

# Stalham Farmers' Club

Wednesday, January 16, 2019

Vera's Coffee House, Wayford Nurseries

At the first meeting of 2019, the chairman Henry Alston welcomed a total of 70 members and guests including the speaker, Sophie Bambridge, of B & C Farming. And a record number, 32 including 13 members of North Walsham Young Farmers' Club, enjoyed supper.

In opening the meeting at 7.40pm, Mr Alston asked for a period of silence in memory of a longstanding former club member, Tom Crane, OBE, who had died aged 88 on Saturday, January 5.

Apologies – Tom Hume, Alastair Wright, Louis Baugh, Robin Baines, Jason Cantrill, Christopher Deane, Jonathan Deane, Nick Deane and George Gay.

New members – No proposals.

Secretary's report – Members were reminded of the forthcoming bowls/ 10-pin match against Holt & District Farmers' Club on Friday, February 22 at Rossi's, North Walsham. For the first time in seven years, it has been necessary to increase the price for bowls/ three course supper to £25. Michael Pollitt also said that a full report of the December meeting had been posted on the club's website a month ago. Further, the club has upgraded its website security. A full obituary of Tom Crane, OBE, was on the site too. He said that invitations to the club's annual dinner at The Boathouse, Ormesby, on Wednesday, March 20 would be sent out soon.

Chairman's remarks. Mr Alston gave a brief introduction to the evening's guest speaker, Sophie Bambridge, of B&C Farming.

"Meeting tomorrow's Challenges. . . today" was the broad theme outlined in a commanding 40-minute presentation. She rather surprised her audience by admitting that she had no formal agricultural background although she was brought up in her native Norfolk by her father, Tony Bambridge, currently chairman of Norfolk National Farmers' Union, and who runs B & C Farming.

Sophie, who read French and Spanish at the University of Kent, was encouraged by her father to join the MDS graduate entry programme, supported by 25 leading fresh food and produce groups. And one of her first jobs was working with leading supermarket buyers responsible for about 40pc of the annual sales of Hampshire-based Barfoots - pioneers of corn on the cob, sweetcorn and other more exotic crops. It gave her opportunities, which was very much the theme of her talk, to travel widely to Spain and even South Carolina to learn about growing sweet potatoes. After about six or seven years, having learned a great deal at first-hand about working with fresh produce retailers, she felt it was time for a change of direction.

And so, because her father wanted to recruit a technical manager for the expanding family business, B & C Farming, she returned to her native Norfolk. Coming into an established business about two and a half years ago, and working for her father, was a challenge. Although rather modestly describing herself as a "trainee farmer," she has brought new disciplines and her ideas into the business, which now farms about 1,450 ha of cereals, sugar beet, peas, beans and maize, plus 175ha of seed potatoes and 140ha of ware potatoes.

A passionate advocate of quality food production, she said that the agricultural industry had to raise its game in terms of promoting itself. And it was absolutely essential as social media become so successful at influencing younger consumers and especially changing attitudes. Giving just one example, she said that Vegan foods were being eaten by an increasing number of consumers. While some estimates suggest that Vegans accounted for about 0.06 of the population, some Vegan food products were bought by as many as 16pc of the population. Again, as social media influenced attitudes and especially towards eating meat, many consumers were deliberately reducing consumption. This trend towards “flexitarian” diets has already seen some consumers eat meat one day and then maybe meat-free or vegetarian or even Vegan another day.

Sophie argued that farmers and food producers needed to be more “pro-active” and promote positive messages to consumers. In a lengthy question session, she suggested too that farmers need to respond. She told Stalham’s president and top potato grower Thomas Love that maybe he could help by having a presence on Instagram! In Britain, farmers produce food to very high quality standards, not just of welfare but also to demanding environmental rules and regulations, she said.

Too often, she argued, these positive achievements of the industry were not heard and so it was really up to the industry to help itself. It was certainly a message that resonated with her attentive audience.

She was presented with a copy of Alec Douet’s history of Norfolk agriculture, 1914 to 1984, “Breaking New Ground” by the club and was thanked by Sarah Norman, of North Walsham YFC.

The meeting was closed at 8.50pm.