

2005

Pessimism personified

Agricultural economics, along with chiropody and the paintings of Cy Twombly, is the most boring subject in the world. And if it is boring to a farmer like me, it must be doubly so for the rest of the human race. So brace yourselves for a dollop of tedium. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was invented over fifty years ago for two big reasons (and lots of little ones). The first biggy was to ensure that never again would Europe be vulnerable to U boats sinking our food supplies as they trundled across the Atlantic. The second was to make peasants richer and thus less likely to vote communist. Don't laugh. In the 1940s nearly half the Italian and French peasants did actually vote communist.

Anyway, two generations have now passed and the CAP has succeeded splendidly. Not a single ship carrying wheat has been sunk by a submarine and the peasants of Europe are a chubby bunch. At least they were until recently. An entire generation of farmers like me grew up and grew old as we basked in the sunshine of the CAP. The high noon of farming prosperity was somewhere around 1993 when in this Annual Report I wrote "One third of our harvest left the farm during the first ten days in August and fetched an average price of £118 per tonne.....*Cadenza* was sold at £130 per tonne in December." To put this into perspective the price of wheat today is £64 per tonne. Twelve years ago our biggest problem was knowing how to spend the profits. But were the farmers of Europe happy? Were they hell. Look at the correspondence columns of *Farmers Weekly* for this period and you will see an endless succession of miserable bleating farmers bewailing their fate. Across Europe the farmers' organisations told the politicians that unless they raised the prices (no nonsense with market forces in those days) their members would go bust. At Thriplow, as you would expect, we were happy to admit our good fortune. The final sentence of this report for 1985 read "Over the past decade we have enjoyed unparalleled prosperity.....it was good while it lasted."

Why do I go into such mind-numbing detail about ancient history? Simply to show that I am not the little boy who cried wolf once too often. Which may just convince the reader that I am telling the truth when I say farming in Britain today is no fun whatsoever, and that the future looks no better than the present. The price of our main product, wheat, remains static at around sixty pounds while all other costs - particularly energy - rise inexorably. One final example: Two years ago we paid £110 per tonne for our urea (nitrogen fertiliser). This year it cost us £152 per tonne. Ouch.

We are going to lose money this year. And next year too unless the price of wheat rises a lot. Of course any business should be able to endure a loss for a year or two without going bust. The snag is that today I detect very little optimism on the horizon. As a result it is becoming increasingly difficult to fake

cheerfulness in front of the bank manager. And, worse still, the general public is profoundly unsympathetic. They've heard it all before from my fellow farmers and so don't believe a word I say. Who can blame them?

WHEAT

A poor – but not disastrous – harvest. Our yield of 8.6 tonnes/hectare was slightly lower than the average of 8.8 tonnes/hectare which we have managed over the past six years. The reason for this was simply because of a long dry spell in May and June during which our light land suffered very badly indeed. It was on this light land that we were growing *Macro*, supposedly to take advantage of the early trade during the first week of August. As it happened the *Macro* produced a pathetic 6.5 tonnes per hectare and a hectolitre weight of 66. This means that the grains were so small and shrivelled that they did not meet the basic requirements of any feed mill in the country. It is the last time we shall grow *Macro*. *Cordiale*, another early variety grown on light land, did only slightly better at 7.4 tonnes/hectare. *Malacca*, which is a high-quality breadmaking variety, did somewhat better at 8.9 tonnes/hectare but once again we found it hard to produce a high protein sample for which the millers pay a premium. Two fields of *Robigus*, a feed variety which has proved very reliable on this farm, went over ten tonnes per hectare and the variety as a whole averaged 8.9 tonnes. The success story of the harvest was undoubtedly *Einstein* which averaged 9.3 tonnes/hectare. It is a pity that this variety has fallen out of favour with the millers and thus will produce little or no premium this year. Next year we shall stick with *Robigus*, *Einstein* and *Malacca* and will also grow the new high-yielding feed wheat called *Glasgow*.

OILSEED RAPE

After last year's disaster a yield of 3.4 tonnes/hectare was spot-on average and thus we can neither celebrate nor complain. It is impossible to say which of the three varieties we grew (*Winner*, *Lioness* and *Tequila*) did best because the yields were largely influenced by the soil types. The heavier the land the higher the yield. This year we shall be increasing the oilseed rape acreage at the expense of beans and shall be dropping *Lioness* in favour of the new low biomass (short strawed) *Castile*. We shall also be growing a substantial proportion of the crop for biofuel – and will thus be earning a few pounds more per tonne than if we raised the crop for crushing. The government's new commitment to produce more biofuel is welcome news.

BEANS

Every harvest has its disaster. Last year it was oilseed rape and this year it was beans. And how. Our yield of 2.3 tonnes per hectare is by a long way the worst result we have ever had with this crop. Why did it happen? Initially we thought it was because we had used a lower seed rate than normal and thus we simply did not have enough plants. However, it seems that everyone in this part of the country also had a terrible bean year, so we must put it down once again to the weather. What made us especially sad was that for the first time in a decade we had actually bought a new variety of bean, *Wizard*, instead of using our own farm-saved *Punch*. And to add insult to injury, the resulting crop was rejected for the human consumption market because the beans were riddled with insect holes.

