

Oxford Farming Conference 2013

Laura Thompson – Oxfordshire Agricultural Society Trust Scholar

When I heard through Oxfordshire Young Farmers that there was an opportunity to attend the Oxford Farming Conference as a Scholar immediately, I requested an application form and submitted my application to the Oxfordshire Agricultural Society Trust.

I had read reports from scholars in previous years and was both anxious and excited as I arrived in Oxford for the start of the 2012 conference. After registering, I attended two of the three fringe events, the first of which addressed the contribution made by science to agricultural sustainability. This included a discussion on genetic modification and the challenge of integration with the consumer. This was to set the tone for the whole conference. The second fringe meeting I attended covered the role of trees in supporting sustainable intensification. I had been surprised to see some familiar faces at these events and I met a few other scholars as well.

The afternoon's fringe meetings had left us all feeling very positive about the future of agriculture, a feeling that grew at the Chairman's Reception for Speakers, Scholars and Patrons. It was fantastic to be part of a room full of young people, who had a passion for agriculture and the support of the individuals and corporations who were welcoming us. From the reception, we went to the Town Hall for the Pre Conference Dinner which was an honour in itself to dine in such a beautiful room. After dinner Lord Henry Plumb shared with us some highlights from his many years experience and took questions on his view of the future.

In an effort to make the most of OFC we were up in good time for Morning Prayer, unfortunately, we followed a group of people from Morning Prayer who weren't heading to the Clydesdale Bank Breakfast and by the time we realised our mistake we were too late to head back! I did, however, make it to the conference opening in good time and took my seat, as coincidence would have it, next to a farmer from Oxfordshire! The morning session on politics flew past with speakers of very high regard including the Rt Hon Owen Paterson, Mairead McGuinness and the Hon John Luxton. It was pleasing to hear such influential figures voicing genuine concerns over issues such as rural broadband and accepting that innovation was necessary to keep British agriculture at the forefront. It was also pleasing to hear that 88% of the general public feel that farming is very beneficial to the countryside, a sign that the hard work is paying off.

The reminders at the beginning of each session to ensure phones were on silent but to keep tweeting inspired me to get on twitter (@DinkyThompson) and I was able to follow other views on what was going on at #ofc2013. It was quite apt that the second part of the morning session was entitled 'A Changing Perspective' where we heard from environmental campaigner Mark Lynas. Yet again the subject of the conference came to genetic modification and we learnt that you are more likely to be hit by an asteroid than hurt by GM, we were also reminded that people have died from organic food (think back to killer bean-sprouts in 2011).

After lunch we were joined by Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal and the introduction came via video from His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. The title of the report presented in the afternoon was 'What do UK farmers deliver to society?' and aside from the obvious landscape and livestock it was interesting to hear that approximately 10% of the population regularly connect with farming in other ways than eating food. We then heard from Tom Heap, BBC Presenter, Ian Pigott, LEAF demonstration farmer and Matthew Taylor, CEO, RSA who gave their views of the report. For me the resounding message came from Tom Heap who commented that farmers offer 'Salvation from Starvation'.

Whilst the other delegates prepared themselves for the debate, scholars were invited to a workshop sponsored by McDonalds where we worked in groups to address issues facing the industry. An introductory talk from James Price encouraged us to use our passion and enthusiasm whilst we still had it, to say yes to every opportunity available and to build and use our networks no matter how clichéd that may seem. My group worked with James and Howard Gray of McDonalds to discuss the question 'How can we challenge outdated perceptions and raise the profile of farming as a progressive industry?' We discussed how the use of farmers in adverts did not always paint the industry in its best light (I am thinking of a certain Specsavers advert where the elderly, bearded hill sheep farmer clipped his dog by mistake!), how the media were quick to publish emotive and fact-less articles and how farmers themselves often fail to connect with the wider community. At the end of the discussion we were once again joined by Princess Anne who listened to our presentations and advised us to make the most of the opportunities we are given and to ask questions.

With this in mind we all headed to the Oxford Union for the debate where the motion 'This House believes economies of scale in agriculture are overstated – size is not important' was debated. Strong arguments were put forward for both sides and I took the final opportunity to speak for the opposition which was a nerve-racking and unforgettable opportunity. The result, revealed at the post debate supper, was that the motion was overturned by a majority of 105 votes. Christchurch was a fitting venue to end the day's formalities and the Post Debate Supper and drinks offered a wonderful opportunity to talk to the industries leaders.

Friday saw another early start with the RSPB Early Bird Breakfast followed by a session on Technology and Innovation. We heard from Professor Maurice Maloney, Rothamsted Research, Mark Smith, Genus and Jake Freestone, Farmer and Nuffield Scholar who all shattered any preconceptions of the farming industry being simple. It was interesting to hear how the dairy industry is at the forefront of genetic improvement with 60-70% improved genetics used where the beef sector is left behind at 5-7% showing the trend for extensive production systems. It concerned me to hear that 20% of the milk produced globally is from Buffalo in India where animals are selected on the shape of their horns! It was exciting to think that there is so much scope for the beef and sheep sectors to catch up.

After coffee David Gardner, CEO of RASE stretched the imaginations of everyone present with his insight into where science, technology and our understanding may take us. He suggested that the concept of genetic modification may be more readily accepted once it is associated with health benefit, for example loading tomatoes with anti-oxidants which may prevent cancer or heart disease. Talk of

robots and a video demonstrating the capability of robots to pick soft fruit without damage ended the session on a really positive note despite the hurdles of health and safety and insurance which would need to be overcome.

The highlight of the afternoon for me was Martin Thorley of Merston Peters Recruitment Consultants comparing the remuneration for graduate jobs within the agricultural sector against those within other sectors. He told us that 111,000 businesses employ 444,000 people in agriculture, of those 77% are male and 99% white British, a demographic that was well represented by delegates.

At the end of three very full days I was pleased to get home and put my feet up, add my new friends on Facebook, tweet about my experiences and do a bit more research into genetic improvement of beef cattle. Attending Oxford Farming Conference has broadened my horizons and encouraged me to consider the farming businesses I work with from different perspectives. I have also learnt that if farming is to be my future I must do everything I can to build that future with the support and understanding of the consumer.

I was very lucky to be offered a place at Oxford Farming Conference and would like to thank Oxfordshire Agricultural Society Trust for funding my place. I also want to share my experience with other young people who were not as fortunate as myself and intend to write about my experiences for Young and Country online magazine. I will also talk to my local young farmers, colleagues, farming groups and, in the spirit of Oxford Farming Conference, learning and taking on new challenges, I will be tweeting my experiences!

The lasting legacy of Oxford Farming Conference to me is not only the contacts I have made, the lessons I have learnt but also the oak tree I was given by the Woodlands Trust which will hopefully continue making its contribution to sustainable agriculture long after I am gone.