

# 1999

## BEST HARVEST - WORST PRICES

A miracle happened at Thriplow this year. It was called harvest. We enjoyed the sort of yields which come only once in a lifetime. For this we are grateful and gobsmacked.

Had a neighbouring farmer told me that his wheat had averaged 87cwt per acre (10.75 t/ha) across his entire farm I would have replied (or at least thought) that he was a liar. Remember that throughout the 1930s and 1940s my Father only grew barley or rye at Thriplow because conventional wisdom (and the constraints imposed by organic farming) dictated that the land was not strong enough for wheat. Half a century later, in spite of those who claim that our system of farming is "\*unsustainable" our yields have climbed (with many ups and downs) to today's Himalayan levels.

How did it happen? The weather, which was almost perfect throughout the growing season, must take most of the credit. Rain is normally our limiting factor, and this year it fell regularly and softly.

But lest anyone think that, as a result of this harvest, we are wallowing in prosperity, the rest of the story is not quite so cheerful. Three years ago, in May 1996, the price of wheat reached £130 per tonne and, as if that were not enough, a grateful Brussels gave us £109 for every acre of wheat we planted.

This year at harvest wheat fetched £69 per tonne and a less grateful Brussels gave us £98 per acre.

Now it is perfectly true that three years ago we were making excessive amounts of money - and I admitted as much at the time. In my annual report for 1995 I wrote "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 that was then and now is now. This year - in spite of our incredible harvest - we shall make only a very small profit. Which explains why the mood in British agriculture today is gloomier than it has been since the war. And it is worth pointing out that however hard life is for arable farmers, it is even tougher for dairymen, sheep and cattle farmers in the upland areas and, worst of all, for pig producers.

WHEAT (Subsidy = £98/acre or £242/ha.)

The yields this year came as a total surprise. The crops growing in the field looked reasonable but in no way spectacular. The first field of wheat we combined, a second-year crop, actually looked downright poor. The result, however, was incredible; it had yielded over ten tonnes to the hectare and it soon became clear that we were sitting on the biggest harvest this farm has ever known.

One particularly satisfying aspect was that all of our wheat varieties were

actually born and bred here in Thriplow. The plant-breeders, CP13-Twyford, have been working on this farm for twelve years now so it shouldn't be surprising that their varieties suit this land. What was hard to believe, however, was the fact that the highest yielding wheat was also the highest quality wheat. In normal years the low quality feed wheats invariably produce around 20% more than the high quality milling wheats. This year the rules ceased to apply. Equinox, all of which was admittedly second-year, looked very ordinary in the field, but eventually averaged 80 cwt/acre (9.96 tonnes/ha). Bear in mind that a typical second wheat average would normally be less than 3 tonnes per acre (7.5 tonnes/ha). Aardvark, a new variety from CPB-Twyford, averaged 92 cwt/acre (11.32 tonnes/ha) and - glory of glories - the milling variety Malacca achieved a completely unbelievable 99cwt/acre (12.21 tonnes/ha). Overall across the entire farm at Thriplow this year wheat averaged 87 cwt/acre (10.75 tonnes/ha). I still feel a bit giddy.

We were also lucky - maybe even clever - to have harvested two thirds of the crop before the monsoon came. After two weeks of non-stop rain in mid-August the quality - which had previously been wonderful - dropped and the cost of drying rose. But that's farming for you.

BARLEY (Subsidy = £98/acre or £242/ha.)

The miracle of harvest started with barley, which broke every rule in the book. Fanfare, the only variety we grew this year, is a malting barley which invariably either produces large quantities of rubbish fit for pigs or small quantities of beautiful kernels fit for brewers. This year the yield of 67cwt/acre (8.3 tonnes/ha) was excellent so I braced myself for bad news in the quality department. A few days later the phone rang and the local grain merchant announced that the nitrogen was a superb 1.4%. We had, it seemed, a world-class crop of malting barley on our hands. And so we would have had at any time for the past two thousand years since some drunk somewhere discovered the joys of beer. But this year things were different. The brewers had decided to re-write the rule book and instead of wanting low nitrogen barley they now required high nitrogen barley. Why? Because the market today consists of lager rather than the traditional bitter. And lager, it seems, doesn't require quality barley to make its malt. Anyone who's drunk American beer will understand why.

OILSEED RAPE (Subsidy £123/acre or £303/ha)

A good yield if not in the same class as the cereals. 28cwt/acre (3.5 t/ha) is slightly above our long-term average, so we were not downhearted. But here again the price has collapsed. Last year we received £167 per tonne and this year £110. There seemed to be little difference between Pronto and Panther, which was rather disappointing.

PEAS (Subsidy = £141 /acre or £349/ha)

For the second successive year our peas gave a good but not exciting 34cwt/acre (4.2 t/ha). The price, however, at £80 per tonne, makes us more than usually grateful for the subsidy. Without it we certainly would not be

growing peas. One way we have been able to economise is to use our own seed, which we put over the dresser and then tipped straight into the drill. We shall persevere yet again with Baccara because the newer varieties give a yield increase of only one or two percent and are thus not worth the extra money we would have to pay.

