

A farmer's view of Kiwi farming

February 9, 2022

A meeting of Stalham Farmers' Club was held at the North Walsham Rugby Club, Scottow, on Wednesday, February 9, 2022. Earlier, a total of 32 members, including 13 North Walsham Young Farmers' Clubs members, enjoyed a supper of roast pork and crumble.

The chairman, Chris Borrett, opened the meeting shortly after 7.30pm, and welcomed our guests, North Walsham YFC members.

Former club secretary - He asked more than 40 members and guests to stand in memory of Nigel Wright, who had been secretary to the club for almost a quarter of century between 1962 and 1985. He had been chairman in 1991 and a life vice-president. A letter of condolence had been sent to Mr Wright's family including his eldest son, Alistair, who was himself a former club chairman.

The club had been well represented at the funeral at Ingham Church on Wednesday, January 26 where he had been laid to rest.

Apologies – Paul Corfield (Covid), Jo and Ian Willetts.

New members – None.

Secretary's report – Michael Pollitt said that the club's final competition, for the Cantley Cup, would be judged – and the result reported to members.

It was proposed that the annual meeting would be held on Wednesday, March 16 at Vera's Coffee Shop (A G Meale's Wayside Nursery and Garden Centre). This was agreed by members.

It was also suggested that an informal club annual dinner would be held at Scottow on Wednesday, April 6 when the cups, trophies, prize cards and awards would be presented. There was general support for holding the dinner but several members were concerned that it might be too crowded, so numbers would be restricted. A guest speaker would be invited.

Guest speaker – The chairman was delighted to welcome Tom Harrison, of E G Harrison & Co, of Trimmingham, who had spent three years in New Zealand working for a large family owned farming company. He had returned a year ago to take up the reins and more particularly on the family's long-established potato enterprises.

In his highly-professional presentation, "An insider's view of Kiwi farming," Tom said that after attending Gresham's and studying at Easton College for a Level 3 diploma

in agriculture, he went to New Zealand, initially for three months working for Balle Brothers. This enterprise had started on 16 acres in 1919 and today employed more than 330 staff. It had some 33 different enterprises including 1300ha potatoes, onions and specialist seed, 300ha of grass seed, as well as 2,500 head of cattle. The business, run by seven brothers, ran a 45-strong lorry fleet, and was heavily involved in food processing, including chips and fries.

He had been farming on South Island's Canterbury Plain – mainly on potatoes, including 130ha of seed. A further challenge had been growing ultra high-value seed crops, carrot, radish and white clover. Ironically, when he had returned home to Trimmingham, and was planting radish as a cover crop before potatoes, it may well have a crop that he had harvested. There were only about seven or eight radish seed growers, all on the Canterbury Plain, so there was a fair chance that he might have grown the crop.

He said that New Zealand farmers enjoyed many advantages including access to crop protection products unavailable in Britain, access to copious quantities of water from the snow-fed mountain range in South Island. Even stubble burning, banned in England in 1993, was still allowed.

In addition, the plain's rich soils sloped towards the sea – enabling gravity fed irrigation for arable cropping. On one block of land, formerly a vineyard, a river had been diverted, buildings and re-located and woodland removed, to create large blocks, each about 20 to 25ha. It was possible to irrigate 1,400 ha of land every four days with at least an inch of water.

Land typically cost about £22,500/ha in this part of New Zealand, which was formerly exclusively pastoral farming. After all subsidies were scrapped in 1984, more arable enterprises replaced livestock.

There were challenges – for example, occasional “brutal” winds of up to 130km/hour, which could strip top soil from planted crops in dust storms.

But returns could be spectacular – for example, by growing 20ha of carrot seed, worth up to £22,500/ tonne, in a good year. Sometimes, it was a 1:5 success and yields could be devastated by wind or poor pollination by bees. Likewise radish or white clover could yield high returns in a good year but demanded exceptional management and weed and disease control.

He spoke enthusiastically about the seed potato enterprise, which was able to produce between 25 to 30t/ha on unirrigated land – often as much a UK farmer might achieve with irrigation. Was the soil, more water or just sunlight the explanation. Typically, seed potato yields were about 40t/ha.

Tom answered numerous questions during his presentation and he was thanked by former chairman Robin Baines. James Hancock, of North Walsham YFC, thanked the club for inviting his fellow members to supper.

The next meeting will be on Wednesday, March 16 at Vera's Coffee Shop (A G Meale's Wayside Garden Centre, 7.30pm, with supper beforehand.

The meeting was closed at 8.55pm.