Thriplow Farms

Housen

Annual Report XLIV - 2017

David Short, who until recently was landlord at the Queen's Head in next-door Newton, is a mine of local historical information. When he tells me that he knows what my family, who used to live in Newton Hall until 1971, got up to back then, there's always a twinkle in his eye. So far he hasn't told me any *really* scandalous stories but I am sure they are in there - certainly there must be something more juicy than where the guy lived who sold my parents their herbal remedies forty years ago. Another scrap he mentioned to me was how when he started working at the pub, one of the old timers, who had never left the village, used to use the old Anglo Saxon way of pluralising words, which was to add the suffix -en, rather than the -s we use nowadays. We still use a few words left over from those days - David's example was "oxen" - but there's also "children", "men", "women" and a handful more. Anyway, there is one word that David recalled him using a lot, and it's how he would have described the reason why my eye has been off the farming ball for a lot of 2017: housen.

Mundanely, we have been refurbishing the farm house for the best part of a year now, which involved ripping out most of the ground floor, and rebuilding from there on upwards. A little like the guys on *Grand Designs* who end up quitting work to become their own project managers, as time has gone on I have become more and more sucked into the work, to the point where I've been a digger, painter, carpenter, wallpaper stripper, joiner, and most effectively, a demolisher.

Perhaps slightly more relevant to my actual day job has been plans to redevelop our existing grainstore site into housen, and relocate the farm a mile to the north west. Not surprisingly there has been some resistance to this idea, although there is also a large amount of support as well, for no real number of new housen have been built in Thriplow for at least four decades, pricing everyone but the very richest out of the village. Whatever the pros and cons - and this is certainly not the place to discuss them - the entire project has taken a

considerable amount of time and energy. Right now, most of the my work is done, and we are waiting to hear our fate, probably in early February.

A minor facelift for the farmhouse

And that proves my point nicely; on to the second page and no farming talk. Well, autumn 2016 was not a good one. Following on from a poor harvest, it was really incredibly dry, causing problems for everything we planted, particularly the cover crops and the oilseed rape. What followed was a pretty unexceptional winter, not particularly wet, not particularly cold. It was fine. The same cannot be said of spring. From the middle of March, we had effectively no rain whatsoever for two months. This was bad news for the wheat on the heavier end of the farm, really bad news for the wheat on the lighter end of the farm, and terrible news for anything planted in the spring.

Harvest itself was not much fun, as, although we managed to get finished in August, unlike some friends who were still waiting for beans in October, it was entirely stop-start for about a month. We would wait days for crops to dry before getting in half an hour of combining before another bit of drizzle stopped play once again. We don't mind that so much if the results are good, but they were not. One of the great things about farming is being able to put last harvest behind you, and be optimistic for next year, which I like to think I am pretty good at. Unfortunately, I have to re-live it all again for you here.

Let's go.

Wheat

Just as last year, most of us were too optimistic in our wheat yield forecasts, and sad to say, once again the pessimistic guesser won our annual sweepstake. The overall yield was 8.71t/ha, almost 1t/ha less than our rolling 5 year average, and over 0.6t/ha down on the 10 year average. It's our worst wheat harvest since 2012 (8.23t/ha) - although that year some wheat left the farm for £229/t, compared to a maximum of £150 this year. To think we were disappointed back then!

Things could actually have been much worse, and for much of harvest it appeared they would be. Because we start off in the southern part of the farm, where the soil is much sandier and prone to drought, we got the real stinkers out of the way early on. KWS Crispin managed 6.32t/ha on what is probably the least productive field on the farm, and KWS Siskin produced an actually-quite-respectable-in-the-circumstances 7.25t/ha next door. They both seem like sensible varieties, and so we continue to grow them this year, primarily for their great inherent disease resistance.

