## January 2024 club report

A meeting of Stalham Farmers' Club was held on Wednesday, January 10, 2024 at Wroxham Barns

A total of 27 members and guests joined the vice-chairman, Jonathan Pye, and the guest speaker Henry Lamb for a two-course supper including chicken and bacon pie. Nine members of North Walsham Young Farmers' Club, including the chair Alice Saunders, were invited to join supper as the club's guests.

The vice-chairman, used the club's official gavel and welcomed more than 30 members and guests to the opening meeting of 2024 at 7.35pm. Apologies – The chairman, William Sands, Graham Duncanson, Nick Deane, Richard Gay, John Grier, Tom Hume, Anne Kent.

Minutes – A summary of the December meeting with speaker Anna Hill was posted on the club's website. A brief summary was read, and it was agreed that the Vice-Chairman would sign.

New members – Sam Mitchell, of Repps with Bastwick, was proposed by Jon Pye, and seconded by his father John.

Secretary's report – Michael Pollitt invited members to deliver final grain samples for judging for the wheat and barley cups. The chairman has invited Anna Hill as a guest to the annual dinner, which would be held on Wednesday, March 13. He mentioned too that Graham Duncanson had suggested the evening's speaker and agreed to give the vote of thanks. However, the attraction of a skiing holiday proved too tempting! Guest speaker – Henry Lamb, winner of the Young Farm Vet of the Year, and poultry specialist, based at Attleborough, then briefed members about the ongoing "world's worst animal disease epidemic" in wild and farmed birds. He gained knowledge and experience of poultry from the age of 16 and was influenced by the Joice family's enterprise at Raynham, and especially by Nigel and his late son, Patrick. After qualifying, he joined the Attleborough-based Crowshall veterinary practice, which has clients throughout Britain and even into the United States. A part-time lecturer to students at the Royal Veterinary College, he had also advised governments in Rwanda, India, and producers in the northern USA.

Mr Lamb explained the background to this latest outbreak of avian flu, H5N1. One of the biggest challenges in understanding the rapid spread of the disease, especially from eastern Europe, was partly political. A map of Europe showing cases in 2021 and 2022 had virtually no reports from Russia and neighbouring countries. He said that this strain of highly pathogenic H5N1, which has devastated farmed and wild birds across northern Europe, has now spread, most unusually, into South America including Boliva. The scale of mortality was massive in farmed poultry. In the USA, a total of 81,367,877 birds since 2022 were lost across 47 States and in the wild population, it was widespread.

Fortunately, the number of cases in Britain has fallen sharply since October 1 and five have been reported. At this time last year, there had been more than 100 confirmed cases of H5NI strain 2.3.4.4b. In total, there have been 370 confirmed cases since October 2021 with the loss of 8.3 million poultry and probably 500,000 wild birds.

Mr Lamb said from October 2021, it had been found in waterfowl too. One of the biggest challenges to this complex disease spread was the susceptibility of ducks. To add to the veterinary challenge, it was possible for some (farmed) ducks to be infected yet not show any symptoms. Ducks were also highly efficient at potentially spreading the virus.

He said work was progressing at pace to develop a vaccination against H5N1, which was being led in France. Next week, he would be at a conference in Europe for a progress update. While three vaccines were under development, there was no indication of the likely cost and trial results were keenly awaited.

However, he said that probably the best protection for poultry, especially housed birds, was maintaining the highest standards of biosecurity. Evidence has confirmed that 1g of infected bird muck could kill 500,000 birds. So, keeping even the tiniest amount of bird dung outside units was crucial.

Mr Lamb warned poultry producers to maintain the highest biosecurity as the key spring wild bird migration would resume in mid to late February. There were indications that wild birds may have developed some resistance. While a vaccine, if it proves effective, may offer protection from this H5N1, it could be costly and if another strain mutates . . . .

A vote of thanks was given by Polly Papworth and on behalf of North Walsham YFC Alison Saunders.

The meeting closed at 8.55pm.