

# THRIPLow FARMS

2012

## From drought to deluge

A most peculiar year. It was wetter than I can ever remember. Our normal rainfall is only around 550 millimetres but in 2012 we have reached 817 millimetres. After an extraordinarily dry Spring, the Times contacted me in March and asked me to write a piece about the desperate plight of farmers in one of the worst droughts in my forty years of farming. I said I would be unwilling to do this and from that moment onwards the rains came.

The quality of grain was worse than I can ever recall. I think we only had three lorry loads which were up to standard. All the others were full of low specification wheat which resulted in deductions to the price we received. On the other hand we enjoyed good yields for peas, beans, oilseed rape and sugar beet, overall the results were not too bad.

The 100 hectares which we bought in 2011 at least gave us a harvest, albeit a relatively small one. The fields yielded 7t/ha of wheat which was shrivelled and full of weeds. This year we should have been growing around 50 hectares of beans there but it was too wet to drill them and we shall be putting them into peas this spring instead. We were lucky to plant 50 hectares of wheat in between downpours.

### **Wheat**

Our main crop, wheat, averaged a pretty dismal 8.2 t/ha and almost 3200t was sold before harvest at an average of £158 per tonne. The balance has yet to be sold.

157mm of rain in July meant that the three loads a day we had sold for the first week of August were somewhat of a challenge to get harvested. In 2008 we thought wheat going through the drier at 27% was impressive. This year we managed 32.1%. The early wheat was all Target, which produced what turned out to be some of the best quality wheat the farm produced all year. A couple of loads even managed to get through with no claims at all. It averaged about 8.5t/ha.

Viscount also produced a mediocre sample, at almost 9t/ha. Santiago was one of our two main varieties, and it averaged over 9t/ha, with one field reaching 9.6. It seems that the higher disease resistance in this variety allowed it to cope better with the constant wet weather in June & July.

Our other main variety was Oakley, which after a disastrous year is being phased out of the rotation from 2013. Results were skewed against it by the fact that all of the second wheat and wheat after sugar beet was Oakley, but it still did not achieve what it should, with some of the trailers coming off the field at barely over 60kg/hl specific weight. This resulted in claims of around £30/t on these loads, subtracted from a base price of £147/t.

This has been an interesting year for marketing wheat – it has come into sharp relief that some merchants have a distinctly more helpful approach than others.

### **Oilseed Rape**

Oilseed rape averaged 3.9 t/ha. Excalibur managed around 3.7t/ha, and Rhino 4.2t/ha. After several years of consistent performance, Excalibur will no longer be grown. This year we have again tried PR46W21, even after the crop failure it gave us last autumn. So far the establishment has been similar to Rhino – which is not to say it is great. We are lucky not to have a large problem with slugs, and one dose of pellets has so far done the job. Pigeons and rabbits are another matter altogether.

### **Beans**

As usual we planted Wizard, which yielded 4.2t/ha. Selling pulses seems to be a lot more variable than selling grains, as prices offered for the same sample have varied by around £30/t from the best to worst offers.

### **Peas**

For once, these were easily the best crop on the farm. Prophet yielded 4.9t/ha, and the price has gone up from £250/t last year to well over £400 now. We were lucky to achieve a very good sample though, with a nice colour as is desirable.

### **Sugar Beet**

Only 20ha has been harvested and delivered so far, but we hope to achieve 85t/ha across the farm. A new method of harvesting using an old harvester converted to a chaser wagon seems to be a great improvement, and results in much less rutting. This was lucky timing as for the first time we have established a field of wheat after sugar beet using min-till. So far it looks as though it has worked well.

This Spring we will try establishing our first field of sugar beet without a plough, when a strip tillage machine will be coming to the farm on demo. Currently one of our lightest and sandiest fields has an eight species cover crop growing on it, and this will be the site of the experiment.

### **Livestock**

Three Wagyu calves, Mizu (水), Tani (谷) & A1, were born in the spring. Seven more are due in April 2013, with more to follow in June. Only three more years until we can try some of the beef.

The cows were outside for several months in the winter eating a cover crop that was planted in early August. This field will be going into peas in the spring, and it

will be interesting to see if the grazed part of the field shows any improvement after a short grazing period.

4ha of Church field has been taken out of cropping and will be seeded with grass in the spring. From 2014 onwards it will be the site of another 7 horse paddocks for the livery stables.

### **Machinery**

No machinery was bought except for a new VW pickup truck.

### **The Future**

Grant Anderson completed his first full year on the farm, and we hope he will be here for many more.

It's an interesting time in farming, with new technologies allowing the application of new (and old) techniques. Experiments this year with cover crops, different fertiliser regimes and reductions in cultivations may see the farm moving in a slightly different direction in coming years. Within twelve months we will hope to have had our first field of sugar beet established, removed and re-drilled with wheat, all without the use of an expensive and time-consuming plough. With any luck peas and beans can follow the same path, and with cover crops we could make use of some 'free' nitrogen at the same time as improving the soils and letting them hold on to more water. Which, in case we forget, is normally more of a problem than it has been this year.

With any luck, 2013 will be a more 'normal' year than the last two.

David Walston

With a few minor additions from Oliver Walston

January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013