My ire was mainly reserved for Evolution, which in the early fields was grown after oats - always tricky to do in our no-till system. The yields of 6.57 & 6.53t/ha were poor, and even worse was the sample, full of shrivelled grains which reduce the value of the crop by several percent. I had considered these problems were due to the oats in 2016, but when we finally got onto our other field of Evolution, after oilseed rape, that too was a really bad, shrivelled crop. On a field that should have been getting into, or close to, double figures, 8.58t/ha was really poor. Goodbye Evolution, I can't say it has been a pleasure.

The very ugly, shrivelled, Evolution

Reflection is a very dirty variety which requires constant doses of fungicides to keep the leaves free of disease, I'd imagine it's a bit like farming potatoes. However, it is a consistent performer for us, so we keep on growing it. This year it was mid-range, 9.35t/ha on Smiths 23 and 8.97t/ha on Stocks 3.

In 2016 I had high hopes for a new wheat we were growing, KWS Lili. It's fair to say it didn't set our world on fire, but we grew more this year anyway. I'm glad we did; it was the standout performer. OK, so it was helped by being grown mainly on our heaviest land at the northern end of the farm, which we cut last of all. After all the yields starting with 6, 7s and 8s, it was a big relief to have large areas coming back with results of 9.61, 10.38 & 10.45t/ha. It certainly gave our yield average a big, and much needed, boost. But perhaps the single most impressive KWS Lili result was on a field of second wheat, on the lighter end of the farm, where it made 8.39t/ha, probably around 1t/ha more than I would have expected compared to what was around it. Bravo.

Barley

Somewhat embarrassingly, I was actually on holiday when harvest started on July 7th. Looking back on it, I should have stayed away, as this one single field of winter barley that we grew was easily the only good crop we had all season. As in 2016 we grew KWS Tower, and it yielded 9.09t/ha. At the time, reports from other barley growers were middling to poor, which gave us (me at least) an inflated view of how harvest was going to pan out. As it happens, we have actually decided to drop winter barley from our rotation: one poor year, one good year, but overall, does it add much value to our cropping? I don't think so.

Spring barley continues, primarily as a tool in the fight against our most irritating weed, black grass. I've got to say, we still haven't managed to grow a really good crop yet, and this year we averaged 4.9t/ha, again with Propino. Pretty much all of the blame for this lies on the complete lack of rain for seven weeks after planting. What grains did exist were big and fat; unfortunately there just were't very many. I see that the advice is changing a little bit now. Whereas before we were told to plant as late as possible, another emerging viewpoint is that we should in fact be drilling much earlier, say February, but with a high seed rate, and twice in the same field, to achieve a better crop cover. This is meant to get the crop going before the weeds, so that you can make use of barley's natural suppression of other grasses. I'd love this to be true, as I'm sure it would make our crops less prone to drought. I think we will have to give it a go.

Oilseed Rape

Arrrgggh. Not a fun year for oilseed rape, again. When we planted in the middle of August, the soil was bone dry. Nothing happened. Ten days later, it rained, the seeds germinated, and all the slugs arrived. Almost instantaneously, 60% of the crop was eaten. But wait, this is why we grow oilseed rape cheaply - home-saved seed, no fertiliser, no pre emergence herbicides - so we went back with the drill and re-seeded those fields. A couple of weeks later and it wasn't slugs that were the problem, but flea beetles. Two fields were heavily damaged, and another was completely destroyed. We tried using insecticides, but they had no noticeable effect. Amusingly, Friends of the Earth visited the farm in the middle of September to talk about controlling flea beetles, and to see if they were actually a real problem. I was able to show them a 33ha (that's 330,000m^2) field, where we struggled to find a single rape plant. Yes it is a real problem, but I think there are ways around it.

So not the best start to the oilseed rape year, and matters were made worse over winter as pigeons love short plants, as they can easily walk around and munch away. Add this to the spring drought and it's not difficult to see why our yields were so bad - the average was 2.47t/ha. This was split between the *really* bad fields which were re-drilled in September: 1.94 & 1.05t/ha (Campus), and the almost reasonable ones: 3.11 & 3.13t/ha (Picto). Luckily for us, the bigger areas were the better fields.

