



IAgrM National Farm Walk 2019

On Thursday 3rd of October members attended the Annual National Farm Walk at Courteenhall Estate in Northamptonshire. Martin Wilkinson, Senior Lecturer in Finance and Farm Economics and the outgoing Chairman of Institute kicked off the day with an update of the Institutes current affairs, events and activities followed by the AGM. We welcomed the new chairman of the Institute Mark Robins in his new role for the next two years as well as introducing our hosts for the day Johnny Wake and Charlie Reynolds.

Courteenhall Estate has been in the Wake family since the seventeenth century, with four generations of the family currently living and working on the estate. The estate has gradually built its farming business to farm progressively, efficiently and environmentally both for itself and on a contractual basis for local farmers. This traditional but modern estate consists of farming, property, events and commercial ventures, all of which complements their location adjoining Northampton and the M1.

We started the farm walk with presentations of the various aspects of the estate from both Johnny and Charlie ranging from the main house, stables and park, the home farm as well as the new poultry unit to encompass all the estate has to offer. The estate farms approximately 850ha in hand of cereals, oilseeds and pulses plus additional contract farming services including whole farm contracting.



On our first stop we all embarked on 3 x tractors and trailers where we were shown around the grounds overlooking the park and main house. The grade II* listed house is now a popular venue for weddings and commercial events as well as a filming location. Johnny expressed the popularity of the site and hoped to boost this side of the business further, creating a front of house aspect to the estate which would complement it's working part of the estate. The idea being to create a synergy between estate enterprises to complement each other and ultimately spread risk and create other sources of income for the whole business. An

excellent example of this working on the estate was as we drove by multiple rooftop solar arrays generating electricity and being fed into the poultry unit.



Next stop was the newly built poultry unit consisting of 4 units housing around 185,000 birds reared for meat production. The new site was in its first month of operation with the aim of seven crops per year supplying Avara Foods. Once we had all made our way through biosecurity, we were shown the some of the latest technology installed for rearing poultry from start to finish in the most efficient productive and high welfare way. State of the art ventilation systems combined with ground source heat technology and underfloor heating meant that the environment inside the sheds could be completely controlled even at the coldest times of year. This would ensure the birds were always comfortable whilst growing at their optimum rate as well as being managed by professional staff who were clearly passionate about rearing and delivering a quality product. The new site is aiming to enable lower rearing costs and return higher margins to ensure enterprise viability and long-term sustainability for the estate. Enterprise integration between the arable and poultry has meant that all manure can be spread on the estate reducing inorganic fertilisers as well as the arable enterprise supplying its own home-crops as a cheaper and more sustainable source of feed.



We then moved onto the main farming site where the machinery, grain storage and handling facilities were based. There we met the rest of the farm's team with Charlie explaining the benefits of only growing crops that they can achieve premium prices either by quality of the grains/seeds or the location/proximity to market. He also explained how the farm has utilised offsite storage for much of their crops at Camgrain and how they use their on-site storage to suit their immediate harvest needs. The farm also undertakes gross margin mapping to highlight areas of the farm that financially and environmentally might be better suited to being in an environmental scheme rather than growing crops. They were also proud to highlight their strong environmental focus being part of a stewardship scheme which brings huge benefits for pollinators and biodiversity on the estate. The farming estate itself operates a Controlled Traffic Farming (CTF) system which is hoped to encourage less compaction, better yields, lower inputs and reduces the number of passes. This system as a result reduces establishment costs within each field and improves soil health to ensure better crop margins on the farming estate. Furthermore, the farming enterprise actively undertakes benchmarking to compare its growing costs as well as being part of a buying group for purchasing inputs which has allowed them to be in the top 25% against other farms benchmarked.



One thing that was clear from our day on the estate is the emphasis on encouraging attention to detail combined with a capable and professional team. The use of precision farming and benchmarking to inform clear business decisions meant that each farming enterprise complemented each other in spreading risk but to also strive for those marginal gains to improve overall profitability. Finally, by encouraging the environmental practices with that of the renewable energy has enabled long term farm business sustainability, that ensures Courteenhall Estate can remain viable for the future custodians of the estate.

The farm walk offered all those who attended a glimpse into a traditional estate adopting a modern forward-thinking approach to estate management. Courteenhall Estate offers much insight into what can be possible if you make the most of location, opportunities and attention to detail.

Daniel Liddell – CMI AgrM

