

Thriplow Farms

The F Word

Annual Report XLVII - 2020

What I am doing now, in early December, is not unusual; I'm sitting at my desk, writing the annual report. The process is generally pretty quick, because over the preceding weeks and months, I've already come up with the germ of an idea about what I'm going to write, and it all flows from there. But this year something is different. I cast my mind back and wonder - what of note has actually happened this year? I'm drawing a blank - was 2020 the most unremarkable year of my life?

I jest, of course.

Now, I can't pretend to speak for everyone - who knows what they have been up to - but as I think back I realise what a brilliant year it has been. Why, just recently, I discovered an excellent mobile fish & chip van, which was so good even my two daughters enjoyed it ("We are only ever going to like THESE fish & chips"). The entire spring was notable not just for the lack of traffic on the roads, which made driving a tractor around nice and easy, but also for allowing Sabrina and myself to spend so many extra quality days with Elyse & Maddie, as we 'taught' them every day for months on end. What a privilege. This could have been so much worse, but the weather was permanently glorious, with blue skies and bright sun allowing 8 hour play times at Kitchen Table School, having completed an arduous reading lesson from 9 to 9.15am each day - at least when I was the teacher.

Later in the year, after another early finish to harvest, we took a family holiday to Venice. This was originally scheduled for May, but for some reason which slips my mind, we postponed it. Back in 2010 we were married here, and although I recall it being a city famous for its masks, nowadays they have taken this idea to a whole new level.

However, what really cements 2020 as being one of the vintage years for me, is something much more significant than all the milestones mentioned above. This was the year when I finally managed to get my Putin-riding-a-bear-holding-an-AK47 t-shirt onto the BBC.

Stand back everyone, I have arrived.



But what of the farming in 2020 I can hear you cry - was that also typically brilliant? Well, no actually, it was an unmitigated disaster. I'm not sure if I have already mentioned the weather at all, but this spring it was permanently diabolical, with blue skies and bright sun killing off our hitherto good looking crops' potential one hot dry day after another. Our weather station has been alternately unreliable and dead for most of the year, so I have no accurate measurement of the rainfall between April and June. However, you don't need a gauge to tell you that no rain for two months is Not Enough.

How bad is bad? I must say, I'm getting mightily bored of writing how each year's harvest is worse than the year before, but almost every crop produced the lowest yields we have ever recorded. I REALLY hope next year I can be more upbeat.

Wheat

I'd certainly struggle to describe the wheat yield as good news, but it was in fact marginally higher than in 2019, up from 7.86t/ha to the dizzying heights of 7.94t/ha. This was actually a pretty frustrating number to land on, and we were only a few hundred kilos away from 7.95t/ha - an important distinction, as it would have allowed me to claim 8.0t/ha on our one-decimal-place harvest mugs.

Autumn 2019 was not a great one for planting any crops, and we were lucky to have all our wheat in the ground by the end of October. This was not the case for many farms; some didn't manage to plant a single square foot of wheat until the following spring. We were actually pretty optimistic about harvest all the way into May. The wheat looked good, and although April was dry, the wet winter meant that there was plenty of water in the soil for a lot longer than at the same point in 2019. Finally though, the point of no return was crossed, and everything started to die prematurely. Again!



As is to be expected, the lighter land on the farm didn't perform well. This year it was all growing Graham, a variety whose name I continue to find bizarre, like when people call their dog Terry, or Maureen. The yields were all low to mid 6t\ha, which is par for the course with such an arid spring.

Our slightly better fields, running in a belt through the central southern part of the farm, were planted with KWS Crispin, and they produced the best relative performance of the season. Yields of 8.64, 8.30, 8.76 and 8.71t/ha were around 40% higher than the Graham could muster, which is a much bigger differential than I would have expected to see if the only variable was the field in which the crops were planted. I've tended to use this variety on the poorer end of our farm, but perhaps that's an error. I wish we had had more of it this year.

