

MEETING REPORT 13/11/24

All the King's Horses – behind the scenes The opening meeting of the 2024 winter season was held at Wroxham Barns, NR12 8QU.

The chairman, Jonathan Pye, was supported by a total of 28 members and guests for a supper of shepherd's pie and stick toffee pudding with the guest speaker, Capt Emma Lane-Ley, her husband Cameron and her sister, Victoria.

Welcome – The chairman welcomed about 48 members and guests to the first meeting of the winter season.

Apologies – Christopher Deane, James Taylor, Becky Collen, Greg Smith, Richard Hirst, Jo Willetts, Sam Summers, Richard Baines, Alistair Wright and Tom Hume.

Chairman's report - He said that the joint farm walk at Park Farm, Blickling, with the East Norfolk National Farmers' Union branch by invitation of Tony and Emily Bambridge, had been a great success with almost 100 members and guests in attendance. Tim Papworth regretted that the Eastern Daily Press report of the summer farm walk had not mentioned Emily Bambridge's Haflinger stud. In response, the secretary, Michael Pollitt said that a full report had been submitted to the EDP, which had chosen to remove the reference. The club's website – Meeting Reports – had a full summary of the visit, which had highlighted the Haflinger stud.

The chairman was delighted to announce that Jason Cantrill had agreed to become vice-chairman. Proposed by the president George Gay, seconded by Ken Leggett, there was unanimous support and as there were no other nominations, the decision was confirmed.

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New members – Louis Baugh proposed George and Jane Ritchie, the president-elect of the Aylsham Agricultural Show Association, seconded by Ian Deane. Agreed.

Secretary's update – Michael Pollitt said that the Potato Cup had been judged, thanks to Robin Baines. In addition, the two sugar beet competitions had been judged by Sam Summers. The results would be announced at the club's annual dinner on Wednesday, March 26 by the Lord-Lieutenant of Norfolk, Lady Dannatt. He urged members to submit grain samples – barley and wheat – to Chris Borrett, of Adams & Howling or bring them to the next meeting, which would take place on Wednesday, December 11.

Guest speaker – The chairman welcomed Capt Emma Lane-Ley, of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. Brought up at South Repps, where her parents still live, her early years were surrounded by animals - lambs, pigs, plus horses, dogs, cats and chickens, fish, rabbits etc. It was little surprise that she decided on a veterinary career especially when her local practice, Westover, had been so supportive and gave her first-hand practical experience.

She applied to several veterinary schools, fortunately Nottingham University, which had become the country's eighth, offered a place on the five-year course. Unusually, Nottingham was pioneering a more practical, hands-on teaching regime than the more traditional lecture room focus. After five years' study, she graduated in 2015 having completed placements including with Norfolk-based Westover.

She had joined the East Midlands Officer Training Corps and decided on a career in the Army but managed to break her wrist in her final year which delayed Army selection. In a year out, she worked in the Dubai Equine Hospital as an intern. Then, in 2016, she went to Sandhurst on a 12-week course and was commissioned into the Royal Army Veterinary Corps.

Give her then-considerable equine experience, her first Army posting involved caring for dogs! She also served in Germany before returning to the United Kingdom in 2018. Based in Knightsbridge with the Household Cavalry was a wonderful opportunity to polish her equine skills and then she joined the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery based in Woolwich.

Again, highlights of this posting including preparation for the late Queen Elizabeth's State Funeral and then more recently, the King's Coronation.

As she explained, the King's Troop was virtually on a state of constant readiness for taking part in major State ceremonial events. When the late Queen's death was announced, the King's Troop had just hours to perform the formal "Death Gun Salute to mark the Monarch's passing. It was especially challenging because most of the troopers were on leave and even some horses had to be brought back from the field. But, again, it all went smoothly.

Capt Lane-Ley's enthusiasm for her chosen career was inspiring and also illustrated the range of opportunities in today's Army. As a veterinary surgeon, she really enjoyed the challenge of working with horses and explained some of the background to selecting the right horses for the different squadrons or sections of the King's Troop. It was proving more challenging, especially sourcing replacement top-quality horses from the Republic of Ireland.

It also gave her the opportunity to ride in central London, down the Mall and in front of Buckingham Palace during the Covid lockdown and seeing the capital through her horse's ears. And she met her husband Cameron, also then a fellow Army officer.

She was especially pleased that one of her charges was nominated for a leading award. Yogi (officially Lord Firebrand) was awarded the PDSA's Order of Merit – effectively the animals' OBE – earlier this autumn. The 15-year-old horse, which was retired in December 2023, had led the procession of the late Queen's procession from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Hill. He was a real character, who seemed to "grow" a couple of inches as he undertook his leading roles, she said.

Her next posting involves a return to the Army Defence Training Regiment at Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. With a total of around 1,000 dogs in the Army's ranks performing a range of key duties including bomb searches and security, it is quite a responsibility. But her more immediate task is to buy a pram, she said.

She was thanked by Ann Coller, of Westover vets, who said that her enthusiasm and obvious enjoyment of her chosen career was an inspiration.

Thanks too to Cameron Lane-Ley for setting up the projector, which was loaned by the East Norfolk NFU branch. The meeting ended at 8.50pm.

The next meeting – Wednesday, December 11, when Geoff Turner will be talking about the Happisburgh lighthouse.