



50 Farmers' Tales

An Archive of Interviews with Kent Farmers



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Countess Phyllis Sondes
Location: Lees Court Estate, Stringmans Farm, Selling
Size: 3000 acres
Type: Mixed Arable

Interviewed by: Rajindra Puri
Filmed by: Joe Spence
Date: September 18, 2015

Countess Sondes: For me the key commitment would sit more as an overview which would sit on top of the agricultural passion, is for a way of life to continue as it has here for so many centuries. And how do you keep it going and really, if your desired result is to keep a way of life, which again is, you're fighting it to see farming continue and of course, you know how tough a time it is in agriculture, to see a shoot continue, our involvement on the Swale with the fisherman. Again because of my ignorance, if it's a fisherman or a gamekeeper or a farmer, they're all struggling to keep a way of life going, with the differences with all the things you know, the obvious ones of how x number of people are now, whatever, whatever, whatever.... But the other leg, which I think has shown a great deal of change, is conservation. I'm very proud to say [we] have won the Purdey Award and so for conservation, although that tends to be more linked to game and a lot of what's in here is the farming aspect on shooting, in terms of the game cover, which Charlie who's strictly a farming consultant would spend quite a lot of time on our game covers and with the shooting dimension, so it's really a little bit different to start.

Charlie: But even the game covers have changed massively. They were maize which... a mono-culture.

Countess Sondes: Do you, just Charlie to maybe expand it... What a game cover does and what it's goal is, what it's purpose is in shooting?

Raj: No you can, yea, explain that.

Countess Sondes: Yea, I would embrace that.

Charlie: So effectively it is an area to hold, feed and give protection to game birds and generally as a flushing area. So you focus them in that area that provides good cover, they feel safe, safe environment with food, and then they're flushed from that environment, over the guns. However, what we've achieved working, partly with some of the schemes we've developed, conservation schemes, is now, and the cover just behind here is a prime



example, we have four different blocks and only one of those is now maize, the other containing kale, quinoa, fodder radish, chicory. And there's the huge proliferation in songbirds, finches in particular, because the food supply has gone up, as well as being a very good food supply for the game birds. But actually, the environmental benefit has been really embraced. They're much harder to grow but actually they're much more beneficial to the shoot and to the environment, so it can work hand in hand.

Raj: So these are things people have traditionally grown for shoots, for supporting game birds or are you introducing new....?

Charlie: Some of them are introducing new ways of doing it but yes, they have been grown, traditionally it was very much, going back 20,25,30 years, Kale and maize, and we've seen Millet come into the covers but quin-o-a, or keen-wah, depending on how... Game covers always pronounced quin-o-a. They've been added in probably the last 5 -10 years and actually, so they're, really.... And I think we grew a commercial crop of Quinoa in 2003.

Countess Sondes: We did, and really not that successfully.

Charlie: No, it was full of pheasants! They're not stupid - Nature's not stupid!

Countess Sondes: Culturally, and from my perspective what's quite interesting and what I think speaks very well of those on the estate is you tend to have a divide between the shoot and the farm and there's some obvious reasons because, very often, what's good for the shoot's not good for the farm and vice versa. And there's just, historically, I'm sure you have found that in other....

Charlie: Every other, almost... As Lady Countess Sondes sums up really, traditionally, the view has been that what is good for the farm is not good for the shoot and vice versa.

Countess Sondes: And you do, even in the decision making, and we'll come back to you, if lets say we're looking at increasing game cover, which might be helpful to the shoot, so that means you're taking, in most instances, you would be taking land out of production. So, is it worth it? So you're looking at, what will it produce, now that may be very different this year than it would have been when prices were stronger, so you have to really weigh in on both sides and also how both aspects are doing. But the cooperation, which is a cultural aspect, at least from what I've observed, I think we've done very, very well. I mean there's a little arm twisting sometimes. And one of the points which I think you had the question you posed to Charlie, which I think there's a very, very, good answer we can supply, is we have a small, and very much small compared to the kind of things we've tackled, is a program to the reintroduction of the gray partridge - So we bring in red partridge, red legs, for the shoot but we, and what we did, even though again that's the reason for emphasizing it's a small project, we're doing it in partnership with the local primary school, with Plumpton College, which, where a place you would train future game keepers and that national game keeper's organization. And our gamekeeper who, is a very skilled communicator, I also believe a very fine gamekeeper, he heads the national game keeper organization educational trust and we also have, for Lees Court, we have LERN - Lees Court Education Research Network, and we do a lot of education programs, whether it be people looking to see what farming or



conservation, or we do just for disabled, disadvantaged, we have got very much more involved in woodlands so we have an international Elm tree conference coming up because we're, just literally across the road, trialing some and those are also international, they're coming from, Britain, typically isn't doing very much, so they're French and they're Italian trees, just little tiny... And also with Ash dieback we really have a very, very interesting woodland program. And really, it's pretty much works, what we're doing for woodland, which again is a much bigger story, as a trial for what the government is doing because they're really not extending grants and the very simple point of it is, if an Ash is going to die, and at the moment about 80% of our Ash is infected, that's huge, that's massive, so if, when that tree dies, we have, in the grants that we have, we've established a variety of trees. If you don't do that, what will happen is the Sycamore will overtake everything else. The canopy, the shade of the Sycamore is going to block out the sunlight and all the biodiversity in the woodlands is gone. So it's not just that we lose the Ash but within about 10 years, according to our expert, our consultant, you're looking at loss of, you're master of this, the whole habitat. And we have a particular place in woodland, where you actually can see, you can literally go from this point to that point and you can see what's on the floor of the wood. So if you, the short sightedness of the government, it's not just these trees, it's woodlands as we know them. And 10 years, in terms of, as you know, let alone with woodland terms, is not very long.

Charlie: Two governments.