The Crispin's good results were reinforced when comparing them to the KWS Siskin, which although it yielded slightly more, at just under 9t/ha, was being grown on what is usually significantly better soil. I would have predicted these fields to yield perhaps 10-20% more than they did. The scale of our moisture problem was laid bare in Home field, where we ran the cattle mob grazing trials a few years back. The average yield was 8.89t/ha, which incorporates some strangely bad yielding headlands (under 8t/ha), and some seriously excellent patches in the low lying, wet areas (over 13t/ha). In the end, I think the Siskin under performed by 15%, and the Crispin over performed by the same amount.



Once again, there was a huge difference between soil types this year. Note the large BFG ears on the Freiston in the right hand photo

Freiston is a variety that's a bit like the BFG - unfashionable, reliable, massive ears, and a favourite of mine. It dropped off the Recommended List a few years ago, but we continue to grow it. This year it performed OK, with 1st wheat yields of 8.72 and 8.39t/ha, and 2nd wheat yields of 7.19 and 7.34t/ha.

Finally, I have to talk about KWS Extase. What an exciting variety. We, along with many other farmers, have moved strongly towards choosing varieties that offer strong natural disease resistance, which can allow us to spend less on applying fungicides to the growing

crop. This has been made possible by the breeders, who have come up with better and better varieties, and top of the disease resistance class is KWS Extase. It is so good that in trials there is almost no response to fungicides, whilst also producing a good yield. We grew one, fairly small, field this year, producing seed for other farmers. It is our very best soil, and our best field. What a disaster. There is no other way to put it really, but the plants just died off two weeks before anything else. The yield, 7.73t/ha, was only marginally better than the very rough looking second wheat next door, and was at least 1.5t/ha down on what I would have expected. I don't know what happened here - I have friends who experienced exactly the same thing this season, but then other friends who grew it and had good results. One thing is for sure - I had planned to grow a large amount in 2020/21, but that plan went on the back burner PDQ.

Oilseed Rape

It's safe to say that without the great harvest in 2018 we would probably have followed many of the other farmers around here, and stopped growing this crop entirely. As usual, the biggest single problem was again the dreaded Cabbage Stem Flea Beetle. Back in a blog post in 2018 I described CSFB as

“a little shit of an insect which eats the small plants in the autumn, and then lays its eggs in the stem”

and it is safe to say that my opinions of it have not improved since then. Things wouldn't be so bad if it just ate the new plants in the Autumn, as then you could write off the crop and plant something different. But oh no, that would be too easy. What CSFB really wants to do is make you think that you've survived the onslaught, whilst surreptitiously planting mini larval time bombs in your plants. The next spring these explode with destructive effect, magnifying the effect of a drought. The only thing predictable about a CSFB attack is its unpredictability. Our yield of 1.48t/ha was really horrible, but within a handful of miles of this farm we had neighbours yielding over 3t/ha, whilst others had almost total crop failures.



CSFB larvae demolishing the insides of oilseed rape plants

The OSR harvest was temporally notable this year, as it started on June 30th, earlier even than 1976 (July 3rd). We grew mostly Elgar, which started off on a very light field with a yield of 1.67t/ha. Before we could get into the next fields, we had a very windy storm come through, which knocked a noticeable amount of seed onto the ground. How much I'll never know, as the flea beetle damage makes it practicably impossible to compare fields accurately. The neighbouring fields of Elgar yielded around 1.2t/ha, and after this we went on to some better land. I became optimistic when one field produced 2.25t/ha, as our best crop was right next door. Dare I hope for a yield starting with a 3?! If I did, then it was a sore disappointment to get only 1.50t/ha.



These plants weren't just damaged by CSFB, they were killed

Our one field of Codex had some really nice bits around the edges, and some blanks in the middle. Overall result was 1.72t/ha. Campus, which has performed so well in 2018, was a bust in 2020. We had only one field, but it was over 40ha in size. In some places the yield was over 4t/ha, but in whole tracts flea beetle had just killed the plants stone dead in early spring.