Obviously we have stopped growing oilseed rape after all these bad performances. Oh wait, actually we are growing 60% more this year. And it looks brilliant. But that has to wait for 2018.

Oats

Like the winter barley, the winter oats were much better this year than last. Again we grew Mascani for a seed contract, and it yielded 7.05t/ha. Again the black grass control was horrible, and we ended up killing off around 5% of the field where the weeds got out of hand. Also like winter barley, we won't be growing it again for 2018. A shame, as I had high hopes when we started with it two years ago.

Spring oats were, predictably, hit hard by the drought. We have continued with the new(ish) variety Elyann, which the millers still love. The yield was fairly poor at 5.76t/ha, but it is a crop that seems to suit our system. I look forward to seeing what it can do with an earlier drilling slot next spring.

Beans

No spring beans this year; they just don't stack up for us. Too risky on the yield (they would have been dreadful this year in the dry), and the weed control is somewhere between non-existent and actively bad. We ended up growing more winter beans than originally intended, because the 33ha field of twice drilled oilseed rape was eventually re-planted for a second time with beans. Our other field was sown in late November, having up until recently been home to our grazing ley, and all the cattle. These two fields were both Wizard, and yielded 3.80 & 3.19t/ha respectively., for a total average of 3.48t/ha, about 1t/ha below average.

Beans coming up through the dead grass where two months previously cattle had been grazing

Peas

The less said here the better. Very dry spring? Not good news. A wet harvest which meant they were ripe for two weeks before we could harvest them? Also not good, as the weeds went berserk with all the rain, and made combining a small nightmare. This delay also meant that the nice green colour, which is highly prized in the variety we grow, Sakura, all but disappeared. They have not been sold yet, but the price will be taking a hefty hit I'm certain. Even I am slightly embarrassed to disclose the overall yield, of 2.17t/ha. After several good pea years, the last couple have been shockers.

I'm going to go off on a slight tangent here for a minute, but whilst sitting around in the grainstore over harvest, I noticed something rather odd. It seemed to me, looking back through history, that pea yields and oilseed rape yields always seemed to be very close. I

plugged the numbers in, and sure enough, the correlation coefficient is 0.9, which means a "very strong correlation" [For comparison, the correlation between oilseed rape and wheat yields on our farm is 0.03, in other words, there is no link at all]. This is odd; oilseed rape is in the ground for almost 12 months, peas for only 4. They have different growth habits, flowering times, and harvest dates. Why should their yields be so closely linked? And does it mean anything beyond mere curiosity? Who knows.

Peas & Oats growing together, quite successfully - described below in "Experiments"

Sugar Beet

After a break last year, we moved back into sugar beet. I was all ready not to grow it again, as I was convinced the price would be £16/t. When it tuned out to be £22/t there was little choice. This is a real conundrum crop for me, as I would really prefer not to have to put the soil through the pain of such a destructive harvest, but everyone has their price. To mitigate that we have been trying, for years, to get strip-tillage working to establish the plants. The problem has always been matching up the tilled strips with the seed drill, so when we were offered a new machine that combined both jobs in one I thought we were onto a winner.

The strip-till/drill combination. It promised a lot…but still needs some work

No such luck. A combination of a poor drill, mistakes in setting it up, and bad weather, meant that our crops did not go in well at all. So bad was one field that a couple of months after drilling I was convinced we would have to rip it up and plant something else. Luckily it came through, slightly, in the end, and it will be harvested in January. The other field, which

looked better, but still only moderate, actually ended up yielding 89.5t/ha. Considering it was planted with only 60% as many seeds as it should have been, this was a very pleasant surprise.

Livestock

None. Happy days.

