ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS GROUP

We started our autumn programme with a discussion on solar farms. Farmers in many parts of the country are seeking permission to build large arrays of solar panels on their land. Is this a good or a bad thing? The UK has an urgent need to increase electricity production. And many farmers find it almost impossible to make a decent living out of

food production alone. But it's widely accepted that the country needs more, not less, home-grown food. There was a lot of sympathy for our farmers, and a feeling that solar panels were probably fine on lower quality agricultural land, especially if sheep were still able to graze between the panels. But turning over land currently used to grow cereals to solar panels didn't seem to make much sense, particularly when there is so much unused rooftop space in urban areas. And any large-scale generation scheme in rural areas faces a big problem – it can take up to ten years to get connected to the grid!

We had a taste of real science at our October meeting. Stephen Maberly, recently retired from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology at Lancaster, gave us an account of the ecology of Windermere and other Cumbrian Lakes. It's impossible to capture the details of his talk in a short article like this, but he was able to give us a comprehensive account of the science behind the changes taking place in the Cumbrian lakes.

As might be expected, most of the changes are man-made – such as the increase in nitrates and phosphates coming off neighbouring fields, as well as increases in phosphates from human settlements around the lake.

The lakes are warming up, too – surface temperatures in Windermere are now almost 2° higher than in the 1950s. Most of this increase has come about since 1995. The good news is that improved water treatment technology is beginning to lower the amounts of phosphates, and hence the growth of algae. The water quality in Windermere is now deemed "satisfactory", and while this still leaves plenty of room for improvement, it does reflect real progress. Thanks Stephen for a fascinating talk.

We had another guest speaker for our November meeting – Tim Bloomer from Fell Brewery, Flookburgh. Tim, co-founder and sustainability director at this local craft brewery, explained to us how they've succeeded in reducing their carbon footprint by up to 80% since 2021. A report they commissioned from Small World Consulting in Lancaster pinpointed the major sources of their CO 2 emissions, including ingredients, distribution and electricity. The brewery then set out to tackle emissions in each of these areas. Steps they've taken include using grain from sustainably-run local farms, installing solar panels on their roof, and delivering their beer using electric vans. Getting the entire workforce committed to improving sustainability has been a major factor in their success.

While Fell Brewery still haven't reached the ultimate goal of zero-carbon beer, they're still exploring ideas to improve sustainability in the future. While they started improving sustainability because they felt it was the right thing to do, it's beginning to pay off financially as well. Tim felt that if Fell Brewery could succeed in slashing their carbon footprint in this way, there was nothing to stop other small businesses following their lead. Many thanks, Tim, for an entertaining and thought-provoking talk.

John Eakins