Countess Sondes: Well said Charlie. So it's, there are, earlier, the point I wanted to make is, so certainly the non food crops, which is the statement about that, for us, is the message of it can be cutting edge, it can be exciting, it can be... it can embrace a lot more than the very traditional agriculture which can be, boring. And the problem is, I think the image of the farmer is not very good, and to attract younger more vibrant farmers who want to have an opportunity to, someone who's looking for adventure, for a chance to be creative.

Charlie: I completely agree. We're often asked and asked, in consultancy roles, 'what's happening out there?' 'What are really challenging you at the moment?' Everybody's challenged by commodity prices, the weather. Everybody has that same, they're sort of standard issues that you know, you have to deal with in a business, which we do for each business differently. But actually it gets exciting when you start challenging yourself to develop and deliver something that's not normal practice. And as Lady Countess Sondes, right from the outset, 2002, remember the meeting well, 'what else can we have from our Wheat?' 'What's wheat germ - wheat germ oil' and sort of projects evolved into other oils, properties and what they're used for. And really, speaking in the local community, when you meet local farmers, when they see the crop in full flower, they are, it's a stand out sort of image, the crop is just saying WOW and that's what everybody's thinking. And you know that when they're speaking to you they're actually, all quietly say, 'how does it work?' Within farming there's a lot of skepticism and cynicism in terms of 'well it doesn't pay, it's just a fad' Actually, the really successful part about this is, the only reason it really does, cos it does pay, as well as being entrepreneurial and delivering lots of other benefits, it also adds to the business which is, does make it, the cherry on top of the cake really. Because the main thing about them, we have this, from a wildlife, biodiversity point of view, the mid 70s were a complete disaster for farming. We switched to a winter monoculture so we lost lots



of overwintering habitat. We've got pictures of lots of farming clients and they're driving gray partridge out of mangles, which are almost like a stubble turnip, because they were mixed farming, even in the east, all the way from the north, and a lot in the south east, but across the east of the country switched very much to a winter cropping program, winter wheat, winter barley and then in the 80s, oil seed rape really grew as the sort of yellow peril. We all enjoy our deep fried chips. And that really was the nail in the coffin, but actually the opportunity of spring crops, non food crops, which actually have moved on from there because actually we're getting them back into the food chain, has been a real development into providing winter cover, winter stubble, and you can see the grey partridges almost follow, we saw them this morning as we walked across, some of the grade 1, some of the best arable land there is in the southeast, in the country. The grey partridges are there. And it adds to the biodiversity and breaks up that monoculture of winter cropping. And when they flower, you do think, Wow.

Countess Sondes: The Echium is a vivid blue, violet blue and the calendula, which is actually pot marigold, and that is a vivid orange and when you see, we have some, aerials, and the caption we tend to use is 'changing the colours of the countryside' Because it's aerial and it's obviously high, you begin to see all the normal colours and you see these patches of vivid orange and violet blue, so it does make the statement. Curiously, a new crop which we're doing with an American company, and that is very interesting, they're looking to be, what we're doing is principally a niche area in agriculture, may be very important but it is never going to be a major crop and yet, Ahiflower, Ahiflower, which we're growing under contract is something which, they're aspiration is to be as significant as peas. And our farm foreman, was dropping me off one night, said that when he started at Lees court, which was 30 years ago, he had never farmed rape, oil seed rape. And he was saying, 'Well, is Ahiflower going to be the same?' and it has been very interesting, it was on the strength of our having experience in these novel crops but of being part of a bigger operation as well to see where this goes. And what's behind it, the concept of Ahiflower, is, their logo is a fish, I'm not sure I would have chosen that, but the reason is, it's the stearidonic acids, the omega 3, 6 fatty acids and normally you would get that from (eating fish) exactly. And with the depleting fish stock, couple with all the garbage, the mercury and the things that they would be traveling with, you're able to find that in the same thing in a crop. What I couldn't, to use the vernacular, I couldn't get my head around, is how could you get something from a fish in a crop, but it's in the algae that the fish is carrying that provides the stearidonic acid, the fatty acids. So that was the link for me.

Raj: So that's new, you just started that...

Countess Sondes: No, no, no...

Charlie: We're now in, we have a contract arrived on my email yesterday for this winter,

Countess Sondes: No no, but it's not the first year...

Charlie: So this will be the 5th year - We've had two commercial crops and two management agreements with them. We were one of their first growers and it's moved on from the



development stage and now they're a bit more hopeful, but they always are hopeful at this time of year and it's sort of May, June we understand how exactly how they're crops moving.

Raj: Where does it come from? Where was it traditionally grown? Was it grown as an oil or a food oil?

Charlie: The species they have developed, the actual variety they have developed has come from about 50 different varieties they've collected from Eastern Europe, from Russian steps, so it's all native species to Eurasia and the downside is, it's not as pretty is it? It's pretty dull!

Countess Sondes: It's not as photogenic, it has tiny little white flowers - how thoughtless! But what we have, and I hope that you... There's only a small window, really about 3 weeks that really it's all in flower, but what we have is, and again I would be delighted to show you or a group, the physical set up that we had this year, and of course because of the obvious rotation of crops and everything will change, we go from, there's a polytunnel, which we use for experimenting various seed

Charlie: an assessment of traits of the crop, so we might have one plant species with seven or eight varieties but we don't know what they're like.

Countess Sondes: How that works - there's a scientist, a professor who has really written most of the most important patents for lipids when he was at Crota, and he's very close to this area and he'll know and will say to Charlie, he thinks in New Zealand there are seeds, so let's say Echium, we've grown about 10 different varieties of Echium. Charlie will attempt to source, what has, we've had as few as 27 seeds, for someone, farmers, that we do we think in terms of tons, acres, you know, we don't deal with seeds. And they will be planted, initially we were doing 1 seed per pot, individually irrigated, then we've gone to 2 seeds per pot but that is a very intensive way of, a lot of love and care has to go into that, and does. And we've sourced from Majorca, from Rhodes from, where are all the different places you've had to search?

Charlie: Lots of volcanic islands.

