

Former club chairman Peter Perry-Warnes was now a “turnip” enthusiast on his arable enterprises spreading across almost 5,000 acres of north Norfolk.

In thanking the guest speaker, Viscount Raynham, who had spoken about the vital importance of soil health and fertility, Mr Perry-Warnes had embraced turnip and radish growing to improve the land. He was now sowing 1,300 acres of cover crops on almost a quarter of his acreage and had noted significant benefits to soil structure, moisture retention and yield benefits. He was now a great fan of “Turnip” Townshend’s innovative techniques and the radish/turnip combination was a “win-win.”

Mr Perry-Warnes, who had joined Holt & District Farmers’ Club 35 years ago, highlighted some of the achievements of the past 75 years in an often-hilarious romp through the decades. It was thanks to a near-neighbour, Charles Skinner, that he was persuaded to attend that first meeting, which later saw him become Club chairman between 2013 and 2016.

But, he noted, and which clearly surprised many of the guests, the Club had been launched in 1948 at the Shire Hall, Holt, with one particular rule (contrary to today’s political correctness): “Strictly no women as members.” This had been jettisoned, albeit only about five years ago but today, the Club was keen to recruit from across all sections of farming and rural businesses, especially younger members.

The Club’s founders had included Lord Walpole, George Knight, of the Stody estate, John Seaman, Fred Hammond, Mr Hall, Mr Slapp and Mr Pointen. Sir Charles Mott-Radclyffe, of the Barningham estate, became the first president in 1949 and was succeeded by Billy Hammond in 1993. In 75 years there have been five presidents, five secretaries, including the longest-serving Tim Nicholson since 1992, and a dozen chairmen with Martin Jensen now in post.

Mr Perry-Warnes that the Club rules promoted social and education and discussions were to be non-political. As membership increased, the Club moved to the Feathers, which remained the meeting place until about four years ago when Holt Rugby Club offered a home.

The Club thrived in the following decades. The former chairman noted that two farming families, each with three sons, Henry, Ted and Bob Mack, and later their respective sons, and the Ross family, Ian, John and Colin, who was unable to attend, and their sons, including Stuart, chairman in 2007, all made their mark.

In 1970, the first club tour took place – to Oundle. Other more ambitious destinations quickly followed with trips to Wales and Scotland. Then in 1990, with passports in hand, a party visited Holland. Later, as home and abroad visits alternated, a tour of Portugal gave members a unique insight into Common Agricultural Policy’s curious “triple” stacked funding, for olive, sheep and barley area payments on the same land on a single holding. The RPA, at home, enforced payment rules much more strictly. Other trips to Germany, France and Poland also followed including to the death camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau, which was an unforgettable experience.

Other highlights included the annual ploughing match, which was formerly staged for years outside the town – thanks, more recently, to the Ross family. Again, Mr Perry-Warnes spoke of the huge success of the Holt Farmers’ Sixth Form Student Days when as many as 1,000 youngsters from across Norfolk learned about food, farming and the countryside.

The backing of the Youngs family, which hosted the initial events and then Tony & Phillida Hurn's family at Wickmere, was crucial but so was the financial backing of sponsors from across the food and farming sector. Sadly, the costs of transport and timetable pressures led to reduced attendance and the event was moth-balled. The organisers had included Ken Leggett, the current Club president Richard Brooks and Rob Hughes, who were all present at the anniversary dinner.

While the Club has weathered the headwinds of Covid-19, and an enforced move to a new meeting venue, the next challenge was to recruit new members from across north Norfolk. He recognised that the ever-increasing size of farm businesses had potentially limited the pool of membership. And his family was now farming some 5,000 acres on what was formerly 38 holdings – many would have possible members.

The business element of the club was important but so too was the social side, he stressed. Mr Perry-Warnes said that annual competitions against Stalham Farmers' Club had included bowls and clay pigeon shooting, which had sadly lapsed. However, the annual malting barley competitions again thrived. It was gratifying that the Club's long-serving barley judge, Bob King, who retired last year after almost 40 years of judging, was able to attend.

Finally, he thanked all those, who had helped to make the occasion such a great success, especially William Youngs and secretary Tim Nicholson. On behalf of members, he sent best wishes to two supporters of the Club, who had been unable to attend - Dorset Dick, aka Roger Bullen, and Colin Ross.

In closing, Martin Jensen echoed his thanks to the guest speaker, Viscount Raynham, the sponsors, and the caterers, Florentina, of Watton, who had done a superb job.

