

Stalham summer farm walk 2024

Native breed cattle and a top herd of Haflinger horses were just two of the themes of a highly successful farm walk at Park Farm, Blickling.

Tony and Emily Bambridge welcomed about 85 members from Stalham Farmers' Club and East Norfolk NFU branch to the tenanted farm on the National Trust's Blickling estate. The estate of 4,464 acres, including 2,600 acres of arable, had been given to the Trust on the death of the Marquess of Lothian in December 1940.

He took on the tenancy of the 96-hectare Park Farm 34 years ago. The farmhouse dates from circa 1680 and there's a range of 18th century pre-industrial buildings as well as more functional, modern livestock barns. The 41ha of low-lying traditional grassland, alongside the River Bure, is grazed by the pedigree herd of Lincoln Red cattle. His lease does not permit artificial fertiliser or pesticides to be used on the meadows.

The field sizes have remained virtually unchanged since 1797 when Faden's Map of Norfolk was published. In the past couple of years, 2.6km of hedges have been planted - all set back from the original boundaries as mapped by Faden.

The party was briefed on the successful Hobart herd of Haflingers.

Emily, who worked closely with the late Tom Crane for 15 years, said that her success in producing a more modern type of Haflinger, was partly down to her original stallion, Sultan. He had produced some excellent stock but she has been concentrating on improving the pool of female lines. As ever with breeding, she has produced a bigger percentage of colts, roughly 70pc in recent years. Another key reason for success has been the breed society's strict inspections, which applied to both mares and stallions from three years and upwards.

As the party snaked down the road, the first halt was a briefing on the arable cropping. Mr Bambridge, who has specialised in growing seed, said that a field of pre-basic spring barley, LG Diabolo had just been officially inspected – twice. It was planted after two years of grass seed. In the neighbouring field, Gleam was growing after two years of vetch, also grown for seed. While it was tricky to harvest seed because it could grow 6ft tall, vetch was twice as efficient as a pea crop in fixing nitrogen – a considerable benefit to following crops. One field of spring barley, Laureate, grown after sugar beet, had looked fantastic until the previous night when 47mm of rainfall fell, mostly in just half an hour – causing parts to lodge.

Again, growing grass seed, especially in a wet harvest, was especially challenging last year. Mr Bambridge said part of the tetraploid crop of a fescue/ ryegrass had been cut without a mower conditioner at 45pc moisture content. Then the heavens opened and days later, they had to cut underlying grass growth to harvest the seed. Fortunately, five tonnes was salvaged. However, about 350 bales of haylage were taken for feeding to the beef cattle.

The next stop was a crop of Maris Otter malting barley. Bred by Dr G H D Bell in Cambridge and launched in 1965, this cross between Pioneer and Proctor remains one of the most popular varieties for brewing quality ales. And, the Great Ryburgh-based Crisp Malting Group has produced a documentary on the Life of Maris Otter, featuring Mr Bambridge's B & C Farming team. Chris Day, technical manager, is one of the narrators of the brief video –

www.crispmalt.com- the life of Maris Otter.

A stroll across the river meadows revealed the former course of the River Bure, which was diverted and "canalised" in 1388. As Mr Bambridge explained, this major medieval diversion created a channel to power the water mill at Ingworth, which ceased working in 1912. They even built a culvert underneath the river to take the water to the mill. It was remarkable that more than 600 years ago all this work was completed by hand.

William Heal, formerly of BASC (British Association for Shooting and Conservation) and secretary to the Blickling Flyfishing Club, said that members have embarked on restoration projects including planting trees to provide shade, putting tree trunks into the river Bure to slow the water and fencing to stop cattle breaking down the banks. However, the biggest challenge for this chalk stream, one of 17 in Norfolk and 224 in the country, was the American signal crayfish. With the ability to tunnel three metres into the river banks, they have caused

serious damage weakening the sides, which then collapse. This reduces water quality when soil gets into the river and threatens the survival of the native fish population including brown trout. However, there was some good news – two sea trout have been caught (and released) so far this season.

As the party wended its way back along the Bure, there was another halt as Mr Bambridge talked about the Hobart herd of Lincoln Red cattle. He founded the pedigree herd in 2009, which numbers more than 55 breeding females. Although the breed society has just 3,000 registered females, it is likely that numbers could increase again. The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) now offers support of £146 per hectare for grazing by native breeds. However, cattle must be registered with a native breed society. The stocking density is very low at one per 1.2ha. Mr Bambridge aims to bulls to other breeders and has enjoyed much success even selling to herds in Lincolnshire. He is the sole supplier of Blickling-reared and finished beef to traditional Aylsham butcher, Crawford White, who takes about 50 cattle a year. The beef is typically hung for between 21 and 28 days.

The Lincoln Reds are very quiet and naturally polled – another bonus.

They are easy calving too, possibly assisted by a birthweight of 28kg to 36kg but the calves grow rapidly.

Bob Clabon, branch chairman, thanked Tony and Emily Bambridge of behalf of fellow members and also Stalham Farmers' Club for hosting the farm walk. It was actually his first "farm walk" rather than being driven on a tractor and trailer which he had really enjoyed as it was also an opportunity to chat along the two-hour route. The hog roast was provided by James Cawdron and the East Norfolk NFU team including Christopher Deane, James Taylor and Becky Collen, ran the bar.