Countess Sondes: Yes, and I remember visiting in Sicily and seeing the Echium was growing there.

Charlie: So yes, lots of volcanic islands, a little bit comes from New Zealand and yes, the Mediterranean coast is being, sort of, wider Persia is traditionally where lots of these crops were, or plants, grow.

Countess Sondes: But many of them have not been, would not have been, tested for their properties. So when we can get, and literally, we're looking at handfuls of seeds in some instances, then we would, there would be an extraction and that could be everything from desktop to, we also tend, where we can, to use ... co2 instead of cold pressing, because that will involve Hexa, which is a pretty ferocious carcinogenic drug, not drug... what would it be? - Chemical...



So we have the combination of Charlie in his view and with our farm foreman trying to say well what is viable to grow and seeing the results of what the lipids are in this... what the stereodonic acid, what it's going to produce. We would then go to the next stage which would be a field trial, not a field trial, but an outdoor trial and so we would have parallel to that, but outside to see how, if it will make the next the step. And then it'll go through the same process. And those which we're now looking at, which have done well, we're trying to get aqualegia and lunaria to grow. And we've had field trials so you can sort of go from polytunnel, those that are outdoors, the field trials and then we have some of the fields that we're growing of Echim, Calendula and Ahi flower. So it's a, for me, it is so exciting to see this process. So, was looking this year at the polytunnel, first I was really disappointed, because it was so full of life and colour and then it was really quite... Empty.

Charlie: Empty!

Countess Sondes: But that was from the whole process of really coming down to what is viable and that is, there was an interview once that was in a publication for Strutt and Parker and I was really thrown by the question, cos the interviewer, and it was not done as a trick question, said but 'who's doing what you're doing?' and I really enjoyed, I really thought I was, and I said 'monsanto' - the most horrible company imaginable. My point is that there's really not, and Charlie could address this in a more professional way, but it is very cutting edge what we're doing and it's, which makes it quite exciting.

Raj: Can I just ask a question about the... So the process is to collect as many varieties as you can and then test them, so you're selecting varieties that are more viable in this countryside - I mean, cos they come from the Mediterranean and different climates to what you have here so....?

Charlie: That's exactly right. So the first point is the plants, or the varieties, are selected on, sort of, expected, suggested suitability. Then the first challenge is to actually grow them, which hasn't always happened, because we get certain seeds which simply don't even germinate here. And it may be the difference between, and we've, so those seeds, we've had them in the freezer for a year, had them in the freezer for a week, put them in the fridge, heat them up, put them in the ... whatever and they seem to not germinate. And then they germinate perhaps two or three months later. Some plants have needed a period of vernalisation and, obviously people go 'well that's obvious', but it's not at the outset. And, once we have grown them, we can assess how they grow agronomically, how physically big they get. One of them is, at the moment in the polytunnel, is at about 4ft 6 and it still doesn't seem to have any flowering heads coming on it, so I'm not quite sure how big that's going to get. And then once the seed is, then pollination, so we have bees, to ensure that we, put some honey hives, bee hives around, to ensure we get the suitable pollination. But they always seem to pollinate better outside rather than inside so we see that the wind and things are still having an effect. Seeds collected and then we analyze that seed to see how the lipid profile looks. I say 'we' - it is analyzed. And then if the plant is ticking lots of agronomic boxes, or the other way round, if the oil is excellent, is that agronomically good enough to grow. Normally... not. But we're at the very beginning so there's a couple of very exciting species we may be able to develop. And then it goes into the next stage is seed multiplication so, Liz in the office has been investigating single row hand drills and things,



because our equipment is 4 meter power hower combination drills and 24 meter sprayers and 7 meter combine heathers. They're not designed for....

Raj: As an ethnobotanist I would be interested to know to what extent those have been planted in other parts of the world - there may be some knowledge that you could tap into. But I imagine you're heading towards a process of artificial selection, because you can begin to select.

Countess Sondes: Yes, it is quite interesting but, just on something that Charlie was touching on, there's 2 stories which I enjoy to tell and they make the point of how new this is. So we had, for which Charlie secured the first contract for Collangiler in the Northern hemisphere, and it was, we got the seed. And the seed has a hook like that [shows] so a farm manager at the time looked at this and he said 'how are we gonna get it in the ground?' Because you were saying about we didn't have the right equipment...

Charlie: 'What are we gonna do with this?!

Countess Sondes: So, needless to say, we got it in the ground. Time comes to harvest it... 'How are we gonna harvest it?' No one's harvested it before, no ones grown it before. We're literally pioneers in that regard. So through more trial and error, though you can talk about how we do harvest it which is, or ended up harvesting it, but there's just no frame of reference. First year we did Colangiler, again first contract, the petals are used in Africa and Holland and other places but it's the oil that we look for, that's the part that makes our work unusual. And it was beginners luck, it was a gorgeous crop. The vicar said the tourism for Sheldwich had increased, BBC would come down, we were concerned about accidents because people were constantly stopping and photographing and drawing and it was, first it wasn't seen, and it was stunningly beautiful and it was virtually a perfect crop. That's the last perfect crop we saw because we've since then had very serious problems with weeds. And we went to, after seeing this year on and year on, Charlie went and, we went did some work with Syngenta to try to deal with it and came up with a little bit of a different program and it's helped but there's still problems.

Charlie: The first, it's a really interesting process in itself because we've developed, we've had to develop, in the first year we worked, with the people giving the contract and the pesticide safety directive to apply for some specific off label applications for certain agrochemical products. So that, being farmer led, is quite rare. Normally you would have a group of farmers, and the sunflower groups have done it, when we've grown sunflowers, but for an individual farmer to do that, sort of 'Hello, I'm a farmer, can I apply for an off label recommendation, application...' So we got one or two products which were pretty key to, for herbicide and fungicide. But yes, we really did struggle with two particular weeds. And, hence the [indecipherable] from that, and that has actually, we've been slightly helped with the Echim species because that work was done whilst we were doing it under the group. But it's been an interesting red tape exercise in terms of how you... because we do follow the rules, you can't just wildly apply things just because you think they might work. You have to get the...