SUGAR BEET

Last year I described our sugar beet results as being “The annus mirabilis from which legends grow.” This year the legend has continued. From 64 hectares we managed to produce 4500 tonnes of beet at a sugar content of 16%. This means the yield was 70 tonnes/hectare compared to our five year rolling average of 64.7 tonnes/hectare. Back in the bad old days I tried to persuade my father to allow me to give the crop up altogether. In the 1970s there was a series of years during which we managed to harvest less than 20 tonnes/hectare. Compared to the new and sexy crop of oilseed rape, sugar beet seemed a stupid proposition. Today it is the only crop which regularly shows a profit. But for how long? The glory days of sugar beet are definitely coming to an end. If the World Trade Organisation has its way the price we receive will fall by at least 50%. Whether we shall grow any sugar beet at all remains to be seen. Watch this space.

SETASIDE

Once again eight percent of the farm produced absolutely nothing and the figure will remain the same for next year.

MACHINERY

Not a good year for the machinery trade. We bought one solitary tractor, a 120 horsepower John Deere (complete with automatic gearbox) to replace our two 95 horsepower Massey-Fergusons. As a result this machine, which is today the smallest tractor on the farm, is bigger than the biggest tractor was twenty five years ago.

LIVERY STABLES

Twenty years ago we started to use the old cowshed at Thriplow as a DIY livery stable for local horse-owners - a sort of horse hotel. Not only does it make use of redundant buildings but, more important, the horses graze the paddocks around the farm which would otherwise have no use. This year we spent £23,000 and replaced our old and decrepit manège (which everyone insists on calling a ménage). Now, as a result, we have thirteen customers and probably more to come. It looks as if once again this small diversification will make good financial sense.

THE FUTURE

A muted Hallelujah is in order to celebrate the fact that at long last the Common Agricultural Policy has got it right. No longer are we paid for every tonne we produce or every acre we plant. Instead we are asked to look after the countryside and, in return, we shall receive a slug of cash. Part of this slug is compensation for the subsidies we have lost. This segment will shrink rapidly over the next few years. The remainder is our reward for being park-keepers rather than food-producers. This chunk may well increase over the next few years – always providing we are good and sympathetic park-

keepers. For this reason we shall be attempting to qualify for what is inelegantly called Entry Level Stewardship. If this is successful we shall be paid an additional £12 per acre. We shall also try to move even closer to Environmental Sainthood by applying to join the Higher Level Stewardship scheme. This will not be easy since it is a competitive scheme and thus we will have to persuade DEFRA that our plans for looking after this piece of South Cambridgeshire are better than those of other farmers in the region.

Listening to politicians talk these days about the iniquities of the CAP, it appears that they are unaware of (or choose to overlook) the fact that our subsidies are today paid largely for environmental reasons. I would have no real objections to being asked to compete with Saskatchewan, Kansas and New South Wales in a subsidy-free world. But I would object most strongly to be told that whilst my Canadian, American and Australian competitors can do what they like with their landscapes, I must be restricted by tough, inflexible and expensive environmental restraints. For this reason today's environmental subsidies are right, proper, reasonable and just.

Three years ago we decided to stop ploughing on two thirds of the farm and instead use the technique which is called Minimum Tillage which is a great deal cheaper and faster. The results have been decidedly mixed. On the one hand we have saved a bit of money and have been able to plant all the autumn crops in good time with a smaller labour force. But the downside also became very visible this year in the shape of a tsunami of grass weeds, particularly sterile brome. This was largely due to a dry autumn last year which meant that the weed seeds did not germinate. This year the autumn has been well-nigh perfect and thus we should see a great improvement next harvest. If, however, the sterile brome remains at this year's level, we shall have to think seriously about reintroducing the plough.

Back in 1947 we employed eighty men on two thousand acres, albeit with a lot of livestock. They lived in tied cottages from which they could be evicted at the boss's whim and in which, if they were lucky, there was a single cold water tap. They worked outdoors in all weathers, and indoors they clogged their lungs with dust and injured their backs by lifting eighteen stone (114 kilos) sacks of corn. Their pay was insulting and their holidays short. Hence the ambition of every young man on this and every other farm in Britain was to find a job – any job – out of agriculture. Don't let your urban organic friends tell you those were "the good old days".



Harvest Supper. University Arms Hotel. 1947

The farm today remains the same size as it was in 1947, although the horses, dairy cows, beef cattle, pigs, sheep, turkeys and chickens have long since disappeared. This Christmas, Ted King, who has been the skilled and cheerful fitter here for twenty five years, will retire.

As a result the total workforce at Thriplow now looks like this.



Lindsay Anderson and Dick Arbon

I thank both of them publicly and profoundly