

1986

A very bad year. In financial terms it was the worst we have experienced since 1970. The cause was simply the poor cereal yields, which were particularly disappointing at a time when the rest of the country was enjoying the second biggest harvest on record. The graph below shows the problem starkly. From a peak in 1983, our cereal yields have fallen, in spite of an improvement last year. The causes are, as always in farming, unclear. However, certain specific actions have probably influenced these figures. They include:

1. In 1984 we stopped burning and started ploughing to incorporate the straw.
2. In 1985 we started growing three successive wheats instead of our previous policy of only growing two.
3. In 1985 we began to drill a majority of milling wheats instead of the higher-yielding feed varieties.

It was some compensation that grain prices this autumn were five percent higher than last year -in spite of the fact that it was a very big harvest indeed and five million tonnes of surplus corn were already sitting in Intervention Stores. For this we have to thank the drought in southern Europe and the weakness of the pound. It would, however, be rash to assume that the same two factors will keep prices high next year.

Because of the very poor outlook for agriculture, we took some fairly drastic steps to reduce our overheads. As a result, we now employ five fewer (33~0) people than we did two years ago.

For a few months it looked as if we would have some new neighbours in the shape of New Farm Crops Ltd. A wheat breeding operation was started by them at Duxford Grange, staffed by refugees from the Plant Breeding Institute who had voted with their feet against privatisation. It now appears that they will find a permanent home at Abington, but we look forward to working closely with them.

Amidst the encircling gloom of harvest a few rays of friendly light did illuminate the landscape. The most notable of these was when we set a new record (which has been submitted to the Guinness Book of Records) for "The Fastest Bread and Butter in the World". The butter, thanks to Greta Allen (a Norfolk farmer's wife), Stan Gillett and Daffodil, took 17 minutes 12 seconds from a standing cow. From a standing field of wheat it took 29 minutes 34 seconds for a white and a brown loaf to emerge from the oven. Our thanks are due to all the people who helped in this amusing nonsense, in particular Anglia Television for the inspiration and the two film crews, Read Woodrow for the milling and baking equipment and J. Mann & Son for the combine..

CEREALS

From the moment the crops were drilled in the autumn they looked very bad indeed. The soil was so dry that, regardless of the actual date of planting, nothing germinated until November. Two weeks of hard frost in January managed to kill up to 60% of the barley plants in some fields, and certainly thinned out the plant population in the others. As if that were not enough, we then had a very hot dry June which shrivelled the grains. The overall result was an extremely bad harvest indeed.

But worse was to come. For the past few years we have noticed that as wild oats become less and less of a problem, cereal volunteers from previous crops are ever more widespread. Thus each year we spend more time and money rogueing barley from wheat. This year the problem exploded into a crisis. We lost 350 acres of Pipkin grown for seed as it was impossible to remove the wheat. We only just managed to save 200 acres of Slejpner by rogueing each field three times at a cost of £50 per acre.

The cause of this problem remains a mystery. We assume that it is connected with our decision to stop burning straw two years ago. Since then we have chopped all straw behind the combines and have incorporated it (and the ungerminated seeds) into the top 4 inches of the soil. These seeds are then ploughed down, only to emerge two years later when the intervening break crop has also been ploughed. To combat this problem we have tried to create a shallow filth immediately after the combine has left the field to induce the seeds to germinate immediately. Time will tell whether we are successful, but if we are not, we shall have to seriously consider whether we can remain cereal seed producers.

The problem of Sterile Brome grew worse again this year, in spite of the fact that every acre on the farm is ploughed.

Of the wheats only Hornet did well, averaging almost 80cwt/acre (10 tonnes/ha). Apollo, for which we had high hopes, turned out to be extremely disappointing at under 50cwt/acre (6.1 t/ha). A direct comparison with Hornet is unfair since it was planted with a lower seedrate into a less fertile field. Of the other wheats only Slejpner managed to average above 60cwt/acre (7.5 t/ha), and this was largely because all the crops were first wheats. Brimstone was appalling, averaging only 45cwt per acre (5.6 t/ha), and the other varieties were not much better.

Our hybrid wheat production field was disappointing because it suffered from what appeared to be severe drought stress. We shall be growing 10 acres of hybrid wheat this year which should be interesting. We shall also revert to our old practice of growing mainly feed wheats and not milling varieties. Hence we shall have a large acreage of Hornet and Apollo.

The barleys did, if anything, even worse than the wheats. Even Panda, which has been very successful in the past, was unable to yield more than 53cwt/acre (6.3 t/ha). It was a sad moment to see the last field of Maris Otter on the farm. We have grown this variety continuously for twenty years.

