

Thriplow Farms

I want to live like common people

Annual Report XLV - 2018

Back in the dim and distant past, I spent the best part of a year ‘working’ on a farm not too far from Cape Town. The farm consisted of 6,000 hectares of almost pure soft sand - the kind you might find on an exclusive beach on the Mediterranean coast - which just about supported the growing of wheat, sheep and cattle in their very dry climate. This was back when my interest in farming could be counted on the fingers of zero hands, and so I spent most of my time helping out elsewhere, mostly with the guest house that was also part of the operation. Whilst I never learnt anything at all about agriculture, I did pick up other highly useful skills, in particular an appreciation for G&Ts.

My friend, who still owns and runs the farm, found himself on the mailing list for the Thriplow Farms Annual Report from around 2001 onwards. He’s pretty big on the classics, and he enjoyed my Dad’s obscure references, and consequently was fairly disappointed when I took over writing duties, and he would critique my reports by saying things such as “I miss the erudition that comes with a Cambridge education. Where are the Latin phrases, for example? References to mythology and the classics?”. I, with my plodding and predictable prose, obviously had no come back to this. Until now. So read on Julian, and behold the transformation.

Anyway, this was a pretty long preamble to get where I wanted to go: the weather. It’s a pretty boring - not to mention predictable - subject to lead with in a farming report. But this season was so defined by what happened that I can’t help myself. Autumn 2017 was warm and wet, producing a vintage cover crop, but 2018 is when things started to get crazy. The Beast From The East hit in late February, bringing almost four weeks of miserable, freezing weather. Unfortunately for Thriplow, it also just coincided with our annual Daffodil Weekend festival, resulting in several thousand OAPs with not just blue hair, but entirely blue complexions as well.

On farm, our spring drilling campaign was set back to the end of March, which quickly turned into a very, very wet April. Normally we like wet springs, but there is a limit, and 2018 crossed it. More of that later though. What followed in the second half of April, and onwards into June, was also highly unusual, because it was



Clearing roads after winter storms

nigh on perfect. Sun followed rain, followed sun. What more could you ask for? Unfortunately, from June onwards sun followed sun, followed sun, and boy was it hot! Temperatures were consistently breaking the 30°C mark for weeks on end, and with not a single drop of rain.

Unsurprisingly, harvest started early, on July 12th, perhaps a week ahead of normal. What followed was a harvest compressed to the point where light would struggle to escape its gravity. Where normally we would have to wait for the following crops to be ready, it all came at once. Peas, normally harvested in the middle of August, were cut in the middle of July. Beans, often not ready until September, were started on July 30th. The entire harvest... completed on August 3rd. We'll get on to the results in a bit, but first I need to reference the Classics that Julian so missed from my Dad's reports.

*I want to live like common people,
I want to do whatever common people do,
I want to sleep with common people,
I want to sleep with common people,
Like you.*

Classic '90s pop (from *Pulp*, as you all know). OK, so it goes a bit off point after the first two lines, but what does a farmer do when he finds he has the entire month of August off? He does what Common People do, and goes on holiday. I've often said the worst part of my job is having to work for the entire summer holiday period, and here we were, in 2018, when that wasn't true. Climate Change may ruin our planet and our childrens' futures...but in 2018 it meant I got to spend August as a Common Person, and I loved it.

But enough silliness, time for the boring bit.

Wheat

Unsurprisingly, not a great year for wheat, and the yield dropped from the poor 8.71t/ha in 2017 to 8.40t/ha this year. However, because of various factors, the global weather being a big one, the price shot up massively during harvest. Luckily, I hadn't sold too much crop in advance, and so from a financial point of view, this was the best wheat year since 2013. I managed to snag a deal for 522t of feed wheat at £190/t, which compares quite favourably with 2015, when a large proportion of that year's (excellent) harvest left the farm for less than £110/t. As my Dad says, it's better to be a bad farmer who is good at selling wheat, than the other way around. Of course, this isn't very encouraging for those of us who are good at neither.

As per usual we started off harvest at the sandy end of the farm, where we are most affected by dry conditions. KWS Crispin initially came off the combine at 6.26t/ha, before improving in the neighbouring field to 7.72t/ha. When there's no rain we often struggle to get a good quality sample of wheat, as the grains shrivel up. This year was a big exception to that rule, as the huge quantities of sunlight made for dense berries, helping the yields and ensuring the evil merchants don't penalise us.

