

To Breckland and back - an expedition to the Stanford training area

A joint expedition to the heart of Breckland by members of Stalham Farmers' Club and East Norfolk NFU branch was blessed with glorious weather – and sunshine.

A total of 29 members and guests started the visit with a buffet lunch at the Angel, Larling, which is well-known for good food and real ale. The landlord, Andrew Stammers, was as welcoming as ever and the lunch was generous indeed.

Then, it was off by a car convoy of some sorts down the A11 to John and Melinda's Croxton Park, near Thetford. After a minor (and unintended) diversion via the vegetable washing plant, the party arrived to be greeted by Mr and Mrs Raker's son, Henry, and James Paterson, who had driven straight to the correct rendezvous.

Henry welcomed the group and then gave a brief introduction to the various enterprises. On this very light and (normally) dry part of Norfolk, he said that a total of 650mm had been logged since January 1, including 165mm in the past fortnight.

But he was delighted that the sun was shining.

Cropping including 90ha of carrots and 115ha of potatoes plus a further 100ha of onions. The carrots, grown for processing, were drilled from mid-December and were grown under cover for lifting from June 14.

He then led the party on a walking tour to look at carrots, the traditional Scots pine shelter belts, onions and rye, grown for Ryvita. He explained that they concentrated on growing field-scale vegetables while a neighbour, Gerald Groucher, grew the cereals. It was a successful specialism, he said.

Members were impressed by the farm's solar array, which produced power for the washing plant and also the two onion stores, which had total capacity of about 2,500 tonnes.

Henry also described the rapidly-expanding Salix enterprise, which grows plant material for riverbed and tidal estuary restoration. And, Salix had grown plant material for 26km of riverbank for the 2012 London Olympics.

After returning to Croxton Park, the party was served tea and delicious chocolate brownies and cake by his mother and father. Melinda has even bought a new large tea pot specially for the visitors.

A vote of thanks was given by James Paterson, who presented John and Henry with a Stalham club silk tie and bottles of wine.

Then the party moved to West Tofts for the final leg of the Breckland study tour. Lt Col Tony Powell met the 33-strong group. He described the remarkable history of the training area, which had been compulsory evacuated in June 1942 and that more than 700 residents had been given just three weeks' notice to leave their homes.

It was also probably the best evening of this year's summer tour programme, he said.

A luxury coach from D & H Harrod, of Downham Market, took the party to St Mary's Church, West Tofts, and then across the northern part of the 22,000-acre (or some 33 sq miles) training area. There was an opportunity to inspect at close quarters the Afghan village and compound and then the Iraqi settlement.

Members were impressed that 13,500 ewes – the largest lowland hefted flock – were run in two flocks alongside a busy training programme. And the party drove past members of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Anglians, who were also training on what's now known as Dean's Avenue – much to the delight of Stalham's chairman, Jonathan Deane!

The final stop was at Frog Hill – the scene for the opening and final sequences of the BBC's Dad's Army episodes. And what a glorious finale for a special visit – looking across miles of open Breckland countryside as it would have been more than 70 years ago. The only sign of change – a view of the wind turbines at North Pickenham in the far distance.

Back at West Tofts, Paul Corfield thanked Col Powell for spending the evening as our guide. He was presented with a club tie as was the coach driver, Adam.

A donation of £175 was made to charities including Help the Heroes.