BEANS (Subsidy = £141 /acre or £349/ha)

A good year, though not quite record-breaking. For the second year we used our own Punch seed, spread them in early November and ploughed them in at around 9 inches deep. The resulting 41cwt/acre (5.1 t/ha) was respectable but, like the peas, would not be remotely economic if it were not for the subsidy of £349 per hectare.

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

Here again heavenly choirs are singing Hosannas. For some strange and inexplicable reason a good cereal harvest usually means a poor sugar beet harvest. In 1999 this rule too was suspended. As a result we broke our yield record for the third consecutive year. At the time of writing we still have 25% of the crop to lift but it is perfectly clear that the yield will be more than 26 tonnes/acre (65 tonnes/ha). Thank goodness we reduced our acreage considerably this year and will, as a result, just produce enough for our A and B quota. The rumour is that surplus C sugar beet will eventually be worth around £2 per tonne - which would not even pay for the harvesting cost. One of these years our sugar beet crop will revert to a normal yield. We simply cannot continue to break a record every year. But in the meanwhile we give thanks and keep our fingers crossed.

SETASIDE (Subsidy = £124/acre or £306/ha)

This year the men from Brussels ordered us to set aside ten per cent of the farm and grow no crop at all. To a non-farmer being paid £306 per hectare may seem like a fortune to do precisely nothing. However, at today's prices this sum does not even cover our fixed costs (mortgage interest, wages, insurance etc.) and so we actually lose money on each square centimetre of setaside.

MACHINERY

For the first time in several years, shiny paint was once again seen at Thriplow. We bought two yellow Western 14 tonne trailers which replaced our 12 tonne French Brimonts which had lasted for twenty years. It was lovely for a change to be able to replace foreign equipment with British machinery. We also replaced a 7800 John Deere with a 7810 model complete with front suspension and a radar device which measures workrates.

Another exciting development was the appearance of an automatic laser-guided self-steering device for the Claas Lexion 480 combine. This amazing machine enables a bad combine driver like me to steer straight and a good

driver like Dick to concentrate on other things. It is probably the most important breakthrough in combine harvesters for the past twenty five years.

We seriously considered replacing our ancient 12 metre Horsch drill with a whole new system of no-till machines. The demonstrations seemed to be very successful and the appeal of not having to plough was a great attraction. However, at the end of the day the economic outlook is now so gloomy that we eventually decided to persevere with our old machines and keep the money safely in the bank. This was as sad as it was sensible. I'm glad I'm not a machinery dealer.

## THE FUTURE

Last year I began this section with the words "Today once again the outlook seems gloomy." And so I thought. Yet those were the days when we were selling wheat for £77 per tonne. This morning the telephone rang and a grain merchant offered us £61 per tonne for wheat next harvest, which may explain why I am still in a state of shock. At this rate I shall need a psychotherapist more than an agronomist.

But however gloomy the future, at least this particular farm is in reasonably good shape to cope with the difficulties. We own the land we farm, we owe relatively little money and our equipment (in spite of the fact it is not new) is still in good nick. And, best of all, we have Dave, Ted, Dick and Lindsay who are skilled, tough, energetic and reasonably sober.

In the past year we have converted two old farm buildings and are now receiving rents from a garage and a high-tech company. Surplus houses on the estate have also been renovated and now are let out to some of the hordes of people who are drawn to this area by the lure of Cambridge. From a purely financial point of view it is perhaps lucky that we are situated in the fastest-growing area of the UK and not on a windswept hillside thirty miles north west of Darlington. Or Glasgow. Or Exeter. Or Hereford.

Next year it seems very probable that we will have a GM trial at Thriplow. If all goes according to plan there will be a half hectare plot of genetically modified sugar beet which will be one of a number of sites in the UK designed to assess the impact of GM varieties on biodiversity. The resulting crop of sugar beet will be harvested separately from our commercial crop and will then be destroyed. The actual trial will be carried out by Brooms Barn, the world-famous sugar beet research institute outside Bury St Edmunds.

The reason for this trial is not because I am a GM enthusiast. On the contrary. I am completely agnostic on the subject and have no firm feelings about whether the technology is good or bad (or indeed whether consumers will even wish to buy the resulting crops). But I do feel strongly that in order to know the answers to these questions one must first ask the questions - and this can only be done by conducting rigidly supervised trials. I must also admit that another factor caused me to allow a GM trial at Thriplow, and that was the sight of ecological protesters wilfully destroying other farmers' GM trials last year in the name (yes, really) of democracy. These actions were

designed as much to terrorise the farmer as they were to gain publicity. This particular farmer may yet find that his trial is destroyed, but he sure as hell ain't going to be terrorised.

0M. December 6th 1999