

1994

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL.....

(as they sing in Louisiana)

And roll they certainly did. The price of wheat went up, the yield of wheat went up and the subsidy we received for every acre went up. Which all goes to show why this farmer isn't complaining in 1994. On the contrary.

But however lovely has been the experience, it happens to be lunacy. OK, so we can't blame the politicians when we have a good harvest. But elementary economics should have ensured that as the supply rose the price fell. The opposite actually happened. And as if that weren't crazy enough, the acreage payment (i.e. the subsidy paid for every acre we grew or set aside) rose too. The reason for this was a political one: Brussels had reduced the support price and so, to cushion the blow, made sure that our acreage payment went up. How could they have possibly foreseen that the laws of supply and demand are occasionally suspended? It has been a mad, stupid but - for arable farmers at least - a highly profitable year. Deo Gratias.

There are other things we should give thanks for too. The weather in the spring was perfect for our light land, and this meant that when almost ten thousand people turned up at Thriplow for CEREALS 94 they found the farm looking its best. The event was a huge success both for the exhibitors and the organisers. One of the most enjoyable aspects of the day was the presence of wheat growers from Argentina, America, Canada and Australia who were able to tell their British competitors what life is like out there in the real (or almost real) world.

So much for the good news. Now for the bad. As a clever, computerised and highly sophisticated farmer, I make use of all the devices available today. Among these is the futures market with which one can hedge one's sales and lock in a profit when the price seems right. Thus it came to pass that in February I realised that the price being offered on the futures market for wheat to be delivered in November was exceptionally good. Armed with this opinion, I proceeded to sell forward a part of our probable harvest for a mildly profitable £90 per tonne. Nine months later the spot price had risen to £105 per tonne and all the primitive farmers who didn't understand or care about the futures market were making a killing. I felt terrible.

WINTER WHEAT (Subsidy = £78/acre or £193/ha)

The best harvest we have ever had. Across the entire farm we averaged 71cwt per acre (8.7 tonnes/ha), which is marginally better than our previous record set in 1983. As with General Elections when the first constituency to announce sets the trend for the night, so also with harvest the first field gives a clear picture of what is in store. We knew it was going to be good when a field of second year Mercia produced 62cwt/acre (7.7 tonnes/ha) on thin land. And from then on we never looked back. Brigadier excelled, with one field

producing 87cwt/acre (10.7 tonnes/Ha) and Hunter did almost as well. It is a pity that these were the two varieties which nobody wanted for seed since there was already a surplus on the market. Riband once again amazed us, with second year crops comfortably exceeding 73cwt/acre (8.2 tonnes/ha). A single field of Nickerson 's new feed wheat, Buster, managed 75cwt/acre (9.3 tonnes/Ha) on very thin land and a second year field of Cadenza did almost as well. It was a year to remember.

Next harvest will be a sad one. For the first time in thirty nine years we will not be growing any seed for the Plant Breeding Institute. This breaks a tradition which started when we first grew Proctor for NIAB back in 1956. As far as varieties are concerned, the much-predicted swing to quality wheats has once again been postponed. Instead the opposite has happened as we bid farewell to Mercia. Old favourites like Riband, Brigadier and Cadenza will survive and a few newcomers will appear for the first time. We shall be growing two new winter-sown spring varieties from Cambridge Plant Breeders, Chablis and Shiraz as well as PBI's Beaufort and Consort.

OILSEED RAPE (Subsidy = £177/acre or £437/ha)

A disappointing year of average yields. The Apex, all of which was grown for seed, had looked magnificent throughout the season and we braced ourselves for avalanche into the combines. Instead we managed a rather tedious 25cwt/acre (3.1 tonnes/ha). But at least the price was good, the seed premium better and the acreage payment positively scrumptious. We shall be growing APEX for the third successive year in the hopes that Zeneca will still be able to sell all our crop for seed.

SPRING BEANS (Subsidy = £127/acre or £313/ha)

By now we really should have learned our lesson: never grow spring crops at Thriplow unless absolutely necessary. We had a field of Vasco, which we were assured would yield well and sell even better because they are tannin-free. They didn't. The yield was only slightly higher than the oilseed rape and the sale has yet to take place. The reason is simply that spring crops need strong drought-resistant land. But still we persevere in the hopes that one year the rains will fall at the right time. Next year we shall make the same mistake by growing Baccara, the most fashionable pea on the market. The one good thing you can say about the new CAP is that the price of the crop is today less important than the acreage payment. It's what the Americans call 'farming the system'.

