

1980

It has been a year to remember. Every crop except herbage seed has enjoyed the biggest harvest in our lifetime and for the first time we managed to grow more than ten tonnes of wheat per hectare. Oilseed rape and sugar beet have also excelled and so at first glance it would appear that our financial results were equally exciting. They would have been had it not been for inflation. As it is we have done no better than last year simply because the additional income produced has been equalled by expenditure, which has increased by twenty four per cent since last year. It is a sobering thought to wonder what would have happened if we had experienced a normal harvest.

CEREALS (1650 acres)

The high point of the harvest was undoubtedly the field of Norman which we grew for NSDO. Not only did this crop break the Ten Tonne barrier for the first time on this farm, but it was also awarded the ICI Ten Tonne Club cup for the highest yield in Cambridgeshire. This farm is not on what most people would call wheat land so the achievement was all the more exciting. The fact that the crop was combined and immediately weighed by NSDO means that we cannot even be accused of inflating 'Pub Yields' simply to impress ourselves or our friends. The crop looked no better than average until the drought started in April. Pretty soon it began to look poor and only towards the end of June when the rains came again did it perk up. Within a week we were all dimly aware that the crop was extraordinary, largely due to the enormous size of the ears rather than to actual plant population (which was not outstanding). I compounded the problem by predicting - albeit a bit sheepishly - a ten tonne yield in front of the television cameras. But the story had a more than happy ending because the field was magnificent by any standards.

Perhaps even more amazing was the performance of Brigand which managed to average 75cwt per acre over 250 acres. To make matters even better we had used a very low, seed rate of 93lbs per acre so the achievement of this variety was perhaps the most significant fact this harvest. Every other variety also did well. A field of Otter - again combined and weighed by NSDO - gave over 54cwt per acre and several fields of Igri produced over 60cwt per acre. All in all it was an amazing year and one which, in spite of our hopes, I doubt if we shall repeat for some time to come.

As far as the future is concerned we shall stay with Norman and Brigand as our mainstays in the wheats. A new one from NSDO called Longbow is being grown for the first time. The barleys select themselves although the trade seems to have dismissed Otter as being an also-ran. We feel that this is both wrong and short-sighted because. We will be sticking with the variety, increasing the acreage of Igri and reducing that of Sonja.

We shall maintain our high-input regime with chemicals and fertilisers and even increase it next year. We shall be using a new technique whereby a computer in Nebraska, USA, does our soil analysis for us and enables us to apply trace elements and other chemicals in more precise quantities than

previously. We shall, in short, be trying to fine tune our techniques in the hopes that yields can be pushed ever higher. But it is worth remembering that on this light land more than most we are entirely dependent on rainfall for our crops. Thus it is the weather we should thank for the harvest. In retrospect it was perfect even though, like so many farmers, we tended to complain during the drought and keep our mouths tight shut when things went right. This year they went right with a vengeance and it is a pleasure to admit it.

HERBAGE SEED (200 acres)

A disappointment compared to the other crops this year and also to the amazing yields we had last year. It looks as if the S24 will yield about 8cwt and the Barenza the same, compared to 14cwt and 11cwt respectively last year. Costs, of course were up and the price for the Barenza down from last year. Thus it has been an average year for herbage seed. Next year we shall be growing; a new variety, Parcour, which will eventually replace Barenza and it looks as if S24 will be superseded by Frances as our early variety.

OILS EED RAPE (200 acres)

An average yield of 27cwt per acre (3.33 tonnes/hectare) broke our old records easily. Not that this was a difficult task as we had never been terribly good with rape. But this year everything seemed to go right and we even managed to rogue the charlock out of the crop, thus guaranteeing a useful seed premium which made a good year even better.

SUGAR BEET (300 acres)

At the time of writing the final yield is still not known but it is clear that this has been our best sugar beet year so far with an average yield of around 15 tons per acre (37 tonnes/hectare) and maybe even more. Sugars have been around 17.4% which is lower than last year's extraordinary levels but above our usual average. Weed control has been bad but the Moreau AT64 has made a far better job of this problem than our old harvesters would have done. Indeed this machine has made sugar beet a pleasure to lift instead of the protracted torment which our old systems used to cause.

CATTLE (185 head)

As the herd gets nearer and nearer to being pure Charolais the predominant colour becomes whiter and whiter. So also do the calving problems become worse but these, we understand, are inevitable. We try to find out from other herds what their calving mortality really is but we somehow never quite manage to find out the facts and thus we shall also be coy on this subject other than saying we lose more than we would like. The prices last spring were excellent and there is no doubt that the Charolais problems are rewarded in the auction ring with higher prices. We shall continue our policy of culling out the cows which show the Jersey or Angus blood in them and thus next year will see a suckler herd which is almost uniformly Charolais in appearance. The attraction of the pedigree herd continues to nag us but it rather looks as if we shall remain, a commercial operation for many years to

come.

