us through media training to finish the course. We did radio and television interviews then analysed them to complete the course before the final dinner. It became obvious that we're all our own worst critics when it comes to how we're portrayed in the media.

Conclusion.

Going into the course with mixed expectations I came away much better equipped for life's future challenges. The Challenge of Rural leadership was a really valuable two weeks, and the perfect follow on post-Nuffield. I'm all the better for getting to know another great passionate bunch of people involved in Agriculture and associated industries. I have learnt and have access to a range of tools and a network of people that will assist me in the continuously changing and challenging conditions of the Agricultural sector.

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