

1988

AN ABOVE-AVERAGE HARVEST AND SOME BETTER-THAN-EXPECTED PRICES GAVE US A GOOD YEAR. BUT NOT A GREAT ONE.

1986 and 1987 were two of the most difficult years this farm has ever known; the outlook in 1988 is now slightly better. To cope with the problems faced by all European arable farmers - which at Thriplow were made worse by two successive bad harvests we have had to make some very drastic changes. In 1984 we employed twelve people. Today on our 1200 hectares, the full-time labour force consists of six, a Manager, mechanic/foreman and four men. Each man now has his own personal two-way radio so communications have improved dramatically.

Three years ago the farm ran a total of ten vehicles; we now operate four. Our sixteen tractors have shrunk to twelve and the four combines are now three. Other changes include the fact that the office is now manned for only three hours a day and I have been reduced to supplementing a meagre income by selling my soul (or what remains of it) to the media. On the marketing side we have also made a profound change. This year was the first time that we did not have a single seed contract with a merchant. Instead we grew all our seed as a freelance operation and sold it ourselves into the trade.

As a result of these measures, we have succeeded in reducing our fixed costs by nearly 20%. It is difficult to see how these can be cut much more. Rent, mortgage and bank interest, which today absorb almost half of our fixed costs, are clearly beyond our influence. The recent rise in interest rates has not helped.

WINTER WHEAT

Five years ago we stopped burning straw and started to incorporate the stuff. Our yields have been declining ever since - until this year. Whether there is any link between these events will remain uncertain, but we have a strong suspicion that there is.

VARIETY Hectares Tonnes/Ha Remarks

HORNET	233	7.9	Include one field of 6t/ha	SLEJPNER	121	8.8	Some		
3rd wheats	MERCIA	111	7.5	Largely 2nd wheats	RENDEZVOUS	68	7.2		
All 2nd wheats	RIBAND	47	7.6	PASTICHE	27	8.9	HAVEN	24	8.5
BROCK	19	7.5							

An overall wheat yield of 7.9 tonnes/ha may not seem too impressive, but bearing in mind that we were growing 688 hectares, of which 100 were third wheats, we were not unhappy. For the first time in this farm's history, we grew no barley whatsoever. It seems to have been the right decision. The success story of the year was certainly Slejpner. A field of third wheat yielded 7.8 tonnes/ha and the variety overall averaged 8.8 tonnes/ha. This was particularly heartening because we kept hearing dire tales of rust epidemics.

Hornet, for the third year running, did very well for us while Mercia and Riband did adequately. PBI Cambridge's two new varieties, Haven and Pastiche, look very promising.

But what really made the harvest a success was the fact that Hornet and Mercia seed was in short supply so we were able to sell ours very well. The same could not, however, be said for Slejpner and, as a result, we were forced to dispose of 1000 tonnes of certified seed for humble feed. All our wheat was sold and off the farm by early December. Time will tell whether this was the right strategy, but it certainly does wonders for the cashflow. Next year we shall be sticking with the same varieties with the addition of PBI Cambridge's unnamed CWW 86/4 which should be interesting.

SPRING WHEAT

A vintage year. We had not grown spring wheat for over a decade and so it was with some trepidation that we planted 36 hectares of Alexandria. Drilled in January, it yielded 7.8 tonnes/ha, cost far less than the winter wheat to grow, and has now all been sold for seed. The only problem was that the conditions seemed to be perfect not just for spring wheat, but also for ergot. Next year we shall be changing to Axona. t)ll

OILSEED RAPE

After a shopping expedition to Schleswig-Holstein last autumn, we grew only the German double-zero varieties, Ariana, Lirabon and Ceres. Of these Ceres did better than the other two and this year our entire crop is this variety. Yields, which averaged 3.0 tonnes/ha, were disappointing because the crop had looked good from the beginning. However, very high winds just before combining the desiccated crop meant that we lost a lot of seed.

SPRING BEANS

Beginner's Luck. It happens every time with a new crop, and it happened this year with the spring beans we were growing for the first time. A yield of 5.4 tonnes/ha was beyond our wildest dreams, and the fact that the variety, Troy ripened before the end of August meant that they also fitted into our harvest very conveniently. Next year we shall try (and almost certainly fail) to repeat this success with Panther, a new variety from PBI Cambridge.

SUGAR BEET

Another good year. If only we could be certain that we would get yields of around 47 tonnes per hectare every year, we would reduce the area and grow just enough to cover our A and B quota. This year, as in the past three, we have produced a lot of C beet, which is not a very intelligent thing to do. But we should not complain because less than a decade ago we were seriously thinking of giving up beet altogether because the yields were so poor.

HERBAGE SEED

The third bad year in succession and, as a result, this will be the last time we

grow the crop. We started growing herbage seed to replace lucerne in the rotation, and very occasionally it has done us proud. But over the years it has probably lost money and, as if that were not enough, it is very difficult to combine. What is worse still, the straw is time-consuming to bale and impossible to sell. This year our late perennial ryegrass, Brenda, yielded no more (and probably less) than .90 tonnes per hectare. PEAS

A disappointment. We were growing Solara for the first time and they looked very good throughout the season. But after the trailers had gone over the weighbridge we realised that we had managed a rather ordinary 3.6 tonnes/ha. As with the beans, the price is very poor indeed so that the gross margins of both crops will be meagre. However, we shall persist with them since there are no good alternatives today.

MACHINERY

This was the third year of our self-imposed machinery diet. The heady days when we blithely spent £120,000 every year on shiny new tackle now seem a long time ago. It is a great tribute to Ted King, the mechanic, that our machinery repair cost has gone down for the last three years and now stands at the pretty respectable figure of £22 per hectare.

For the past twelve years we have been forced to use liquid nitrogen because sprayers were the only machines which could spread 24 metres. This year we found what we had been looking for, a high-capacity trailed 24 metre pneumatic spreader. Manufactured by the German firm of Rauch, it worked perfectly, enabling us to use urea and cut our nitrogen costs by 25%.

Henceforth there will be only two reasons to buy machinery; either to replace worn-out models or, as with the Rauch, to cut our costs. The days of buying tackle to avoid paying tax - or simply because it was fun - are long gone.

THE FUTURE

The smallest rays of optimism are now dimly discernible on an otherwise gloomy horizon. If, as seems likely, the world today is actually short of food, we may have reached the bottom of the trough into which we have been sliding since 1984. Of course, it will take a long time for the politicians to realise this because, like hippopotami on a trampoline, they take a very long time to slow down - let alone change direction. Thus in the short run prices will continue to fall and the pressure on farms like this one will continue to grow. If we can survive for the next two years, we may well find that life begins to get easier again.

But survival is not going to be easy at the best of times, and will only be possible if we keep our costs as low as possible. The future of farms like Thriplow can only be as low cost extensive arable operations on which a very few men look after a lot of hectares, using big machines. The fashionable ideas of diversification simply do not apply to us. Farm shops, pick-your-own, leisure parks and Bed and Breakfast might make sense on farms which are small and overstaffed. But our strength will be to produce wheat seed as cheaply (and possibly cheaper) than anyone else in the EEC. We have this

year completed the first stage of what Mr Gorbachev would call Perestroika at Thriplow, by reducing our fixed costs drastically. Next year we shall have to concentrate on the second part of the plan. We shall try to increase our output and, in doing so, lower our unit cost of production still further. In other words, the more tonnes we can squeeze from a hectare with our existing staff, the cheaper each tonne will become. This is, of course, rather easier to talk about than to achieve.