

1995

DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN (as Yogi Berra once said)

Mr Berra, who was a very good catcher for the New York Yankees and a so-so baseball manager in later life, would never have heard of the Common Agricultural Policy. The nearest he ever got to agriculture was probably playing for the reserve teams which are known as farm clubs. This is just as well because Yogi Berra, like all rational human beings, would certainly find it hard to understand why this year - once again - the prices went up and the subsidies went up too. This phenomenon started in 1994 and I assumed it would soon correct itself. Far from doing so, it actually repeated itself so what had once looked like mild eccentricity turned into serious lunacy. Not that I am complaining in any way. Far from it. As far as this farm is concerned, we are profoundly grateful. But a still small voice somewhere deep inside what might otherwise be called a conscience keeps asking whether the system is not stark staring crazy.

Eventually it all became too much and the still small voice burst out on radio, television and in the press. What the British public felt about a farmer baring his subsidised breast in public is unclear. Maybe they were too bored to respond. My farming colleagues, however, had no such inhibitions. Letters (and phone calls) poured in to Thriplow. All were angry, many offensive and a few anonymous. Farmers Weekly ran an editorial announcing that I had done the industry a disservice and the correspondence column echoed with abuse for many weeks. I enjoyed every minute of it. If there is one thing worse than being slagged-off it is being ignored.

Yet the fact remains that the Common Agricultural Policy as it affects this particular East Anglian arable farm is (a) Misguided (b) Expensive (c) Inflexible (d) Delicious. It has been highlighted this year as never before by the fact that while the price of wheat has risen by around 20%, the subsidies have gone up by 25%. A tonne of wheat is today worth £125, compared to £110 last year. The cheque we will receive any day now will amount to £190,000 compared to £150,000 last year.

Any system which insists on raising the subsidies at the same time that prices go up too has got to be stupid. It's as simple as that.

But the Common Agricultural Policy was not the only thing which exercised my brain this year. For St Paul it may have happened on his way to Damascus. With me it was in a lawyer's office. On August 3rd I was a believer in low rents and high interest rates. By midday on August 4th I was a passionate advocate of high rents and low interest rates. The reason was simple: I had at last succeeded in buying the 2000 acres we farm at Thriplow from my landlords, the Kent County Council Pension Fund. As a result I took on a vast debt and the responsibilities (at least on 50 acres) of being a landlord.

I also discovered the true meaning of that old farming cliché: A tenant lives

rich and dies poor; an owner-occupier lives poor and dies rich. But no sympathy is asked for or deserved because I am extraordinarily happy to have been able to buy back all the land which my New York Jewish grandmother had bought at the beginning of the century. Gucci loafers to Gucci loafers in three generations.

WHEAT (Subsidy = £109/acre or £269/ha.) (In 1994 it was £78/acre or £193/ha)

An average harvest, neither good nor bad. The overall yield worked out at 7.8 tonnes per hectare. This is something of a miracle because the drought this summer was ferocious and the temperatures hovered around the mid 90s fahrenheit. It meant that for the fourth year running (is this global warming?) we enjoyed an almost Kansas-type harvest in which the grain did not need drying - and occasionally needed cooling. Also like Kansas, the quality of the wheat was extremely good. We only worked on one weekend and never had to keep the combine running late into the night. The yields were extremely variable, with the new Thriplow-bred variety, Chablis, the worst at a pathetic 5.6 tonnes/ha while at the other end of the spectrum the new PBI variety, Consort, managed a decent (but not mind-blowing) 9.4 tonnes/ha and its stable-mate, Beaufort achieved 8.8 tonnes/ha. In between these extremes Riband and Brigadier yet again did well, both averaging over 8.5 tonnes/ha. Cadenza (another CPB variety bred in Thriplow) fell from its heights of last year and produced a dismal 6.7 tonnes/ha while the other new-ish milling wheat, Rialto fulfilled its promise with 8.5 tonnes/ha. Buster, which also did so well last year, fell back to earth with a bump at 6.1 tonnes/ha. It was not a harvest to remember. But it wasn't a disaster either. Next year we will simplify our lives by only growing four varieties: Riband, Brigadier, Consort and Rialto.

OILSEED RAPE (Subsidy = £192/acre or £475/ha)

An excellent year; probably our best ever. The yield of Apex came out at 3.4 tonnes/ha which made us all happy. But what was even better was that the price rose steeply, the subsidy rose gracefully and - as if all that were not enough - we sold the whole crop for seed and received an £80 per tonne premium. Apex has done us very well since we started growing for the breeder, Zeneca, three years ago. We will stick with it next year too.

PEAS (Subsidy = £157/acre or £389/ha)

Peas, which are planted in the spring, do not like droughts, which is why we were bracing ourselves for a disaster. But Baccara managed to hold on through a Saharan June and produced 5 tonnes/ha which - though far from being a record - was at least respectable. The world price of £110 per tonne was most unappealing but at least the subsidy added spice. We probably made a small profit on this crop, but without the CAP we certainly would not grow peas or beans.

