

Stalham Farmers Opening Meeting 2018-19 season at Vera's Coffee Shop

Wednesday, November 14.

At the first indoor meeting of the 177th season, the chairman, Henry Alston welcomed 34 members and guests including the guest speaker, Jake Fiennes, to the new venue.

Supper was served at the new venue, Vera's Coffee Shop at AG Meale & Sons nursery at Wayford Bridge, which was much appreciated by the 14 strong-strong company.

The meeting was called to order at 7.40pm

Remembrance: Members were asked to stand in memory of our former president, William Donald, and former members including George Morton and John Withers.

Apologies – Robert Gray, Geoff Beck, Rob Baines, Sir William Cubitt, Jason Cantrill, Tim Papworth, Christopher Deane, Ken Leggett, Roy Houlden, Jo and Ian Willetts.

Chairman's report – A visit to the Strumpshaw estate and the part of the adjoining nature reserve had been enjoyed by some 80 members and guests. The tour of the estate's museum had been especially appreciated and the opportunity to enjoy some many of the rides too. In October, 20 members had visited Kettle Foods at Bowthorpe, Norwich, which had been a fascinating tour of the operations. A £3m investment as about to start, said Mr Alston.

New members – A total of six members were duly elected.

Ben Catling and Neil Punchard, Andrew Claydon, David Pickering, Charlotte Hovey and Harold Dustan. They were proposed by Will Sands and Chris Borrett and agreed.

Secretary's report – Michael Pollitt said that entries for the club's grain competition would close at the December meeting, when samples could be brought or left at Adams & Howling or at Neal Sands' factory. The crop competitions – for whole crop and best two-acres of sugar beet had been judged, thanks to Ken Matthews and Sarah Bebb; and the potatoes by Denis Walsh. Results would be announced at the club's dinner in March 2019.

The club's programme had been sent to all members in mid-September. With apologies to the former club chairman, Jonathan Deane, his name had been omitted from the list of honorary life vice-presidents.

It was also reported that the club's website had now received more than 100,000 visitors; clearly, many people were keeping a close eye on the club's activities.

And further, Sarah Ellero was thanked for starting the club's twitter account, which was also generating further interest.

Trophy success: The chairman thanked Nigel Cooke and also the secretary for representing the club at the recent county quiz and with three members of Holt & District Farmers' Club winning the Norfolk Livestock Club's trophy. This was the first success for club since the competition started in 2008.

Mr Alston then welcomed Jake Fiennes, who had spent 24 years at the Raveningham estate, and who had moved to Holkham as general manager for conservation on October 31. He was also the East Anglian member of the NFU's environmental forum.

Mr Fiennes, who had originally moved to Sir Nicholas Bacon's south Norfolk estate as a gamekeeper, had been largely instrumental in developing a conservation strategy and framework across more than 5,500 acres. This concept of active wildlife management had become a significant income earner and also delivered major benefits especially in over-wintering and breeding bird species. By working with tenants, and even neighbours, the "cluster" approach had boosted wildlife and crop yields too. Mr Fiennes, who had been featured across three pages of the Financial Times in July, reported that the estate's average wheat yields, for example, had risen from 6.5t per ha to 10.5t.

Having just attended the NFU environmental forum meeting at Stoneleigh earlier that, Mr Fiennes had also spent several hours with Defra secretary Michael Gove to discuss new proposed environmental support policies.

In his new role at Holkham, Mr Fiennes suggested that a similar "cluster" approach to producing wildlife benefits and good farming and food production could work. He said that north Norfolk could become "a beacon" of environmentally-friendly farming and land management.

With future support for the industry dependent on the Treasury, the industry had to show leadership in developing new practical strategies. Farmers were best-placed to deliver solutions on the ground, taking into account local soil, climatic and wildlife, he added.

He spoke with enormous enthusiasm and then answered questions for more than 40 minutes. He was thanked by Nigel Cooke and warmly applauded by members.