SHEEP (300 ewes)

The great Experiment of the year which was caused by a combination of the following four factors: 1. The arrival of a sheep-keen New Zealander in May. 2. Cheap sheep as the bottom fell out of the market. 3. Increased acreage of herbage seed for sheep to eat. 4. A desire to get into what so many farmers were getting out of. We bought 300 mule ewes and some pedigree Hampshire and Suffolk rams. These, together with electric netting, a sheep dog and a lot more overtime, will provide the basis for our experiment. The sheep will eat herbage seed aftermaths, beet tops and lucerne during the summer. If we like the system in a year's time we shall expand the flock. If it fails we shall sell the flock and lose some money. What happens if it is partially but not entirely successful remains to be seen. Life is rarely simple.

MACHINERY

We spent all the money we had available on a grain drier and then had one of the wettest harvests on record. The drier, a 30 ton per hour Law Denis SC 212 was a great success and already it is hard to remember how we managed without it. In addition we put in a space-age control panel so that the entire grainstore complex can be controlled from a single spot. This makes life easier - and also impresses visitors. The other notable event was the arrival of the ECF Community Radio system which has been fitted to four vehicles and the farm office. On a farm this size it has meant that we spend less time driving round simply looking for someone and, like so many new machines, it makes us wonder why we didn't get one years ago. After harvest we treated ourselves to two; 110hp Schluters but found that the second hand tractor market was so poor that we were unable to trade in the two old Deutz machines as we had hoped. For the next year we shall be replacing the two Claas Dominator 85 combines with Dominator 96s and, thanks to some extraordinary credit terms we decided to get rid of the Dominator 105 and replace it with the new International Harvester 1480 axial flow combine. This will be an exciting machine because, in addition to its revolutionary threshing method, it will have a table 21 feet wide.

THE FUTURE

The cereal boom is definitely over. Looking backwards, never a difficult task, we can see that it started in 1974 and continued until 1979 with the high point - in terms of profits - coming around 1977. We now face the reality of a surplus in cereals, a Common Agricultural Policy which is in chaos, and a population which does not like the idea of subsidising farmers anyway. Thus the outlook is unclear other than to be certain that we shall not enjoy the sort of prosperity we have become used to in recent years. But paradoxically enough this means that we shall try harder than ever to maximise our yields even if this only increases the grain surplus. As our profit margins get squeezed ever tighter we have to produce more and more simply to stand still. This is total madness because old-fashioned economics always taught us that supply and demand would ensure that everything was kept nicely in

balance. The snag is that this simply does not work with farmers.

Another feature which has changed a lot in recent years is the seed trade itself. Gone are the days of Proctor and Cappelle, Field Approved Seed and the simple life. Instead we have too many merchants, too many varieties and too many regulations. The pressure on merchants applies to Growers too and we realise that we shall have to take some share of the risks when it comes to growing new varieties. Here again it will mean that profits will be lower than in what we are already looking on as the Good Old Days. But all these problems also make life far more interesting.

The sheep experiment which has been described earlier is probably the most significant thing we are doing this year. If it works we shall aim at setting up a system whereby the shepherd eventually owns his own flock and we - in effect - have a partnership with him. We would be providing the land, the fodder and the machinery and he would be providing the sheep and the skill. There are many problems to be overcome with an idea as complex as this but if it works the possibilities are very exciting indeed for a farm this size. We could start similar schemes with pigs, poultry, forestry and all manner of enterprises which would have two main aims; to provide opportunities for talented young men who lack land and capital while at the same time intensifying the land use here at Thriplow.

The time has come when we as farmers should start taking conservation as seriously as the conservationists. We at Thriplow have been fortunate in not having inherited small fields and so we have not had to rip out hedges or cut down spinneys. This is the only advantage to farming what had previously been heath land. But nevertheless the pressure to conserve what little countryside we have is growing and will continue to grow. We shall therefore be planting several acres of trees this winter in an effort to make our contribution.

The other pressure which is building up every year is for greater access to the countryside. Here again if farmers continue to ignore this they will suffer from government legislation forcing them to make concessions. We have taken the small step of welcoming walkers and riders to the farm on the sole condition that they keep to the paths and do not go on the fields. This may sound simple and reasonable but there are members of the public who feel that even this concession is not enough and that they insist on riding their horses on the fields when the paths become muddy.

Seven years ago I began writing these Annual Reports, which we now send not only to members of the staff but also to our friends and customers in agriculture generally. I ended the report with the words 'It is perhaps lucky that we produce food and not cars or washing machines'. If this were true in 1973 it is even more so today. Indeed, I now look back on 1973 as being a vaguely Golden Age before Bayleton came and complicated our lives, and when a five ton trailer was considered too big. If we have changed this much in the last seven years the mind must boggle at the prospects for the next seven.