

Pete Meadows (2023)



This was ‘Take Two’ of the Oxford Farming Conference for me, and like all the great sequels – Shrek 2, The Dark Knight and The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King – it took all the best bits of the first attempt and added a whole lot more. With Covid getting in the way of an in-person event last year we were incredibly fortunate that McDonald’s and the Future Farmers permitted us to return for a second bite of the apple.

This year’s focus was on ‘Farming a new Future’ with noticeable themes on sustainability, regenerative farming methods and what ‘the farm’ in the future will look like. Even the debate was about whether there would still need to be humans on farms in the next generation. Fortunately for all of us, and despite some brilliant opposing arguments on the influence of technology and struggles with labour availability, we will still be needed in the future!

The Minister of State for DEFRA, Mark Spencer MP was clearly delighted to be able to speak at the conference, leaning heavily on his farming heritage and involvement in Young Farmers. He was able to bring some nuggets of good news, with increased payment rates in Countryside Stewardship and he beat the drum that the new schemes will deliver on government targets. There was however broad scepticism from the audience that this went either far enough

or had enough meat on the bones to really make a tangible impact to farmers on the ground.

Fortunately, there was a plethora of insightful speakers to give optimism on the future of British Farming. From the importance of dung beetles to a co-founder of the Eden Project giving a passionate ‘rant’ which when paraphrased suggested if you want something ‘go out and make it happen’. Anne, the Princess Royal gave a brilliantly insightful and beautifully witty speech, and I would argue she has worked tirelessly to showcase the success stories and to champion British Agriculture more than any other over the last 70-odd years.

The inspiring, speakers session on Friday brought forward a brilliant mix of passionate success stories from around the UK. Salih Hodzhov convinced the whole audience of the absolute need for not only diversity on UK farms but flying the flag for bringing in labour from countries where the skills and enthusiasm exists by the bucket load.

Samantha Kinghorn MBE brought it all into stark perspective by telling her amazing story in overcoming adversity when she lost all use of her legs in a farming accident, subsequently driving on with unwavering determination to achieve multiple Gold medals at both European and World levels in wheelchair racing. This taught us all that life can be short or life can be long, so why do something you don’t enjoy?

Yet for me the greatest part was to get to know the other scholars and meet a huge range of people to learn from their experiences. All this to allow me to bring a wave of ideas and options on the way forward back to what I am doing day to day; all made possible by the Future Farmers. So why wait: go and get it!



Tom Holliday (2023)



At the start of January, I was fortunate enough to be offered a scholarship to be able to attend Oxford Farming Conference 2023 on the McDonalds Scholarship programme, all thanks to the Future Farmers of Yorkshire.

The programme initially involved a two-day trip down to London in October with the other scholars for a leadership and networking event – this involved a presentation from McDonalds, McCain Foods, Mike Duxbury from Inclusive farm, and also a visit to the Houses of Parliament where we had a tour and a Q&A session with Robbie Moore, MP for Keighley and Ilkley.

This was an excellent event which allowed everybody to get to know each other before the conference.

At the conference, I was impressed with the range of interesting topics that were discussed and how significant the changes to agriculture are going to be.

A key point that I took away from the conference was that by 2050, all the world's forests would have to be destroyed to create enough land to feed the world if we don't change our current ways of farming and consuming.

In addition to all the amazing industry speakers, I was also particularly struck by the speech that Paralympian Samantha Kinghorn gave.

Samantha had an accident on-farm as a teenager which led to her being paralysed from the waist down.

Hearing her story was incredibly inspiring and showed us all that life can change completely at any moment. So, why bother wasting your time doing something you don't love?

The take home summary I had from the Oxford Farming Conference 2023 is that there are a lot of major challenges that the world faces – population growth, food demand, climate change and the biodiversity crisis. These are all incredibly difficult issues to tackle with no immediate answer.

The conference highlighted that agriculture is where the solution starts for a lot of these issues. To help solve these challenges, it is clear that we need to attract more people into the industry to help bring new talent, ideas and hopefully a diversity of solutions.

By doing so, this should help to create a much more resilient food system and climate going forward. Feeding the growing planet is going to be a huge opportunity for our industry as the global population continues to grow.

