

2000

RAIN, RAIN GO AWAY, COME AGAIN ANOTHER DAY

Fifty years ago we used to chant this at school. Today, as I stare out of the window onto ponds which litter the farm in places where I have never seen water stand before, the jingle has a slightly sinister ring to it. It is also rather poignant because I, like most farmers, have my own arsenal of folksy, meaningless (but somehow very reassuring) aphorisms. I am particularly proud of one of these because I happen to have invented it myself. On our light drought-prone land we need moisture quite as much as fertiliser. Hence my cheerful refrain, "We'll never go broke if it rains". Today, after the wettest autumn which has ever been recorded, it is time to admit that I got it wrong.

Over the past twenty five years these Annual Reports have, I hope, been notable for one characteristic above all. They have never yet contained the slightest semblance of a moan, a whinge or a complaint. On the contrary, I have been happy to admit to our good fortune even though this has made me profoundly unpopular with my fellow farmers. Today, it is time to break the habit of a (farming) lifetime. Brace yourselves.

It isn't just the rain which will make this year memorable. The downward spiral in which farmers have been trapped for the past three years has continued – even more steeply. The price of wheat dipped below sixty pounds per tonne – exactly half the amount we received in 1996. Our area aid (the subsidy which we receive from a once grateful Brussels) fell by nearly ten percent, largely due to the fact that sterling is so strong. The price of nitrogen fertiliser rose by 90% and the price of diesel fuel has doubled. I could go on, but by now you will have got the picture.

All of this explains the saddest and most difficult event which took place at Thriplow this summer. Dave Gould, who had been foreman and then manager for as long as I myself have been farming, was made redundant. I must here publicly pay tribute to him for having done a superb job for quarter of a century. As a result the farm staff today consists of Dick Arbon, Ted King and Lindsay Anderson. Three men on eight hundred hectares. When I was a child eighty employees used to sit down each September at the harvest supper in a barn bedecked with sugar beet and wheatsheaves. Romantics (i.e. those who have never lifted a hundredweight sack, humped a bale or hoed sugar beet) like to call these the good old days. They are wrong. Today we all pile into a plane with our wives and spend a weekend slurping beaujolais in

France. I know which I prefer.

WHEAT (Subsidy = £95/acre or £235/ha.)

Last harvest – which was bigger by far than anything we had ever known - was a hard act to follow. It wouldn't have been so bad had this year's crops not looked so incredible in May and June. Lots of plants, lovely lush flag leaves and big ears. We were, it seemed, all set for a harvest even better than last year. But it didn't work out like that. A mild attack of orange blossom midge and very little sunshine meant that the grains never really filled out. Instead of being big and plump they were small and pinched. The bushel weights were poor and when eventually the trailers started to come in from the field they were carrying half a tonne less than they had last year.

Yet in spite of my initial disappointment, it is nice to admit that this year's harvest turned out to be the second best harvest on record. The wheat averaged 8.9 tonnes/hectare (1.85 tonnes less than 1999). In any normal year I would have been a very happy bunny. As it was I felt dismal and dyspeptic.

Once again – after another wet spring - the poor land managed to produce better crops than the conventionally good land. And once again we were growing only varieties which had been bred in Thriplow by John Blackman and his team at CPB-Twyford. Malacca, which had performed so spectacularly last year, was rather disappointing at 7.5 tonnes/ha. Aardvark was respectable at 9.3 tonnes/ha and Equinox almost broke the ten tonne barrier at 9.9 tonnes/ha.

There was, however, one genuine triumph about this year's harvest. As usual, I had sold over one thousand tonnes of wheat to be delivered during the first and second weeks of August. This is a risky thing to do because if the crop is not ripe – or if rains delay the harvest – one must fulfill the contract by buying wheat on the open market. This year a wet July delayed both ripening and combining and our nerves were getting a little frayed. However, thanks to heroic work on the combine – and most of all by Dave Gould on the drier – we managed to fulfill our contracts and sell at around £74 per tonne (some £14 more than the spot price for wheat at that moment).

A combination of early land and a large grain drier means that we are uniquely suited to this early wheat trade. But it only makes sense if the premium offered matches the risk involved. This year it most certainly did.

BARLEY (Subsidy = £95/acre or £235/ha.)

Last year our barley averaged 8.3 tonnes/hectare. This year it managed a decent 7.2 tonnes/hectare. Once again Fanfare has produced a good malting sample and has been sold for £75 per tonne for delivery in December. So the financial results for this crop will mean that we may even make a small profit.

We started growing barley again three years ago because we found that second wheats on our thinnest land yielded poorly. This year's results, together with the fact that having a few barley fields spreads out the harvest and enables the combine to start earlier, will ensure that we continue the practice. But if we could be guaranteed a really good premium for early wheat (see above) it might be worth giving up barley once again.

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

A good yield (3.4 tonnes per hectare) but once again down on last year's bonanza. The crop, which was once the favourite of the Brussels cash dispensers, has now fallen out of favour and, as a result, the subsidy has shrunk. The trouble is that it is such a good break crop that we would probably continue to grow some oilseed rape even if we did not receive £300 per hectare.

