

Oxford Farming Conference 2017

Oxford Farming Conference 2017 Scholars Report

By Sam Dilcock, NFYFC Scholar of the Worshipful Company of Farmers

Upon arrival at the Worcester College the scene for the forthcoming few days was set, despite warnings the accommodation was somewhat Spartan this wasn't to matter, as if one was busy appreciating the inside of one's eyelids or a student's bedroom then one was missing everything the Oxford Farming Conference had going on! I was none the less uncertain of what the OFC had to offer, all I knew was I had to just go get involved to find out.

Despite my initial concerns about not knowing other people at the conference I had travelled down with fellow Yorkshire Young Farmers who had been awarded sponsorship through the NFU or YAA so we at least had a reference point with each other should we become lost. However, it took no time before I found other members of the NFYFC and started making new friends straight away.

Once the bags were dropped off it was straight off to registration and to attend the Tuesday afternoon Fringe meetings. The architecture was inspiring as we walked the streets of Oxford to the examination school. The meeting rooms were well signed and we had no problem finding our way to the first fringe meeting, Emerging Leaders.

It was a shame that room 14/15 was set out in a long rectangle with a dividing wall, this negatively affected the acoustics for those in the far section of the rooms but I personally pushed through to the first room to get a front row seat. The debate had a diverse panel of active farmers from all over the UK who shared some of their thoughts on how Brexit could affect their business, including trade, labour, subsidy and the environment.

A swift exit was made from Emerging Leaders to attend the BASF 'Crop protection regulatory threats and opportunities post Brexit'. The meeting did set out quite clearly what could be removed from the present policy to ensure an innovative line of active ingredients are retained and developed for future production but some care does need to be taken in how we use and regulate these actives to prevent social and environmental damage. In the Future Farming Policy, no greater risks will be taken than those which are scientifically sound, fit for purpose and necessary for food production. It was also stressed where appropriate Voluntary Initiatives were proving their worth there was no need for further policy or interjection from a regulatory perspective.

Refreshments provided an opportunity to introduce myself to other scholars and delegates prior to the AHDB 'Inspiring our farmers & growers to succeed in this rapidly changing world'.

The AHDB Fringe event did do exactly what it said on the tin. The presentation lead by Jane King gave the congregation the confidence that the AHDB had a clear strategy on how it was to use the levy payer's funds to develop the research, innovations and knowledge exchange they needed to compete better in the expanding global market. AHDB took questions about their plans and procedures in their stride, ensuring us we wouldn't return to the days of ADAS and that the AHDB would address work the levy payer wanted doing, rather than telling growers what they should be doing. The AHDB stressed the importance of benchmarking, and the development of slicker tools to assist with this modern business approach to analysis.

The subsequent scholars' reception introduced the group to each other and set out the opportunities we would be able to take advantage of in the next few days, who to talk to if we were unsure and to be confident in talking to other delegates as they are friendly, interesting and approachable. This was indeed to be proven true from the get go. It also highlighted our attention the OFC Scholars travel programme which looked of great interest.

We were soon ushered onto other drinks receptions where the opportunity was taken to meet new people and discuss the various subjects that had been brought up during the day.

The Pre-Conference dinner was another awe-inspiring setting, like something off of a Harry Potter story. In an effort to make as many new friends as possible I tried to seat myself with different people and was met by the company of John Park, a regular attendee of the OFC who pointed out people around the room, discussed his livestock & farm shop enterprise, introduced me to Rosie Cairne and engaged in some deep and meaningful conversation over dinner. I was quite entertained by the after-dinner speaker, and although it was difficult to hear all he said on the speakers it was a shame to see him slow clapped off in the end, the consequence of being controversial is you may make more speculators than friends I suppose. The meal was delicious none the less and I had a chance to catch up with colleagues from the European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA) in the bar afterwards.

