

Stalham Farm tour June 2026

A long-term strategy to blend food production and improve wildlife habitats on a light land estate in north Norfolk was already yielding dividends.

Almost 100 members and guests of Stalham Farmers' Club and the east Norfolk branch of the National Farmers' Union were invited on June 16, 2026 to tour the 2,250-acre Kelling Hall estate, near Holt, by Hayley Robertson, on behalf of the Widdowson family.

After a brief welcome by club chairman Jason Cantrill, the party was taken by tractors and trailers to one of the highest points on the estate close to the sea and the shingle banks in the near distance. There, a suckler herd of Hereford cattle, with calves at foot, was grazing a former arable block of land.

Chris Hill, the estate's farm manager, explained that in 2022 the family, led by Mrs Robertson, has switched to more environmental and nature-friendly farming after almost 15 years of more intensive cropping, especially of arable. About 200ha (500 acres) of the better soils was growing traditional crops including sugar beet, winter and spring barley, potatoes and parsnips.

There has been considerable investment in encouraging wildlife by, for example, planting 10 to 12km of hedging, with and without grants, said Mr Hill.

Agronomist Kerris Poland, of Frontier Agriculture, has been advising the estate for the past four years. Given the challenges of farming such light, sandy soils, one policy has been to continue efforts to improve soil fertility and structure. Farmyard manure was especially valued when available, she added.

In addition to her advisory role on cropping, she was involved with the estate's "greening" through countryside stewardship and the sustainable farming incentive.

Here, a variety of options have been introduced, with considerable success, including miscanthus (elephant grass), wildflower mixes and assorted herbal leys.

Chris Borrett, a director of independent grain merchants Adams & Howling, said that the estate had been involved with the long-standing ABC malting barley contract since the Kelling estate had been acquired in 2008.

Set up by Adams & Howling, H Banham and the Crisp Malting Group, of Great Ryburgh in 2007, it was probably the largest dedicated malting barley supply contract in the country and offered considerable advantages for growers.

Mr Borrett, a director A & H, said that quality malting barley was grown at Kelling – just 16 miles from the Great Ryburgh maltings. While maltsters were facing challenges – not least because of reduced demand for Scotch whisky in the USA, he said that there was still demand for about 80,000 tonnes of malting barley – down from last year's 100,000

tonnes. It was likely that the group's winter and spring varieties would each produce about half the tonnage required.

Richard Barnes, also of Frontier Agriculture, urged farmers and growers to support the annual Big Farmland Bird Survey, co-ordinated by the Wildlife & Game Conservation Trust.

The estate has invested heavily in all aspects of wildlife conservation by integrating planting policies to ensure wildlife corridors linked woods, copses, hedges and fields. To bridge the so-called hungry gap for bird species from mid-January, he said that the estate undertook supplementary feeding – accounting for at least 17 tonnes last winter.

By providing the right conditions, for example with cover crops, this helped beneficial insects – the farmer's friend in terms of pest control – as well as supporting numbers of brown hares and other mammals. Although the thrust of these policies only really started in 2022, it was already delivering significant results, added Mr Barnes.

Specialist potato grower Tom Harrison was growing a total of 460ha for the Trimmingham-based enterprise, which had started in 1963. About 22,000 tonnes were stored between Foulsham and Catfield and supplied to a range of key processors including Lamb Weston and Albert Bartlett. The costs involved were considerable and especially in a drought year with typical costs of running 26 irrigators about £50,000 a week.

On the return to the estate yard a magnificent hog roast supper was served by Karl Graves, of Briston. Members also enjoyed liberal refreshment supplied by James Taylor, Becky Collen and Joe Buxton, of East Norfolk NFU.

The club chairman Jason Cantrill, who thanked the host Hayley Robertson, presented a floral display of Norfolk flowers from Louisa Butcher's Brunstead Blooms. The farm manager, Chris Hill, was given a bottle of malt whisky.

He also thanked Holkham estate for loaning a trailer and especially Peter Scott, of TNS, of Sculthorpe, for collecting two trailers from Morley Research Centre.

Michael Pollitt