Raj: So you're not working under any kind of certification?



Charlie: Absolutely, we're governed by a assured combined crops standard specification and all farmers have to comply to the regulations under the, that the rural payments agency and defra, and for that, you are not, you cannot just apply a chemical that's not approved for the product.

Raj: No, I meant certification as in terms of organic or...

Countess Sondes: No no, The kind of, our crop fenola, which we were growing for seed and it's a dwarf hemp, so that would have certification. In fact you'd have to smoke a field for it to be... but it is, and the smell was, of course, what it was, it was hemp. An area which is a little different, isn't the kind of certification you're talking about but is fascinating is we're trying to patent some of our work. We have a patent pending in the US and it, from the very little I've seen and the very little I know of these areas, it would make pharmaceutical patenting seem child's play. It is very very very very interesting and work with someone whose, of course, patent law is very specialized so that's another aspect that i think is relevant. But your point, of what you're suggesting is exactly what we're doing with Echium because we find with Echium, when you look at it at a distance you see just a solid block of colour but it's actually, some is very blue, some is pink, some is white and we find that there's quite a difference in the amount of seed that they're carrying and how they're producing, which again Charlie can address. So what we've done in one of the trial plots is to try to eliminate and develop a Lees Court blue which would be a superior Echium. So I think that's exactly where you were going...

Raj: Yea that kind of artificial selection, there's Biocultural diversity there

Charlie: We often feel that the white flowers are ignored by the insects, the pollinators, and do we get better oil profile from the darker flowers. There's a theory that actually the professor thinks that...

Raj: Well secondary compound usually are produced as a natural pesticide.

Charlie: So, little trial pot, all the white flowers got pulled out, all the pink flowers got pulled out.

Countess Sondes: At this moment we're talking about a tiny, tiny area.

Charlie: Yeah, from Small seeds...

Countess Sondes: The most we grew, was we had 160 acres, about 3...

Charlie: Which was an interesting market reaction because Echium, the oil, traditionally, is used nutraceutical use and a US company applied for soya milk, no, a soya bean extract, to be added into baby food which was high in stereodonic acid. The European market then moved for a non-GM guaranteed source which was from Echium so the price had gone from 2 and half thousand pounds a ton to over 4000 pounds a ton in about 3 days, so... that year, I



think it was 2009, it was by far the highest margin crop on the farm, it was really... Yes, we were 160 acres.

Countess Sondes: And they were interested in, cos of course, at this scale and for a crop like this we grow, we keep our seeds so there was also the value of the seed which we, Charlie is finding, is a little bit underway, but it's a commodity like any other so I remember we were, again, had this meeting and would learn that the price had soared up dramatically, needless to say our interest peaked, and the same way that, the question of course was 'why?' and understanding that again it was driven by this baby foods, non-GM and, shot up, we had a superb contract and I think it was about 160 acres, all by contract, at an excellent price, as Charlie just shared. And sure enough, it dropped because it went, it then went from Echium and it went, i think it was, to Borage, which we have grown and would never grow again, which we could go into that but certainly...

Charlie: We're still growing it....?

Countess Sondes: That is the problem. We don't plan to but it still grows, it smothers the crops coming after and we'd just never recommend it for anyone. There are good contracts out there but it is quite a hazard.

Charlie: It's interesting, the Borage market's much more of a wider market now, Borage and Ashi,

Raj: What do they use it for?

Charlie: Again for the fatty acid profile

Countess Sondes: Almost all, everything that's the thing in them...

Charlie: But it's not as superior as that of the profile of Echium. But you get a much higher yield of oil per hectare because you get a higher yield and you get, of seed, and it's cos of slightly higher oil concentration so per unit value of oil it's cheaper. And industry sort of demands, but it's not as good quality. But we still have now, one Echium user in Europe who we're supplying and he's gonna continue using Echium as long as he can get hold of it because his process is set up and that's through a Dutch company we supply.

Raj: So you said that's your theme? Your theme is fatty acids and, not oils in general, I mean essential oils.

Countess Sondes: That has certainly been our, we have a commercial project, seeds, which is hoping to, some of the properties are very much of interest, whether it be skin care, wound healing, the key, for us, we've been looking at the fact that it will create collagen synthesis which usually is artificial, synthetic or is from animals. So if you can do that naturally that's quite interesting. So that's been our particular focus but everything we've been planting, that's been the aspect that we've looked for.



Raj: Ok, I'm gonna just shift the conversation just a little bit, if that's alright, to ask you, because we wanted to look at, obviously, the history of the farms, we've been interviewing people about histories. The first thing we usually ask is 'what are you doing on your farm?' and you've kind of explained a lot of that already, the kinds of things you're growing and the kind of things that you're involve in and that's really fascinating...

Countess Sondes: But I would emphasize, this is a very small percentage of our acreage. So in other words we haven't, we've been conservative, we've still, we're very lucky in that we have mostly grade 1 soil, which is perhaps only 10% in the country, I think that's close to what I've been told, and we still grow about 50% wheat, about 25% rape, break crops, we also find that these crops have worked very well as a break crop. In fact the wheat, after we've had Echium, the wheat usually is a pretty good...

Raj: ... follow on...

Countess Sondes: Exactly. So it's

Raj: So, 50% wheat, 25% rape and then?

Countess Sondes: Beans, peas, in this instance, when we have enough of it, Echium. They all will work as a break crop.

Raj: Fruit?

Countess Sondes: Tenants. We have tenants on the estate and one is a fruit farmer, dairy and the other is arable, the way we are.

Raj: Ok, wow!

Charlie: One old traditional cherry orchard which is in the conservation scheme.

Countess Sondes: Yes, third stewardship!

Charlie: So third...

Raj: Big trees?

Charlie: Huge trees! Amazing cherries this year.

Countess Sondes: Amazing cherries, and not of interest to the supermarkets so it's more for us really.

