

Survival strategy outlined for hard-pressed family farms at 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner.

A survival strategy for hard-pressed family farms was outlined by the head of one of Norfolk's longest-established farming businesses at a special anniversary dinner.

The Townshend family can trace its roots in the county more than 900 years to the year 1121 AD, said Viscount Raynham, who was the guest speaker at the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holt & District Farmers' Club at Gresham's School.

Viscount Raynham, who returned to become chief executive of the family's 5,000-acre estate in 2016, was the winner of last year's Norfolk champion county farm business award. "It was a great honour to be invited to speak at the club's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner," he said.

While researching his address, he had found records in the estate's archives revealing that a Townshend ancestor had a farm at Rudham in 1121 AD during the reign of Henry I, the youngest son of William the Conqueror.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, land was added at South Raynham, and again in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He found a document granting a tenancy in 1574. It was in the closing years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the Raynham estate became an agricultural innovator. The transformation was led by Charles, Viscount Townshend, who was born at Raynham in April 1674. He became a leading politician, also marrying the sister of Robert Walpole, of Houghton Hall, who became the Prime Minister between 1721 and 1742 – incidentally, that phrase was coined by the man, probably best known as "Turnip" Townshend.

When he retired from active politics in 1730 to his Norfolk estates, having lost out to Walpole, he devoted his energies to agricultural improvements. While serving as Ambassador in Holland between 1709 and 1711, he was impressed by Flemish farmers who used rotation and root crops to boost food production. He encouraged the growing of root crops like turnips, which had made it possible to keep more stock over the winter in the Low Countries. This produced manure, which boosted soil fertility and thus achieved higher yields of following corn crops.

Townshend, as early as 1716, was an enthusiast for "marling," which by spreading chalk on the land, improved fertility. Marling and manure made it possible to achieve higher crop yields. Again, he recognised that granting longer leases, typically of about 15 years, was mutually beneficial to tenant and landlord. He was ahead of his time as the practice was not adopted on the nearby Holkham estate for another generation or two.

Such policies – growing roots like turnips, and then ploughing the tops into the soil, and adopting a rotation of white straw crops, with grass/ clover – were radical but highly successful. Townshend encouraged such good husbandry, also planting hedges, and showing that care for soil health and improving fertility would benefit all parties.

And today, the estate, which won the Aylsham Agricultural Show Association's 2023 champion farm award, had put caring for the soil as a central strategy. Having qualified as a chartered surveyor in 2005 with Bidwells, he joined Knight Frank buying and selling investment farms but admitted – to much laughter - never having actually farmed in his 15 year-year career.

Lord Raynham told members and guests of Holt & District Farmers' Club that the family's estate has shrunk over the last 100 years from around 30,000 acres to 5,000 acres today. Broadly, it had adopted a seven-course rotation, which includes about 1,000 acres of cover crops and also

re-introduced livestock with a large beef suckler herd. A further bonus, blackgrass had been eradicated, he said.

In the past five years, Raynham has halved use of artificial (nitrogen) fertilisers. In addition, digestate from the AD (anaerobic digester) plant, which produces gas for generating electricity, is returned to the estate boosting soil fertility.

Three centuries ago, his ancestor adopted measures including crops like turnips to improve the soil. Today, that very same policy has become an essential tool to maintain consistent production of food and caring for the environment too, said Lord Raynham. Having a much better understanding of the importance of soil health and fertility was key rather than debating the virtues of different cultivation techniques, such as “no till, min till,” he added.

Farmers and land managers must be willing to embrace opportunities of new technologies from crop gene editing, artificial intelligence and crucially data, he said. Four leading Norfolk farm enterprises including Raynham and Holkham were using “data” from farm operations to generate significant efficiencies and also drive down costs. As family farm businesses faced ever greater challenges, he argued that collaborating, and sharing and pooling data would help many to survive and thrive in the future.

