

BRITISH FARMER AND GROWER

SOUTH EAST EDITION

National and regional news for members of the National Farmers' Union

MILK – SINK OR FLOAT?
NFU dairy chairman speaks out

Is farming's number up?

Diversification goes
double-barrelled

WIN copies of 'On the
Farm' by Jimmy Doherty

NFU – 100 years on

News and views from
your part of the world

Innovation and tradition endorsed by Lees Court

ASHFORD group secretary Jon Redshaw writes: A very damp Tuesday evening in mid-summer saw nearly 30 Ashford members attend our annual farm walk, which this year was held at the Lees Court estate, which belongs to the Countess Sodes.

The rain certainly did not dampen the enthusiasm with which Countess Sodes and her team greeted us at the start of our evening. They gave us a very warm welcome along with an explanation of the estate's background, objectives and business philosophy.

The principal aim of the farm is to be both profitable and to farm in a sustainable manner, taking due care of the environment and the local community. The key to the farm's performance and profitability is the ability to maintain high levels of gross margin from producing good yields and adding value to crops grown on the farm. The conventional cropping includes winter wheat, peas, spring beans and oilseed rape and the 2003 harvest produced very respectable yields per hectare.

However, the highlight of the tour were the diversification elements and non-food crops for which Countess Sodes is a superb advocate. She has infused the Lees Court estate with a 'can-do' American ingenuity to respond to the challenges agriculture faces today.

The Countess has launched 'Seeds' her own innovative range of bath and body products, initially using wheat



germ oil from the estate. The oil used, is extracted using a special chemical-free process and is the first to be obtained this way in Britain.

She is very committed to other new revenue streams and the estate works closely with the national non-food crop centre and Springdale Crop Synergies, who are the leaders in linking research, industry and agriculture in areas of non-food crop development. The Countess believes that development in these new areas could save many struggling farmers and hopes that her farm will be an example to others of how embracing change can lead to success.

On our walk round the various crops we were given explanations by Countess Sodes and her farm manager, Bill Harbour, and we learnt enough to appreciate the estate's position at the forefront of cropping technology.

The non-food crops grown are hemp, echium (pictured on right), quinoa and

calendula (marigolds – pictured above) on a relatively small area of just over 40 acres in total, which has been used to assess the potential for the future. This commitment to diversification has not created a compromise on the established traditions of the estate. The Countess continues to run Lees Court's renowned shoor and upholds the traditions which help maintain the countryside way of life. The estate is also involved in a joint research project with the game conservancy trust and participates in three countryside stewardship schemes.

On our return to the grain store we were treated to most welcome hot drinks and a bite to eat, and a further opportunity to talk with Countess Sodes and her staff to find out more about this fascinating estate. The ladies in the office enjoyed trying some of the body products and the evening ended with a fitting vote of thanks to all at Lees Court estate by our chairman, Peter Bromley.



Last chance for Horsham producers

HORSHAM FOOD AND drink festival takes place over three weeks from Saturday, 11 September to Sunday, 3 October. It kicks off on the Saturday with a launch event called 'The Big Nibble' in the Drill Hall, Horsham between 10.00am and 4.00pm.

The Big Nibble will include all day cookery demonstrations, tutored cheese tastings and wine tastings from John Radford, as well as an abundance of local produce to taste and purchase.

The ladies of Storrington WI Market,

the last in the Horsham District, will be bringing as much home-baked goods and local produce as they can carry. Other participants include a farm shop, farmers' butcher, vineyards, breweries and Waitrose offering tastings of all products sourced locally. In addition to all this food, the Allotment Society will advise on how to grow your own and Brinsbury College will be promoting their gardening courses.

As part of the festival a programme

is being compiled of all the local businesses participating in the event and this will be printed and delivered to 55,000 households and businesses in the Horsham District along with extra copies in public places.

If you have not received any information and would like to take advantage of this Free publicity please contact Chris Baister, business development officer, Horsham District Council – 01403-215542, email chris.baister@horsham.gov.uk – if you are unsure about how you can participate contact Chris for ideas and help. Time is running out!