Charlie: Or even anymore men that come along and say 'can I buy your cherries this year?' Mainly the birds and the locals. They were excellent this year.

Raj: That was my actual question was going to be, what is... you've talked about all the new things and what is the continuity from the past? So that's interesting...



Countess Sondes: As a little bit of an overview, as going way back, the estate is approximately 700 years old, I think you've been focusing on the last 50 years..?

Raj: We have but you can, any distance in the past is fine with us

Countess Sondes; Well, just to put it a little in context, Strutt and Parker has been representing the estate for over 50 years. My stewardship started in 1996 when my husband died. So, what might be of interest to you is to see, given the nature of the trust, which the estate is in, that was really a little different in the terms and that was controlled by trustees and Strutt and Parker were managing it...

Raj: That was prior to 96?

Countess Sondes: In my husbands lifetime. My description of that, and I think it would be important Charlie if you saw it differently, of course that preceded Charlie, I guess that would be obvious, that it was, had an almost institutional feeling cos it was controlled by trustees, Strutt and Parker, I can remember when my husband did die and the big upheaval and my battle of saying 'look, these crops are being neglected, you know, we're just not getting the attention' For my stewardship, there's a little bit of a different role - so its the opportunity to do new things and to, which we really are doing in space, whether it be the straight agricultural work, which we've discussed, or on, as Charlie was mentioning what we do with the shoot, or the other aspects which is very important to the message for me, is to say, the tortoise breeding, it can reflect your own passions, skills. And the reason I say I feel it's important is in order to try to attract a younger generation, a more vibrant generation, or if it's, where it's a farmer or an estate where you see the tradition of generations, so you see someone who's looking forward to going into that because they see it as, I mean as far as boys toys you'd be hard to find them much better - combines and tractors! And it can take you, as has been your experience, it can be global. It takes you out of a 9-5 job, which may not be right for everyone, it's an alternative to that and it can, for me, it's my canvass we're able to do some very exciting things. And the conservation work i think we've... is very meaningful to me. We won the Purdey award in 2013, the bronze, which is really the most important award for conservation in this country. And that's another very meaningful aspect in that, if you're out on the estate which, hopefully another time you might enjoy, immediately there are things that'll jump up at you, whether it be a beetle bank at the headlands, all the things that I think of course with your experience will be obvious to you. And we have, in the earlier project that I talked about, a lot of that was really analyzed very form the financial perspective that the fact that we did bring in headlands, we weren't, we didn't have less income, which is.... right Charlie?

Charlie: I think the, it's really great points, I mean I've been involved now for 15 years and I think the emphasis that comes through from LS stewardship is very much right. We've done very well, always there's always recognition that the farms performed well but there's always that challenge of 'how can we do things better?' There's never a status quo, which is brill... each year we have a league table of our yields and I'm always thrilled to say the farm is definitely in the top 5% of those because it has some of the best land but, at the same time because we're growing milling wheat, because we're always adding value and everything is adding value. But we're challenging that by, when I started 15 years ago, there wasn't a



beetle bank, a hedge, a wild bird strip on the grade 1 land, and yet Kim and I walked through this morning, he's the foreman, walked through the wild bird seed which is up there, and there must have been 2 or 3 hundred house martins. And yet you've got 50 meters either side of that and they were, there's something, there's life going on. And actually we can grow great yields, we can get the top performing farming business alongside conservation and I think actually that's been the real challenge. So it's not just what we were doing in 2000, because if we were doing what we were doing in 2000, we'd be in...you know everything has to evolve. It doesn't have to evolve over night but it's just got to be a process and that's, I think, the stewardship, from the farming side, which obv I'm very heavily involved with is always to challenge what we've done and make sure we can do it better.

Raj: And your new ideas are obviously very innovative, they're coming from you I suppose, quite a few ideas about how... Where are the new ideas coming from? It doesn't seem to be necessarily market driven but more a choice about your values and what you believe in...

Countess Sondes: Well, i think it started like any other estate. It was going back to a time that was very tough in agriculture and my key passion is to try to keep all of this history, all of this, sort of the 700 years, right up on one's shoulder. How do you keep it going? How in light of all the problems...? We've certainly, you don't have to look very far to look at other estates - houses are sold, pictures are sold, land is sold, estates are sold. It's the country is structured that way, it's tax system, its, its, i'm not judging it, but it's clearly, you have to really fight to find ways and we don't have, we have these wonderful tortoises but we don't have a safari park you know we don't have.... We had to find our way and

Charlie: Good idea! There are already two in Kent!

Countess Sondes: So it would have been the buzz word at the time was a farm diversification project. And that could have been for some a B&B, it could have been taking office building, taking farm buildings and using that for commercial value and our PA Liz, we were looking at 'what do we have?' and we looked at the time of, we're wheat at that time, and looked at a different way of the extraction and found this dramatic change, just by virtue of the extraction. One is an unattractive and the other is sort of a silky and it's really the vitamin E and it has all kinds of properties and that was how, launched us looking further. And certainly then, through the United Nations, was very interesting indeed, although quite a minefield in other respects of opening one's eyes to what's happening in these areas. And then the analogy which, of alternative medicine and mainstream medicine, so you would have, Charlie would have been at the time mainstream agriculture, and would very, very much the same formula changing a little bit per, depending on the nature of the farm and or estate.

Charlie: Tweak here, tweak there...

Countess Sondes: And we came in and said 'look.. we want' and it was trying to say, now Charlie is considered one of the real experts in this area, and justifiably, but earlier on it was really saying 'this is what we're doing and let's, we're going to have a look at this'

Charlie: 'We are doing this!'