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

Every year has to have at least one disaster and for us it was the peas. My father always used to call them a "gambler's crop" and he was right. Last year we harvested an adequate 4.2 tonnes/ha. This time we fell back with a bump to 2.7 tonnes/hectare. Why? Very bad weed control, some soil compaction (which peas can't abide) and too much rain. We shall, however, persevere because they are drilled in the spring (spreading the workload), are a lovely entry for wheat and once in a while we hit a miniature jackpot. But not this year.

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

The same old story. Last year a yield of 5.1 tonnes/hectare. This year 4.0 tonnes/hectare. Thanks to the wet spring the beans grew almost as tall as the one Jack climbed up, which made harvesting extremely difficult. I would like to be able to report that we shall be growing winter beans next year, but the autumn has been so wet it has been impossible to drill the crop. We shall instead be planting spring beans – and will be praying that we don't have a drought next spring. It may be interesting to note that in spite of reasonable yields, a price of £80 per tonne and a subsidy cheque of around £350 per hectare, we shall still

lose a lot of money on both peas and beans this year.

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

As usual it is too early to know what the yield of sugar beet has been since at the time of writing only one third of our crop has actually been delivered to the Bury St Edmunds sugar factory. Things did not look good after a cool, wet summer which was painfully short of sunshine. Yet at the time of writing it rather looks as if we shall produce the highest yield we have ever known which should be rather more than last year's 65 tonnes/hectare. This is, however, a very mixed blessing because the biggest single cause has been the autumn monsoon. As I write this at the end of the second week of December we are struggling to harvest the crop in conditions which look like a Flanders trench in 1917. But the weather has been warm and the beet has simply kept on growing. It is a very small silver lining in a very large cloud.

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

Once again Brussels instructed us to set aside ten percent of the farm and in return they paid us around £300 per hectare. This we duly did, albeit with no enthusiasm.

MACHINERY

It was a vintage year for our friends the machinery dealers. We bought as much equipment this year as we had done in the past five years. We began buy buying something which we have lusted after for a decade or so - a second-hand JCB backhoe. At harvest time we traded-in our old Sinar moisture meter for a £4500 model which does everything except keep the beer cold. On the tractor front a John Deere 4255 and 7600 were replaced by two 180 horsepower John Deere 7810s. As a result of the reduction in the labour force we finally decided to convert from mouldboard ploughing to a system of minimal tillage. Not only would this require fewer men, but it would (in theory anyway) save fuel and conserve moisture. The snag is that it also involved spending a lot of money on a 6 metre Horsch drill and a 7.5 metre Horsch cultivator. But worse was to come; we needed a tractor to pull this hardware. We finally settled on a 275 horsepower rubber-tracked Claas Challenger 55 and the deal was sealed at 33,000 feet over the North Sea between Stansted and Stuttgart. Buying farm machinery will never be the same again.

The decision to go for minimal tillage was, it seems, a good one. In the wettest autumn we are ever likely to see, we managed to drill all the

cereals in conditions which would have stopped us completely had we been using our traditional system

THE FUTURE

Rather over seven thousand years ago a man (in fact it was probably a woman) had the bizarre idea of rubbing some seeds out of wild grass and actually planting them in the soil. Thus a hunter-gatherer became a farmer and agriculture began. Since then only one thing has been absolutely certain about farming; it is cyclical. The question which obsesses all of us is where we are on the cycle at any given time. Only with hindsight can we ever see precisely where we were on the endless and irregular cycle of farming.

It is, however, worth remembering this at a time when farmers are more pessimistic – sometimes even suicidal – than they have been for generations. And yet even today, after yet another horrible year, there is just the dimmest sign that maybe and perhaps we are at the bottom of the trough and once again the cycle is beginning to move upwards. The price of wheat has firmed faintly but perceptibly in the past two months. The world's stocks of cereals are smaller than they have been for ages – a mere nine weeks' supply. The Pacific Rim economies are recovering from a horrible three years. And, of course, the world's population continues to increase inexorably.

For some farmers this recovery (if indeed it is a recovery) will come too late. There is, after all, a limit to how long a bank manager will lend money to a loss-making business. Other farmers may simply decide that it just isn't worth working their guts out for no return at all. But for those who – by luck or good management – can survive this particular tornado, the future may be good. However, one thing is certain. The prosperity which we may enjoy in the future will never remotely match the surreal days of lunatic (but delicious) riches which British farming experienced in the twenty years between 1970 and 1990.

The biggest change which will take place at Thriplow next year is our entry into the Arable Stewardship Scheme under which we shall receive money from the taxpayer for being slightly nice (less nasty?) to the environment. This means we will have uncultivated strips round some fields, create beetle banks between other fields and in one case we shall leave a 44 acre field fallow for the whole year in an effort to persuade stone curlews to nest on Thriplow Heath again. It certainly makes a change from being paid to grow more wheat which nobody wants.

On a more prosaic note, as the rain slashes down on the soggy sugar

beet yet again, it isn't surprising that farmers have been traumatized by the weather. Which is why I remember the wisest man I have ever met in agriculture. He is called Dr Rolf Haberland and he used to advise some of the finest farmers in Schleswig-Holstein. One day I asked him a typically banal TV interviewer question: was there a single piece of advice he would give his farmers. He stared at the ceiling for almost a minute and then replied, "I would tell them to forget last year."

O.W.

December 11th 2000