

1998

ANOTHER HORRIBLE YEAR

When my old nanny was angry she would sometimes mutter under her breath "Go to Jericho". Fifty years later, I would like to take up her suggestion. The town of Jericho today is a dusty settlement on the west bank of the Jordan, surrounded by Palestinian refugee camps. It is also a place which farmers should be thinking about this year. The reason is simply because it was in Jericho, around 7500 BC, that arable farming was born. It was here that man, instead of simply gathering the grain from wild einkorn (an ancestor of wheat), actually began to plant these grains and harvest the resulting crop.

Why this archaeology lesson? Because it is worth remembering that for the past 9500 years farming has always been a cyclical business. Even the Old Testament (a relatively modern document in the history of agriculture) recorded the seven lean years and the seven fat years in Egypt. And these cycles have continued ever since. In the fat years we farmers keep very quiet and hope that nobody notices, but in the lean years we shout from the rooftops.

The trouble with cycles is that they often last longer than is comfortable. Last year, when I was feeling pretty sorry for myself, I wrote "1997 has been, without any doubt at all, the worst year since I started farming twenty five years ago." This year I must repeat the message. Indeed 1998 has been far worse than 1997. If someone had told me three years ago ñ when the price of wheat was £123 per tonne ñ that this harvest we would be offered £68 per tonne, I would have said he was crazy.

As a result of these prices we actually lost £20,000 last year. This is only the second time in 30 years that we have shown a loss. And that in spite of the fact that one third of our gross income now comes in the form of our subsidy cheque from Brussels. But at least there has been one bright spot in an otherwise gloomy landscape. Yields have been better this year than for some time.

WHEAT (Subsidy = £100/acre or £247/ha.)

A good ñ nearly very good ñ harvest. Our overall average yield was 66cwt/acre (8.2 t/ha), almost 20% better than last year's dismal result. We managed to sell 750 tonnes for delivery in the first week in August which meant that we caught the weather market with a price of £75 per tonne. Of the varieties Equinox (which happens to have been bred here in Thriplow by CPB-Twyford) was by far the most successful. One particular field produced a record-breaking 93cwt/acre (11.5tonnes/ha) and the variety as a whole averaged 79cwt/acre (9.9 t/ha). Riband, which we were growing for the twelfth consecutive year, was its normal reliable self at 65 cwt/acre (7.8 t/ha). Consort varied wildly from a disappointing 54 cwt/acre (6.7 t/ha) to a cheerful 78cwt/acre (9.6 t/ha). Rialto, a high-quality milling variety, averaged 63cwt/acre (7.8 t/ha) and a premium of £10per tonne made this a good result.

Next year we shall be introducing two profound changes to our wheat regime. We shall stop growing seed for the first time in almost fifty years simply because the premiums are no longer worth the extra expense. This is a sad moment but not an irrevocable one. We shall also only grow three varieties of wheat, all of which come from CPB-Twyford here in Thriplow. These will be Equinox, Malacca and Aardvark.

BARLEY (Subsidy = £100/acre or £247/ha.)

Our decision two years ago to start growing barley again on our thinner land seems to have paid off again. The yield of Fanfare was 63cwt/acre and the reasonable quality (1.75 nitrogen) means that it may just go for malting instead of going into Intervention to swell the EU's grain mountain. There can be no doubt that barley does better than wheat on thin land, and it also has the advantage of spreading the harvest as it ripens at least two weeks earlier. Next year we shall continue with Fanfare.

OILSEED RAPE (Subsidy £184/acre or £257/ha)

In spite of the fact that the crop looked wonderful the yield, at 22 cwt/acre, was very disappointing. We grew a hybrid variety, Pronto, for the first time as well as the traditional Apex. The difference in yield was minimal. At least the price of £167 per tonne has fallen less than other commodities. Last year it was £160. PEAS (Subsidy = £150/acre or £372/ha)

After last year's disaster with peas this harvest was something of a relief with the Baccara averaging a good but not exciting 34cwt/acre (4.2 t/ha). The price, however, at £70 per tonne, makes us more than usually grateful for the subsidy. Without it we certainly would not be growing peas. Next year our acreage will increase not because we love the crop but simply because CPB-Twyford want to use a bigger acreage of land which has been free from cereals for two years.

BEANS (Subsidy = £150/acre or £372/ha)

The big disappointment of the year. Throughout the growing season our Punch beans looked stupendous. Tall with lots of pods, they were clearly going to break all yield records. And then came the wet summer. The beans were smashed to the ground by the storms and, as a result, became almost impossible to combine. We must have lost around a third of the crop, which explains why this autumn these fields produced a superb display of volunteer bean seedlings. As with the peas, the prices are very bad indeed. However, we shall persist with the crop as part of our rotation.

SUGAR BEET (No acreage subsidy but a quota and a fixed price of about £30 per tonne)

For the last two years running our sugar beet has broken all records, and this year it did it yet again. We lifted a 65 acre field in October on our thinnest land and sent it all off to the sugar factory at Bury St Edmunds. The yield (adjusted to 16% sugar) turned out to have been fractionally over 25 tonnes

per acre (62 t/ha). On light land without irrigation this is nothing short of incredible. The other two fields are on better land and will, it is estimated, produce over 26 tonnes per acre (64 t/ha). Quite why we have enjoyed this amazing success is, as usual in farming, impossible to pinpoint. Ever since we bought a new Kleine sugar beet drill four years ago our yields started to climb, and the fact that we now use seed treated with the insecticide Gaucho has certainly helped a bit too. This year, however, the wet summer was obviously perfect for the crop.

