

1981

A strangely disappointing year in spite of the fact that the harvest was only five percent smaller than our record of last year and the sugar beet has been better than we have ever known it. It is, of course, unrealistic to imagine that yields can increase every year but this has happened so frequently in the past that we feel an anti-climax when last year's record does not become this year's average.

In financial terms our profits will be down on last year and we must now all accept that the golden years of the 1970s when even a bad farmer could make a lot of money are now over and done with. Instead we shall probably return to the climate of the 1960s when good farmers managed to survive but the profits were (relatively) small; indeed in some years there were no profits at all. Thus once again the pressure will be on us and we can forget that only a few years ago our main problem at the end of the year was finding ways of spending money on machinery largely to avoid paying tax. It is lucky that we were able to do this because today we are exceptionally well-equipped and are able to face the future reasonably happily. To give an example, I doubt whether we would be able to spend some £90,000 on a grain drier in the next few years as we managed two years ago.

CEREALS (1700 ACRES)

When 162 acres of wheat averages 75cwt per acre it is probably stupid to be disappointed but the Norman had looked so exceptional throughout the summer that we were convinced it would improve on last year's record. There was one small consolation, however, which was that we did at least break our record by combining 414 tonnes of wheat on a single day from 109 acres. The combines stopped work at 11.15pm. Avalon did exceptionally well on the light Duxford land to show a yield increase for the third successive year. Brigand let the side down rather badly by turning in a yield of under three tonnes to the acre for one field. We shall not be growing the variety next year. The only excitement came with the field of Longbow which, after some careful adjustments for moisture, did manage to squeak through the magic four tonne barrier and restore a bit of lost pride.

The barleys managed to average just over 50cwt overall but this figure masked a dreadful performance by Otter whose yield collapsed to the lowest level for the past seven years. Quite what caused this remains a bit of a mystery but all the fields of Otter were badly lodged (even where a growth regulator had been applied) and suffered from Barley Yellow Dwarf Virus and - rather more ominously - from Barley Mosaic Virus, for which there is no known cure. Igri and Sonja were satisfactory if unspectacular.

Next year, in order to keep ahead in the seed-growing game, we shall be growing two new wheats from NSDO, Fenman and Avocet which are high-yielding feed varieties, As far as barleys are concerned we shall be growing a new variety from Nickersons called Tipper which is supposed to combine Igri's yield with Otter's malting quality. This sounds too good to be true but

we live in hope.

We shall, somewhat reluctantly, continue our policy of using very high levels of chemical inputs in an attempt to keep pushing yields upwards. Indeed we may well find ourselves using, more rather than less chemicals than before because we keep finding new problems which can only be solved chemically. An example of this is Barley Yellow Dwarf Virus which appears to be here to stay and so we now spray all our early-drilled fields as a matter of routine. Nitrogen levels, on barleys at least, will drop back a bit after last year when it became clear that we had overdone things a bit after the storms of early June. As usual we shall simply hope for a wet spring and early summer to keep our thin land moist.

HERBAGE SEED (200 acres)

Not a good year. A glut of seed on the market meant that the merchants were praying for low yields and, at Thriplow anyway, their prayers were answered. Our three varieties, S24, Barenza and Parcour all produced results which were slightly below the average for the past few years. Next year in addition to Parcour, we shall be growing Frances.

OILSEED RAPE (200 acres)

The one genuine disaster of the year. After an exceptional yield last year of 28cwt per acre we really felt that we had mastered the crop. Little did we realise that a combination of late storms and frost during flowering not to mention some savage attacks by cabbage stem flea beetle would all contribute to an overall average which barely managed to reach 15cwt per acre. It is little consolation to average the last two harvests and see that, if taken together, they were normal. This year we are growing what the breeders hope will be the successor to Jet Neuf, a new variety called Lingot.

PEAS (100 acres)

After a decade of disappointing sugar beet results from the Duxford land we decided to grow Maro peas instead. How were we to know that this was going to be the best beet year for ages? The peas did moderately with a yield of 22cwt per acre but there would have been more had we only been better at combining them. We shall persist for another year or two and will probably be growing Progreta this year. Peas do at least have the advantages of being combinable and providing an excellent entry for winter corn compared to the mess that is left behind after sugar beet has been removed from a muddy field in December.

SUGAR BEET (256 acres)

If rape was the disaster of the year then sugar beet has been the success. and about time too because it was very definitely under a suspended sentence. This fact must have concentrated its mind wonderfully because it looks as if the average yield across the farm will be more than 16.5 tonnes per acre with sugar averaging nearly 16.8 percent. It would be nice to be able to

identify the reasons for this success and, as usual, the weather must take most of the credit. However, we did have the cleanest crop anybody can remember and this may well be due to the fact that for the first time we made use of the low-dose high-pressure system of Betanal E and Format. We have been roguing wild beet for the past two years and will continue to do this so that if the problem ever reaches epidemic proportions we shall be in a relatively strong position. The closure of the Ely Beet Factory has made our lives easier. Thank you Sugar Corporation.

CATTLE (200 head)

It is now becoming difficult to see the original Jersey blood in the suckler herd as it becomes whiter and more Charolais every year. This year the prices for store cattle at Bury Market in May were pretty good so the results for the herd are good - always assuming that you can find a way of costing the labour and the feedstuffs. Our calving mortality was lower than in past years and we hope that this trend will be continued by the new Murray Grey bull we bought to replace the old Angus on the heifers. We have also bought a new pedigree Charolais bull to replace Oliver who has done us well for the past four years.