Machinery

It's been a big year for machinery here - only two items were bought, but both fairly big ticket. Firstly we took delivery of the first new drill on the farm in over 15 years, in the shape of a new John Deere 750a. It arrived in time for spring drilling, for which I had high hopes. By now you will know (unless you do what I always did as a kid and skipped to this section) how that turned out. Now, in December, it has done most of the autumn drilling, which has been largely successful. I'm looking forward to it completing *at least* another 15 years on this farm.

The second item, which only came a month or so ago, was a new-to-us Claas 760 combine. This marks a fairly radical shift for us in a number of ways. Firstly, we have moved to a physically smaller machine, although we believe it will be capable of producing the same

output as our old, wider, combine. Secondly, it's not a new combine - rather it is an ex-demo. I think we did rather well here, as probably due to the horrible weather at harvest, it really has not done many hours at all; hopefully enough to have worked out the niggles though. Finally, we did not trade in our old machine, instead we sold it privately to a dealer in Slovakia. This

went smoothly, and involved a magic trick when we managed to load the header into a standard curtain-sider lorry which looked so small that everyone laughed when it turned up. The last laugh was on us, as it did indeed fit - with only inches to spare.

Experiments

I wrote last year about the lucerne that was planted under our oilseed rape, which then stayed on into the wheat crop. That turned out to be a bust - either there was no lucerne at all, or it was so thick that the wheat was smothered out. Other experiments included:

• Rye: not strictly a 2017 thing, but we have decided to grow rye on some of our lighter land instead of wheat. The market is growing as more people eat rye bread, and it is supposed to be a lot more drought tolerant than wheat. Winter barley & oats have fallen by the wayside - fingers crossed this one will be more successful.

• Bi-cropping: probably my favourite bit of work was when we planted oats and peas together in the same field, and then harvested them together in August. This actually worked fairly well, and seemed to make more money than just a straight crop of peas, although separating the two in our grainstore was easier said than done.

There were, undoubtedly, too many oats in our bi-cropping experiment this year

• Fungicides: there was a semi-formal trial running this year using different fungicides from different manufactures on two wheat fields. I am still waiting for final results, but it looks as if there was no significant difference between any of them - and in fact there did not appear to be any difference whether we used one or four applications!

• Spring oats: we hosted a formal trial on spring oat seed rates and fertiliser regimes. It seems that higher seed rates are better, as is splitting the fertiliser into two applications.

The future

There is not a lot of point crystal ball gazing at the moment, as everything is so murky. We dodged a bullet recently when the important herbicide glyphosate was re-authorised for use in the UK. This was a massive relief, as without it much of the good work we are trying to do by farming with reduced tillage and cover crops would most likely have come to an end. The EU came under heavy pressure from environmental groups to ban it, although as it is one of the most benign chemicals we use, I suspect the motive was more anti-Monsanto than anything else. Strangely, the same groups who (correctly) like to point out the weight of scientific evidence for Global Warming, were in this case more than happy to ignore the scientists entirely and go with scare tactics. Luckily Mrs Merkel fell out with the German Green Party at the right time, and they ended up voting the correct way.

No doubt the future holds more of these type of battles in store, and I hope the science will be followed then as well, although this does not always mean that farmers will get their way. There must be chemicals out there which cause harm we don't know about, and there should be no problem in discontinuing their use when new evidence comes to light. Unfortunately the pesticide industry has a terrible record as "The boy who never cried wolf", and so when they tell us everything is all right, only the naive would believe them.

Back on the farm we finally signed up to our new environmental stewardship scheme, which sees roughly 10% of the farm moved out of food production and into ecological enhancement. We have planted miles of wildflower grass margins, set aside areas for arable plant regeneration, created buffer strips next to water courses, sown herbal leys and pollen & nectar areas for insects, and prepared the ground for growing wild bird seed this spring. I'm proud that we can say how much work Thriplow Farms does for the environment, and this is, I suspect, what the future holds for us.

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