

# 1989

NOT A GOOD YEAR - BUT NOT A BAD ONE EITHER.

The weather played an even more important role than usual this year. On our light land we need constant rain; we did not get it. In fact we actually experienced a worse drought than 1976. What was even more worrying is that (unlike 1976) the drought appears to be continuing throughout the autumn and winter. While the topsoil today is damp after a month of mists, the subsoil is as dry as an Ethiopian hillside.

The only benefit of the drought was that it gave us the fastest harvest on record. We began on July 24th and ended on August 12th. There were no drying costs and - as any machinery salesman will confirm - no spare parts were needed for the combines.

After a decade of losing money on herbage seed, we inevitably chose the wrong year to stop. Harvest would have been the easiest ever and the prices were good too.

Three lagoons have been constructed on the farm to store treated sewage sludge before it is injected into the land during the autumn. It is too early to tell whether this has been successful, but first indications are that we shall be able to save some fertiliser in future. It is, however, hard to see how this system will fit in with the new Nitrate Sensitive Area which was announced this year and covers almost 25% of the farm. Quite what this will mean in practice is still unclear, but we shall clearly have to use less nitrogen - and use it more carefully - than we have in the past.

The economies we started making four years ago have enabled us to survive, if not flourish, in difficult these times. Our fixed costs, which used to be around £555 per hectare, are today £445. But there has been a cost to pay. The farm looks slightly messier, the office telephone is answered by a machine and the tractors last longer than they used to.

## WINTER WHEAT

An extraordinary year which saw the both highest yield we have ever known - and some of the lowest. Overall, our average of 7.9 tonnes per hectare, was exactly the same as last year. How the wheat managed to survive the heat in June (up to 34 degrees C), we shall never quite understand. There seemed to be little or no pattern to the results. Some fields (heavy and light) did well, while others did appallingly.

The high point of the harvest - and indeed the year - was when one field of Beaver produced 11.1 tonnes per hectare, which broke our previous record by almost one tonne. To set against this, however, a field of Hornet (3rd year, admittedly) managed a pathetic 5.6 tonnes/ha.

Variety Ha. Tonnes/Ha Remarks

Hornet	237	7.44	Some 2nd year	Mercia	174	6.85	Some
3rd year	Riband	86	8.95	Some 2nd year	Slejpner	62	7.84
2nd year	Beaver	39	9.90	First year	Pastiche	27	7.9
	Haven	24	8.47	All 2nd year			

Total 649 7.9

In line with the NIAB Recommended List, Beaver and Haven were the stars, with Riband doing well for the second year. Slejpner, in spite of alarming reports of yellow rust, performed respectably, while Hornet and Mercia were disappointing. The dry weather meant that we had no problems with germination and, when we came to sell the varieties which were not required for seed, the quality was higher than we had ever known. This did not, incidentally, stop the millers from deducting money for small grains, any more than it stopped them from putting up the price of bread while the price of wheat went down. Since three millers control 75% of the flour market, it is not difficult to think uncharitable thoughts.

Next year we shall kiss Slejpner good-bye, grow a lot more Beaver and Haven and experiment with Hereward.

#### SPRING WHEAT

Last year I reported "A vintage Year". This year (growing Axona instead of Alexandria) was a disaster. The yield dropped from 7.8 tonnes/ha to 4.10 tonnes/ha. We won't be growing spring wheat again for a long time.

#### OILSEED RAPE

One third of our acreage failed to germinate properly in the autumn. Looking backwards (never a difficult task in agriculture) we should have ploughed it up, but we didn't. The remaining fields of Ceres looked very good but performed disappointingly to produce 2.6 tonnes/ha. As if that were not enough humiliation, we sold the stuff far too early and watched while the price rose by 25%. A year to forget. Next year we shall be growing the PBI variety, Capricorn, which did not get on the NIAB Recommended List but - our friends at PBI assure us - is a wonderful variety. Have we been gullible?

#### SPRING BEANS

Like Spring Wheat, spring beans did as badly this year as they had done well last year. A yield of 2.4 tonnes/ha meant that this crop made a hefty loss but, when averaged with last year's miracle, we will persist with Troy next year and hope we don't have another Saharan summer.

PEAS As with all spring-sown crops, this was a big disappointment because for a time the peas looked excellent. The eventual yield of Solara was a dismal 3.2 tonnes/ha. Next year we shall probably try Bohatyr.

#### SUGAR BEET

After five years during which our yields were consistently around 48

tonnes/ha, this year has seen them drop to nearer 38 tonnes/ha. The wonder of it is how, with so little moisture, they managed to be that high. At least the sugar content was good, averaging 18%. The sewage sludge which was injected into some of the beet fields produced some peculiar weeds, including lots of sunflowers, some tomatoes and a solitary cherry tree. The diet of the Cambridge population appears good, but their digestive tracts leave a bit to be desired.

## MACHINERY

After five years on a strict diet of abstinence, we started to re-equip the farm. Our ancient 10 metre folding Vaderstad rolls finally wore out and we replaced them with a 12 metre set. After much thought, we also replaced one Claas 116CS combine and two Claas Dominator 106s with three new Dominator 108 Maxi machines.

Today's replacement policy means that we shall keep tractors for at least 5000 hours, so we won't be needing any for another two years. Indeed, the only machine we plan to buy next year is a large zigzag harrow.

## THE FUTURE

Maybe it is irrational optimism, or just wishful thinking, but the economics of farming look very slightly better than they did. The headlong slide into bankruptcy which threatened arable farming twelve months ago, now seems less headlong. The grain mountains and milk lakes have all but disappeared and once again a few far-sighted people are beginning to wonder whether there will be enough food in the world. Nevertheless, our prices have again remained static while inflation runs at 8%. Not many people in this country would tolerate this for very long.

But if the economic outlook is very slightly brighter, other pressures have grown massively stronger in the past year. Nitrogen Sensitive Areas, tighter restrictions on chemicals and now a ban on straw burning (albeit only in 1993) will all make our jobs more difficult.

This, however, need not be a bad thing. It is fairly clear that - like all arable farmers - we are extravagant in our use of fertilisers and chemicals. Of course we would deny this charge in public, much as we denied that we could ever run the farm with fewer men. But today we know we can - and run it well. Tomorrow we shall probably also find that we can grow crops with fewer inputs.

We are lucky that we stopped burning straw six years ago so we have now worked out a technique for dealing with the stuff. Our yields fell for the four succeeding years but appear to be rising again. Whether this is a direct result of straw incorporation is impossible to prove.

One thing is certain, whilst it certainly costs more not to burn straw, it is far from being impossible. The heavy land farmers who today insist that wheat growing is impossible if they are not allowed to burn straw are talking hysterical rubbish. It will, admittedly, be more difficult and - as with cleaning

up all forms of pollution - will certainly cost money. But to whinge and whine does the cause of agriculture no service at all. In four years time - without a whiff of smoke in the August sky - the clay soils of East Anglia will still be growing as much wheat as they do today.

The next few years will see some big differences in the way we all farm. We must be flexible and open-minded so that when these changes come, we are able to adapt. Above all, we must not complain and claim that the rest of the population owes us a living. They don't.