

Tradition and innovation in the Kent countryside

The Countess Sondes tells Diana Crampton about her visionary approach to maintaining and continuing the work of the Lees Court Estate

LADY SONDOS was left, bereaved some 7 years ago and found herself in a situation of having to decide whether and how to maintain the work of an estate that is part of the family's 700 year heritage. At one stage the Lees Court Estate had 85,000 acres. Now it has just 4,500, yet it is a farming challenge.

■ Lady Sondas tells me "We are on the verge of a farming revolution in the areas of non-food crops that will go into pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, industrial and bio-fuels. Here on the estate there is some industrial oil-seed rape. The Government has said that by the end of the year diesel has to be 5% bio-diesel. This will be cheaper to manufacture than mineral diesel. The technology is there to transfer. For instance, it is possible to get ethanol from wheat which can be turned into petrol.

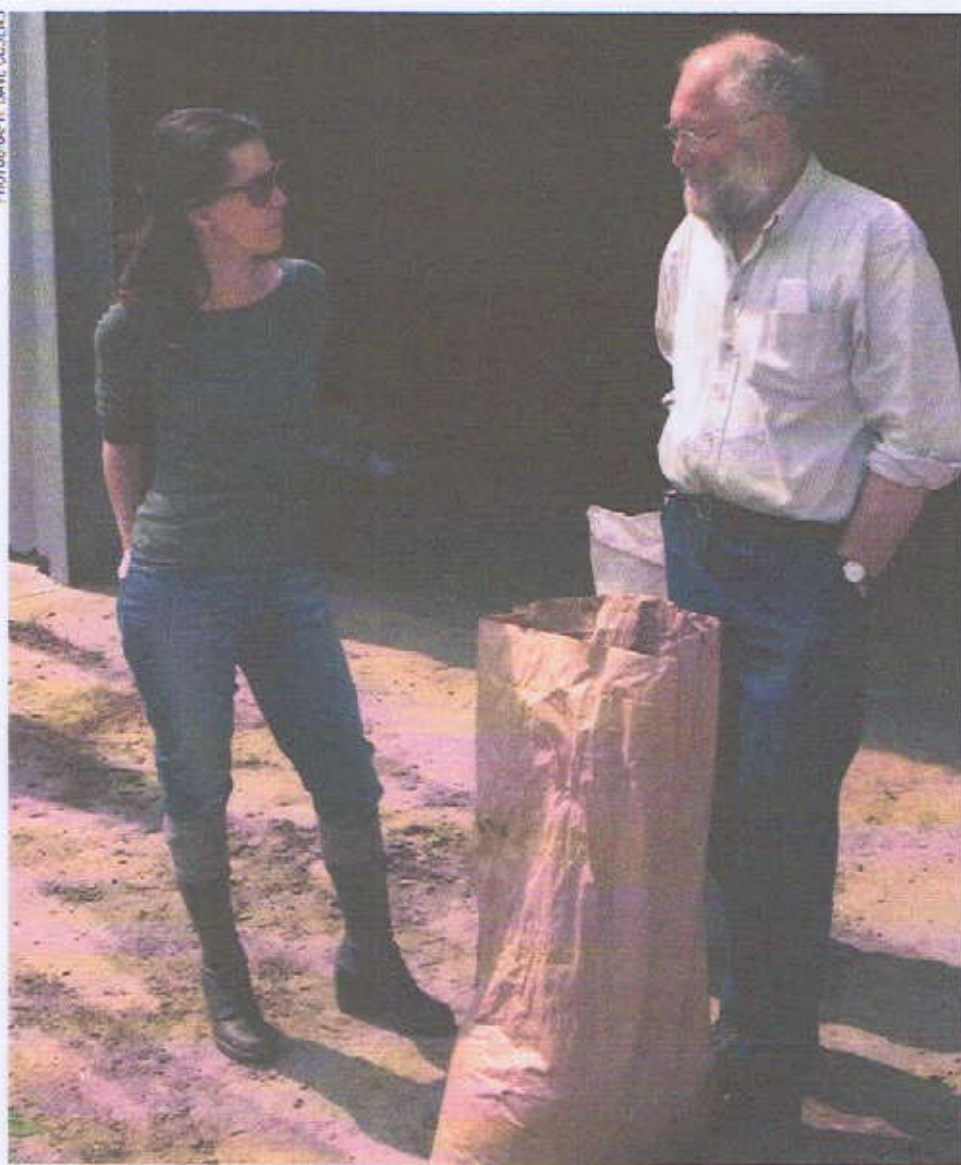
■ Half of farming in the next decade will be non-food.

■ Lady Sondas is very interested in conservation, telling me "the new crops are heaving with wildlife." These new crops are echium, campanula and Finola. This last is grown on contract to Springdale Crops Synergies, a state of the art firm with great expertise. Finola was certified in January by Springdale who have worldwide rights. It will be grown for seed and it is possible to get two oils from the plant.

■ The commitment to non-food products came about through a diversification project, which was to develop a line of bath and body products available in America and to be launched next year in the UK. Lady Sondas is using oils which are extracted from the estate's crops. In particular Lady Sondas is proud at having found a company which will provide a method of extracting oil from wheat germ which does not use a chemical in the extraction process. In addition she looked hard to find a company which would mill the wheat and return the wheat germ. The wheat germ is a bi-product of the wheat and is a value added. Then Lady Sondas chose to grow echium, which has anti-rugosity properties as well as Omega 3 fats. "The flowers are beautiful and full of butterflies". Two laboratories are working with this crop now, Peter Jarvis in Ipswich and Hansworth of Chichester.

■ A third aspect of Lady Sondas' work is the Lees Court Estate project, a joint project with the Gamer Conservancy Trust, working with

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVE COOPER



The Countess Sondas speaking to farm manager Bill Harbour.

Professor Nigel Leader-Williams of the Durrell Institute for Bio-diversity. The shoot is very important for the estate. Lady Sondas wishes to continue this as her husband, the late Count, was an enthusiast. Currently they are on the fourth year of a five year project to monitor the ecological effects. So far they have found that the number of song-birds on the estate is, contrary to county wide prognostications, actually on the increase.

■ Countess Sondas' view is holistic: the game

conservancy, and interrelationship of arable a non-food crops and seeds each bring something to the estate, yet the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

■ Travelling around the estate, it is pleasing to see that Lady Sondas' concern for the countryside is contributing to maintaining a way of life and interesting to see how the diversification into new crops, a challenge for a lady left alone and with no training in farming, has opened new vistas in Kentish farming.