



Testimonials – Oxford Farming Conference bursaries



BEN PARKER (2020)

The theme of this year's Oxford Farming Conference was 'Growing a healthy society' this was a timely theme given some of the challenges faced by UK agriculture. Namely how to feed a growing population with ever changing dietary requirements and choices, while trying to adapt to increasing environmental pressures and changing government policy. Attending the conference as a Scholar was a great honour and showed me first-hand how the industry is preparing to tackle these challenges and more.

The scholars programme introduced me to many other like-minded young people working across all aspects of UK agriculture. From farmers like myself, dairy scientists, land agents and farm consultants to agricultural commodities. Making these new contacts and meeting other conference delegates was a fantastic opportunity for my personal development and business growth in the future. I am also proud to now call many of them friends and found everybody at the conference, including speakers very happy to chat.

It is difficult to pick one favourite highlight from the conference as there were so many wonderful sessions. I very much enjoyed the science lecture by Professor Alice Stanton on food quality and human health. This highlighted the need to enjoy a healthy balanced diet that includes red meat. It was especially refreshing to hear this and see scientific data to back it up and learn how farmers can play their part in this. It certainly made me smile.

I was very much looking forward to the politics session and it did not disappoint. It was great to listen to Minette Batters of the NFU champion British agriculture and say there is 'nothing more important than food' This was followed by Craig Bennet from Friends of the Earth discussing the environmental impact of agriculture but also very interestingly how Agriculture can be part of the solution to climate change. Next we heard from Professor Fiona Smith who considered how agricultural trade could look after Brexit. We then awaited the response from the Defra secretary Theresa Villiers MP. Theresa explained the new Agriculture Bill and what new farm support will look like. As well as the very welcome line 'This government will always back British farmers.'

It was a real pleasure to attend that evenings debate at the Oxford Union. 'This house believes cheap food is worth the price' All the speakers were fantastic and very thought provoking. It was great also to have the Princess Royal in attendance here and a real highlight to have her as after dinner speaker in the magical setting of Christchurch hall afterward.

I also attended fringe events focusing on agricultural data and how this can be used on farm were very useful for business in the future. Another very interesting fringe event was on carbon capture and mitigation particularly as this will form part of the new government agricultural policy. The Barclays business breakfast provided more networking and it was great to see how banks are here to support farmers. I also particularly enjoyed the crossover event between the two conferences – The Great wine debate it was great to hear and sample how the UK wine industry is growing alongside my fellow Yorkshire delegates.

Attending the Oxford Farming conference was a fantastic personal and professional opportunity and one for which I am very grateful. I would hope to be able to attend again in the future.

NICK GRAYSON (2020)

Each January the Future Farmers of Yorkshire group sponsor a select number of members to attend the Oxford Farming Conference. But the rival Oxford Real Farming Conference is fast gaining in popularity, so this year Future Farmers thought they'd do something different.

Stoking the fire of competition, they sent two Future Farmers to each event. Getting off the farm isn't something that happens very often, so when I got the opportunity to go to the Oxford Farming Conference, I jumped at the chance.



I run our tenanted farm near Rotherham with my wife Carys and two young sons. We farm 150 acres of arable land, a herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle, a few rare-breed sheep and pigs and at Christmas we have plenty of turkeys to keep us busy. Our main passions are supplying local meat to the surrounding areas and farming using sustainable practises.

My family started producing Christmas turkeys on this farm in 1929 and we have carried on ever since. More recently we have introduced lamb and pork boxes – sausages and bacon have proved a hit on Sunday mornings! Given our interest in sustainability, diversification and local supply chains, the line up at OFC was right up our street.

The Scholars programme kicked off last November with a visit to OSI in Scunthorpe, the main processing plant for McDonald's burgers and what an eye-opening experience. I am still quoting all the facts and figures about the McDonalds business to anyone who will listen. We even had a go at constructing our own Big Mac and I can confirm nothing is added and they are definitely 100% Irish or British Beef.

Fast forward to the conference in January and I arrived at my room in Christchurch College ready to learn, network and, of course, have fun! Speakers of note for me included Professor Alice Stanton, Minette Batters and Henry Dimbleby.

Professor Alice Stanton discussed the health implications of vegan diets which can consist of highly processed food. Minette Batters gave an uplifting speech around ensuring food with lower production standards isn't imported into the UK, post Brexit. Finally, restoring the environment was the main topic for Henry Dimbleby – for someone in the early stages of their farming career, this challenge is something I find very exciting.

To top it off, as we all left to make our way home, we were serenaded by Extinction Rebellion protestors singing "if you want to be our farmer" to the tune of the popular Spice Girls song!

The whole OFC experience was truly inspiring, from the setting to the speakers and sessions. During the diverse and engaging programme, I made some fantastic connections, along with making new friends, catching up with old friends and, of course, sampling one or two beers at the rowing club!



SARAH HUNT (2019)

When the Yorkshire Agricultural Society Farming Networks Newsletter landed in my inbox, I noticed that I was quickly approaching the upper end of the age range for their scholarships to the Oxford Farming Conference (OFC), so decided it was now or never. I turned on the laptop, updated my CV and wrote a covering letter. I was surprised and delighted to hear I had been awarded the scholarship and my employer was also very supportive.

The scholarship started with a scholar's day in November at Martin Brower Distribution centre in Manchester. This was an opportunity to meet fellow scholars and hear about the conference from some of the OFC directors.

