

1993

THE CHEQUE IS IN THE POST

If "I love you" is the most frequent lie told by civilised (?) man, then "the cheque is in the post" must be the runner-up. Few people seem to love farmers these days so we have not been unduly worried by the first promise. But the second is giving us some nervous moments as 1993 draws to a close. Any day soon a brown envelope should come thudding through the letter box. Inside will be Brussels's thank you note (giving a new meaning to Bread and Butter letters) for the three hundred acres (120ha) we set aside this year. But that won't be all. There should also be a small financial sweetener, amounting to a mere one hundred and twenty five thousand pounds sterling. At the time of writing this exciting event has still not happened, though some of our neighbours have received their cheques. We, like most farmers, will put the cash in the bank, grit our teeth and pay our taxes. There are, however, exceptions. One of our friends was so overcome by excitement the day his cheque arrived he immediately went out and bought himself a new sugar beet harvester.

From a farming standpoint the year was - as usual - not half as bad as we had expected. The only exception being the wheat which promised so much and delivered so little.

Perhaps the most significant event at Thriplow was the fact that our tiny staff of four (down from fourteen a decade ago) managed to look after two thousand acres (800ha) very comfortably. Indeed it would appear that the fewer people we employ, the less outside help we seem to need. No longer do we use a contractor for spreading base fertilisers or hedging. We do not even take on a student at harvest time any longer. And the work gets done as promptly - maybe even more promptly - than it ever did.

Much of the reason for this simply because the staff at Thriplow is so incredibly flexible and willing. The days when the Manager lived in his Land Rover and the Mechanic in his workshop are now just memories. As this report is being written both men are on tractors lifting the last remaining acres of sugar beet.

The advantages of this new system are not just financial. Much to our amazement, we find that the standard of field management has actually improved. No matter how conscientious a manager is, no matter how many hours he spends walking the fields, he sees less than if he sits on a tractor seat while he sprays every acre of the farm several times a year. From this vantage point he notices small details he could not possibly have seen from the seat of a Land Rover. And so it happened at Thriplow this year. Wages bill down; management inputs up. Maybe there is a case study for a Business School here.

WINTER WHEAT

Another easy harvest, but a very disappointing one. Right up until the first combine went into the field we had been expecting a very good harvest indeed. The crops had been drilled in good conditions and, far more important on our light land - the weather had been wonderful, with almost no drought stress at all. As it turned out we had one of our poorest harvests in recent memory. Why, in a year when most farms in East Anglia had a good one and some had their best harvest ever?

The only reason we can come up with is the appearance of a bug which we had never seen before. Called the Orange (referring to its colour and not the citrus fruit) Blossom Midge, it appeared shortly after flowering and caused a bit of panic as we rushed around trying to find what we should do. The consensus was that spraying would probably be neither effective nor economical, so we did nothing. As the grain began to fill we noticed that some of the florets were sterile (empty) but the plant population was good and the crops themselves looked so healthy that we were not unduly worried.

We should have been. With an average yield of 57cwt per acre (7t/ha), we found ourselves facing a very dismal harvest indeed. Some varieties produced disastrous results, especially Apollo, (46cwt/acre, 5.7t/ha) which we were growing after an interval of four years specifically to take advantage of its good hectolitre weight and export potential. Slejpner as a first wheat (61cwt/acre, 7.2t/ha) was almost as disappointing and even our old standbys, Haven (51cwt/acre, 6.3t/ha) and Beaver (55cwt/acre, 6.9t/ha) did quite extraordinarily poorly. Compared to the others, Riband (63cwt/acre, 7.8t/ha) did rather better and only Cadenza, (70cwt/acre, 8.7t/ha) which happens to have been bred at Thriplow, did even reasonably.

But to set against the disappointment of our yields, at least the marketing was a success this year. One third of the harvest left the farm during the first ten days of August and fetched an average price of £118 per tonne. The remaining feed wheat which did not go for seed was sold forward for £105 per tonne in November, which turned out to be some £10 above the spot price. The milling wheats managed to produce some high proteins in a year when the rest of the world was having low proteins. Once again Cadenza scored heavily here, being sold for £130 per tonne in December, a premium of 35% over feed wheat.

OILSEED RAPE

A vintage year. We were growing the new variety, Apex, for seed. Throughout the growing season it had, just like the wheat, looked wonderful. Unlike the wheat, however, it actually delivered on its promise and produced 28cwt per acre (3.5t/ha). This, together with a decent seed premium and an area payment of £175 per acre, meant that rape did us proud. No wonder the national acreage this autumn is up by 20%.