SETASIDE (Subsidy = £132/acre or £326/ha)

For the third year running we were asked to set aside only 5% of the farm. Next year, however, to reduce the mounting European grain surplus, we shall have to set aside 10% of the farm. We shall do so happily, safe in the knowledge that this is our entry ticket into the subsidies game. And without subsidies these days we would surely go bust.

MACHINERY

It is a mark of how difficult times have become when the only piece of machinery we bought in the past 12 months was a post hole borer for digging holes for fenceposts. Compare this to what happened in 1974 below.

THE PAST

Since this is the twenty fifth year I have written an Annual Report, it might be amusing or even instructive to look back a quarter of a century to what was happening on this farm in 1974.

In those days we farmed 700 acres more than we do today and we had a herd of 150 Jersey cows and 300 beef cattle. In addition there was a mobile crop drier which produced dried lucerne wafers. There was a staff of twenty two consisting of a manager, foreman, nine arable men and an agricultural student, a herdsman and three dairy people, a grain store man, lorry driver, plumber/electrician, mechanic and two maintenance men. Today we employ a total of four men.

In 1974 I was very excited by the yield of the new wheat, Maris Huntsman, which produced 55cwt (6.8 t/ha). The Maris Otter winter barley managed 32 cwt/acre (4 t/ha) but most of the cereals were spring barleys like Berac and Proctor which yielded 28.5cwt/acre (4t/ha) and 27cwt/acre (3.3 t/ha) respectively. "Prices," I wrote, "have remained high this year" so at least I had resisted the temptation to whinge.

The sugar beet was a disaster with a yield of 7 tonnes per acre (17.3 t/ha) compared to the 26 tonnes per acre this year. We also grew mustard, which yielded 8cwt/acre (1 t/ha) and was worth £120 per hundredweight, and herbage seed which had a bad year. The crop drier suffered from a 200% increase in the price of fuel oil and produced 700 tonnes of lucerne. We grew some grain maize, for which the report had the single sentence: "The wet autumn has meant that this crop cannot be considered a success this year."

We have never grown maize since.

On the livestock front we seemed to have got the mastitis problem under control in the dairy and the beef herd "continues to expand rapidly". The letters BSE meant nothing then.

The machinery purchases leave me feeling breathless. They consisted of 1 Claas Apollo mobile crop drier, 2 Taarup forage harvesters, 1 Colman forage box, 1 Fyson elevator, 1 Bentall rolling mill, 1 Parmiter post driver, 1 John Deere 6 furrow plough, 1 Massey Ferguson 5 furrow plough, 1 Massey Ferguson 1200 tractor, 1 Ford 8600 tractor, 2 Ford 5000 tractors, 1 Ford 3000 tractor.

I summed up the future by writing "after two good years the outlook is not very encouraging unless corn prices continue to rise rapidly in step with other costs, and this does not seem likely." I was wrong. It is exactly what did happen. This farm and every other farm was on the verge of the greatest prosperity we, our fathers or our grandfathers had ever known.

THE FUTURE

Today once again the outlook seems gloomy. Yet it is hard (but not absolutely impossible) to believe that things can get worse and that we are today at the bottom of a very deep trough. Of course, if Old Testament rules still apply we have another five lean years before we see a fat one. However, the bureaucrats in Brussels have rather more economic and political clout than the Pharaohs did (which is maybe why there are grain mountains today instead of pyramids). For some strange reason the economic prosperity of farming does not invariably run in parallel with the world economy, which is just as well as Europe teeters on the edge of recession. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s as the British economy was deeply unhappy, farmers enjoyed an unparalleled boom. Now the opposite seems to be the case.

The causes of our problems are far from straightforward, but the meltdown of the Far Eastern and Russian economies have reduced demand and the strong pound has made matters worse. Sterling will probably weaken somewhat over the next year but one would have to be a congenital optimist to believe that the demand for hamburgers in Moscow and Manila will increase much in the near future.

In the meanwhile a strange phenomenon is happening in Britain today. For the first time in a generation both the press and the public are beginning to show some sympathy for farmers (and also beginning to criticise the overweening power of the supermarkets). This amazing event would have happened sooner had it not been for the ludicrous, dishonest and self-defeating insistence of farmers to bemoan their fate while they were actually prospering. The story of the little boy who cried wolf too often should be framed in large letters on the office wall of every farmer's leader.

By the end of the next quarter century this farm of 2000 acres will be considered small for East Anglia. It will have a full-time staff of one man and

will make use of contractors at the peak seasons. (A Kansas farmer told me a couple of weeks ago that the optimum (NB optimum but not typical) sized farm for one man in his state today is 4500 acres.) The number of farms in Britain will have halved. Yields will continue to rise, albeit at a slower pace than we have seen in the past twenty five years. Machinery will be bigger than it is today, with combines of 30 feet wide being normal. Tractor horsepower will also increase so that four hundred horsepower will not be unusual. The application of fertiliser and chemicals will be tightly monitored by the use of satellite navigation systems, which will also enable some work to be done by computer-controlled tractors.

Incentives to extensify ñ or take the organic route ñ which will grow in the near future, will have peaked within the next decade, after which the pressure to feed the world's population (which increases by 80 million annually) will once again mean that farmers are asked to maximise output. Genetically modified crops will be widespread. Access to the countryside will be enshrined in law, fox hunting will be banned. The climate will be drier and hotter. But some things will not change. Farmers will still whinge and the public will still not believe them.

(If this report has only whetted your appetite, tune in to BBC2 at 7.30pm on Monday January 4 and the following three weeks. My series, Against The Grain, covers these subjects in some detail.)

O.W. December 16th 1998