

Nuffield Arable Study Group visit to France May 2007.

Why no set-aside in France? The role of French farmer co-ops in developing non-food uses for farm crops was the focus of the 2007 Nuffield arable tour.

Some 20 Scholars and partners made their way to Epernay, home of champagne, on the 17th May. The visits were based on a life long friendship between Stephen Fell (Scholar 1983) and Olivier Simphal, a leading farmer in the area and his extended family.

The first visit was to Olivier's cousin, Yves, who farms several hundred hectare of easy working loam over chalk on a rotation of combinable crops plus potatoes and sugarbeet. All beautifully maintained and not a square metre of set-aside in sight. All set-aside land grows industrial crops. As a diversification Yves had developed 20000 tonnes of commercial potato storage using a bos system and mechanisation that he had discovered in the UK. It was fascinating to learn that this whole intensively farmed area had, until WW2, been a huge hunting forest planted by Napoleon 111. Olivier's grandparents had seen the potential and were amongst those clearing vast tracts from which this generation benefits.

On to the local sugarbeet co-op where Yves is President. They deal with over 2 million tonnes of beet, 25000 tonnes a day, in a 90 to 100 day campaign, with the co-op providing loading and haulage. We were struck by the advantage for other farm work of finishing the beet harvest so early, a practice forced on them by the risk of early severe frosts. Faced with losing quota members of the co-op had agreed to invest in a bioethanol plant and it was impressive to see the all the stainless steel vats and pipework making up the refinery and the road tankers rolling in to cart away the product. Some 60% goes to creating an 85 percent bio road fuel and the rest into industrial uses such as perfumery. To maintain their viability, particularly their beet acreage into the future the members of the co-op had voted to raise a further €300 million to invest in expansion financed mainly through delayed beet delivery payments. It was salutary to learn that the sugar beet factories operated by co-ops were mostly investing in bioethanol with an anticipated return of 7 to 8% when oil is \$60 a barrel, whilst company owned factories were not.

Next to co-op Cohesion in Reims where Olivier is President. The objective there was not to learn about their day to day operations, but to understand an initiative in the Picardie/Ardennes regions taken jointly by co-ops, agri-business and research bodies, encouraged by government, to co-operate and co-finance research and development of non-food uses for wheat and other crops. The co-op was contributing €167000 a year to the project; a new initiative still finding its feet.

The day finished on the farm of Olivier and Pascal that lies between Reims and Laon; a large holding on good soil all within a ring fence. All arable, it has a rotation of combinable crops and sugarbeet. As a diversification Olivier has a large area of 10m² trial plots growing sugarbeet for the seedhouse Van der hoeve. This is one of 10 test sites and Olivier manages five of them on behalf of the company travelling as far as Cap Gris Nez. As the work is seasonal this allows him a reservoir of labour to keep the home farm in tip top order and it was a pleasure to see everything being so well done.

Olivier and Pascal generously entertained the group to supper including the offer of beers brewed on the farm and local wines. Two sobering thoughts. Just as in the UK this involved and leading family seemed to be short of sons and daughters in the next generation battling to take on these very successful businesses. A reality of Europe that we ignore at our peril; the neighbouring village had fought over and changed hands no less than 18 times during WW1 and had been raised in the process.

It would have been wrong to be in Epernay without sampling the champagne so we took a tour and tasting at Mercier, learning what a superb publicist and marketeer the founder had been.

Many thanks to Olivier Simphal, Stephen Fell and Guy Smith for organising such an interesting and enjoyable programme.

Steven Bullock. 22.05.2007.