SHEEP (450 ewes)

Had we only known in advance what lamb prices were going to do this year when we bought the ewes in 1980 we would have bought 600 rather than the original 300. The EEC Sheepmeat Regime has meant that returns have been excellent this year and it was partly for this reason that we bought an additional 150 ewes in August. Thanks to some skilled shepherding and a lot of hard work from members of the staff who had never even seen a sheep - much less thought about one - before last February, we managed to have a lambing percentage of 169 sold. This was a quite a bit better than we had been told was par for this particular course. Our fears about bloat and lucerne were largely unfounded although we did lose a few animals in this way. Next year we shall start to lamb just after the New Year and it will be interesting to see the influence of our Charollais tup on the flock.

Six members of the staff have formed a consortium which owns the nucleus of a pedigree Charollais flock. We bought one ram and two ewes from Norfolk and then imported a further two ewes from France. It is a pretty speculative venture but if this breed does for sheep what their namesakes have done for cattle we shall all be rich in ten years time.

MACHINERY

Three new combines arrived this year. Two Claas Dominator 96s replaced the five year old Dominator 85s and an International Harvester 1480 axial flow machine took the place of a Claas Dominator 105. The axial-flow was a fascinating machine with an exceptionally comfortable cab but we found that its header was simply not able to cope with our crop conditions especially badly lodged barley. We replaced the original 22.5 foot header with 16.5 foot model but found that although the problems were less pronounced the basic design was not adequate. We have therefore decided, with some sadness

and disappointment, to replace this machine with a Claas Dominator 116CS. This is itself a new and relatively untried design but it has at least been developed for European conditions.

Another new idea we have made use of this year is the An-Stra-Verter, a Danish device which treats straw with ammonia, thereby doubling the food value and increasing the protein by approximately 50%. If this technique works satisfactorily it will enable us to make good use of our two main arable by-products, straw and threshed ryegrass by feeding them to the sheep and cattle.

The other interesting development has been the arrival of two micro computers on the farm. The first of these, a Rockwell Aim, runs the new weighbridge at the grainstore. It manages to remember such things as tare weights, totals from individual fields and can also automatically adjust all weights to 15.5 percent moisture. Thus for the first time we have a totally accurate idea of yields immediately after a field has been combined. The other computer, an Apple IIe, has been installed in the office. In addition to keeping the accounts and running the payroll, it also looks after all field records so that we can look at these details and compare various treatments which would take a very long time if it were done manually. Within a few years both of these machines will appear to be very old-fashioned but it is certainly a good idea to become familiar with the disciplines involved so that we will be able to take advantage of the new technology when it is available.

Machines bought this year included the following: 2 Claas Dominator 96s, one International Harvester 1400, a Claas Rollant 62 round baler, 2 Standen Rondo bale carrier, one An-Stra-Verter.

THE FUTURE

We have now become so used to making profits that it is hard to believe it is not only possible but also likely that we - and other arable farmers - may well be making the occasional loss in the years to come. A cereal surplus is bad enough, but when it is sold at prices some twenty percent above world levels it is clearly intolerable for consumers and taxpayers (who are usually one and the same animal). This statement is not a complaint - East Anglian arable farmers have less cause to complain than any other group in Great Britain - but simply a recognition that the Good Times are over. We shall therefore try to spend less on new machinery, think twice before taking on a new member of the staff and generally try to save money wherever possible. This is, of course, easier said than done because we have grown extravagant during the past decade and it is a difficult habit to kick,

Our system of farming may well also see some important changes in the near future. Straw burning, which is a vital part of Minimum Cultivation, is now under very severe threat and we should accept that we shall be stopped - or at least drastically curtailed - within the next few years. The fact that straw burning saves farmers both time and money is of absolutely no concern to the non-farmers whose house, car or washing is covered with a thin film of soot from burnt fields. We would therefore be foolish to confuse what we would

like to see happen (continued straw burning) with what we think is likely to happen (no straw burning). At Thriplow we shall be trying to find ways of dealing with stubble without having to go back to the mouldboard plough. The straw itself can be chopped behind the combine but the stubble will provide a very serious problem to overcome. If it does eventually appear that we shall have to revert to the plough we shall have to spend a lot of money on far more powerful tractors which will be able to pull eight furrows as a very minimum. This will be necessary if we are to prepare the 2,200 acres for planting every autumn which we manage very easily today with our two sets of big discs.

One solution which should, in theory at least, help the situation is diversification. However, this runs against the trend which has meant the simplification and specialisation of arable farms in recent years.

Our experiment with sheep is an example of this philosophy and it will be interesting to see if it really does make sense turning arable by products into meat or whether the advantages are outweighed by the costs and problems which are inevitable when animals are concerned. The success of the venture will hinge on whether or not we can treat sheep as an arable crop without the need for an expensive shepherd. The optimists are, unfortunately, outnumbered by the pessimists.

As far as crops are concerned we shall stick to the same overall pattern as we have today. The wheat acreage will probably rise and barley decline now that we have enough confidence to believe that providing we replenish the soil in proportion to what we have removed (i.e., use more fertilisers) it is possible to grow wheat where before we felt we were lucky to get a crop of barley. Our rape acreage will not increase and peas will certainly be on probation for a few more years. We will persist with herbage seed because it is not a crop to get in and out of unless you want to lose money very fast indeed. The real crunch will come in a few years when it is time to replace our sugar beet harvester. At that moment we shall have to decide whether or not to give up the crop completely. If this year's results are anything to go by we shall certainly stick with beet. But, as is always the case on our land, we depend on the weather and thus must sit back and keep hoping for lots of lovely rain.