Countess Sondes: And it has evolved really from there. But it was like, every other farmer, cos this does go back a number of years and you had to find, well some didn't and some don't farm or some, certainly many farmers are still struggling and certainly, although it's tough for an arable farmer, we all know that for a dairy farmer or others it can be really serious, but no different than any other farmer, and just our way of finding a farm diversification project was different solution to that. And not a solution, because it's, this is still, as you've heard, very much a work in progress. It's been quite a substantial gamble. Well some is by contract, if it's by contract we're protected and we've done, on balance fine, as Charlie said, some of the gross margins have been outstanding, they've been tremendous, but others we're just developing and hope this will, with time, become an interesting opportunity for other farmers and hope perhaps to create a market for it.

Raj: Do you think your ability to take these kinds of risks stems from the size of the farm and ability to set aside a bit for experimentation while you can maintain the main support through traditional crops? In other words, would a smaller farm be able to [inaudible]

Charlie: No, no, no. I think the size of the farm probably doesn't bear much, I think in relation, if you were going to push on with these projects, you have to have the conviction to actually carry them through. The bottom line is always important of the, whilst there's experimental area, actually any field scale crops are always backed with a contract somewhere. Either to seeds, or to a commercial partner, as a normal crop merchant would have a contract. So there's limited risk to the farming business other than the investment and the time that we're putting into the polytunnel and to the small scale trials. But it's limited. But there is still risk there. But it's the desire to make it, like anything in business or life, the desire to actually make that happen that really makes it happen.

Countess Sondes: We've tried to separate seeds, as a commercial venture, from Lees Court Farms and Lees Court Farms has done well but the risk has been with seed and that remains to be seen.

Raj: So to go back, let's see if we can go back, what was the farm like, if you know, or from what you know, what was it like about 50 years ago? Any idea, I mean, do you know?

Countess Sondes: I would imagine that it was, well there are obvious things that I'm sure every farmer would say - you would have x number of people, where today you have less, the equipment would be different, you wouldn't have the conservation, the average field size would be different. That would be across the board and, in a way, not different to us. I'm sure that everything you see, across the board in Kent and Britain, would be much the same...

Raj: But here in particular...?

Countess Sondes: I would think it was, there would not have been an active family member and so it would have been, as I mentioned earlier, that I think it would have been probably a pretty institutional, I don't know if that's the right word, but it certainly wouldn't have had any particular passion or direction behind it, or even kicking Charlie.



Charlie: The earliest that I can say is actually 1977, not because I was there, but that's the year that the previous farm manager started, Bill Harver (sp), and actually I used to extract information from him. I'd be sitting in the car, or walking across a field with him, or just chatting, and it was fascinating. So the crop variety was much greater, 1977 they were growing potatoes, unirrigated on the farm.

Raj: Unirrigated?

Charlie: Unirrigated potatoes. Apparently they were a disaster. One half of the field because they went in too late, which was probably - that's Bill all over isn't it?!

Countess Sondes: I have actually heard that story.

Raj: What else?

Charlie: Lots of wheat, Barley and many more break crops, but as Lady Countess Sondes said, no oil seed rape. The landscape was, the sort of traditional hop gardens behind Gosmere. And many more orchards as well which were the previous tenants' - or the existing tenants' sorry, on the land, the Higgs had at the top. 5 men, so this is going back nearly 40 years, so there were 5 men which is now what 1 man is doing, so there would have been 5 tractors. We now have 2 tractors, so those obvious changes. But there have been some moves, there was the definite divide between the sections on the estate which, as Lady Countess Sondes referred to, the old joke was nobody ever talked to the keeper because...

Raj: it was a separate business

Charlie: It was a separate business - Well it wasn't even a business, was it, I mean that was...

Countess Sondes: It would have been more, almost a personal.... The shoot now is all commercial. I don't shoot, it's a way of keeping the shoot going because of the combination of, really 2 reasons, 1, I think the conservation benefits are so substantial, I mean it's just, the estate would be entirely different if we didn't look after the predators, create the habitats, all those things which are really essential and it's very, very important to the way of life on this estate and it's, we have the smaller community and an extended community that comes together and is just a great history and, we could have, we've had up to 60 people on the field. Some from different, 3 generations, going... it's terrific that way and is really the heart of the estate.

Raj: And back then it was just a separate...

Countess Sondes: Sorry, I wasn't being clear... It would have been more, I don't shoot, but it would have been, let's say in my husband's life time, it would have been his relationship with the gamekeeper or then it would have been game keepers' plural, and that's why it was so daunting because Charlie, or someone like Charlie, although again, it's different, but could run the farms. That was what happened. All of the estate management can be done, and is done by the agent, the land agent, which is also Strutt and Parker and works very, very



closely with... But the shoot was really done by my husband, and here I am, don't shoot, don't have experience in it, there's an expression [inaudible] 'how are you gonna get that ox out of the mud?' you know, 'how are we gonna keep this going?' and that's another story, I'm very, hugely proud of how we, over the years, have built that up. But that didn't come easily and that was why that was really done personally, by my husband, rather than it being run more, as Charlie said, well not really as a business.

Raj: So you wanted to keep it going?

Countess Sondes: I felt there was never a moments question that the shoot had to, we had to find a way of keeping that going.

Raj: And was there a hunt? Before hunting was banned, was the estate involved as well?

Countess Sondes: Yes, they come and shoot and we have some wonderful old sketches from the late 19th century of the hunt and of the family and some pictures at the big house where they would gather before the hunt and that's very nice because, with our post shooting season, we sort of have an extended sporting season and we have the hunt in and we have wildfowling on the Swale, we have pigeon shooting, we have the falconry in, we have the beagles in on different days, which we couldn't do. I should just also mention, although it's going back historically, the estate was once 85,000 acres so....

Raj: And it's now?

Countess Sondes: Well, it's a little bit hard to describe in normal terms, the core estate is just under 3000, but the Swale, which is mud, it's under the high water mark, but very, very, very, very interesting is 42 hundred acres. But it's hard, we bang this around all the time, cos you don't know quite how to categorize that.

Charlie: Definitely produces the most tasty crop!

