

Oxford Farming Conference 2018

R Jackson

RWMT Scholar Attendee Report

On the 3rd – 5th January 2018 I attended the OFC courtesy of the RWMT. I was lucky to attend with a number of SAYFC members as well as meeting countless new contacts on the trip, it changed my perspective on agriculture, work and the future of our industry immeasurably. The direct and indirect benefits to me personally have been significant and I am grateful for the opportunity to attend the event in such a significant year for UK agriculture.

Wednesday

The three day conference was kick started by a Scholar's meeting which was sponsored by Mcdonald's, with approx. 50 Scholars in attendance, it was great to see a young cross sector of our industry around the room. Having the opportunity to work with other like minded peers at the beginning of the event was a nice way to set the tone for what was to come. After some introduction to media interviews and welcome from Matthew Naylor the group explored the city of Oxford.

In the afternoon I was fortunate enough to attend the AHDB fringe event titled "Inspiring farmers, growers and industry to succeed in a rapidly changing world" which sparked passionate discussion from the audience.

I had heard a great deal about the dinners at the OFC and the Keble Conference did not disappoint. The ornate surroundings still allowed for a relaxed atmosphere with the banquet style layout. Sat opposite my university Chancellor and next to a passionate easy care sheep farmer, it is like no other dinner I expect to attend for a long time!



Some of the Scottish Scholars at the Conference

Thursday



Rt Hon Michael Gove MP at the conference

The Thursday began with the hotly anticipated Politics session. To be able to see Rt Hon Michael Gove MP make his speech first hand was a great experience. The atmosphere at the conference following the speech encouraged debate and wider thinking on both Michael Gove and Ted McKinney's presentations. It is not often that such open and high level discussion is had with anyone and everyone at an event, yet OFC was successful in encouraging all attendees to engage with the agenda.

It is easy to say that the event had wider benefits to me, but this speech was a direct example of just that. I was recently asked about the contents of Michael Gove's speech in an interview for a travel trip to California which I have been lucky enough to be given the opportunity to attend at the end of 2018. Having attended OFC, I was able to answer genuinely and from an informed perspective that I do not feel I could have gained from merely reading the contents online.

Following the politics was the Digital Revolution Session, a mixture of thought provoking, admirable and inspirational the speakers; Amy Barthorpe, Chris Sheldrick and Kit Franklin had something to offer everyone in the room. Chris Sheldrick, CEO of What3Words, had an instant impact with Scholars using his method of location identifying instead of postcodes for a meet up at the end of the day!

After a sociable lunch we heard from three farmers in the Inspiring Farmers' Session. Duncan McConchie was flying the flag for north of the border and managed to make the whole room want to holiday in Dumfries and Galloway! Tim Papworth reminded us not to cut corners and showed us how to persevere through adversity. Brazilian farmer Carla Mayara Borges earned a great deal of respect from the room, conveying her story in her second language (English) and detailing her ambition and success setting up a new venture away from home.

Professor Chris Elliott filled the next slot, I enjoyed his visions of the future of food consumption with him mentioning package scanning that would detail true traceability for consumers.

The formal part of the day was drawn to a close by HRH The Princess Royal. At the time of attending, I was in training for the SAYFC Speech Making competition. By the end of Thursday I had seen over 20 speakers on stage all with their own style and mannerisms which I noted and learnt from in a different way. However, without a doubt I found HRH The Princess Royal the most captivating, her formal yet welcoming tone combined with up to date observations of the speakers she had just watched emphasised her intelligence and added gravitas to her more technical points.

The OFC Oxford Union Debate, Dinner and Comedy

In the evening of the Thursday the OFC contingent moved to a standing room only for the OFC Union Debate.

Topic: "This House believes that by 2100 meat eating will be a thing of the past"

Proposing: George Monbiot, journalist, and campaigner

Seconder: Philip Lymbery, Compassion in World Farming

Opposing: Gareth Wyn Jones, farmer and broadcaster

Seconder: Emily Norton, farmer and researcher

The potentially controversial subject was in fact much tamer than most who follow the discussion on Twitter would expect. Well educated and eloquent arguments debated rationally to reach a sensible conclusion. A surprising number of the audience members changed their minds on the stance and I certainly view meat consumption differently following George Monbiot's arguments.

To round off an incredible programme, we were treated to the Post Debate Supper in the Christ Church Hall. The inspiration for Hogwarts, the dinner was another excuse to meet new people and discuss the day's varied line up.

Arguably the least educational element of the day was our trip to see Scottish comedian Jim Smith on the Thursday evening. A former SAYFC member himself, I had somehow managed to get through two years in Scotland without seeing his act so enjoyed watching Jim's best "easy to understand" accent and sly digs at city dwellers. A light hearted and lovely end to day 2 of the OFC.



Christ Church College

Friday

Friday was set in the Sheldonian theatre. A different tone to the previous day, a focus on environmental based speakers kicking off with James Wong who I latterly described to someone as a "trendy botanist".

A debate under the title "birds and bees" with;

- Tony Juniper CBE, a writer, campaigner and environmentalist
- Mike Green, Environmental Stewardship Manager at BASF
- Julia Aglionby, Executive Director of the Foundation for Common Land and Chair of the Upland Alliance
- Paul Temple, farmer and Chairman of the AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds committee.

Next up on the agenda was my personal highlight of the conference; Eve Turow Paul speaking as the Frank Parkinson Lecture on the subject of changing food values and generational changes. Millennials attitude to food, eating out and all set in the context of the political climate experienced as Millennials grew up in a recession. Eve noted that people wanted to feel things from their food. Eating and cooking is no longer just about satisfying hunger but providing a connection to basic skills that we lacked in our over technologized world.

Steve Murrells of the Co-Op followed, his overwhelming message was that if the Co-Op are backing farmers then we should back them. The chain of stores has made a monumental commitment to UK agriculture and this needs to be recognised with farmers choosing to shop with them and promoting the commitment where possible. A fair point that was well timed following a day of discussion and debate around the future of our industry.

The final day included a street food lunch which rivalled culinary delights I have sampled in restaurants. The lunch was a practical demonstration on the application of many of the topics discussed over the conference; people were excited by the food which was cleverly set in a dimly lit room to provide more than just a sustenance stop.

Conclusion

Following a Scholars de-brief we dispersed and I can honestly say that I instantly viewed food, restaurants and consumption trends differently. It didn't take long to realise that the "eat happy" slogan on the fast food chain in the airport was in fact tapping into Eve Turow Paul's approach to food.

I was particularly fortunate to attend the event during the year that Caroline Millar was chair, Caroline held the event together by smoothly transitioning between speakers and ensuring the event felt as monumental as anticipated. It was excellent to see a cross sector of the United Kingdom in attendance with Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English attendees as business owners, advisors and general professionals all mixing together.

Prior to attending I stated that I hoped the event would allow me to facilitate opportunities for land owners, clients and farming contacts following Brexit. I certainly feel the event delivered on this front and excelled in enabling me to critically review our industry's wider circumstances for opportunities.

I am extremely grateful to the RWMT for allowing me to attend, particularly as this is something I have wanted to do for a number of years.



Eve Turow Paul