

1990

HEAT + DROUGHT + C.A.P. = BAD NEWS

"The trouble with farmers", says the man on the Clapham omnibus, "is that they always complain. If it isn't the weather it's the prices, and if it isn't the prices it's the politicians". This time he is right. For almost twenty years since these reports began, we have resisted the temptation to moan. Today we can hold out no longer.

Greenhouse Effect or just bad luck? Whatever the cause, 1990 was certainly the hottest, and one of the driest on record, and our light land suffered accordingly. Yet only ten miles away on the heavy clay soil of west Cambridgeshire farmers enjoyed a superb harvest. We did not. Which is why we have had a poor - maybe even a bad - year. And as if the weather were not difficult enough, the economic situation has grown steadily worse throughout the past twelve months.

It was not always thus. Back in January optimism was rampant. The crops at Thriplow looked excellent, the surpluses throughout the world had shrunk to almost nothing and, thanks to a devaluation of the Green Pound, the price of wheat had risen by about 10%. This fact also did wonders for our spirits because it meant that at last we were receiving almost the same as our German friends do for a tonne of wheat. We were pleasantly suffused with what in Schleswig -Holstein they would call schadenfreude.

By early summer it became clear that the rest of the world was enjoying the weather and there was going to be a very big grain harvest indeed. From the Ukraine to Saskatchewan - and most places in between - yields were good. Down came prices and our morale. Up went surpluses and our costs, particularly those related to energy. It was not a pleasant sensation.

We started the year with the objective of reducing our use of chemicals and fertiliser by 20%. This was for economic reasons, as well as in response to mounting public pressure. The snag is that it took as much courage to reduce inputs in 1990 as it did to increase them back in 1977 when we first started high-input-high-output farming. To give us courage and advice, we hired ADAS. In return for a fat fee, they provided wall-to-wall consultancy. The theory was that the money we spent would be saved by more efficient use of fertilisers and agrochemicals, and that we would also benefit from their wisdom about agronomy in general. Whether they have actually proved cost effective is impossible to say, since we don't know what we would have spent without them. But at least we now have a shoulder to cry on and a second opinion to listen to.

We did manage to reduce chemicals substantially, but this was partly because the dry summer kept cereal diseases under control. Nitrogen was also cut by over 10%. The presence of a new government-designated Nitrate Sensitive Area on part of the farm has concentrated our minds wonderfully!

WINTER WHEAT

A below-average harvest at 57cwt per acre, compared with a normal 63cwt/acre, was disappointing but inevitable. We received almost no rain between May and harvest, during which time the temperature briefly rose to a record-breaking 98 degrees Fahrenheit.

Beaver and Riband excelled by averaging over 70cwt/acre (8.7t/ha). Haven was reasonable, with one field managing 79cwt/acre (9.8t/ha). Hereward, which appears to be the most promising breadmaking wheat since Mercia, was unfortunate to be on the thinnest and most drought-prone land. Pastiche, for which we had high hopes, turned out to be an unqualified disaster. Its yield was abysmal and its quality so poor that no miller wanted to buy it. For a brief period in the autumn it looked as if it would suffer the ultimate indignity of being sold into Intervention. It narrowly avoided this fate and will instead be exported in the spring. Apostle did badly, and never made the NIAB Recommended List, Hornet was disappointing and Mercia no better.

Amidst the encircling gloom, three features did give some pleasure. After last year's fiasco, we did not grow any spring wheat - which would inevitably have done even worse than it did in 1989. The actual harvest itself was even quicker than last year, finishing on August 10th. Finally, the marketing was good. We managed to sell most of the wheat very early indeed when prices were almost reasonable. This achievement, made even more attractive by high interest rates, salvaged some of our pride. Nevertheless, it was a harvest to forget.

OILSEED RAPE

At least we did not have to plough up half the crop as we did in 1989, and the price of £275 per tonne in August was a big improvement. But those were the only two bright spots. We were using the variety Capricorn which, we were advised, needed lots of fungicides. Thus our costs were high and the yield, at 22cwt/acre was below average. Next year we shall grow Falcon, Lictor and Silex and hope to do better. The problem is that rape is entirely dependent on EEC subsidies, and these are becoming increasingly fragile.

SPRING BEANS

A truly disastrous crop. Three years ago we grew spring beans for the first time and achieved 45cwt/acre. Last year we fell to 19cwt and felt we could never do worse. In my report for 1989 I wrote "we hope we won't have another Saharan summer". We did. The result was that both varieties, Troy and the low-tannin Slaney, produced precisely 9cwt per acre. With a price of around £155 per tonne, our gross income was less than the cost of seed, fertiliser and chemicals. Next year we shall grow winter beans instead. We have learned our lesson. PEAS

Like all spring-sown crops, peas did badly. For the third year we persisted in growing Solara, which really does not like thin land, however well it does on heavier soils. The peas yielded 22cwt per acre, which meant that they also

lost money. The only saving grace was that harvesting conditions were perfect and drying was unnecessary. That is, however, small compensation for a very bad crop. We may persist with peas next year and will probably grow the variety Bohatyr.