The sun soon began to rise and there was no time for procrastination on the Wednesday morning, although I must admit to arriving a little late to the Barclays Breakfast as I had bumped into a member of DEFRA to whom I had made representation in the previous month on behalf of NFYFC. This gave us a chance to discuss Future Farming Policy and the

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structure of forthcoming round table discussions over a slightly soggy mushroom and cheese sandwich as all the other ones had gone.

I soon found a seat for the opening of the conference and Martin Davies introduced the day's proceedings and Andrea Leadsom took to the podium. Although Andrea came across well, she didn't exactly give us any specific details on policy but we did learn CAP payments will be honoured until 2020, the RDPE is ready to fund rural growth, DEFRA wants to help agriculture manage risk, prioritise capital investment, increase production and leave the environment in a better state than we found it. DEFRA wants to streamline EU red tape and prioritise common sense rules, improve the timeliness of payments, equip the workforce better, innovate and export more and encourage more young people into the industry. DEFRA will be producing 2 green papers for consultation, one for Food & Farming and one for Environment.

Following Andrea George Eustice, Calumn Kurr, Lesley Griffiths and Michelle McIlveen spoke about their thoughts and feelings post Brexit.

George wanted to break down the pillar 1 & 2 system into a single pot, provide support that makes agriculture more profitable and rewards farmers for engaging in Environmental Services. George also believed the subsidy system had not been helpful in delivering these goals and would not be helpful in doing so in the future.

Lesley Griffiths on the other hand was hopeful that the same level of subsidy would be kept post Brexit and couldn't imagine a time without subsidy, although was concerned about the public perception of what these payments are for.

Michelle McIlveen felt the same as Lesley, stating things were very uncertain post 2020 and farmers are under an extreme amount of pressure to meet so many standards at present.

Calumn Kurr strongly stated support payments are critical and counted for 2/3rds of Scottish Farm income. Calumn saw innovation and environmental management as important parts of the subsidy provision and that we should be committed to that and the Future Farming Policy. He questioned if DEFRA's voice was strong enough to deliver on the future policy and I found him to be a very powerful and poignant speaker, I thought he had the most stage presence of the four speakers.

Questions were made as to how subsidies distort UK markets and what the appropriate triggers for varying levels of support may be.

The Frank Parkinson lecture was delivered by Konrad Brits, and he takes my award for most surprising subject matter at the conference. With most speakers at the conference one could predict their subject matters content but with Konrad it was a real step into the darkness as far as what his lecture would entail. Konrad took us on a journey from his beginnings in Africa, during times of great political turbulence and he made accurate observations as to the needs of any society or business, how people and commodities interact and how we need to be responsible in the acquirement, consumption and discarding of resources and commodities. The lecture looked into the type of infrastructure required to ensure good trade and the poverty traps that prohibit a nation's commercial and social development. He showed us how his company improved the productivity and efficiency of farmers through training and cost reduction, how better communications helped sell a farmer's brand and told a story and how traceability was improved using very simple technology. The threats that his farmers faced were urbanisation, aging producers, food crop competition and climate change. Understanding changing cultures and collaboration in the supply chain brought forward positive opportunities that benefit whole communities.

It was amazing to think an African coffee farmer faced the same set of challenges in principle as an East Anglian Cereals Farmer or a Scottish Beef Farmer.

Dr Ruth Clements won the OFC/RASE Science & Innovation award for her developments in a 5-point Sheep Lameness Management System which could have significant economic benefits for the UK sheep industry and reduced incidents of lameness 10-fold.

We also heard from Oscar Smith, OFC/DLG travel scholar award about his experiences and his business. The travel scholarship looked a very exciting prospect and is indeed worth considering by any scholar.

A break for lunch came which offered further chances to network and restock the energy levels ahead of an afternoon on markets.

The afternoon session focused on feeding and watering the city. Simon Stenning gave us a break down of the stats and trends around the £87.2 Billion eating out food industry and pointed out that it was in fact understanding the behaviour of the 'millennials' that was key to a significant market share. Sarah Mackie showed an insight into her food purchasing business based within her family farm enterprise and Guy Watson made a very entertaining presentation as to how he found his way through various different methods of supplying the market from his organic enterprise.

