

67th Worshipful Company of Farmers

Advanced Course in Agricultural Business Management

Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, Gloucestershire

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Report by Antony Vagg, 2013 Nuffield Scholar



The Worshipful Company of Farmers



This experience would not have been possible without the extremely generous support from The Worshipful Company of Farmers, Nuffield Australia and iTravel Griffith. The support they provide shows the importance placed on development in the industry and to give this opportunity is something I am extremely grateful for and owe a great deal of gratitude.

Overview

18 members attended the 67th course from all types of demographics. The Course was led by John Wibberley and Rita Walsh with support from Elizabeth Badger and Marta Munoz. The course was previously run by John Allis who passed away suddenly last year. Having never known him, the obvious influence he has had on so many is profound. With short time, John Wibberley stepped in and delivered the course to an amazing standard. Delegates came from Australia, New Zealand and the rest from the UK. The value gained by having a diversity of other nations I sincerely hope was extremely valuable as I know the value gained from an

Australian farming system perspective was immense. In talking and briefing with other delegates, the value provided by non-UK farmers was of great value to them. This diversity gives such strength to the course.

Amongst the delegates were intensive pig and poultry producers, farm shop managers, consultants, arable farmers, agricultural developers, sheep producers, estate managers, dairy, mixed farming, livestock, agro tourism and myself in the rice industry for good measure. The delegate's position ranged from start up to extremely successful businesses and this variation also added strength to the course.

The course ran over the three weeks and provided an intense schedule to stimulate and challenge delegates but also guests and presenters. The challenging nature of many topics, particularly Brexit and succession planning, provided rigorous debate which was encouraged and only led to better outcomes.

Completing this course proved to be an amazing expansion of thinking and complemented my studies on my Nuffield Scholarship exceptionally. There were a couple of other delegates who had completed a Nuffield Scholarship and a significant number of participants are eager to complete a Nuffield in the future. I gained so much encouragement through the ties between Nuffield and the Worshipful Company of Farmers. They complement each other fantastically which only provides extra strength.

The speakers throughout the course were nothing short of exceptional. Notable speakers include Sean Rickards – global competitiveness, David Hughes – agricultural food marketing, Peter Morris – media and networking, John Alvis - succession, Robert Shepherd - leadership, Rod Parker – agricultural future in the UK, Minette Batters – NFU, and James Thompson – Dyson in agriculture. Some presenters would present views we would not agree with, but the respect shown at all times by all parties ensured everyone got the most out of the presentations. It was also a fantastic idea to have case studies, not only of peers but also of local businesses. This provided a platform to work in teams and put everyone's skills and knowledge to the test.

Course Content

a) Personal Development

In the first week we all undertook psychometric testing with Stephen Harris. This involved completing a multiple question survey of which Stephen then assessed to determine our personality profile. He then spoke to each of us individually. Having previously completed a similar test I was comfortable with the response although some aspects I wasn't too sure on. My partner Rachel quickly determined the test was accurate when I sent it to her! From there we then had the group results shared. This was confronting but a completely worthwhile activity as it helped the group understand the personalities and helped us all gel.

We also completed a case study briefing on our own business. This was then presented to the whole group. The feedback given was in depth and concise. Having come from a completely different background it was somewhat difficult for other participants to critique in detail the operations of my business but the financial and structural guidance I received was hugely beneficial. This is a critically important part of the course to allow us all to get a better understanding of each personality and also each individuals business and circumstances.

b) Case Studies:

Case studies were broken up into studies of individuals businesses on the course (six in total) and field visits and assessment as a group. The individual business case studies were fascinating and no doubt the six case studies selected would have got significant benefit from the group feedback. The real strength of this is the professionalism and diversity in the group that allows opinions and assessment of businesses from different perspectives. Each group had three individuals presenting on an individual case study.

The second main case study we conducted was on a farm that was hugely successful, trying to diversify, worried about Brexit and working through succession. The openness and honesty they presented was greatly appreciated and is required for this to be successful. The two generations were extremely kind with their time and more than willing to present all the facts and figures. Nothing was off limits. At the end of the week we all presented our group findings and had a question and answer session with the two farmers. They seemed to get a lot out of it. Plenty of food for thought and it also made us all think about how our individual businesses are faring in comparison.

Off-site Visits

We visited a variation of businesses and locations during the three weeks. These included:

a) Jolly Nice:

Rebecca Wilson, co-founder of Jolly Nice kindly spoke to us about the adventure that was starting up a farm shop from scratch to making it into what is now a very successful business. She talked about drive and determination to make a start-up work as well as the issues that come with growing pains. She also shared with us ambitions and the future of Jolly Nice.



b) Bath Rugby:

Peter Morris kindly took us to Bath to watch a game of Rugby but also hear from one of the players about the rigour of being a professional athlete, coping with injury and what leadership means. The chat was fantastic and we were very lucky to get some time to listen.



c) Hawthorns Estate:

We visited Chris Patfield's business at Staunton. His approach and business thoughts were different to most in the group and so challenged our thinking. One main variation is that Chris was not building a business to lead to succession. This difference of concept was an interesting take home for us and to see the way he is structuring the business gave us all a lot of thoughts going forward.

d) Gloucester Services:

Sarah Dunning, Chair of Westmorland Family kindly told the story of how her parents developed Tebay Services and how that business then took the plunge to develop Gloucester Services. The business employs 1,100 people and is one of the most successful privately owned service areas in the country. Sarah talked about how they defined market separation and what they offer compared to the rest and also talked about the reliance both ways with the local community and producers.



Themes

Succession:

Succession in one form or another was a topic that had direct interest from all participants in the course. The variation and point of progression for all participants was vast which was great as it gave everyone perspectives and lessons from other experiences. A lot of speakers talked about succession however the presentation from John Alvis along with the interaction with our case studies gave rigorous debate and fantastic pointers to go away with.

BREXIT:

The role Brexit will play in the future of agriculture in the UK seems to be anyone's guess and there are immense issues that need to be overcome. It was however refreshing to hear the number of speakers who talked about the opportunity Brexit may well present. Given the driven nature of the candidates, it was fantastic to see the response to a positive outcome. The likely upcoming change in subsidies in one form or another and the realisation that some industries will suffer more than others is a realisation delegates reached. How to be agile and able to adapt will be the difference between successful transitions and failure.

Value Adding:

Throughout the three weeks it became increasingly apparent that diversification is a hugely important aspect of any agricultural enterprise going forward. The other main opportunity is to value add on the products already produced. From observing other participants operations and viewing the case studies, producers in the UK are significantly better at this than in Australia. This may be due to land lock, low commodity prices, lack of scale etc. but it certainly opened my eyes to some possible ventures going forward.

Summary

I cannot recommend this course highly enough to those individuals looking to develop managerial skills and are excited by the opportunity to be challenged by industry leaders and also their peers. The lifelong friendships we all have gained as a result cannot be underestimated and the greater Worshipful Company of Farmers Networks is always there for us to call on.

In this, the programs 67th year, the program is extremely well designed and catered for a multitude of different businesses and people. The three weeks is the perfect amount of time to run the course, the intensity is right and the balance of own time to manage case studies and group work is no doubt deliberate yet extremely effective.

However, the strongest point of the whole course is the people. The speakers, the deliverers, the Worshipful people working in the background and of course the participants are a calibre of people that you cannot help but be inspired. A wonderful experience I will never forget and look forward to contributing further over the years and enjoying regular catch-ups with course 67 participants.



The 67th Worshipful Company of Farmers Advanced Course in Agricultural Business Management group.