

First meeting of 2015

A total of more than 50 members and guests, including more than 20 members from North Walsham and also Acle YFCs, were welcomed by the chairman Neil Jordan to the Sutton Staithe Hotel, on Wednesday, January 14.

Apologies – William Donald, David Hughes, Jim Holt, Abby Deane, Robin Baines, John Purling, Frank Read, Paul Corfield, Richard Hirst, Sam Summers, Will More, James Taylor, Alan Beck, Robert Gray, Elliott Simpson.

Stalham's success in the inter-club barley championship was reported by the chairman, Neil Sands. He said that an entry of Cassata, grown by William Sands, of HBS Farms, had won the trophy – a first for the club.

He hoped that the club might enjoy further success against Holt & District Farmers' Club in the forthcoming bowls and 10-pin bowling at Rossi's, to be staged on Friday, February 20, starting about 4.15pm. Two teams of 18 players would be needed – names of potential players to be sent to the secretary, Luke Paterson, Robert Norman or Christopher Deane. The cost, £20, including bowling.

The long-standing organiser, William Donald, has asked to be relieved of his duties and members wished him a speedy recovery from ill health.

A new design of high-quality club ties, featuring a bigger Stalham hoe, were now available. These would cost £20 each, in three colours – claret, navy blue and green. A special early-bird deal – for all orders received by February 11 – would be available – price £35 for two ties in different colours. Otherwise, orders could be made direct to the secretary.

(Post meeting note – a total of a dozen ties have now been sold of the total stock of 169).

Former chairman Ken Leggett asked if members would support a campaign to eradicate the so-called Sky (or Chinese) lanterns. He urged members to contact their local MPs.

A summary of the last meeting was given by the secretary – full details on the club's website – meeting reports.

It was also announced that a garden visit would take place to North Norfolk on Wednesday, June 17 to Corpusty – details to be announced.

As samples of goats' cheese were handed to members, Sam Steggles, of Fielding Cottage, spoke about the rapid expansion of his speciality cheese business.

And after success in the World Cheese Awards in London when a sample of Wensum White won one of 62 gold medals – and only 20 were given to UK cheeses, sales were expanding rapidly.

A new line of skin care products with goats' milk was now being shipped to China – and more retailers were looking to start stocking his Field Cottage Goats' Cheese. While many top London chefs were already customers, Waitrose was the latest retailers about to stock their cheese.

Sam, of Honingham, near Norwich, said that the first cheese, Ellingham, was made in the Breckland village less than six years ago. He explained that he and his wife, Caroline, had looked long and hard at possible business ventures before considering a venture with dairy goats. With the foundation stock of 10 dairy goats from Carlisle, they started making cheese, initially in a 180-litre vat – now they used a 1,000-litre container and were making cheese three or four times a week.

He had decided to concentrate on the marketing and manufacture of the cheese. Their goats, now numbering more than 250 in milk, provided the raw ingredient for the cheese enterprise – they had decided to stop milking the goats themselves to concentrate on the retail end of the business.

The whole venture had been a very steep learning curve and that attending farmers' markets, eventually some 18 in total, had been key. Although he has since reduced his attendance to concentrate on more specialist food shows and events, the farmers' markets had made it possible to get very speedy and immediate consumer response and feed back.

He said that the success in the RNAA's Growing Business Awards with Norfolk young farmers had provided vital funding with a £5,000 prize in 2009. He had bought a new cheese room – actually a second-hand portable office – for £1,250 – payment on delivery after the Royal Norfolk Show. Fortunately, he was able to bank the prize cheque before the office arrived the next day.

Sales have grown, rapidly, online – and thanks to immediate next day delivery – were becoming increasingly important. He said that the backing of retailers, including Roys of Wroxham and the East of England Co-op had also been tremendous.

And he had just been invited by Waitrose, which was now keen to start stocking some of his range of cheeses.

Another diversification, into skin care products, was also taking off. Some had been exported to China, which was another potentially exciting opportunity.

He was thanked by John Withers and the chairman, Neil Jordan, presented Sam with a new design of Stalham silk tie, almost matching Fielding Cottage's green colour scheme.

Members were reminded that Dr Belinda Clarke, would be speaking after the formal business at the annual meeting on Wednesday, February 11, starting at 7.30pm.