We went quite big on KWS Siskin in 2018, and it put in a mediocre performance as a second wheat, 7.53t/ha on medium land, but did fairly well on better ground as a first wheat: 9.32 and 10.07t/ha. Sticking on the KWS theme, we also grew Lili, which ranged from the bad (5.79t/ha, but a large portion of the field was sprayed off due to weed infestations), to the disappointing (9.13t/ha on what is usually our best performing field) to the very pleasing

(10.42t/ha in the field we had cattle grazing on up until two years ago). KWS Lili seems to be a fairly consistent performer, so we continue to grow it.



Cutting KWS Siskin on Foxton, July 24th, some four weeks ahead of schedule. Note the pink straw, a phenomenon caused by the lack of rain not washing unused potassium back down the stalk in to the soil, as would usually happen

a common occurrence on some farms, but entirely unheard of at Thriplow in my personal experience. Needless to say, we are growing a lot more of it for harvest 2019.

The star performer was undoubtedly our 2018 new variety, Freiston. Admittedly it was grown on what's probably our second best field (maybe best now?), but even taking that into account 10.58t/ha was a very good result. It's just a shame the field was so small. What really makes it stand out in my mind is that the hectolitre weight (that's a measure of density, and is one measure of quality) was over 80. This is a

It's really worth remembering that these fields were harvested the best part of a month early - if they had been rained on just once in mid June, and the ripening period extended by a few weeks, it could well have been a record year.

Oilseed Rape

I'm so glad I can finally say this, but 2018 was a great year for oilseed rape. Recent harvests, in particular 2016 & 2017, have ranged from barely average to horrible. As mentioned in the intro, we got off to an excellent start. A change in growing philosophy saw us planting much earlier than normal, at the beginning of August. Very favourable weather meant that autumn growth, without fertiliser, was exceptional. Almost too exceptional in fact, as the companion species we planted with the rapeseed threatened to get out of control, so we had to kill them off in November. This brilliant growth was good news, primarily because it

protected us from getting too much attention from pigeons, which are often a seriously significant problem in the late winter and early spring.

2018's crazy weather wasn't so much a problem for the rapeseed, as it was already starting to mature when the drought kicked in. That meant we didn't lose so much compared to other crops, and the yields were very consistent. Picto



A magnificent field of rapeseed in October, with buckwheat, linseed (seen here flowering), vetch, and fenugreek companions

produced 4.26t/ha, Campus 4.29t/ha and Elgar 4.12t/ha, making an overall average of 4.27t/ha. This compares well with our five and ten year averages of 3.24 and 3.52t/ha, and was in fact our second best ever, slightly behind 2013 at 4.37t/ha.

It actually gets better, because if we look at how we grow rapeseed in 2018 compared to 2013, we now use cheaper seed, no cultivation, no insecticides, fewer herbicides, and half the number of fungicides. The yield may be ever so slightly down, but the profit is way up. If that sounds like boasting...it is.



The future is bright, the future is yellow

[note to self, remember to deny this in 2019 Annual Report]

Barley

After a two year experiment, we stopped growing winter barley for harvest 2018. We did continue with spring barley though, unimaginatively still using Propino, which doesn't have the best yields, but does have great quality for the brewers. I had hoped to drill our one field of this crop in late February or early March, but as mentioned already, the Weather Gods didn't play ball. It did end up being the first crop into the ground, at the end of March, and although it was then heavily rained on, the light soil allowed all the moisture to drain away. This was a blessing at the start of the season, but a curse later on, when the drought hit. A promising crop hung on bravely, ending with a yield of 5.68t/ha. Better news was to come though, as barley yields and quality around the country were poor, and I had not sold ours yet. The price went crazy, and not only did I sell it for £203/t, but it all got accepted by the brewers with not a single complaint.

Oats

As with our barley, we have dropped the winter crop, and kept the spring. I really like spring oats; they seem to suit our no-till system well. We have continued to grow Elyann, and this year we had a relatively large area of them - a bit over 83ha. This was all in our heaviest, wettest land near Barrington, and so it was the last to be drilled in the spring as we were waiting for the soil to dry out sufficiently. That had just about happened right at the end of March, and there was a huge effort to get it all done before the rain forecasted at the beginning of April hit. We managed it, with some pretty late nights, and although I was keen to tell everyone how clever that made me, it backfired a bit:

One field, Januarys 2, is a reclaimed coprolite mine. Coprolite, for those who don't know, is fossilised dinosaur poo, and it used to be mined and used as fertiliser. Google it if you don't believe me; I did when someone first told me. Anyway, when the mining was completed, they put back some fairly dodgy 'soil' and it's still giving us problems today. There are patches of the field which stay very wet, and with 65mm of rain in the three weeks after drilling oats here, fully a third of the field had to be written off, as the seeds had just rotted in the ground.

