

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

I am immensely grateful and honoured to be serving as President of the Suffolk Agricultural Association this year, and so of the Suffolk Show, May 29th and 30th.

The Suffolk Show of 2015 was my induction into Suffolk life, coming just two weeks after my consecration as bishop. It was the perfect way to learn not just about farming in Suffolk, but about a whole range of organisations, activities, and institutions – and people - that make this such a fabulous county.

I have learned a great deal more in the years since, from the contacts made at my first show, and have tried through my time here to support and encourage our farmers in their vital role of providing our food.

We all know the challenges our farmers face, from the unpredictability of the economy and complexity of changing government support, to the volatility of our weather and the clear impact of climate change.

I am grateful the Church is so engaged in the farming life of this county, and I see a deep spiritual affinity between church and farm, evident in so many of our communities. There is something about being literally close to the ground, subject to the seasons and the changing climate, that places you in a very particular relationship with our Creator.

I have learned a great deal from those whose outlook and perspective is shaped by their labour seven long days each week, bringing to market the fruit of the ground to feed the people of this land. So much of the Church's year is shaped itself by the same closeness to the changing seasons– not just Harvest and Plough Sunday and Lamma, but "Lent" and "Easter" are religious terms whose meaning originally had to do with spring.

So the deep connectedness of the Christian faith and working the land is clear, and we can see that over and over again in the stories Jesus told. So I am glad the Church of England has a strong presence at the show, in the marquee at stand 602 on Flower Show Avenue, which provides stories about the work of our Church in Suffolk - as well as free refreshments.

I am particularly pleased for the support we continue to provide farmers through chaplaincy, from the work of the extraordinary Canon Sally Fogden, to the work of our present indefatigable chaplain, Graham Miles, and his team as they care for farmers pastorally including supporting farmers with an increasing range of mental health challenges.

County shows like the Suffolk Show, which was first held in 1832, started out as occasions for farmers to exchange information and experiences of innovative farming practices. The Suffolk Show continues to do that, going from strength to strength, providing the opportunity for farmers to share knowledge and experience on the latest farming techniques as well as bring their livestock to show.

But like shows across our county and country, the Suffolk Show has during the decades become much more than that, and crucially carries out an educational purpose for non-farmers like me, helping us understand the complexities and challenges of farming, and crucially, helping us better understand where our food comes from.

The show achieves this through a whole array of displays, stands, activities, events and performances, as well as the central events involving the judging of livestock and horse-riding displays.

I am pleased that there are specific ways for all of us to learn, and I am particularly pleased that the Farm4Future display, the initiative of last year's President, Stephen Fletcher, has been expanded, with its range of stands on sustainable farming practice.

I have been struck across the county with the number of farmers who are adopting practices that are both environmentally and economically beneficial and I want to support these developments.

I have also wanted to find ways to expand access and awareness to both the show and to farming, particularly for young people who may not think of coming or considering a career in farming. So I am thrilled that in partnership with the county-wide youth project, Inspire, fifty young people from across the county who would not otherwise have come will be there each day, with a special programme to support their experience and develop their awareness of farming and food, and to have fun.

Like so much of our life in Suffolk, none of this would happen without dedicated staff and an army of volunteers, and their work for the show and the Suffolk School Farm and Country Fair has justifiably earned them the extraordinary honour of the King's Award for Voluntary Service.

And it will be a special privilege and honour to welcome the Duke of Gloucester to the show and we are very grateful that he has chosen to attend this year, underlining once again the importance of this event for our county and beyond.

It is a fabulous day out for families and individuals, with far more on offer than you can possibly see or experience in a day or even two days – so do please come along!