

JSR Farming group

Yorkshire Branch Event - 14th October 2004

As a "man in the street" what sort of farming is environmentally and socially acceptable, ensures a continuity of supply of wholesome food and conserves the fabric and wildlife of the countryside and the answer might be a small organic farm. The last enterprise they would come up with is the largest private farming company in the UK, one farming over 10,000 acres (45% owned), keeping 92,000 commercial pigs and 10,000 elite sows as part of a genetics operation.

That company is the JSR Farming Group, set up 45 years ago on 400 acres by John Rymer and now under the chairmanship of Tim Rymer, his son. The Yorkshire Branch had the chance to see some of the evidence at Southburn, Driffield, their headquarters, on a wet and windy October afternoon.



Potato store under construction

The host at JSR was Philip Huxtable who joined the firm in 1976 when he graduated from Seale-Hayne. He had stayed ever since and is on the main board, is Technical Director of JSR Arable Farms, Property Director of the group and advises the board on environmental matters. He is also heavily involved with a co-operative, Renewal Energy Growers Ltd, which is involved with the growing, harvesting and utilisation of willow. Philip was well qualified to supply all the evidence needed to convince members that the group meet all the requirement of the statement in the first paragraph.

Philip explained how John Rymer had started and



Inside the Potato store

developed the company until it now employs 200 staff in the UK and many more abroad. He emphasised how the care of staff and their training had always featured high in the priorities, now laid down in a Total Quality Management policy. The structure of the group was explained including Arable Farms, Pig Production and Genetics. JSR Property was set up in 2002 to maximise the return on their property assets. These include over 100 residential properties throughout England, not all of which are now needed to house staff.

The group now has a comprehensive environmental policy statement, although Philip explained that they were, for example, planting hedges when others were tearing them out. They are now proud that Southburn is a LEAF Demonstration Farm. They are also long standing Countryside Stewardship Scheme members.

The discussion continued on a tour of the farm. Members were able to see a recently commissioned state-of-the-art refrigerated potato store and grading line. This was needed in order to fulfil supermarket contracts for ware potatoes. It emerged that most of the seasonal staff now came from Eastern Europe. Both the regular staff and management found them more reliable than UK casuals.

An old brick building had just been converted for use as an office and laboratory for the local pea vining co-operative. JSR are the largest grower in the UK. The group offices were also of interest. The old flat roofed building was in poor shape and their solution was to cover it with a steel framed building. Some members thought this would not have been accepted by planners in their area.



In the wilds

The growing of short rotation willow coppice is a relatively new enterprise. 25ha were planted in 2001, at that time for an ill-fated project from the Kelda Group. It is 4 years from planting to the first harvest. The chips harvested in 2005 will go to Drax Power Station in North Yorkshire as part of a contract recently negotiated by Renewal Energy Growers Ltd.

What will JSR be doing in the future? Philip said they would continue as low cost commodity producers because of their skill, scale and use of technology. They would increase their added value products and services, such as genetics, and are big enough to talk direct to their customers. They would be managing more for the environment and producing more non-food crops. They would also increase their non-farming income such as that from property.

David Marston
Yorkshire Branch Secretary