It was a shame, as the rest of the field yielded fairly well, considering, and we ended up at 4.28t/ha. The neighbouring field, also spring oats, got to 6.34t/ha, making an overall result of 5.32t/ha. Again, as with the barley, I lucked out on the marketing. In a normal year I sell forward the oats, on a contract linked to wheat prices, where they trade at a £5-10 discount. This year I forgot to do that, and instead of a discount, they had a premium of £15/t. The selling price of £193/t is great for oats, considering they don't cost a lot to grow, so I remain very happy with them as a crop.

Rye

Rye is becoming a fashionable grain, so unlike a lot of the other novelty type crops, it's actually easy to sell to a merchant. It's also got a reputation for being good to grow on the type of thin, less productive land that we have at the southern end of our farm, so I decided to give it a go. Another key part of this decision was the advice from a neighbour who said it would suit our farm perfectly - of course the fact that he grows a lot of rye to be used as seed would have nothing to do with his enthusiasm, would it?

We grew two fields of KWS Bono, one after peas, the other after sugar beet. Hybrid rye seed is very expensive, so we could only afford a low seed rate, going against our standard



All these tillers from a single rye seed

farm practice, which tends towards higher rates. It established reasonably, but not brilliantly, and grew enthusiastically in the spring. Come harvest time, the yield of 6.29t/ha was probably in line with what we would have expected from wheats in the same place. The quality is good, and so there is a bit of a premium over wheat, but the risk is that in a wet harvest that same quality can disappear instantly, leaving you with a massive discount on the price. One great thing about rye was that the combine loved it, and we flew through the fields at top speed. Was this enough to redeem it, and keep it on the roster for 2019? No.

Beans

Due to a funny bit of farm rotation, I had pencilled in to grow some oilseed rape after winter beans this year. When I told Dick this bit of news, he was highly sceptical, and for good reason. We like to plant rapeseed at the beginning of August, and beans are not usually harvested until the end of August at the earliest. Well, if there was one year to try it out, it was 2018, when we started beans on July 30th, and finished them on August 2nd. For the past decade or more we have only ever grown one variety, Wizard. For the most part we continued with them this year, and they yielded 3.22t/ha. In one small field we have grown a new variety called Tundra. This did slightly better, 3.39t/ha, but it was on heavier land.

In the same way the rapeseed was good this year due to it being early, the beans were poor because they spent so much of their prime growing time in severe drought. Beans are an easy crop to read sometimes, as they continue to grow upwards and flower over a period of several weeks. In 2018 we had pods only on the bottom half of the plants - all the flowers that came later just died in the heat, and didn't produce a single thing. As with the wheat, we were probably only a single rain away from a good yield.

Peas

Impressively, our peas were even worse in 2018 than in 2017. A solitary field (we wanted to grow two fields, but had a problem with the seed) yielded a meagre 2.10t/ha, although in fairness it is probably the least productive field on the farm. Once again we grew the marrowfat variety Sakura, but there was no solace in the quality, which was again terrible. They will not end up as mushy peas in a chip shop, more likely they'll be turned into cattle feed. Like a masochist, I will continue flogging the pea horse, although we may try some different types next year.

Sugar Beet

Talking of flogging dead horses, it's time to talk about sugar beet. My stubborn nature was brought to the fore, and I kept on trying to make strip-till work. Once more, we made some changes to hardware, and went into drilling season confidently. The major change that

we had made was to make the strips first, and then come back a few days later and put the seed in. It was a bit too wet at first, but quickly dried out. When it came to drilling the seed, the job was a slow and tedious one, but it actually seemed to be doing a good job, with a nice loose soil covering all the seeds. As with the spring oats, we finished late one night, only hours before the rain came.



Left: With sugar beet, evenness is key, so having some plants developing much quicker than others is a serious problem. Right: Taken on August 6th, these beet were not relishing the Saharan conditions

Exactly what happened next is not entirely clear. There was a lot of rain. The new sugar beet plants decided to do one of three things, in roughly equal proportions: grow quickly, grow slowly, or die. How much was due to the drilling method, and how much to the weather? We will never know, but I have to own at least some of the blame, as conventionally drilled crops in our area (almost all drilled after the rain) looked fine. Then, as I may have mentioned, we had a shortage of rain, and all our sugar beet was on light soil this year. Whatever the exact reason, it was a disaster. We've had one field harvested this year, and it produced...46t/ha; the worst result since 1995. The second field is being harvested as I write this, and the yield will be similar.