I used to doubt that the CSFB problem was as bad as people made out, but now I have to concede that it really is a significant one. I'm still unconvinced that neonicotinoid seed dressings would be the total solution, but that point is moot anyway. Every year we see brilliant areas and write-offs in the same field - so we know it is possible to still grow good OSR crops. The frustrating challenge is how to harness that potential over the whole field, and the whole farm. Time, and patience, is fast running out.

Oats

Not really a huge amount to report here, aside from another worst ever yield, averaging 4.43t/ha. Almost everything was Elyann, with individual fields only varying from a fraction under 4t/ha up to a high of 4.63t/ha. I say almost everything was Elyann because we grew a

few tramlines of Elison, not because we wanted to see the variety, but because we had a seed nutrient dressing trial going on, and we could not get any Elyann treated. I will talk about the trial later on, but it was interesting to see the Elison and Elyann growing side by side. Too much farming is cosmetic, and being such a vain person, I am easily swayed by such irrelevances as crop height and colour. The Elison was noticeably greener and taller than the Elyann, so I would have bet money on it performing better. In the end, there was no discernible difference in yield, although it was interesting to see how the Elison had much brighter yellow grains.



Elyann on the left, Elison on the right

The goal is always to sell oats for milling, and for that you need a certain quality. This year we may just scrape into that bracket, but the price for oats is trading at a huge discount to wheat. No one can tell me why, but the general advice is to cross my fingers and hope it gets better in the new year, so that's what we will do.

Beans

Such an excellent crop last year, but this year our yields were a third of those in 2019. Without doubt it was not a good start to life for our Tundra seed, which was planted in around mid November, into highly unsatisfactory conditions - the soil was just too wet, and also cold. Drilling caused a serious headache, as in my wisdom I had chosen to have the seed coated with a nutrient dressing. As it turns out, when combined with beans (as the label says is possible), it seems to turn into some sort of glue. Hence the planting operation turned into a

two man job, with Dick driving the tractor, and me on the jump seat getting out every three minutes to unblock the seed rollers. Needless to say, this was a very un-fun experience for all of us, and we were highly glad to see the back of it.

The beans certainly took their time to germinate and emerge, and although they looked OK in the spring, it was if they were stuck in a time warp - always appearing to be about six weeks behind where I would have liked. We only had two fields, one of which looked better all year. In the end it managed 2.52t/ha, whereas the other one, on lighter soil, could only muster 1.24t/ha. Our average, of 1.95t/ha, was of course the lowest winter bean yield we have ever recorded. 2020 was certainly not a bean year, for us or anyone else.



My knees appear to be becoming a regular fixture in Annual Reports

Peas

Last year I purposely finished on the bean crop, as it was the sole high point of harvest 2019. For balance, I will finish this year with peas; almost certainly the worst crop I've ever been responsible for. Given that in last year's report I had this to say:

"I think prize for Worst Crop of 2019 must go to the peas"

it's almost an honour to be able to report how much worse 2020 was. I thought we knew what went wrong in 2019, and that I could learn from the mistakes. So high was my confidence, that I set aside our single biggest field - 64.5ha - for Prophet. We did not repeat the mistake of using 2,4D to kill off the preceding cover crop. We did not use a disc drill. We did not drill

early. Admittedly it was pretty wet when we did plant the seed, but it seemed to go alright, and then we had a bit of rain several weeks later. Everything looked OK...ish.

From then on, it was downhill all the way. The good bits of the field were terrible, the bad bits were literally non-existent. What killed the peas we do not know. Certainly drought didn't help, but just over the road was a much nicer looking crop (not grown by me), and I don't believe the rain stopped right there. End result? 0.76t/ha. We have really struggled with peas in our no-till system, with steadily declining yields ever since the highly successful year that we tried it out for the first time. More changes are afoot for 2021, but on a smaller area, to reduce the risk.