I left the conference feeling inspired, motivated, and grateful to have the opportunity to be working in such an exciting and developing industry.



Joe Weston (2023)



I was fortunate to be offered a place to the Oxford Farming Conference on the Scholars program through Future Farmers for 2022 but the impact of coronavirus meant the Conference was restricted to online form.

Regardless, it still proved to be informative and thought-provoking, even with my collie voicing her opinion at irritating regularity.

Fortunately, I was able to attend the in-person event in 2023 as a ‘roll over’ scholar and finally tread the hallowed halls of Oxford University, mixing with incredibly esteemed company while eating a chocolate pudding underneath a T-Rex.

The theme was ‘farming a new future’, which to me exemplifies what I understand to be the spirit behind the conference. A chance to look beyond the commonly accepted and discuss how things should or could be done in a forum that embraces our industry’s need to change and challenges us to be the best food producers we can be.

The quality of the speakers was testament to this, with some particularly inspiring stories emerging from the ‘Farming Innovation’ and ‘Inspiring Farmers’ sessions, as well as Jane Davidson discussing her ‘Well-being of Future Generations Act’. The debate held in the Oxford Union debate chamber was successful in honouring all that was promised of it. The discussion over whether farms would require

a human presence in 50 years was argued well from both sides and instigated a great deal more discussion from the packed audience.

I sometimes find trying to process what I’ve learnt at events such as this difficult. This isn’t a technical event where you come away with a very tangible action point you can put in place next week, nor is it a machinery show where you come away with a new toy that will revolutionise how you carry out a particular task.

The day after I got back, we were scanning ewes and this isn’t something we’re very big on, in fact it was tried once some years ago and abandoned for the following year. However, my partner and I are keen to try and become as efficient a team as possible this lambing time and we think that scanning is the first step on that journey, so we made an executive decision.

For us this is progress, it isn’t progressive, but it is progress, and progress is different for everyone and all that matters is that we are making some. When you look through the list of speakers all of them have made it to the front of their respective fields though a series of small steps. The incredibly emotive talk by Samantha Kinghorn about her journey from paralysis in a farm accident at 14 to becoming a double Paralympic medallist by 25 highlighted just this point.

I guess events such as the Oxford Farming Conference exist to stimulate discussions and make us question how we could make that step change. It doesn’t have to be big. It might be something seemingly innocuous but if you get the opportunity to attend Oxford, I’d highly recommend it. It might just give you the motivation you need.



Joe Weston (2022)



Back in January I was lucky enough to be offered a place to attend this year's Oxford Farming Conference thanks to the Future Farmers of Yorkshire.

Every year I try to keep up with the event, living vicariously through the many attendees Twitter accounts, marvelling at the grand halls, sharp debate and rooms full of the greatest minds in agriculture, and this all looked so promising until the eleventh hour.

Unfortunately, the in-person event became yet another victim of Coronavirus and instead of treading the hallowed halls of Oxford I was to participate from my slightly more modest living room, I'm not even sure I was the sharpest mind in that room either.

Despite the obvious difficulties the Conference Committee delivered a seamless event that drew an array of speakers from all over the globe and covered so many of the topics that are set to impact our industry.

Dame Ellen MacArthur delivered a great piece on her work on the 'circular economy', her desire to move to an economy that doesn't just reduce waste but doesn't generate it at all, and a world where the by-product of one process is the input of the next. I would argue that many good farming businesses are already reliant upon similar

cyclical processes without even being aware of it, but there is still a long way to go. However, transition to such systems must be backed up with metrics, as sustainability continues to have greater bearing within the market those at the front will be rewarded.

Secretary of state George Eustice informed us all of his most up to date plans of phasing out subsidy for land ownership or tenure as part of the future of agricultural policy.

The Sustainable Farming Incentive will be extended to incentivise IPM and 'sensitive hedgerow management'. What is 'sensitive hedgerow management'? To me it means cutting annually, removing one year's growth at a time, encouraging the hedge to increase in density rather than branch out and become a thin shelter-less environment.

