

# 2006

## *THE ODOUR OF SANCTITY\**

This year has been as good as last year was bad. Not only was our harvest the third biggest on record but the price of wheat has risen by 25%. So much for supply and demand. But perhaps even more exciting than the harvest was the fact that we have achieved the nearest thing to sanctity available to British farmers - short of converting to the organic religion and thereby qualifying for instant sainthood. Such is our holiness it is very probable that we shall soon be secreting the odour of sanctity\*. To understand the significance of this phenomenon it helps to have a profound knowledge of both the common agricultural policy and catholic theology.

The days when Brussels paid us for every tonne we produced or every hectare we planted are now a distant memory. Instead we are paid largely for looking after the countryside. In doing so there are three levels of sanctity available. The first, which is known as The Single Farm Payment, is paid to virtually every farmer in the land providing he is a decent chap, behaves sensibly and does not rip out hedges or pollute waterways. We shall receive about £145,000 for this scheme, although the amount (most of which is paid as compensation for our old subsidy cheque) will reduce drastically over the next decade.

The second is called the Entry Level Scheme. To qualify for this payment the farmer must be actively benign and do such things as plant six metre strips of grass around some of his fields and agree to cut his hedges only every two years. In our case this has resulted in an additional payment of £30 per hectare.

For Buddhists Nirvana is "the natural result that accrues to one who lives a life of virtuous conduct". For British farmers it is called the Higher Level Scheme. To achieve this the farmer must submit a plan to DEFRA which is judged against those proposed by other farmers. It is, therefore, competitive and is only awarded to the most deserving of farms. We spent six months drawing up an elaborate scheme which involved creating still more six metre grass strips, leaving small areas in the centre of fields uncultivated to encourage lapwings, skylarks and (with luck) stone curlews, pollarding willow trees, creating a network of tracks for walkers and riders (for which we receive £90 for each 100 metres) and managing two Sites of Special Scientific Interest on this farm. One of these contains some lovely and relatively rare southern marsh orchids (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*) and bee orchids (*Ophrys apifera*) whilst the other provides a habitat for a plant called Grass Poly and an animal known as the Fairy Shrimp. These creatures are well-adapted to living in dry areas where water is present for only part of the year. Their eggs will survive drought for several years and hatch about 30 hours after rain fills the pools

where they live. Some eggs may not hatch until they have survived several wet/dry cycles. This ensures the animals' survival if the pools don't last long enough for the shrimp to reproduce. Although most fairy shrimp are under half an inch long, some can be as big as six inches. What do they eat? Other Fairy Shrimps. Which means they must get awfully hungry during droughts. Anyway, in October we were informed that we had been accepted into the Higher Level Scheme and would, as a result, receive an additional £22,000 from Brussels.

The one cloud on this otherwise sun-drenched horizon is the fact that DEFRA has still not paid us all of last year's subsidy cheque. Such is the level of chaos in the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) that we are still owed £25,000 which is now almost one year overdue. To make matters worse we received a letter telling us that the amount outstanding was so small that we would not qualify for any interest when (if?) it is paid. Four letters to the RPA have remained unanswered – and even unacknowledged. This is incompetence on a cosmic scale.

## WHEAT

It is the ambition of every arable farmer in Britain to average ten tonnes of wheat per hectare (4 tonnes or 140 bushels per acre) across the entire farm. We have achieved this on only two occasions but by the end of May this year it looked as if we would easily do it again. Indeed I have never seen the crops at Thriplow look thicker, happier and healthier than they did in the early summer of 2006. And then came global warming – or what we now all blame on global warming. We had the hottest – and probably the driest – June on record, with temperatures in the mid 30s centigrade. The wheat plants wilted and shriveled, and with them our hopes of a barn-busting harvest. Yet in spite of this drought and our thin soils, the eventual yield of 9.7 tonnes per hectare (20% more than last year) was pretty damned good.

What makes us even happier than we might otherwise be is the fact that throughout the growing season this farm would never have won a beauty contest. Due to our adoption of a Minimum Tillage system (which means that most of the acreage is not ploughed but is simply scratched) we suffered from some very unpleasant grass weeds which made the crops look extremely untidy. The eventual yield showed that the problem must have been cosmetic and not fundamental.

