

# 1976

It was a year in which the weather dominated our lives even more than usual. The most prolonged drought in history gave us the worst harvest anyone can remember. Winter corn received 7.75 inches between drilling and harvest and spring barley had exactly five inches. Given our very light free-draining soil it is hardly surprising that yields were down 50% on last year. Barleys giving no more than a ton per acre were commonplace and winter wheats of over 30 cwt were exceptional. Without the seed premiums the picture would be distinctly gloomy. As it is we shall make a small profit this year which will not be enough to keep up with inflation but does at least show that we can manage to survive conditions which we hope will not come again this century.

## CEREALS (1450 acres)

Only winter barley excelled. Otter and Trojan continued to improve on last year's good figures, giving just under and just over two tons per acre respectively. Early drilling and frequent mildew sprays appear to be the secret. Winter wheats were unrelievedly bad, with even Hobbit failing to impress (yields down from last year's 57 cwt to barely 30 cwt). Spring barleys were dismal beyond belief. The much-heralded Ark Royal found the thin Duxford land hard going and may just have reached one ton per acre. Aramir managed to set two unwelcome records at the same time: the lowest yield (18 cwt) and the fastest harvesting (60 acres in a day with one combine). As if the poor yields were not enough, the grain size was terrible with headcorn looking like tail. Merchants told us that they were losing up to 50% over the dressers.

## SUGAR BEET (328 acres)

At the time of writing the overall yield looks like being around nine tons per acre, with Duxford again letting us down. Since we normally reckon that a yield of ten tons is the breakeven point, there is little doubt that for the third year running we have lost money on the crop. The sugar is particularly bad - averaging 14%, which is considerably below our normal 16.5%. The one encouraging feature is that we have at least managed to grow clean beet this year which has made harvesting a lot easier and has almost certainly raised the yield.

## CROP DRIER (400 acres lucerne)

For the weather to stop lucerne growing is almost unheard-of, but in spite of the fact that we made no silage or hay the drier ran out of material on August 11th when we had produced 673 tons. We re-started for a few days in October after the rain but still did not manage to reach 700 tons. At least our maintenance and fuel costs were lower thanks to the easy conditions.

## GRASS (50 acres)

Last year I said that it had been the best haymaking year ever but the record

did not last long. Had we but known that the weather was going to stay dry for four consecutive months we would have closed the drier down completely and made hay. What we did make was superb quality but not much quantity.

#### LIVESTOCK (350 head)

The dairy continues to make steady progress if measured by yields and the mastitis cell count. Careful breeding and some purchases from outside herds have enabled us to cull out many of the animals which had been holding us back. The performance of the heifers is particularly encouraging and shows that a solid foundation exists for future improvements. Our target of building herd numbers back up to 140 cows in milk has come adrift this autumn due to the fact that the cows appear to be unwilling to produce heifer calves. The score to date is: Bulls 23 - Heifers 4.

The beef unit has had an exceptionally good year due to high prices and a large carryover of stock from last year. We took a calculated risk in June, when the grazing began to look difficult, and sold about a third of the suckler herd to Scotland. The prices were good and the drought became a lot more severe; thus the gamble paid off.

#### MUSTARD (36 acres)

Against all predictions this was our most profitable arable crop. The price reached an extraordinary £340 per ton, and even with a poor yield the return per acre was better than for spring barley or winter wheat. It is unlikely that the price will remain at this level and so we cannot expect to repeat this performance in the future.

#### BEANS ( 50 acres )

A very poor yield of 10 cwt was made worse by the fact that we combined the crop some two weeks too late. The very dry conditions meant that many of the beans cracked badly and the seed merchant to whom they went was, not unnaturally, a bit concerned. The only compensation was the sunrise over Duxford hill at 5 o'clock in the morning while we harvested the crop with the dew on it.

#### MACHINERY

A decision was taken to purchase all of 1977's machinery this autumn because of rising inflation and the falling pound. As a result the following list is, in effect, two year's worth of equipment. One important and rather depressing feature is the growing preponderance of foreign machinery which we seem to be buying. This is not because we are prejudiced against British machinery but usually because the types of equipment we need simply are not manufactured in this country. The following were bought (\*= foreign made): 1 Hagedorn self-loading trailer\*, 1 MF 30 drill, 2 10 ton Brimont trailers\*, 1 eight furrough Lemken shallow plough\*, 1 Dowdeswell five furrough reversible plough, 3 Ford 6600s, 1 Ford 7600, 1 Deutz 8006\*, 1 Deutz 1006 4wd\*, 1 Berthoud 3000 litre 24 metre sprayer, 1 Claas Rollant big

baler\*, 1 Claas Jaguar 60SF forage harvester\*, 1 Gillibert forage box\*, 1 MIL fodder box.

## THE FUTURE

With inflation running at 15% annually we have to increase our profits by this amount simply to stand still. In order to make progress we really have to make 25% more profit than last year, and this is an impossible task with the weather we had last summer. The answer must lie in higher yields. After a lot of thought we shall be altering our system of growing cereals by going in for what is called the 'High input - High output' method. This involves using more fertiliser (particularly nitrogen) and more fungicides to control disease. Tramlines are an essential part of the programme because it will be necessary to run through the crop more often than in the past. This new approach can come badly unstuck without a high standard of husbandry and for this reason we shall have to take cereal diseases even more seriously than in the past .

Our targets should be the following average yields: Winter Barley 40 cwt, Spring Barley 38 cwt, Winter Wheat 60 cwt. With reasonable weather conditions and the new varieties we should be able to attain these levels even on our light land.

Looking further ahead it seems inevitable that machinery will continue to get bigger. But this will only be of any use to us if we can make efficient use of the equipment. A large tractor which sits in a shed for three months each year is an easy way to lose money fast. But an example of the benefits can be seen from the fact that with our new MF 30 drill we were able to plant 650 acres of corn in the fortnight before October 10th. With a smaller machine we would have been struggling to get the winter corn in the ground.