

# **Beet on agenda for first club meeting in 19 months**

Stalham Farmers' Club

Meeting held at North Walsham Rugby Club, Scottow, on Wednesday, November 10, jointly with the East Norfolk branch of the National Farmers' Union.

The meeting was jointly chaired by Chris Borrett, of Stalham Farmers' Club, and Peter Gardiner, of the East Norfolk branch. A total of 34 members were in attendance and a total of 16 members and guests enjoyed a two-course supper of cottage pie and apple crumble.

By invitation, Michael Sly, chairman NFU Sugar Board, Simon Smith, vice-chairman, and Arthur Marshall, of NFU Sugar.

Mr Borrett, who was wielding the chairman's gavel for the first time in 19 months, welcomed club members and also NFU members too.

He recalled that the last gathering had been the club's annual meeting in February 2020.

Members were also asked to remember the club's former officers and members in a minute's silence including Hugh Crane (life vice-president), Cyril Adams, Rob den Englese, secretary 1985 to 1987, and Greg Anderson.

Apologies – Jason Cantrill, John Greer, Graham Duncanson, Rob Norman, Matthew Adams, James Chapman. Michael Eales, Jim Holt and Andrew Claydon.

New members – The following were welcomed, Emily Norton, Philip Norton, Alex Winchester. William Sands, vice-chairman, proposed Sam Summers, who was duly elected.

Secretary's report – Michael Pollitt said that two club's 2021 competitions had been judged – potatoes and whole crop sugar beet. The 2-acre competition would be judged soon. He urged members to bring grain samples for the wheat and barley cup to the next meeting on December 8 at the very latest. Otherwise, samples could be left at Neal Sands' Brunstead works.

He also reported that the engraving of trophies should be completed shortly. There was now only one engraver in Norwich – two others had give up or retired – which had delayed progress.

Mr Borrett then introduced the evening's trio of guest speakers including Michael Sly, chairman of the NFU Sugar Board, his vice-chairman and fellow Cambridgeshire farmer Simon Smith, and Arthur Marshall, analyst with NFU Sugar. James Northam, of NFU Sugar, was unable to attend because he had tested positive for Covid-19.

Mr Sly briefed members on the background to the latest negotiations with British Sugar. He reminded growers that the last campaign had been extremely difficulty, lengthy and costly. In addition, substantial yield losses caused by virus yellows and other diseases had cost growers an estimated £43m. NFU Sugar, which represents all 2,500 growers, decided to start negotiations much earlier than usual and started the process with British Sugar in

March. In a diplomatic summary, Mr Sly said that the process had not been especially smooth but eventually a deal had been achieved.

He said that a pilot variable price contract, linked to sugar futures, could offer the opportunity for growers to lock-in returns. Mr Sly said that it could become a more significant tool in future. However, he said that the pilot contract had involved a fraction of the national 7.5m tonne beet crop. In total, 67 growers had contracted just 37,100 tonnes but it was another potential tool.

Mr Sly said that beet growers (and processor) were now operating in a completely de-regulated market. He stressed too that the home-grown industry needed to retain scale to supply a large domestic market of around 1.9m tonnes of sugar – with roughly 55pc of the country's sugar grown by England's farmers. There was a major opportunity to supply this market and he urged British Sugar to recognise the need to support growers. He said that a meeting in June with ABF's chief executive George Weston had been positive, who had emphasised his long-term vision for a successful home-grown sugar industry.

In lengthy discussions, a number of members highlighted a range of issues in a genuinely lively, constructive fashion.

Mr Smith said that the NFU had spent three hours the previous day discussing the urgent need to recognise the impact of soaring costs for haulage and contractors with senior British Sugar executives.

Mr Gardiner thanked the speakers, who were presented with a Stalham Farmers' Club tie. The meeting closed at 9.25pm.