The success story of the year was the variety, *Glasgow*, which averaged 10.4 t/ha. *Einstein* also did well, at 8t/ha, bearing in mind that it was second wheat – which always yields less than a first wheat. *Robigus*, a feed (i.e. low quality) wheat bred here in Thriplow by CPB-Twyford, was slightly disappointing at 10 tonnes/hectare. *Malacca*, a milling variety also by CPB-Twyford, had a miserable year averaging 8.8 tonnes per hectare. This year we decided not to pile on the nitrogen and instead we treated it as a feed wheat. The results were exactly as they had been last year when, at great expense, we threw on lots of late nitrogen.

## OILSEED RAPE

We increased the acreage substantially this year at the expense of winter beans, and it looks as if this was the right decision because (see below) beans once again did pretty badly. Last year was an average oilseed rape year – and so was this year too, with the crop averaging a tedious 3.4 tonnes/ha. *Castile* was our best variety at 4.1 tonnes/ha, whilst *Winner* and *Tequila* both produced 3.3 tonnes/ha. The one thing different about this year's oilseed rape crop was that it was being grown for biofuel production and thus (you guessed it) qualified for a slightly bigger subsidy. We shall do the same again this year because the hassle with the paperwork is well-compensated by the larger cheque.

## BEANS

Last year's crop of *Wizard* averaged a disastrous 2.3 tonnes/hectare. This year's did somewhat better at 3.3 tonnes/hectare. However, even this yield is not sufficient to show a profit. Beans are, however, a pretty good entry for the following wheat crop, which is why we will persevere with them. If you listen to my organic friends they will claim that conventional arable farmers, when they are not "drenching their crops with poisons" go in for "monoculture" and do not use crop rotations. This is, of course, nonsense. The reason we grow beans, oilseed rape and sugar beet is to give the land a rest from wheat and (in the case of beans) to fix nature's own nitrogen in the soil. This year once again we have saved some of last harvest's crop and have sown it as seed this autumn. Maybe next year we shall have a reasonable yield of beans, say 5 tonnes per hectare. Watch this space.

## SUGAR BEET

About thirty years ago I hated sugar beet. The crop was labour-intensive to grow, was full of weeds and frequently yielded a pathetic 18 tonnes per hectare. I beseeched my Father to let me give up the crop altogether and he – reluctantly – let me cut the acreage by one third. Since then a large miracle has taken place. The crop regularly produces 65 tonnes per hectare, is weed-free and highly profitable. At least it was until the World Trade Organisation bullied Brussels into cutting back the subsidy big-time. As a result the price we now get paid is £19 per tonne down from £33 per tonne two years ago. Faced with this unpleasant situation every sugar beet farmer in England wailed, gnashed his teeth and announced that he would definitely stop growing sugar beet. But what, I hear you cry, actually did happen this year? The answer is simple: most east anglian sugar beet growers went out and bought the right to grow more sugar beet. We did too, and as a result we will be growing 33% more next year than last year. So much for economics.

## SETASIDE

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

## ENTRY AND HIGHER LEVEL SCHEMES

In addition to the setaside, which we must have in order to sup at the CAP trough, the two new levels of sainthood also require us to leave land uncultivated, and the totals are not insubstantial. The six metres strips of grass surrounding some fields, together with the various other uncultivated chunks of land add up to 30 hectares, or about 5% of the entire farm.

## MACHINERY

After three years of restraint, Christmas came early for the local machinery dealers in the Thriplow area. We replaced our thirteen year old *JCB Teleporter* with a new one which comes complete with air conditioning and a CD player. Our two six year old 185 hp John Deeres were also sent to the knacker's yard. These were replaced by a *John Deere 7830* and a *Fendt 818 Vario*. Both machines have automatic gearboxes and enough computing power on board to run a small railway.

## LIVERY STABLES

The biggest single contribution to last year's increased overdraft was the £25,000 we spent building a new Manège for our livery customers. (We also built a *petanque* court at the same time).

As a result of this we now have a waiting list of eager horse-owners who appear keen to stable their animals here. For this reason we shall probably build a few new stables as well as having to put in new water troughs in some of the paddocks.