HERBAGE SEED

If cereals were bad this year, herbage seed was nothing short of a disaster. The sharp winter resulted in a lot of frost-kill. Hence the first year fields of Brenda never promised to be at all good. As it turned out, they produced no crop at all. We managed to kill them by applying the wrong herbicide. This is the first time such a catastrophe has ever happened on the farm, and we all hope it will be the last. The second year fields of Rathlin did very poorly, averaging no more than 6cwt per acre (.75 t/ha).

OILSEED RAPE

Coming out the winter the Mikado looked worse than we have ever seen it, and for a few weeks we seriously considered ploughing it up. We were right to have left it because the crop yielded a respectable (but not brilliant) 26 cwt/acre (3.2 t/ha).

PEAS

A genuine success. With a yield of 37cwt per acre (4.6 t/ha), the variety Progreta did better than ever before. The price for seed was also higher than we had anticipated, so the overall results from this crop were excellent. Harvesting conditions were good because for some reason the plants did not collapse prostrate onto the floor as they have done in the past.

SUGAR BEET

Another success story. Our yield this year of 20 tonnes per acre (50 t/ha) adjusted to 16% sugar equalled our previous record. In spite of a dull, cool summer, sugars were enormous at over 18%. Quite why this happened will always remain a mystery because we were told that hot summers make high sugars. It appears that the days when we could deliver 500 tonnes to the factory during the first few days of the campaign are over. Other growers are wise to this ploy.

SHEEP

The early lambing flock did well, by producing 1.6 lambs per ewe and having them all fat by May - albeit after consuming masses of very expensive concentrates. The prices were exceptionally good and thus the whole exercise was justified. The late lambing flock probably made less money as we sold a high proportion of them as stores in the autumn. Next year- we shall continue with this system and hope that the EEC Sheepmeat Regime remains unaltered. It has been our saviour.

MACHINERY

This will probably turn out to be the last of the "Shiny Tractor Years". We sold our two old 160hp Schluters which, with 8000 hours on the clock, had done us very well, and replaced them with two 190hp John Deere 4650s. The 6 furrow mounted Dowdeswell ploughs were extended by an additional furrow, and the furrow presses were also widened. Thus two tractors ploughed as much this autumn as three had done the year before. We also scrapped our two old

Berthoud sprayers which have been in operation for ten years and have worked harder than any other machine on the farm. We thought hard about buying self-propelled models but eventually felt that the price of £40,000 each was just too high. So we bought two new trailed 4000 litre Berthouds and put air conditioners into the sprayer tractors. The resulting combination is not as nice as proper self-propelled jobs but, at half the price, seems more sensible.

Other new equipment this year consisted of a PZ Zweegers hay tedder and a home-made box drying system for small parcels of seed.

THE FUTURE

For the past decade these annual reports have invariably concluded with a prediction that the future looked gloomy and things could only get worse. This report will be no exception. But this time the outlook is uniformly discouraging as the CAP starts to crumble. This fact, added to the financial loss we have probably made in the current year, means that we shall batten down the hatches and prepare for squalls. We shall cut back on all expenditure, but primarily capital investment. As a result we anticipate spending a mere £20,000 compared to over £100,000 in recent years.

The biggest difference we shall notice in the future is the drastically reduced size of the farm staff. This will have two main effects. The first is that it will place a bigger strain on all of us at the peak times in the autumn. We shall, as a result, inevitably make more use of contractors and students to help us through the very great workload.

The second effect is that we shall spend less time keeping the place looking neat. The appearance of the farm will suffer, and little jobs which we have previously taken for granted (like tidying up woodland) will probably not get done.

The days when farmers could confine themselves solely to farming are rapidly passing as the economic squeeze tightens on the industry. We have been looking for ways to diversify and, as a result, will be starting some new enterprises in the near future. The first and simplest of these is to cater for the enormous population of horse-owners in prosperous middle-class Cambridgeshire. We are now providing a DIY livery service for eight horses, and this could expand to up to thirty in the next year. Surplus buildings at Thriplow Farm, together with fenced and watered paddocks give us the necessary equipment. In addition we can offer a floodlit manege, a variety of jumps and twenty miles of farm tracks.

We are starting to take shooting seriously as a commercial operation. Not the traditional pheasant shoot with its inevitable gamekeepers and high costs, but pigeon shooting for foreigners who will pay money for the opportunity of freezing behind a heap of bales in the middle of a rape field on a raw February afternoon. Clay pigeon shooting is another leisure activity which we are looking into, but it is still too early to know whether this will make economic sense.

But in spite of investigating the potential for leisure activities on the farm, the fact remains that our future is inextricably tied to the production of cereals. Our soil and climate are better suited to wheat and barley than almost anywhere else in the EEC (the exceptions being East Suffolk and the Baltic coast of Schleswig-Holstein). We should be able to survive - and even flourish - if only we can get our fixed costs down drastically in the next two years. This aim is, however, easier to write about than to achieve. So also (as any agricultural journalist will confirm) is farming itself.