Countess Sondes: Lees Court Oysters - They are really, the reason they're considered [Charlie: They're delicious!] to be as good, or better than any, and that's a quote from a three time Michelin star chef, is they're hand picked, in the traditional way, and usually they're farmed or they're dredged and these are hand picked and they are wonderful. Really, if you like oysters we can..

Raj: I love them!

Charlie: Is that because they're not native? Or

Raj: Wherever you can find them

Countess Sondes: They're pacific

Raj: They're pacific oysters



Countess Sondes: On our mud.

Raj: Do they get sold commercially?

Countess Sondes: Yes, but at a very local level.

Raj: In Faversham?

Countess Sondes: The Oare creek, yes which is in Faversham and Hollow Shore fisheries and if you open it, you'll see it says on it Lees Court Oyster beds and we would hope perhaps to do more with that in the future. That whole area is really, I think, going to change, and it's quite remarkable in this, working with this, just wonderful fisherman and his family, that you have the largest offshore wind farm that had to, in order to bring it's energy onshore it comes through our mud.

Raj: Oh, I didn't realise that, it comes through here?!

Countess Sondes: Well, no, yeah - there.

Raj: This part as opposed to over by Margate or whatever.

?: Mmm it comes into Graveney

Charlie: The new bit's coming into Margate, into Richborough power station [inaudible]

Countess Sondes: There's, because almost always, it's in the hands of the crown, this particular designation, I believe there are only about 3 or 4 places in the country that are privately owned and, so it gives us an interesting...

Raj: you mean the estuary or...?

Countess Sondes: The designation of below the high water mark is usually in the name of the crown almost everywhere but it's privately owned in this, on this 42 hundred acres, although that also includes the creeks. And that being privately owned below the high water mark is only in a handful of places so even when there was news, let's say about something with wind farms on offshore, the press, even the better press, were assuming it was all in the name of the crown. So it does give us some interesting, and has brought some very interesting aspects because, again, we're sort of almost a lone wolf out there. It's pirate territory, it's wild. It's, Strutt and Parker would say, with land, the regulations are almost overwhelming at times, there it's almost totally unregulated and we'll find if there was a blue boat that should be paying mooring fees to us, they'll paint it green so they don't have to pay it. And it's, what's involved isn't worth legal fees, but in some aspects it's pretty, it's very rough and there's a lot of corruption and the local political stuff. And equally there's some great, great, great people and there's some really interesting battles as it were.

Raj: Wow, so...



Countess Sondes: Which is, again, another whole chapter.

Raj: Well coastal estuary environments are quite interesting actually. We had a proposal a few years, to do some research - shellfish, samphire

Countess Sondes: Through Mike Walky?

Raj: No, Roy Ellen and I and a few people. It was more of an anthropological study to look at the uses of the coast as opposed to conservation of the coast. We just thought that very little had been done on seaweed, samphire, [Countess Sondes: A lot more being done.] slugworms etc - looking at the economic impacts of harvest of these. We were looking in Cornwall as well as here.

Countess Sondes: What do you feel about the reclamation of the farmland and what that's done to the environment? So we have a Ramsar site there, Kent wildlife trust just think this is the greatest, all these species of, coming from all over and... Sadly i think you could go to a zoo and find it, it's all artificial and it's, I think it has had, someone like Blue, I think feels that it's her, sees more than anything. Do you have a view on that?

Raj: No I don't, I don't know enough about it...

Countess Sondes: Ok, but, conceptually, it's not, they're not indigenous, but again, we're off the subject a little bit but that was bound to happen...

Raj: No, I don't have much knowledge about that, but it was just interesting to hear about the estuary and the use, and the oysters and other things. And, in terms of potential experimental, you know, moving your experiments out towards the coastal area, towards the estuary, in terms of that area of use.

Countess Sondes: Well there's certainly a lot of, in algae, as we would say, algae as you would say here, and we had discussion, fairly in depth discussion with the university of Greenwich, but there's a lot of research for algae. But Charlie, what were you going to, I'm sorry.

Charlie: I was going to say Camelina being, there's a lot of work on Camelina and there were some contracts available, the oil from Camelina is going to be extracted for use as an alternative to Kerosene in planes, aviation fuel.

Raj: Oh Really?

Charlie: Yea, but when you dug into the business and the company, they didn't really stack up. And I know people grew it in this country and they've still got it in their sheds. They never collected it.

Countess Sondes: That's one of the things that hurt non food crops very seriously was that people, and one in particular that we dealt with quite closely, they would either grow without contract or they grew with contract and the contracts weren't honoured. And they



were really burnt! And so the, I think from what Charlie's explained, the agricultural community really were, felt that this industry is just too young, we just can't get involved with this. And I think generally, cos we do quite a lot, or I don't know what quite a lot is, but we certainly have had quite a number of different groups, the CLA, Strutt and Parker, a lot of flying farmers, lots of people coming to see the crops and I would say, and Charlie you'll tell me if I'm wrong, but the, I think the overall feeling is to wait and see, see what happens with us before they get involved.

Charlie: Completely! Coming back to the traditional farmers, the Canterbury farmers club, local NFU groups, we've had hundreds of farmers round. Strutt and Parker crop technology that we have, so they're farmer group meetings and everybody's fascinated with what goes on. But they'll continue to grow wheat and rape and peas and beans and barley...

Raj: Farmer's are conservative aren't they?

Countess Sondes: That's the British farmer!

Raj: Well, farmer's all over the world are very similar I'm sure. I mean the ones I worked with in Indonesia were very, very conservative...

Charlie: They like their palm oil.

Raj: No, not palm oil. Rice farmers, vegetable farmers, Tarrow farmers and sweet potatoes. These are small subsistence farmers not commercial farmers. But there are all sorts of people trying to introduce all sorts of new things and they just wouldn't...

Charlie: Costs them a little bit more if they take a risk and it goes wrong

Raj: Well that's what I was saying about size...whether or not size matters, because some of the farmer's that we've talked to have basically said that the single farm payment is their profit. Otherwise they're basically operating at [Charlie: Doing quite well at the moment then] just not, barely breaking even year in, year out. If somebody has a disaster somewhere in the world in terms of weather and the price goes up then they do good but it's dependent on other people's misfortunes.