## THE FUTURE

The only certainty in agriculture is uncertainty. The industry has always operated in cycles - albeit of irregular duration and severity. From the first farmer in the Fertile Crescent (circa 7000 BC) to the Egyptian pharaohs' seven lean years (circa 1400 BC) to the mid 20th century the pattern has been one of instability. Sometimes when politicians intervened, as with the Repeal of the Corn Laws and the Common Agricultural Policy, farmers were briefly able to enjoy both stability and prosperity at the same time. At other times (i.e. the collectivization in Russia) politicians made things far worse. But even the good times never lasted for more than a couple of decades, and today we are once again afloat on a world market without a compass and scarcely a weather forecast.

I am, therefore, probably being both irresponsible and stupid when I say that we have now seen the worst of this current farming cycle and that for the next few years things will get better again. The trough of low prices together with increased costs was, I hope and believe, last year. The reasons for this are

many and complex, involving the growth in demand from the consumers in the booming Chinese and Indian economies, the weather (the Australian drought), the changing fashions of the commodity speculators and, of course, good old-fashioned politics.

During the past twelve months British agriculture has discovered a new sales wheeze. It is called Food Miles and seeks to show the environmental cost of transporting food great distances. Not only does it enable British farmers to show their deep concern about global warming, but, coincidentally, it also increases the sales of their produce. On the face of it Food Miles is a sensible and worthwhile concept. However, before farmers get too carried away by their own slogans they should exercise some caution. It will be rather difficult to maintain that whilst the British housewife should only buy British lamb, British beef, British potatoes and British butter it is perfectly acceptable for the British farmer to buy his fertiliser from Lithuania, his pick-up truck from Japan, his tractor from America, his boiler suit from Malaysia and his seaside holiday in Spain. Of course if the farmer concerned does actually buy all his inputs from the United Kingdom, then he is perfectly entitled to suggest that consumers should do the same. The snag is that I have yet to meet a single farmer who is prepared – in this department anyway - to practice what he preaches.

Here at Thriplow the pace of change continues unabated. This harvest for the first time we found ourselves employing two young men from eastern Europe (the Czech Republic and Slovakia). Lindsay Anderson left us after twenty five years and to replace him we found Tristran Worboys who is keen, cheerful, talented and – best of all – twenty four years old.

The trend which is now becoming clearer is that the process of specialisation and simplification on farms will continue, and even speed up. Fifty years ago this was a mixed farm with dairy and beef cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry. Today we have no livestock whatsoever and with big machines we need two full time men to grow and store 2000 acres of crops. Tomorrow we probably will not keep anything on this farm. Instead we will use a nearby co-operative to store our cereals, rapeseed and beans. A few years ago we harvested our own sugar beet. Today we pay a contractor with a vast machine to do the job for us and to cart the sugar beet back to the farm where it is tipped onto the concrete until it is taken to the sugar factory in Bury St Edmunds. Tomorrow the sugar beet will probably be heaped up in the field and loaded straight onto a lorry, saving us time and space and trailers.

Meanwhile the countryside around us in south Cambridgeshire will increasingly begin to look like Surrey. Affluent commuter villages are already here. Fields will morph into pony paddocks, farmyards will become car parks or computer software offices and farm tracks will be converted into roads. Today's *Nimby* will become tomorrow's *Niyby*. A *Niyby* (Not In Your Back Yard) is the man who is perfectly happy to sell his own back yard for a million to the developer but objects most strongly when your back yard becomes a housing estate.

Yet today this particular farmer is a reasonably happy human being. He still

has some wheat in the grainstore and thus would be even happier if the price of wheat reached £100 per tonne.

**\*Odour of Sanctity:** *an unexplained, beautiful, unearthly scent that is said to exude from a number of holy persons and certain European Saints. Among the ladies said to have exhibited this phenomenon was Blessed Maria degli Angeli, an 18th century Italian nun, who could be traced throughout her convent by her beautiful smell. None of the other sisters in the convent exuded this smell and Maria was so embarrassed by the whole thing, that she would place foul smelling objects nearby, but to no avail.*