PMS Meeting Friday 14th December

Farming and The Countryside, past and future.

Andrew Davis gave 17 members and 8 guests an extremely interesting talk on the evolution and possible future direction of rural policy in the UK.

He was introduced by Chris Westwood, President. He grew up on a 2000acre mixed farm then read Agriculture at Keeble College. He then joined his father running the farm until it was sold in 1987. Andrew then became Regional Director of the CLA and then in 2005 became a lecturer at Cirencester, teaching Heritage Property and Game and Deer management.

Andrew described the golden age of farming as between 1750 and 1850 as the system of commoners’ rights and medieval feudal strips of land were changed via Enclosure Acts to produce the field system of today and Jethro Tull and others inventions to mechanise and modernize farming developed. However, in the late 1880s a series of bad harvests resulted in a shortage of grain which was filled by imports from the vast fields of the USA; enabled by the arrival of new iron steamships and the growing international trade in commodities. Later refrigerated ships also allowed transport of meat internationally and there was a slump in domestic farming as the countryside population moved to city factories for work. By the 1930s Britain was only 30% self sufficient in food. Farming remained in recession until the Second World War when it became vital to boost domestic supply in the face of blockaded supplies and government policy promoted food production via measures such as the Womens Land Army. Post war the policy remained to guarantee increased domestic food production but by the 1980s this was producing surpluses across Europe. Farmers were then paid not to produce with compulsory ‘set aside’ to protect rural environments.

In 2012 there were more poor world harvests and a growing recognition of the need to balance food production and food security across the world with the risks of climate change. Ruminant animals cause significant methane production but 25% is caused by paddy fields.

Now we are potentially facing a farming crisis in Britain with the risk of a No Deal Brexit, which Andrew felt would be devastating for farming in Britain. A managed exit would be essential to protect farmers as their Single Payment system is phased out. Brexit would offer the opportunity to leave the Common Agricultural Policy and design our own rural policy, possibly increasing productivity by encouraging the planting of restorative crops and allowing improved management of our uplands.

Questions and discussion followed with a focus on the uncertainties of Brexit and the immediate future; continued over our dinner of Venison Wellington.