

Glorious evening for farm walk at North Walsham

It was a glorious summer evening as a large company gathered at Rookery Farm, North Walsham, for the annual farm walk hosted by Bob Clabon and family.

More than 100 members of East Norfolk branch of the National Farmers' Union and Stalham Farmers' Club were welcomed before boarding three tractors and trailers for the tour of the arable enterprise. And the mood of the visitors was definitely upbeat – given the previous day's welcome rainfall of more than an inch across the entire county.

There was a further bonus element, explained NFU branch chairman Mr Clabon, as the flying visit would include an opportunity to see one of Norfolk's five remaining blackcurrant enterprises.

Since 1963 when the first 40 acres had been acquired on the edge of North Walsham, his father Jim had expanded the family business. It has since specialised in potatoes as well as growing cereals and sugar beet on about 1,400 acres plus additional land on various tenancies and contract. But 101 ha of potatoes was central and especially long-term storage of about 6,500 tonnes.

The farm was spread across several parishes – and was actually almost 14 miles from Sloley, through Paston, Trunch and back to North Walsham. Cropping also included about 300ha of winter wheat, 43ha of oilseed rape, 77ha of winter barley and 66ha of spring barley.

After a disastrous fire destroyed the potato stores in 1996, two 1,200 tonne insulated stores were built, which has given additional marketing flexibility and opportunity, said his brother Philip Clabon.

There was no grain storage on the farm, said Bob Clabon, who explained that his father Jim had been a founder of the highly-successful farmers' co-op, Aylsham Grain.

In a brief summary of the international grain market, Andrew Dewing, of Dewing Grain, spoke of the enormous volatility in prices. Typically, movement of £4 tonne in wheat was noteworthy but in the last week, prices had risen and fallen in a £36 tonne range – and in one week, from a Tuesday to Tuesday, were £20.50 higher. Mr Dewing couldn't hazard a guess as to likely levels of wheat prices given the war in Ukraine. He suggested that levels of production might be significantly reduced for at least the next couple of years. He speculated that prices might possibly settle in a range from £260 to £230 tonne. A good rain across the county – with most receiving close to an inch or an inch and a half – had been a real tonic for all crops, especially cereals including winter wheat, he said.

As a means of driving the business forward, Mr Clabon said that techniques including yield mapping will be key. As the party stood against a backdrop of an impressive field of Rooster potatoes, being grown for Albert Bartlett at Worstead, he said that parts of some fields were incredibly low-yielding. One for example ranged

from 1.5 tonnes on the top of a field to more than 14 tonnes at the bottom. It would make sense to concentrate on farming the good land and not the poorer parts, he added.

Sugar beet was also important and the party was shown some impressive crops. Sam Clabon, who has adopted non-ploughing techniques to prepare land for drilling – and using cover crops like radish – had established beet crops significantly cheaper than more traditional methods involving ploughing and harrowing. In addition, crops had emerged earlier and quicker too, he added.

The tour of Mark Buckingham's blackcurrant fields added a different element to the visit. As he explained, since working with Bob and Philip Clabon, there has been major investment into the crop. In the past five years, about 100 acres of blackcurrants have been re-planted but it requires considerable patience because the bushes take about four years to start producing substantial volumes of fruit. The partnership with Ribena has also been fruitful too. A total of 100 nestboxes around the farm, plus owl boxes have been set up, which are all regularly monitored.

Mr Buckingham said that to achieve good, consistent levels of flowering, the blackcurrants require between 1,500 and 2,000 degrees of chill between October and the end of February. He said that one field on one recent winter night, the temperature as recorded by a weather station ranged from 2C to minus 4. While later-flowering varieties have been bred in recent years, they had to phase the mechanical harvesting programme to get the ripest and sweetest fruit. Mr Buckingham said that usually their crop was about 11 days later than those in Kent.

On return to Rookery Farm, members enjoyed a hog roast supper served by Graves of Briston – provided by the Clabon family. The East Norfolk NFU and Stalham Farmers' Club stood the drinks.

Trailers were lent by Simon Daniels, Richard Hirst, Joe Mitchell and Tim Papworth.

Richard Hirst gave the vote of thanks.