Countess Sondes: I would put it a little bit differently. I think, if it was entirely dependent on the income from the farm, we probably couldn't do, I think you would need props, which, other assets which you could use to that. But it wouldn't, Charlie, I don't think we could have taken that straight out of the farming budget.

Charlie: I think there's a whole different conversation about support payments and I think the budget. And I think you're right, if it had to come out of working funds it would have been a challenge at the start. But I think that's a, the single payment and the subsidy payments are a buffer so that people can carry on doing what they're doing and every now and then, they make a big profit and they carry on doing what they're doing but actually, if you put that to one side, and say right let's challenge the business in a separate way, there



are very few people doing that. And that's because it's about relinquishing control and letting, cos scale does play a big part in that.

Countess Sondes: Yes but even, there are some, today with the prices as they are, even big farms would not be showing very much, or would be showing very much less profit.

Charlie: If they're not doing it very well, they're making bigger losses! That's the truth, the key is, you have to do it well and even by doing it well, you're probably... it's not looking, the price and cost of production are such now that it's tough.

Raj: Interestingly I've, one of the first people I talked to is a guy over in Bridge who's managing a farm there. He's actually from the city and was brought in to kind of create alternative businesses on the farm itself. [Countess Sondes: That's interesting] Including kind of an artists'... turning a big old shed into an artists space where people can come and do work and the little small businesses and stuff, and he talked about the 1920s and how wealthy people from the city, made their fortune and came out and bought the estate and land and didn't know anything about it so they hired out tenant farmers and they got local people and they basically were, I don't know what you call them, 'hobby' farmers? [Lifestyle] But the interesting thing is, that happened in that period and now, we've talked to quite a lot of farmers who have a similar history; who have made their fortunes in the city, who have bought, I have interviewed two vineyard owners who are in that category and there's a couple of other ones as well who are kind of, just barely making it, or not making it and they're not too worried about that because.. [Countess Sondes: They can ride it out] They can ride it out yea, and because they're interested in, they're doing it because they love to do it and this is their dream and their hobby but they're not making, financially they're actually losing.

Countess Sondes: But concurrently to that you also see the property, the values, the capital value of farmland over that period which you really, I'm sure you're going to be looking at, has grown enormously, enormously. So they may feel their income is restricted but they would have had x amount of acres worth, Charlie, in your time, in 15 years, prime.... what, you may have this but?

Charlie: It's gone up 5 fold in round figures [Countess Sondes: I would have thought it would be more than that] It's gone up from about 2000 to about 10,000 an acre [Raj: or 12]

Countess Sondes: I would have thought, depending on of course, but quite a bit more, so they may feel they're doing it for the capital sense, or at least some farmers would be fine, again, if someone like that has other income. As Charlie said earlier, it is another very, very large and interesting subject.

Raj: Yeah, that's, and you see that, old family farms that kind of are having a tough time competing in this kind of environment where everyone is just on the margins... they're getting out and it's younger people and people with a little bit more wealth and support that can take the risk and they're getting in.



Countess Sondes: That's where, personally, I really champion the small farmer because, in my limited experience, I feel it's the small farmer that really has the smell, the feel, the visceral sense of farming and have the real commitment to it. As you know, farms, the trick now, is almost to go, like it is globally, larger and larger, it's an economy of scale and you see that everywhere. And to lose the small farmer is to lose the heart and soul of agriculture. And really that's...

Charlie: You'll end up with the corporate businesses that are very structured with a couple of people involved and then a management team and an operations team and they just go from one farm to the next doing their work. And they're in and out, so that whole harvest feel is gone because the equipment is so big you know 'Bshhhhhhhh' We have that now, you know your lifestyle guys, only 5 or 6 hundred acres 'How's the harvest going?' / 'We finished ours last week' / 'Well, what do you mean?' / 'It took 4 days' - That's it. And where's the, is there any enjoyment? Surely the nice part about it is seeing the culmination of what you've funded and 'oh, I remember...' Perhaps, as a child, the harvest feel, and it was great, you don't get that anymore, it's much more sort of... [Countess Sondes: Well you get less of it, I would hate to think you don't get it at all, but it's] Boof! I still like getting on a combine. I still like getting on a combine!

Countess Sondes: Oh I see. And, saying that, we have about 2 more days of beans and we can't, how much do we have? [Charlie: Yeah] A tiny bit, and we can't finish our harvest. It's been too wet. And you worry, and there are years you feel you worry you're going to lose your entire harvest and, at some point, as you know, the crop will turn so much it's gone. So we'll just have to wait and see, but many, many other farmers would be in the same position as, of course, and we're, in many ways, we're luckier than most, but still come back to really, really do champion the small farmer. Those are the guys, when I say guys it's a compliment, meaning women as well, really to see, it would just be wrenching to see that, and that is, what I mentioned earlier, you're struggling to see things continue, of course you can contract that out and there are a lot of advantages to contracting it out but it would not be, there'd be so much lost.

Charlie: One thing that I don't think we did say which is really interesting, and it used to come from Bill, and I think it still now is, really the people on the farm and they have, they, and the ownership has been very different and it's for lots of different reasons in terms of, no, the ownership has been the same, but the management from the family has been, but actually the one thing that they really enjoy, more now more than anything, is the contact. There's nothing, because the interaction you have and the communication that there is on the farm now is very different than it was, but the loyalties sort of still, Bill talked very fondly about the [?] really enjoy the meetings when Lord Sondes came back and it's brilliant. But they have real ownership of it at the same time, they look over the hedge and they want to see [Raj: They're proud] Yea, they're really proud, they want to see that their crops are the best.

Countess Sondes: Well that's true of really all farmers, there's always

Charlie: No, that hasn't changed in 50 years

Countess Sondes: No, and is unlikely to change.