

JOHN NEILL R. I. P.



North Norfolk farmer John Neill, of Thurgarton, has died at the age of 92 - Credit: SUPPLIED BY FAMILY

Tributes have been paid to a "much respected" farmer from north Norfolk, who died at the age of 92.

John Hendrie Neill, of Thurgarton, between Aylsham and Cromer, was renowned in equal measure for his business acumen, as for his generosity, kindness and quick-fire wit.

Mr Neill was born in Ayrshire, Scotland, and attended school at Kilmarnock Academy until he left, aged 14, to work on his father's farm.

A few years later, he moved to north Norfolk with his older brother Tom to help on his uncle's farm during the war. Although too young to be conscripted, he joined the Home Guard and met weekly at the Black Boys pub in Aldborough - an experience he said was not unlike his favourite television programme, Dad's Army.

The farm at Thurgarton was purchased in 1946 and the brothers moved to Norfolk permanently, bringing with them a herd of dairy cattle from Scotland. The business later expanded when they bought Hall Farm, in Matlaske, near Holt.

In 1955, he married Magdalena Morton, the daughter of another Scots-Norfolk family.

Following the untimely death of his brother in 1969, he took over the tenancy at Babingley on the Queen's estate at Sandringham where he farmed for almost a decade, becoming a regular guest of the royal family at shoots. His favourite gun dog, a black Labrador retriever with "a dodgy hip", was a gift from Prince Philip.

Over a farming career that spanned seven decades, he oversaw enormous developments in agriculture.



His first farm relied on cart horses, but by the time he retired aged 90 his stable of machinery included combines and tractors that tracked wheat yields by satellite, although anyone who worked for Mr Neill would attest that his own eye for a straight line never wavered. Ever the innovator, with his farm mechanic, he designed and built an self-propelled crop sprayer before this machinery was commercially available.

He also supported many local charities including The Big C and the Churches Conservation Trust.

Golf remained an enduring passion, and he was president of Royal Cromer from 1988 to 1991 and county president in 1997. His legacy is still reflected in a hut on the eighteenth hole at Royal Cromer, appropriately situated within sight of the bar.

Mr Neill and his wife were enthusiastic hosts and needed little excuse to throw a party.



A true entrepreneur, he was never afraid of change and moved seamlessly from farming daffodils to peas and beans, and dairy to beef production, and became a regular at Norwich cattle market. He later focused on arable farming and his long and successful relationship growing potatoes for Walkers crisps was sealed with a handshake and a dram of whisky. He was renowned for keeping an immaculately tidy farm, for which he won many awards.

Although he remained true to his roots, playing bagpipes and addressing haggis on Burns Night celebrations, he fell in love with Norfolk, both for the quality of its people and its soil. He made many enduring and life-long friendships in Norfolk's farming circles and beyond.



He was one of life's enthusiasts and always had a project on the go, whether it was re-planting acres of woodland, restoring historical agricultural equipment, or renovating vintage cars. He was a long-standing member of the Lagonda Club and at weekends could be seen flying around country roads with his family in his favourite 1932 maroon Tourer.

He learnt to fly in a Tiger Moth, and was an accomplished furniture maker who was frequently called upon to make speeches. When he discovered the joys of fishing in the 1980s and his busy farming schedule did not allow many trips away from Norfolk, he excavated and stocked his own trout lake at Thurgarton.

Mr Neill died at home on November 17. His wife survives him with their two daughters, Fiona and Karen, and grandchildren. A private family funeral will be held on November 30, with plans to hold a memorial service next year.

*This obituary has been composed by the family of John Neill.