At least I won't have to go through it again in the near future. We will not grow sugar beet next year, as the contract price is way too low compared to all of the other crops. I won't miss it.

Livestock

Still none. Still happy days.

Soya

I recall a time at school when being given back a piece of maths homework, the teacher said to me “your mark was very singular”. As befits someone who gets a singular mark (out of 25), I didn’t grasp what he meant until I saw it in black and white. Equally simple and memorable was our yield for soya this year. Not singular but very round: 0.00t/ha.



This photo was taken in the small window when growing soya looked like a good decision

After the failed pea field, it was mid May, and I’d been toying with the idea of soya for a few years. I’m pretty keen on soya milk, and also tofu, so the thought of being able to make my own sounded good. We bought the seed, and got it into the ground in textbook conditions. The first three weeks were perfect, and it all germinated very nicely. From then on it went wrong in a hurry. Delia fly, slugs, hares, pigeons; take your pick, they were all a problem. The small corner which didn’t succumb to any of these was swiftly seen off by the drought, and so by August the entire field had been condemned. This was an experiment that will not be repeated in a hurry.

Machinery

A brilliant year for machinery at Thriplow. Items bought: 0. Just how I like it.

Experiments

We had no formal trials this year, and I’ve already written about the unsuccessful debuts for both rye and soya. We have however been tweaking our agronomy to drop out potentially un-needed pesticide applications. For example, 2018 saw us farming almost entirely insecticide free. These were not missed at all on the rapeseed, where I had been reducing their use year-on-year since 2014. Likewise on cereals we had sprayed a little bit for aphids in the autumn, but could detect no benefit from doing so. Peas were a different matter, and we tried to make use of moth traps to inform a decision as to whether we should spray or not.

Sadly, the traps turned out to be faulty, lulling us into a false sense of security. We didn't spray - but we should have.

Fungicides have also seen a big reduction, particularly in oilseed rape, where we went down from four applications to two, with no noticeable penalty. This year coming we will try two, one and zero applications. Wheat is a similar story, with new disease resistant varieties allowing us to cut back from four to three or maybe even two fungicides. This is all good news for the bank balance, and probably the environment too.

One more experiment took place in the oilseed rape, when I had a great idea for combatting the threat of flea beetle (a pest which eats the small plants as they germinate in the autumn). I had heard that flea beetle also likes to eat linseed, so it seemed like a good wheeze to plant that with the rapeseed, as a sort of sacrificial decoy. What I didn't know at the time was that the flea beetle which eats linseed is not the same one that eats oilseed rape. Oops. Luckily we managed to get the linseed out of the rapeseed crop over winter, but for a while it looked like it might be a permanent fixture.

The future

Back in March, Grant Anderson, who had been working for us since 2011, decided to leave the farm, which was a sad day. His replacement, Alistair, did a good job for six months, but after that we both decided the fit wasn't right, and he hit the road as well. Finding a replacement has been hard work, especially when the first person we offered the job to changed his mind, and decided he didn't want it after all. Having restarted the process, I've now found a local man who is very keen to get into farming, having worked in a related industry for a few years. Hopefully that will all go smoothly, and he can start with us next year.

I wrote in the introduction for the 2017 report about our attempt to turn our old grainstore into housing. That was ultimately unsuccessful, although we are currently going through the appeals process with certain aspects of that scheme. It was a frustrating time, as many people claimed either before or after the decision to support it, but when the crunch came, they didn't follow through.

Outside of the farm, dare I mention the B word? I don't think this is the place, except to say that I find it hard to believe farming will be a stronger industry outside of the EU than it is inside. How much worse it will be is highly debatable. Some things are clear though; whatever happens we will receive less subsidy, have fewer pesticides to choose from, and the rest of the world will produce more grain.

These are not good omens for a farmer, which is why it's so important that we streamline and optimise the farming side of the business as much as possible, but also try to diversify into other areas. Thanks to a generous permitted development law which came into force a couple of years ago, I've managed to secure permission to convert two of our old barns into four houses. It's going to involve an understanding bank manager, but when the future looks this...scary?...no, unsettling, it has to be the right direction to take.

David Walston

December 16 2018

[@OOOfarmer](#)