

My perspective of the Oxford Farming Conference 2012

John Jaques, Royal Agricultural College – Volac Scholar

As a scholar attending the Oxford Farming Conference 2011 I was very fortunate to experience many great aspects that the Conference has to offer for the 'next generation' entering the agricultural sector.

Once signed in on the Tuesday afternoon, I attended the 2nd of 3 fringe meetings. It was hosted by Sainsbury's, titled: Increasing and securing supply in a rapidly changing environment. I believed their '20by20' target showed a large amount of commitment to the future of British agriculture; including sustainability for their current 17,000 UK suppliers, importance of animal welfare and water management. I thought the quote 'if you don't measure it, you can't manage it' summed up the presentation perfectly.

The fringe meetings were followed by a Speakers, Scholars and Sponsors reception. This was the first chance to speak to some of the other scholars of the conference and gain an insight into the varied backgrounds that they had within the industry. As a current university student it was great to see that some of the scholars were already in work and had been sponsored by local charities, organisations and companies to attend; therefore having a different perspective of what they wanted to gain from the 3 days. This was followed by the conference reception, which gave me the opportunity to meet Andy Richardson of Volac, the sponsors of my ticket.

Charles Collingwood concluded the first day, after the Pre Conference Dinner, with a light hearted view on Agriculture from the perspective of Brian Aldridge from BBC's Radio 4's; The Archers. He emphasised the role the soap opera plays in portraying agriculture to the public, reporting on important past events, such as the catastrophic effect of the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001.

I found the Wednesday offered a good array of speakers including Dr Joseph Glauber's speech on sustainable intensification (an on-going message throughout the conference), along with other Global and US perspectives and developments; such as the Green Food policy and the important role that Biofuels play. The Frank Parkinson Lecture also stretched my mind with the question: 'Have emerging markets already emerged? Stressing the importance of food security, how world trade is market may change in the next 30 years and do they require political change.

After lunch I found the talk about the PIGiS programme very interesting, an inspiration for change within the industry; which aids, rather than hinder, a farm of any size. The importance of individual animal/carcass management was also the subject of Nigel Lok, a South African dairy farmer. This was followed by the scholar's workshop. I found this a brilliant addition to the conference. The number of scholars at the workshop showed the confidence that is displayed towards the 'next generation', another opportunity to discuss the different perspectives of important issues facing the industry in the forthcoming year, along with the emphasised importance towards education and work place mentoring.

In the evening I thoroughly enjoyed the debate, and the arguments expressed for and against the statement: This House believes British Agriculture could thrive outside the EU. I thought that there were many excellent arguments expressed throughout the debate, by an array of different perspectives on the current systems, making the decision to walk out of the 'Aye' or 'Nay' door a hard decision. The unexpected result, after the initial support being behind the opposing speakers, was announced at the Post debate supper, set in the impressive setting of Christ Church College.

The dinner provided another excellent opportunity for me to be able to talk to people who are already working in the industry. The variety of people I met throughout the meals and the entirety conference, made the experience even more enjoyable, along with the feeling assurance and encouragement from other delegates.

The final day opened with session three, which centred round the theme of Power in Global Agriculture. This included the dominance of corporate power and many perceptions mixed in with some interesting statistics and graphs. I found Caroline Spelman had a lot of interesting views about the relationships between food security and climate change, scientific break-through and developments and how the sector must become more sustainable and competitive. She was followed by a number of case studies, providing a number of insights into agricultural developments throughout the UK, and further afield. This acted as a small insight into sustainable intensification opportunities within the industry, and another chance to emphasise the importance of knowledge transfer throughout worldwide agriculture to face the future demands of a growing population.

I found the final session a very important conclusion to the conference, tying back into the fringe meeting that had started my conference experience. This included a subject that I think is a key aspect of the future of UK farming – public perception. This was featured within the opening speaker from 'Which' Magazine, along with food safety and labelling. As a McCain's Scholar at the Royal Agricultural College, I thoroughly enjoyed Nick Vermont's speech of MCCain Foods Ltd. and the importance that grower groups have in security of supply within the company. The session, and conference, was concluded by an impressive slide show on behalf of the British Retail Consortium; emphasising sector influence, biodiversity, waste and the importance of producer groups.

I felt the scholars got a lot of support throughout the conference, and this particularly evidential at the Oxtail dinner that concluded the conference. I was fortunate to gain a last minute place to attend, which completed the entire experience for me. The small group that attended introduced themselves individually, discussed the proceedings of the conference and expressed ideas for next year. Each scholar had the chance to say what they felt they had gained from the past 3 days, along a chance to thank all of those that had supported us.

I personally felt that I gained from meeting a large variety of people involved in the industry, whilst in a relaxed environment, and more importantly widening my view on the future and challenges of exciting times ahead of me in my career. Furthermore, the views expressed in the panel discussions gave a greater in depth view of what had been said in the sessions, and showed the passion for a greater, in depth, understanding of the sector by all attending.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone whose hard work went in to organising the Oxford Farming Conference, and especially Volac for sponsoring my place on a conference, and would highly recommend anyone in agriculture to attend in the future.