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The thrive or survive interactive session had the feel of a modern game show spinning questions to the audience about future policy, subsidy and ultimately will we thrive or survive outside of Europe the answer to which was pretty split in the room, marginally leaning to thrive.

The scholars workshop was another engaging experience where the scholars were split into three groups and then made representations of 3 key questions to Helen Wooley of the CLA, Guy Smith of the NFU and George Eustice MP DEFRA. We tried to answer what should be at the heart of the Future Farming Policy, what innovations would have an effect on the Future Farming Policy and what opportunities lay ahead in the Future Farming Policy. There was a group discussion towards the end of the session which raised some thought provoking points for Future Farming.

After the workshop, it was a brisk walk over to the debate at the Oxford Union. To end up with a front row seat, next to Konrad Brit was certainly a privilege in a room where so many distinguished guests had gone before me. The debate was on the theme that 'the house believes the biggest threat to the family farm was the family itself'. And indeed it turned out it was. Matt Naylor's entertaining and cutting proposition got the support off to a good start, and despite the fact that Rosey Dunn was an excellent public speaker and spoke highly of the important fabric of a family, the opposition both failed to get down to the fundamental point that if it is not the family that is the threat, then what is? The opposition had their pick of the mix their I felt, policy, Brexit, global markets, commodities, lack of skilled labour but they did not mention a single point, they just argued family bonds are important, which they are. Lynsey Martin reinforced Matts points with her own family account of how a family member's ignorance and stubbornness threatened an otherwise viable opportunity and I also couldn't help but stand before the house to comment it is indeed the very human nature of a family that will threaten the continuation of that business more so than anything. For those reasons, I queued to leave via the Aye door.

The Post debate supper held at Christ Church was in an even more extravagant setting than the previous nights and was a delicious British chicken dish for the main. After a slight de-tour home courtesy of Massey Ferguson at the Old Bank Hotel Bar it was bed time around 2 am.

It was soon again breakfast time and the start of the final day. Although I became side tracked in conversation and missed the BBRSC breakfast. A prompt start was made to the day's proceedings with the morning session 'After CAP, what? To survive and thrive what policies does GB agriculture need?'

George Monbiot, a journalist and environmental & political activist felt the current CAP is a disaster, it forces up land prices, doesn't benefit nature and natural habitats, it sustains farming in unsustainable places and those that need subsidy the most in fact get the least.

Minette Batters Deputy President of the NFU wanted a policy based on science, the abolishment of pillars for a single subsidy fund, that the level of subsidy will depend on the trade deal, that cheap food policies are dangerous and tariffs could be an issue.

Helen Ghosh, Director General for the National Trust thought farmers were vital in land management, producing food and restoring ecosystems which some subsidy is essential for. Helen believes that subsidy needs to pay for genuine delivery of public goods and offer good value for money, that it is unacceptable to harm nature, the policy should make it easy to restore nature and that farmers should be rewarded for outcomes.

Guy Poskitt, a Farmer wanted a level playing field, feels subsidy should be used to assist disadvantaged areas and shouldn't be funding 'lifestyle' farming. He thought CAP payment ceilings were disadvantageous as they discourage investment in infrastructure and technology and in the Future Farming Policy the Independent Grocery Adjudicators powers should be extended. Guy thinks controlled migration will be needed for his business but ultimately, we need to be driving businesses to be functional without subsidy, and it is not just the amount of subsidy paid but how it is used that's more of an issue. Guy also thought trade tariffs would be detrimental and asked the question how do we plan for a world with no subsidy?

The panel did seem to agree on a number of things with regards to Future Farming Policy though. Firstly, some form of hardship or crisis fund will always need to be available, transitional funds will need to be budgeted for and used carefully, a fairer market based system could be more sustainable, Upland and Lowlands may need different approaches and that the future subsidy system will be in the hands of frequent political changes and at the mercy of a NHS playoff.

We need to find out what tax payers want to pay for and invest into young people, upskill and empower the industry.

