

Visit to Bradon Fruit Farm by Local Councillors 09 March 2022

A report by Matt Geen, 10/03/22. Draft 0.1.

Cllr Mike Stanton arranged a visit to Bradon Fruit Farm, Isle Brewers. This was as a result of comments that have been made by people in the region about the very bright light that has been coming from the fruit farm in the mornings and evenings in the past winter.

In summary, we (the visitors) were satisfied that the Bradon Fruit Farm team have an effective plan to prevent the light pollution problem next winter. The use of the lights has stopped for this winter. We are also interested that the Farm has the interests of the local community and the wider world at heart. However, we suggest that better channels of communication with the wider community will help to avoid or mitigate issues like the ones we have seen with the lights.

The visitors were Mike Stanton (SSDC), Clare Paul (SSDC & SCC), Kate Beacham (Fivehead PC), and Matt Geen (Curry Rivel PC). We were welcomed by the managing director, John Downes, and Heidi Irvine, Executive Assistant.

The meeting started with a round-table discussion, followed by a tour of the greenhouses.

Mr Downes confirmed that the problem with the lights had arisen because the blackout blinds that had been ordered had not arrived in time to fit them before the winter growing season. They have fitted blinds on the side walls, and the lights face downwards, but the floor of the greenhouses is white, and so light was reflected into the sky. It was particularly noticeable on cloudy nights, where that upward-going light was scattered from clouds.

The lights should not have been used past 6:30 in the evening. They were also used for a longer period in the morning, with the idea that people would experience more disturbance in the evening. However, the lights were on past these times last November, when the system was being tested.

They have finished using the lights now, and the blinds will be fitted in August, so we should not notice this problem any more. I will be watching out for them this autumn to confirm that.

The purpose of the lights is to extend the growing season of the strawberries, so that they can be sold outside the main English strawberry season. The judgement about whether strawberries *should* be eaten outside of the English season is not mine to make. There is clearly a demand for them. Mr Downes has commissioned a study of the overall climate impact of the fruit farm's operations, in comparison with importing strawberries from abroad, which he says shows that their operation is the better option for the climate. He is prepared to share that report with us. They are doing what they can to reduce the climate impact, including the use of biomass (wood thinnings) for heating.

The workers at the farm are mostly from eastern Europe, who visit for a few weeks at a time and live on site. The ones that we met seemed to be happy. These include Ukrainians. Mr Downes says that he is doing what he can to help those of his workforce who are affected by the war, including helping those who do not wish to return at the end of their allowed period to stay on. There is a large amount of onerous paperwork to deal with. We passed on our thoughts to his Ukrainian workers.

Mr Downes explained that the decision to extend the growing season, and thus the problem with the lights, was a result of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. The extra difficulties and red tape associated with employing foreign workers have meant that he has needed to spread the times that they use them over the year.

The councillors pointed out that part of the problem was that it had been difficult to contact Bradon Farm for information about the lights. Mr Downes explained that he does not wish to have a strong public presence. They sell directly to supermarkets, and so they do not have a website. It is not easy to find their contact details with a web search. Clare Paul explained how similar businesses in the area have good success with public liaison committees. Mr Downes is reluctant to do that. However, they were very open to us, and now that we have their contact details, we can deal with any further comments from the public in our area much more effectively. In fact, they have been very successful with involving the parishes closer to them, so that they have received few complaints about the lights in those closer parishes. The current problem has been more with parishes like Fivehead and Curry Rivel, which had been affected by the lights but had not received direct contact from Bradon Farm.

The greenhouses themselves are very impressive. They cover 11 hectares: that's over 15 football pitches! The farm supplies about 20% of the UK's strawberries. They use all sorts of clever technology, including special "good bugs" to eat the "bad bugs", and commercially reared native British bumblebees to pollenate the strawberry flowers.

At the end of the visit, we were allowed to taste a range of different strawberries, some sweet, some tart. And we were presented with a punnet of strawberries to take home.

All in all, we were satisfied with the explanations about the problem with the lights and the descriptions of what they are going to do to fix the problem next year.

And one last tip from the expert for Somerset gardeners: Mr Downes advises "Malling Ace" as the best variety for our greenhouses.



Figure 1 A view down a greenhouse, with the strawberries and picking trolleys



Figure 2 Some essential greenhouse workers: bumblebees!



Figure 3 One of the lights. These are efficient LEDs. But they still consume 2.8 megawatts in total!



Figure 4 Lights in place, with insulation curtains behind. These curtains will be replaced with blackout blinds in August.