SUGAR BEET

At the end of May the sugar beet had never looked better. The plants had met in the rows by the middle of the month and it was clear we would be contributing our share to the sugar (Big Rock Candy) mo untain. From then on the crop went backwards so that by the end of June the leaves were no longer touching. On the lighter land the yields will struggle to make 12 tonnes/acre, while on a heavier field it looks as if we could even get 18 tonnes. Another problem this year was the difficulty we had topping the variety Sandra. We shall not grow it again. Overall we shall not produce our quota and, as a result, will have to increase our acreage next year to protect the quota.

Sewage sludge, which we started using two years ago, may well have benefited the sugar beet. Next year we shall reduce our nitrogen inputs by around 25%, so we will save money and be green (brown?) all at the same time. There must be a snag somewhere. There is. The local inhabitants, who tend to be against artificial fertilisers and in favour of organic farming, also object to the smell of sewage sludge. If they all had Elsans at the bottom of their gardens, the problem would not arise. But it seems that the residents of south Cambridgeshire have come to depend on modern plumbing. The end results must, however, be disposed of somewhere far from where they live.

MACHINERY

Rather against our better judgment (but seduced by a good price and interest-free leasing) we bought two new tractors. A five year old John Deere 4850 became a 4955 while the 4240 was upgraded to a 4255. In the less exciting categories, we bought one vast 48 foot trailed Parmiter harrow (which, as it happens, remained unused through out the autumn) and two furrow presses.

THE FUTURE

My track record for predicting the future is appalling. Last year I wrote, "Maybe it is just irrational optimism or just wishful thinking, but the economics of farming look very slightly better than they did". This year I must contradict myself. The outlook for farming in December 1990 is worse than I have ever known.

After thirty years, the Common Agricultural Policy is collapsing under pressure from the rest of the world (GATT) and European consumers. Surpluses are once again rising while prices (both world and EEC-subsidised ones) are falling. Public sympathy for farming in general is non-existent, and towards large British farmers the sentiment is positively hostile. The EEC's apparently successful resistance to the GATT proposals is illusory, and within months this will become clear. As a result, farmers must face the fact - in spite of what

the NFU may tell them today - that within a few years we shall all be operating without subsidies. Brussels will, however, continue to support agriculture - but in a very different way. Their cash will be targeted exclusively at small farmers. Instead of Intervention prices, a monthly cheque will fall through the letterboxes of the millions of southern European farmers occupying ten acres on a mountainside in Greece, Spain, Portugal or wherever. Never underestimate the power of politics over economics or even logic.

British farmers will hardly benefit at all. Take as an example the typical Cambridgeshire county council smallholder with 100 acres near Ely. He feels strongly that he is a small farmer - and so he is compared to Thriplow Farms. But the people in Brussels don't see it that way. From where they sit in the Berlaymont building, the average farm size in the EEC is 33 acres. Thus the man in Ely appears big next to the average European. Compared to a small European farmer, he is absolutely vast.

We at Thriplow will eventually have to compete with the Kansas wheat grower in an unsubsidised world market - the so-called "level playing field". To stand any chance of success at all, we shall have to bring our costs down to somewhere near the Kansas farmer's costs. Achieving this, however, will be almost impossible because his land is worth £500 per acre and his rent is £20 per acre. The same man thinks nothing of farming 3000 acres with the help of his son, and three students at harvest. His wages bill is very low indeed.

If we at Thriplow fail to compete, one of two things will happen. Either we shall go bankrupt or the government will once again step in with subsidies (i.e. tip the playing field). If the government refuses, then eventually the whole of southern England will become a golf course, a bird sanctuary and a parking lot. Wales, the north and Scotland will be a Nature Reserve. Yet when the "barley barons" of East Anglia do eventually go bust, the public is in for a nasty shock. After they have finished cheering, they will realise that instead of our being succeeded at Thriplow by ten 300 acre farmers, each of whom is cosy, organic, picturesque and keen on planting hedges, the farms and the fields of Cambridgeshire will actually grow bigger still.

The man, or corporation, who grows wheat at Thriplow will do so using exactly the same methods as they do in Kansas. If he doesn't, he will be unable to compete. Thus the British government and the British public - will realise all too late that the only things worse than farming subsidies are no subsidies at all.