I fear it will be interpreted as cutting on two or three year rotations, these hedges are brutally thrashed back to the woody, uninhabitable stumps that farmers are vilified for in social media. If it is securing food sources for wild birds that is the intention I would suggest that extended the hedge cutting season would be the more sensitive approach.

The recurring theme for me was the fundamental difference between stakeholder's points of view, so often speakers and panellists would use different words but mean the same thing, i.e. regenerative, sustainable, and environmentally friendly. Is the IPM approach just another facet of regenerative agriculture?

Encouraging soil health as part of the SFI by discouraging inversion tillage is fine but Professor Sarah Bridle suggested that a microwaved baked potato was one of the more sustainable meals we could

choose. How many potatoes are planted without a plough or a bed tiller? Those with a focus on regenerative agriculture would encourage us to use more FYM and incorporate livestock into the rotation but those whose focus is on greenhouse gas emissions seem sure that ruminants pose a significant concern.

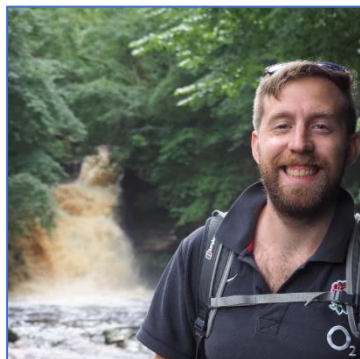
The conference could not possibly have answered all the questions asked of both UK and global agriculture, however, it provided all the

attendees with a great deal to think about. There is currently a significant disconnect in the messages we are receiving because each stakeholder has their own bias and personal influences.

I quite like the phrase ‘the more you learn, the less you know’, I came away from the conference feeling rather bewildered so sure that must mean that I’d learnt something?



PETE MEADOWS (2022)



At a time when the agricultural industry is going through the biggest revolution since the Second World War, the Oxford Farming Conference’s theme this year of ‘Routes to Resilience’ seemed incredibly apt. The conference, as in

previous years, included an incredible line up of speakers from across the UK and around the world.

With a clear driver of government policy towards reducing emissions, reaching net zero and the restoration of wildlife, the undercurrent of information shone on ways in which changes are likely to influence and impact us going forward.

Much of the information at the conference revolved around new data and information seeping down from research and policy.

With the opportunities to farmers and land managers spreading beyond the traditional income streams into carbon markets, the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Environment Land Management Schemes, Biodiversity Net Gain and woodland options, it can be difficult to know which way to turn.

For me, a key take home was to sit tight until more information presents itself and the true value of the goods and services held in the soil on farm comes to light.

Henry Dimbleby, who authored The National Food Strategy, spoke about the need for government policy to improve food nutrition standards, reduce the burden of obesity related diseases affecting the NHS and to maximise the markets of high-quality British produce.

Listening to the 'Inspiring Farmers' section was brilliant to hear how farmers are challenging the norms and pushing boundaries whilst sticking to their roots.

With George Eustice setting out DEFRA's plans to increase payment rates for Countryside Stewardship and the next steps for the environmental schemes, the industry will be keen to see how this develops going forward.

It was also fascinating to hear from commentators outside the industry including Dame Ellen MacArthur who spoke passionately about the works that are being done to reduce carbon in a circular economy and integrating regenerative farming principles into the wider socio-economic landscape. The conference also provided a great opportunity to make new connections, even if virtually this was

more difficult than it would have been in person. Being able to expand my knowledge around some of the key themes and listen to experts in their fields talk energetically about the huge advancements in knowledge and technology gave me great optimism for the future.

There are many obstacles facing farmers today, just as in years gone by, but the options available to grow with the technology, diversified income streams and ever-increasing efficiencies of our farming systems it makes it an exciting time to be a part of the industry.

I would like to thank the Future Farmers of Yorkshire and the Yorkshire Agricultural Society for this incredible opportunity and would wholeheartedly recommend that everyone grasps at the incredible events and bursaries which Future Farmers offer. 🚜

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.

Testimonials – Oxford Farming Conference bursaries

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, Future Farmers 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. 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. Prof 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.

There were several themes that stood out to me throughout the conference across the various talks and debates. Firstly, 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 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 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, there were many opportunities to network with a great breadth of people throughout the agriculture industry.