WINTER BEANS

Another good crop, yielding just under the magic two tonnes per acre (5t/ha). Our seed costs were minimal because, as usual, we kept some of the

previous year's Punch and simply ploughed them in. They remained pretty disease-free throughout the year as they grew taller and taller. Visions of Jack and the Beanstalk were never far away. For some reason we managed to harvest them before the rains came in mid-August and so, unlike many other farmers who combined their crops as late as November, we, were able to sell them in September for £106 per tonne. The area payment of £145 per acre will mean that winter beans did reasonably this year.

SUGAR BEET

Last year sugar beet was the crop of the year. The yield of 22 tonnes per acre (55t/ha) was higher than we had ever known before and - as if that were not enough - the price of C sugar turned out to be around £24 per tonne. It is, therefore, impossible to repeat the triumph. Yet that is exactly what we seem to be doing. It is still three months too soon to know whether our yield will be bigger than last year, but at the time of writing it is clear that it will be very similar.

The reason seems to be that once again the crop was drilled in good conditions and got away to an excellent start. Traditionally we have always hoped to see the leaves touching in the rows by the Norfolk Show in late June. This year, once again, some of the plants were actually touching in late May.

There is, however, a price we have to pay. All the concrete at the grainstore is now covered by a mountain - a plateau to be precise - of beet, and much of this is destined to stay there for another three months. This means that we have to take great care to protect the pile from frost as it sits throughout the coldest part of the winter. How we wish we were in Germany or France where the sugar factories are geared to finish their production campaign by Christmas.

SETASIDE

A new crop for us and one we were uncertain how to grow. Eventually we decided not to put in green cover last autumn and instead allowed the stubble to green over from the volunteer wheat. We also decided not to mow the crop and instead ploughed it as soon as possible after the May 1st deadline. In retrospect this seems to have been sensible and we will be using the same technique next year.

MACHINERY

After several years on a self-imposed diet, we loosened our belts a bit this year and bought some big tackle. First among these was a John Deere 7800 which replaced our 4650 as our front-line ploughing tractor. We also kissed good-bye to a seven furrow Dowdeswell plough and replaced it with an extremely expensive 6 furrow Kverneland vari-width. At its maximum width of 20 inches, this plough is 22 inches wider than its predecessor. Faced with some cloddy seedbeds this autumn, we also bought a 4 metre Kuhn power harrow. Finally, and most expensively, we have completely rebuilt our fifteen

year old Law-Denis grain drier. The substitution of galvanised panels, not to mention a roof over the top, will mean that the drier will now be weather-proof and should last for at least twenty years.

THE FUTURE

Next year will be an exciting one. On June 15th and 16th Thriplow will be the site of the Royal Agricultural Society of England's CEREALS '94 event. We can expect around ten thousand visitors who will come to look at all the latest machinery and techniques connected with combinable crops. The event should have an even more international flavour than in the past because we have invited individual wheat growers from America, Canada, Australia and Argentina to be our guests. It is also possible that there will be a Cultivations Event on the site next autumn. If this does happen it will mean that one hundred acres of stubble will be ploughed for us in a single day.

I make no apology for ending on the same subject as I began this report. For the first time in half a century, farmers are beginning to live in a different world. Instead of being paid to produce more and more food, the emphasis has shifted dramatically. No longer will the subsidies be paid on each tonne we grow, so that the more we produce the more we get paid. Instead the subsidies will be based on the acres we grow in the form of area payments. The link between output and subsidy has at last been cut. Hence the cheque which I am assured is in the post.

The significance of this cheque is very profound. For the first time we will be able to see exactly how much subsidy we are receiving. Hitherto this has been impossible since the prices we were paid were supported by the Intervention System and thus the subsidies were so well camouflaged that nobody knew what proportion of the price came from the marketplace and what proportion from the CAP. This meant that not only were farmers extremely vague about how much subsidy they received, but so also were the general public. Those days are now lost and gone - probably for ever. As a rough rule of thumb we can assume that for the 1993 harvest a typical arable farmer will receive around £60 per acre. All you need to know is how many acres a person farms to work out pretty accurately how big his cheque will be. For next harvest the figure will be bigger still as support prices continue to decline.

This simple piece of information will inevitably give rise to an equally simple question from the taxpaying (non-farming) public. What, they will wonder, are farmers like us doing in return for this avalanche of cash? It would be convenient to tell them that we are growing badly-needed food for a hungry population. The snag is that with a surplus of around 30 million tonnes of wheat and one million tonnes of beef, this will not be an easy argument to make. Rather the opposite.

My solution to the problem was straightforward. In return for these subsidies every farmer in Britain should do what we have been doing at Thriplow for almost two decades - give open access to the farm to members of the public. We have found that the vast majority of the public are extremely responsible,

sensible and do not abuse their privilege.

My suggestion has, however, been greeted with outrage by 99% of my fellow farmers. They, it would seem, are only too happy to pocket the taxpayers subsidies and give nothing (save for bigger surpluses) in return. This is tragic and short-sighted - but not remotely surprising.