Tom Hind, Alison Capper and Jack Hamilton spoke on the subject of 'the World is your market'.

Tom identified key opportunities globally and the routes to market they are being developed. He highlighted the importance of presence and people in these markets and to be aware of cultural mores. Export trade is a long-haul strategy

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that requires the build-up of resources across the industry and brands. Tom also thought that streamlining processes would be a key innovation along with building the reputation of a brand.

Alison Capper took us through the fundamentals of developing, innovating and marketing her produce. How attention to detail has been a very key aspect of profiting from relatively small land areas and that visible branding need not cost the earth, but adds incredible value to ones produce.

Jack Hamilton says to stay out there, you need to be selective, consider your ability to supply, use digital marketing for a local voice and global reach, enter awards and always consider what we can do better. Speaking from experience Jack took us on a journey of how a small vegetable farm in Ireland ended up supplying ready meals in the Middle East even before they supplied this produce in a British supermarket.

A street food lunch was put on in the north room, a delightful selection of stalls and bunting gave the room a real market feel, with a delightful mixture of different street foods on offer which was a brief experience for me, as I met with NFYFC, Scottish and Irish young Farmers to discuss a joint work project ahead of our Brexit discussions.

The final subject, of most personal interest, was our Soil Saviours. Professor Jane Rickson from Cranfield University lead the first presentation focusing on issues such as soil erosion and how different agricultural practises can influence this, how soil structure and ecosystems give important soil quality indicators and how good soil management can improve the environment and cost effectiveness of practises.

John Geraghty took the second presentation to enthuse us about the soil renaissance. He called for a clear plan for protecting soil and pointed out some of the confusion of terms when it comes to sustainable soil management. He told us we need rotations for soil & plant diversity and that 'those farmers in the red, cannot look after the green'. A stark warning that we need to disincentives to soil damaging practises, encourage and support changes, reward land managers for benefits, ensure proactive farm focused support & research extensions and to apply some humanity, but we are running out of time!

Wil Armitage closed the presentations to explain how livestock play a vital role in sustainable soil management. He explained the importance of soil analysis and getting the correct balance of macro & micro nutrients into the land, ensuring good water and root infiltration properties, how carbon balances and organic matter are crucial parts of the environment and sustainable agriculture. Wil explored the practise of cover cropping and mob grazing and that collaboration between the arable & livestock sectors could bring forward more sustainable practises. Wil explained the importance of using composts to fertilise land and feed micro fauna and that good soil management preserves the integrity of our food. Wil believes we can successfully use plant and soil microbes to improve our food quality and build resilience into our farms but understanding your soils and nutrition is important.

The panel then discussed the potential for biological farming to outperform chemical farming long term but issues such as short tenancies are counterproductive to these more sustainable practises. We need to better define soil health and understand the metrics of soil health. We need to know what we are measuring and what changes are meaningful, be site specific and learn where best to apply hard & soft engineering approaches. If we can do all this we can deliver quality, nutrient dense food which benefits human health. The pressure of costs can prohibit this from happening.

Princess Ann addressed the congregation, speaking of her passion and interest for agriculture and the subjects discussed. Her analogy that an Expert is privy to an old navy saying, 'Ex as in was and spurt meaning a drip under pressure' was indeed very amusing. With that Martin brought the conference to an end and handed over to Caroline Millar as Chairperson.

I have gained a great deal from my experience at the Oxford Farming Conference, I feel I have strengthened relationships I already had, met new friends, made new contacts and learned a great deal about what the OFC is really about and the current affairs that are influencing the world in which we live.

If it wasn't for the scholars programme I genuinely do not believe I would have ever attended this event, it is a fantastic opportunity and a generous offer that was made by the Worshipful Company of Farmers and it was an honour and a privilege to attend as a result.

This is definitely an opportunity I will be making others aware of and encouraging them to undertake if they can.

Once again many thanks to the Worshipful Company of Farmers and to the Oxford Farming Conference Council for putting on such a stimulating, interesting and inspiring event, I cannot express my gratitude enough for all of your efforts.