SUGAR BEET (No acreage subsidy but a quota and a fixed price of about £36 per tonne)

The miracle of 1995. Our local sugar factory at Bury St Edmunds usually opens its doors during the last week of September. This year it started three weeks late because the national sugar beet crop was so appalling. The summer drought meant that the beet just did not grow between June and August and I warned the bank manager to prepare for the worst. But then the rains came in September and the roots began to swell (of course the sugar percentage fell at the same time) so that it now, in late December, it seems that what once looked like a catastrophe will turn out to be merely a rather poor crop. The snag is that we will not produce our quota of 3500 tonnes and this means we will have to plant a much bigger acreage next year to ensure we do so in 1996-97. The intricacies of the EU Sugar Beet Quota are far too complicated to be explained in anything less than a book. They are also very boring.

SETASIDE (Subsidy = £138/acre or £341/ha)

This year we went in for both rotational setaside (a field is fallowed for a single year) and also permanent setaside, which consists of the poorest land which you take out of production for more than one year. The latter provided us with an excellent playground for the farm's Abbot tank and Ferret scout car. Setaside for next year has been reduced to 10%, down from the original 15%. At this rate there won't be any setaside at all in two years. This will be good news for farmers but bad news for amateur tank drivers. Bring back the grain mountains.

MACHINERY

Our combine fleet, which numbered four a decade ago and two last year, shrank to a single machine this year. The reason was the arrival of the first genuinely exciting bit of farm equipment to be seen at Thriplow for ages in the shape of the new Claas Lexion. Apart from being the biggest combine in the world (with a 400hp engine, a 25 foot cutterbar and a tank holding 8 tonnes), it also uses some revolutionary techniques for separating the grain from the straw, is loaded with computers, and, best of all, has what the Americans call a 'buddy seat' in the cab so you can take your friend with you. Now this is real progress. Our Lexion was one of five pre-production machines which Claas were testing in Britain. Faced with very dry conditions this harvest, we experienced some severe problems as the brittle straw broke up and blocked the sieves. As a result the hoped-for work rates of up to 50 tonnes per hour were never remotely achieved. However, we shall persist with this machine next year because it has incredible potential and should comfortably replace our two previous Claas 108 Maxis.

We also bought our second six furrow vari-width Kverneland plough, which replaced an old Dowdeswell. It is sad to see one of the very few remaining examples of English machinery giving way to a Norwegian product, but the fact is the Kverneland is just better. The one piece of British machinery we did buy was a very large Todd cleaner-loader. It is not exactly hi-tech but it works well and can load two tonnes of sugar beet in a minute.

Next year will have to make a tough decision about our decrepit thirteen year

old Moreau beet harvester. Do we keep it staggering on, scrap it and use a contractor, buy a re-conditioned second hand tanker model or even lash out £120,000 on a new machine? Watch this space.

THE FUTURE

Last year's report ended on a green note. We had just joined the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and were about to plant two miles of new hedges, repair five miles of old ones, put down beetle banks round some fields and leave 2 metre strips round others.

It would be nice to report that the scheme had been a success and our enthusiasm has remained undimmed. I can do neither. We did everything the Scheme required, planted and repaired hedges and all the rest, and then came the drought which managed to kill many of the tiny plants which would have struggled in a normal year. But that at least was nobody's fault. The same cannot be said for the attitude of the Countryside Commission, as a result of which we have now resigned from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme with great sadness. The reasons need not be detailed here other than to say that it is never pleasant being accused of fraud by a bureaucrat who eventually (and reluctantly) admits that he was looking at the wrong hedge in the wrong field. I only hope other farmers who go in for this worthwhile scheme have a less harrowing experience. Maybe the Countryside Commission will itself have learned a bit from our experience. Looking at the people involved, I am not optimistic.

On the economic side the outlook remains good. Maybe very good. World grain stocks are smaller than they have been for ages while the population grows and the Pacific Rim demands more and more hamburgers. Any day now an American Secretary of Agriculture will be heard exhorting his farmers to 'plant from fencerow to fencerow' as setaside becomes a distant memory.

In the meanwhile the CAP will continue in its present form for another three years, at which time the arrival of the Eastern European countries will force a complete overhaul. If farmers have any sense at all (which is unlikely) they will recognize that our best chance for the future is to press for subsidies to be redirected towards environmental projects so that at least the taxpayers will feel that they are getting something in return for the money they are pouring into the countryside. An alliance between farmers, rural dwellers and environmentalists is our only hope if the countryside and the farms of Britain are to flourish. This will, however, mean that a lot of farmers will have to change their minds. Fat chance.

But perhaps I should take hope from another of Yogi Berra's observations. As the New York Yankees were heading for defeat one afternoon, he spat a stream of tobacco juice onto the floor of the dugout and announced: 'It ain't over til it's over'.