At the conference, The World Beyond Brexit was an interesting session and was probably one of my favourites, because it was looking to the future and looking for opportunity. The world will still have a growing population after Brexit and people will still need food, so although how businesses operate may be need to change slightly, I believe there is still a place for good farming businesses.

Sir Lockwood Smith was a highlight of my OFC experience, he was positive and inspirational and having been through the demise of farming subsidies in New Zealand, he is well placed to offer advice to UK farmers.

It was a fabulous opportunity to hear world leaders' views, especially when there are turbulent political times ahead. There was such a diverse range of speakers and topics that anyone with a business interest in agriculture would benefit from attending.

I really enjoyed my time at the OFC. It was very thought provoking and I think UK farming has a strong future, providing farmers look at their trades as businesses and make good business decisions and not decisions based on emotions.

Three strong messages that I have left the conference with are firstly, you are not going to fix a problem without educating, secondly, analysis of data is the key to developing and strengthening a business and, finally, the future is serving the market place.

The title of the conference was World of Opportunity and the conference definitely had a global feel to it. I left feeling that UK farmers need to embrace the changes coming and remain world leaders in agriculture.

RICHARD PEARS (2019)

The quality and depth of the learning and networking opportunities that were offered to me over the course of the conference meant I was not disappointed.

Brexit, and the opportunity for minimising fluctuations and maintaining growth in the agricultural industry in a climate of both uncertainty and change were central themes throughout the conference.

As a scholar the conference kicked off with a workshop on Wednesday lunchtime. This was an opportunity to meet the rest of the scholars and emerging leaders with a brief introduction to interviews and dealing with the media run by Anna Hill. Press skills are not commonly associated with



a career in agriculture but I found this workshop to be invaluable and feel emboldened to be able to engage with the media more positively in the promotion of our industry going forward.

The conference began in earnest with a politics panel entitled 'The Governments plan for British farming', the headline speaker in this session was Michael Gove Secretary of State for agriculture. The Secretary of State used the platform to stress the importance of taking a long view to agriculture, and to explain his view that we are at 'the dawn of the fourth agricultural revolution' which would be underpinned by AI, robots and big data analysis.

His speech, unsurprisingly, covered many of the themes central to the proposed domestic agriculture bill, including, food security, the environment, rural economy, and consumer health. Minette Batters, President of the NFU spoke of the risks and opportunities presented to the industry by the new trade and agriculture bills.

Dr David Drew, Shadow Secretary of State, reiterated the need for budget security and putting agriculture at the heart of the agriculture bill, emphasising the potential for agriculture to be a cross party issue. D

An incredible line up of speakers meant that I can genuinely say that I found value in every session that I attended.

Although the full value of the scholar experience for me was found in the opportunity to engage with, meet and talk to key figures within the industry and to be invigorated by the positive and forward looking atmosphere of the conference as a whole.

My experience as a scholar has made me feel better equipped, more informed and increasingly confident in the British agricultural sector's ability to not only weather but embrace political and technological change. I am greatly indebted to the Yorkshire Agricultural Society for their generous sponsorship that enabled me to attend the conference.



SARAH DEAN (2019)

Attending the Oxford Farming Conference, entitled 'A World of Opportunity', was a great opportunity. I was very grateful to the Yorkshire Agricultural Society for kindly sponsoring me.

There were several themes that stood out to me throughout the conference across the various talks and debates.

Educating the next generation is clearly so important – If we are to feed an expanding population we not only need to inspire more people to work within the industry but they need to be skilled, innovative and knowledgeable. Whether they are from a farming background or are unconnected to agriculture, but have an interest in it, the introduction of an optional GCSE in agriculture would be a great opportunity to make agriculture more mainstream and bring more talented people into the workforce.

Another point that was mentioned was a lack of education in informing the general public of where their food comes from and

therefore this is seeing the increase of Veganism and Vegetarianism. If more people were educated as to the welfare systems in place in the UK, they would understand that the animals are looked after incredibly well and there would not be the farm animals in the countryside without farmers.

Technology – Technology and artificial intelligence is advancing at a rapid rate which brings lots of opportunities to agriculture; Dr Matt Smith, director of business development at Microsoft spoke about various projects that he was

involved in. One project that he showed us working was a camera system that could identify intruders in a livestock shed (anything that was not the animal in said shed). This could help with; preventing rural crime, identifying other animal species that have been in contact with the livestock and antis sabotaging (setting farmers up to fail).

Data – I attended the fringe event hosted by Map Of Ag, a business that is able to provide a dashboard so that a farming business can keep a closer eye on production figures, compliance, animal health and welfare. They commented that often farmers have all this information but find difficulty in accessing it and pulling it all together into a platform and utilising it.

Sir Charles Burrell spoke about rewilding as an alternative income option, his strategy to do this started by benchmarking his wheat yields with others and due to his high clay soils he was achieving approximately two tonnes less than the average per hectare. The alternative income talks were all very interesting, some more practical and had the ability to be able to be transferred onto the average farm, others more impractical and only to suit a small percentage.

Over the three days of the conference there were many opportunities to network with a great breadth of people throughout the agriculture industry. The Yorkshire Agricultural Society kindly signed us up to all of the optional fringe events so our diary was full and we utilised the time we were in Oxford appropriately.