SUGAR BEET (No acreage subsidy but a quota and a fixed price)

For the past two years we have exceeded our quota by over one thousand tonnes, with an average yield of 22 tonnes per acre (55 tonnes/Ha). This year, with a yield of around 14 tonnes per acre (35 tonnes/Ha) we will miss it by about three hundred tonnes. And yet in the early season the crop looked as good as it has ever been. The leaves were meeting in the row by early June and we were prepared for our third successive successful sugar beet year. And then came the drought and then came virus yellows (in spite of the fact

that we had sprayed three times). By late August it looked as if the crop was disappearing in front of our eyes as the leaves went yellow, shrivelled and died. No celebrations here.

SETASIDE (Subsidy = £110/acre or £274/ha)

Unlike many of our neighbours, we have resisted the temptation to grow oilseed rape for industrial purposes on setaside land. The financial return appears to be very marginal compared to the extra work involved. However, the potential for fiddle is very big indeed. Consider the farmer who has two heaps of oilseed rape in his barn. One heap is worth £175 per tonne for crushing and the other, which was grown on setaside land, is worth £120 for industrial uses. Just imagine the temptation there is to rearrange the piles.

Next year we shall be opting for a mixture of permanent setaside on our worst land and rotational setaside on the remainder. The price of this flexibility is an extra 3% but since Brussels has just reduced the setaside requirement by 3% it will mean that we will remain at 15% of our total acreage.

LIVESTOCK

Our excursion into big-time cattle ranching was only a limited success. We bought twelve very expensive steers at the top of the market last autumn, kept them for a year on grass and managed to sell them fat at the bottom of the market for very slightly more than we had paid. The fact that all twelve survived is a tribute to the very high level of stockmanship we displayed. But, like the wheat, the marketing did leave something to be desired.

Meanwhile the Livery stable (a horse hotel for twenty animals) continues to prosper in a quiet way. It is lucky we live in a part of the country where horses, along with espresso coffee machines and adultery, are part of the landscape.

MACHINERY

Not a good year for local machinery dealers. The only agricultural equipment we bought were two Berthoud 4000 litre sprayers which replaced similar models which had been with us for eight years.

With almost three hundred acres of playground (i.e. setaside) staring at us reproachfully, it was clear that we needed a few toys. Which is why we bought a tank and a patrol car from a local grain merchant who in turn had bought them, from Her Majesty's Armed Forces. The former is a 20 tonne Abbott self-propelled 105 mm gun and the latter is a Ferret patrol car. The Abbott looks magnificent, has a top speed of almost thirty mph and, best of all, uses farm diesel. During the past year it has been driven by an eight year old Russian boy, a sixty five year old American diplomat and many happy people in between.

THE FUTURE

Mention the word Green (with a capital G) to most British farmers and you will

see their knuckles turn white and their faces turn red. This is because they are both frightened by and angry with the Green movement. The reason for this is simple. For decades now the farmers and environmentalists have been huddled in their respective trenches throwing insults (and worse) at each other. Farmers are certain that the Greens neither know nor care about their problems and - far worse - want to tell them how to run their farms. Greens, on the other hand, think farmers are insular, irresponsible wreckers of the countryside and the environment. Neither are right. As a result it is now time to start bridging the chasm which has separated these two groups, because in the final analysis we both care about the same thing - the countryside and those who live in it.

It may not be entirely unconnected with the above sentiment that next year we shall be starting the biggest single programme of landscape management this farm has ever known. We will participate in the Country side Stewardship Scheme which will mean that over the next five years we shall be repairing and replanting over five miles of old hedges and will be planting more than two miles of new ones. In addition to this we shall be putting in 2 metre strips round the edges of many fields and beetle banks between other fields. For this we shall, of course, be compensated by the government and thus the net financial cost will be very small. Five years ago a scheme like this did not even exist, and had it done so I doubt whether we would have participated. But today it does and we are.

The Americans have an expression, 'a Monday morning quarterback' for the man who always knows why his team lost the football game on Saturday. Farmers are equally good at hindsight and will happily tell you why your sugar beet was so poor and what you should have done last year. Looking forward is rather more difficult and a great deal more risky. But here goes.

Agriculture is cyclical. Feast and famine, seven fat years and seven lean years, the story repeats itself from Moses to MacSharry. Today's farmers, after ten fat years, are shell-shocked by the spectre of surpluses and setaside. They should relax because those days are now over. Once again we are about to see a hungry world whose population will ask us to produce as much as possible as soon as possible. Setaside will disappear altogether within three harvests and we will find ourselves on the upswing of a cycle. The signs, for those brave enough to admit them, are visible today. World (and European Intervention) wheat stocks down, land prices up, the world population continuing to explode, the Pacific Rim countries growing richer by the day.

Let the good times roll? You ain't seen nothing yet.