

STALHAM FARMERS MEETING 11/1/2023

The first meeting of 2023 was held at Rossi's, North Walsham, on Wednesday, January 11, and 27 members and guests enjoyed supper with the chairman, William Sands. Six members of North Walsham Young Farmers' Club joined the speaker, Mr Julian Barnwell, for supper as our guests.

Welcome

The chairman, William Sands, welcomed Mr Barnwell and almost 60 members and guests. It was a pleasure to welcome YFC members to supper again. In addition, YFC members are welcome to attend the club's meetings as guests.

Apologies – Tom Corfield, Greg Smith, Graham Duncanson, Sarah Ellero, Jonathan Pye (vice chairman) and Guy Willetts.

New members – None.

Chairman's remarks – A letter thanking the club for a donation of £500 had been received from Nik Chapman, chief executive of Thetford's Charles Burrell Centre. At last March's meeting, Mr Chapman had outlined the centre's efforts to help the local community. The donation had made it possible to entertain 180 people to a traditional Christmas dinner, with all the trimmings, and also fill further food hampers, which were distributed locally.

Secretary's report – Michael Pollitt highlighted updates on the club's website including offering condolences to Jenny Donald's family. She had died aged 80 on December 20. She had been a great supporter of the club and her late husband, William, had been president and a former chairman.

The total number of visitors to the club's website had topped 250,000 – somewhat surprising given the 150-strong membership of the club.

On another note, he had heard BBC Radio 4 Farming Today's broadcast about probably the country's oldest established agricultural discussion group on Tuesday, January 3. The Gloucestershire group had been founded in 1942 – a mere 101 years after Stalham on December 17, 1841! He had dropped a note to Anna Hill, who had spoken to the club some years ago. Maybe the BBC didn't know that Stoke Ferry Agricultural Society was established in 1930 or some 93 years ago? Incidentally, that treasurer of the society, originally named Stoke Ferry & District Agricultural Discussion Society, was Ken Matthews – judge of Stalham's whole beet competition for many years.

Mr Pollitt apologised for causing confusion in a recent email. For members seeking to update their subscriptions, the Club's bank sort code was 20 99 21, account 40827886. Subscriptions, due annually, on January 1 of £20 were payable – some members were still paying £10pa.

Trophy winners were asked to return silverware at the next meeting, on February 15, ahead of the March annual dinner.

Speaker – Mr Julian Barnwell on "Secrets of the Deep – discovering the wreck of the Gloucester off the Norfolk coast.

A 60-minute presentation by Mr Barnwell on finding the Gloucester, which sank in 45 minutes about 5.30am on May 6, 1682, was a tour de force. The audience was spellbound as he described how he and his younger brother Lincoln found it in early June 2007 – then kept quiet about this remarkable find for the best part of 15 years.

The Duke of York, later King James II (1685 to 1688), had ignored the advice of both the frigate's captain and the local pilot to change course. The vessel, actually built in 1654, hit a sandbank, and in all about 130 people were lost but James escaped through a stern window in his underclothes.

The brothers had set out to find a wreck. Their initial interest was stimulated by reading a definitive listing of all known wrecks off Britain's coast. His brother thought that finding the Gloucester would be a challenge and so it

proved to be. Mixing metaphors, it was the proverbial needle in the haystack and they spent four years, covering 5,000 nautical miles scanning the seabed using magnetometers – able to detect iron – before they found an anomaly lying in international waters – ie beyond the 24-mile limit.

On that remarkable day, Mr Barnwell was unable to dive, so his brother descended. The first sign of success – bizarrely was a brick on the surface! As he explained, when his brother found a wreck site, he started sending up some material from the seabed – hence, the brick. When he ascended an hour later, he told his elder brother: “We’ve got her.”

At that stage, they knew that it was a warship because there were cannon on the sea floor. But it might have been the Kent, which had sunk in 1632. It was only after many further dives that first, definitive proof suggested that the wreck might be the Gloucester. A spoon, dated 1674, was a firm indication but it was several years later, that they found the ship’s bell, dated 1681. Incidentally, the bell is a centrepiece of the major exhibition about the discovery of the Gloucester at the Castle Museum, Norwich, opening next month.

They had found many cannon on the seabed because the Gloucester a third-rate would have had about 58 guns, mostly 9ft long. The small team continued the detailed survey work over the following months and years, limited to a typical dive time of about 45 minutes and governed by tides. It was only possible to dive in slack water because the tidal surges were too strong for diving in safety.

Mr Barnwell and his brother then had many years dealing with Whitehall departments and the joys of bureaucracy. As he explained, they’ve kept the wreck site’s location secret to prevent “grave-robbers” from looting the site. Their view – and government has now backed their position – that the Gloucester’s site must be protected, initially, and then scientifically and carefully fully explored.

To date, they’ve found about 400 artefacts. Of these some 29 of the 160 bottles contained liquid, actually red wine. Several, after analysis, contained English wine!

Given that Henry VIII’s Tudor warship, the Mary Rose, contained some 19,000 artefacts, it is likely that thousands more could be lying under metres of sand. As a UNESCO protected site, any articles found cannot be sold, which presents a challenge as possibly millions of pounds will be needed to house a museum to display the Gloucester’s glories.

After almost 45 minutes of detailed questions, finally the chairman invited Robert Stimpson to give the vote of thanks. Mr Barnwell was presented with two silk ties depicting Stalham’s 1841 swan-necked hoe emblem and North Walsham YFC’s James Hancock thanked the club for its generous hospitality.

The meeting closed at 9.10pm.