

Bishop Graeme writes

This month <May> I saw children and teachers interacting with farmers and other agricultural specialists, experiencing many different aspects of farming, food production and the environment through demonstrations, activities and hands-on exhibits.

I watched as children learned about soil types, by measuring how quickly water penetrated different types of soil.

I saw pupils being shown the different uses of malt extract. I watched as children learned, by handling the grain, the difference between oats, barley and wheat. I saw two spinning wheels, taking the fleece and turning it into yarn.

This all sounds rather serious, but there were fun elements to the day too. I saw a heavy horse put through its paces and a farmer introduced the sheep of various shapes and sizes, explaining which were good for meat and which for wool.

Pupils watched dogs seeking out hidden bundles. From the general buzz and activity, the children were clearly enjoying the day.

Every now and again a different sort of invitation crosses my desk as Acting Bishop - and this agricultural fair welcoming some 4,500 seven to nine year olds from schools across Suffolk was just such an invitation.

Robert Rous, the President of the Suffolk Agricultural Association, wrote to ask if I would be interested in attending the Association's School Farm and Country Fair during May.

As Bishop Martin, the former bishop of the diocese before his retirement had been the Association's last President, I felt that this would be a good way of the Church maintaining its connection with Suffolk's agricultural life.

I live in Bury St Edmunds and to my shame, I had never been to Trinity Park in Ipswich, so my first surprise was to find this substantial show site on the edge of Ipswich.

As I arrived, I was amazed to see lines of coaches already parked up. Clearly this was an event of some size. In fact, the fair welcomes some 4,500 seven to nine year olds from schools across Suffolk.

The day is designed to introduce children to the world of farming, agriculture, food production, wildlife and livestock.

It is seen as the first step towards the association's goal of educating young people about the world around them and perhaps interesting them in career options based around agriculture.

Through generous sponsorship each school is provided with a grant from the association to help cover the cost of transport to the fair.

As an "official" visitor I was soon whisked up into a small group to be taken around the fair and from there on saw so much interest in our county's farming life from the pupils.

Indeed it is not long now to the Suffolk Show too, with all the buzz and excitement this brings too and the Church of England will be there again this year with our marquee at stand 601 on the Flower Show Avenue.

Our marquee has free tea and coffee on offer with activities for children, face painting, crafts, puppets, games.

We are also launching a family trail around the Suffolk Show ground with a quiz to complete and prizes on offer which will be good fun for families to do.

As I drove home from the agricultural fair for children earlier this month ahead of the Suffolk Show, I had a strong sense of having been involved in a wonderfully worthwhile exercise.

In Suffolk, we are faced, day by day, with the glory of God's creation. The need to learn to be good stewards of that creation was a vital part of the fair's activities.

To know how to care for the land and livestock; to know where our food actually comes from; to understand what it is to farm in the twenty-first century; all these things go to make up a rounded education.

I would say, thank God for the work of the Suffolk Agricultural Association.

*Bishop Graeme Knowles is the Acting Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich following the retirement of Bishop Martin Seeley after a decade's service in Suffolk. The appointment of a permanent new Bishop is expected to be announced later this year.*