

Congratulations to a “grand old lady.”

Address to members and guests at the 175th anniversary summer party at How Hill Farm, Ludham, by Nigel Wright, honorary life vice-president on Friday, June 17, 2016

“Tonight, I’m the understudy for our president, William Donald, who has had a particularly hard spell of health problems over the last three months, which he has fought with the guts and iron will that we know is William Donald.”

“I visited him earlier this week and I was really cheered to find him much better than I was expecting.

“I have the privilege of having been a close friend of his since his family’s Thurgarton Hall days, 1947 was about the time.

“I am only too glad to be here in his place but I would be a much happier man if he were here speaking for himself.

“I am sure that you will agree with me that we ask our secretary Michael Pollitt to give Bill our best wishes on behalf of the 300-strong company here and to get him home soon.

“Now for tonight; what a wonderful turnout and great event for our old lady, Stalham Farmers’ Club, brought about by a huge amount of work over more than a year.

Peter Boardman, son of a secretary to this club, has thrown his beautiful garden at our disposal. Many thanks to you Peter for your kindness.

Our thanks must extend to the social committee – Sally Lomax, Abigail Coller, Alison Ritchie, Rob Norman and Christopher Deane. They have put in a huge amount of graft over the last year. We owe you a great debt for bringing about tonight’s celebration.

Tom Coller, who organised the banner, the tickets and the Pimms. Many thanks and well done Tom. Many thanks too to another Coller, Nick, who has had the unenviable task of organising and overseeing the parking with great style.

Thanks and Bless you, Jenny Coles, our caterer, who has created a whole new meaning to the word, canapé – pity, I’ve not got room for more. If I say, Delicioso, it is only to show how cosmopolitan Stalham Farmers has become!

Now to the star of the evening, dear old Jonathan (Deane); he has been the driver, the cajoler, the issuer of orders, pressuriser, suffered not a little stress – in other words, been a true leader. Well done, Jonathan - huge gratitude from every one of us.

Michael Pollitt, our blessed secretary, has coped so well with this whirlwind of events, gatherings in the reins here and there and at the same pushing ahead with setting up next season’s events. Well done, Michael, old friend.

All these rounds of “thank you's”, can sometimes appear a bit of a ritual. I meant every word and all of us are full of gratitude, right? Are you all for letting your hair down and giving the organisers a really rousing three cheers? (THREE CHEERS)

Don't fret. I'm going to be brief but I must just say a few words about the Club, the oldest surviving farmers' club; nobody mention Canterbury. I've been to one of their meetings – they are not a farmers' club as we are.

Why have we survived – because we have evolved. At the 150th celebrations, the membership was almost 100pc active farmers. Now at the 175th, I suspect active farmer numbers must have dropped significantly but that doesn't matter, it's all to the good – members from other professions have brought new blood to the Club and reinvigorated it. Welcome to you all.

In 1915, the club received a paper from a lady speaker – 101 years ago. That must have been an exceptional event. Now the committee has 50pc women members, 50pc per cent men. Many women are active members – and this bodes well for the future of the good old Club.

“I'm not going to forecast the future but we have an unusual conjunction of negatives ahead of us which I must mention. Firstly, the wretched referendum – whatever the outcome it will end in tears. It has fractured the Tories, fractures that will not heal before the next General Election. Could this let Mr Corbyn into Number 10: Europe has many problems of its own. I hope a Brexit win doesn't start a collapse of the EU pack of cards. If that happens, think of Vladimir Putin as he rubs his hands in glee at the prospect of a weakened Europe – and relishing his chance to finish the Ukraine, move on to the annexation of the Baltic States. Where do his ambitions end? I've not even mentioned a Trump or Clinton in the White House. Nothing but uncertainties and insecurities.

Yet the prospect is a bit gloomy but farming, prosper or scratch a living, we will be there. English bellies will need filling. This dear old Club, where Bill Donald and I have spent so many happy hours will have a role to play. He and I both wish Stalham Farmers Good Speed and that she prospers and flourishes as never before and steams serenely forward to her Bicentennial Celebrations in 2041.

By the way, talking of the 200th – and I've already seen the 125th, the 150th and the 175th, it's prudent to give my apologies now. I might not be around . . . in another 25 years. Hell no, I'll only be 103. Book me in Michael!