CoVeg (www.coveg.co.uk)

How much do I want to talk about CoVeg in the Thriplow Farms Annual Report? I'm not sure, but let's give it a go. CoVeg was an idea I had in about March, to set up a community vegetable growing scheme, as people were worried about where their fresh food was going to come from, and they also seemed to have a lot of time on their hands at that point.

We were never going to produce a lot in the way of calories, but with support from several helpful companies, and a HUGE amount of irrigation water, we grew copious quantities of courgettes, beans, beetroot, spring onions, leeks, squashes, pumpkins, spinach, parsnips, carrots, amaranth, asparagus peas, radishes, and loads of other bits and bobs.



What we couldn't eat, which was most of it, went off to local support groups in nearby villages & Cambridge, to homeless shelters, and to various parts of the NHS at Addenbrookes and up to MAGPAS at Huntingdon. CoVeg was fun (mostly), it was successful, and it's coming back in 2021.

Livestock

Last year I reported a miraculous recovery from a brain infection for our dog. Unfortunately, only a few weeks after writing that, she had an equally sudden relapse, which proved fatal. We were sad, but at least I don't have to pick up dog poo in the garden any more.

Machinery

Two second hand kid's off-road go karts, a new muck fork, and an SDS hammer drill. Once again, Thriplow Farms has not been a machinery dealer's paradise.

Experiments

Our collaboration with Agronomy Connection/Agrovista saw some interesting trials hosted on the farm, but unfortunately the results have often been kept secret from me, and certainly from the general population. I would hope that in due course they will see the light of day, but as a little sneak peak, we looked at applying phosphorus fertiliser in the autumn in both beans and wheat, neither of which saw any benefit at all. We also looked at how well pre emergence herbicides work in a no-till situation, where there is a lot of pre existing plant residue. As it turns out, even though you would struggle to believe any of the chemical hits the ground, they really are still very effective. Indeed, the areas we left untreated ended up being sprayed off in the spring as they had such a bad black grass infestation.

I mentioned earlier that we had tried out nutrient seed dressings. These appeared to have no effect on the wheat, and none on the beans either - unless you count the drilling nightmare. The spring oats on the other hand showed promising, but slightly unreliable, results, indicating increases in both yield *and* quality. I am certainly interested in this enough to repeat the trial with more accuracy in 2021.

The future

Since Grant left the farm in 2018, we've gone through a couple of replacements, both of whom had their ups and downs. In November last year Nik joined the team, and (I think) it has been a great success. The only real problem is that he's Greek. I do fear that one day in early February, when we are digging a wet, windy hole in the dark at 3.30pm, he will realise that he could be living the dolce vita back at home. But until then, we have the Dick & Nik dream team, and that bodes well.

From a purely agronomic point of view, I hope the future is different. Every year since 2014 has been worse than the last. Springs seem to get drier and drier, and harvest, which used to consistently finish in September, now only lasts into August because our machinery isn't big enough to get it in the shed by the end of July. Some people said that 2020 was my generation's 1976. From a weather point of view this may be correct, but back then prices were, in real terms, around four times higher than they are now. 7.94t/ha of wheat being sold for £600/t? YES PLEASE, sign me up! But no, prices are a fraction of what they were back then, and input costs are higher too.

Some may say that the answer is easy, we just need to farm better. But this is not the answer to *this* problem. We *always* need to farm better, regardless of the conditions at the time. Currently we are in an agonising death spiral of structural problems, and shaving off some fixed and variable costs will only prolong the misery. What is the answer? I'm not sure.

My Dad spent decades saying that we should all stop receiving subsidies, and there are strong reasons for that. However, I'm not sure that now the reality of being £200,000 per year worse off is just around the corner, that it looks so attractive after all. Part of me might think "*it's what you wanted!*", but is it really? It is one thing for everyone to be unsubsidised, but just us? Formula 1 has also spent many years attempting to put a cost cap on how much the teams can spend - something that they basically all agree in principle is a good idea, but getting the detail right has proved tricky. However, how good an idea would it be for only one team to be capped, and the rest allowed to do as they wish? For sure, that team is going to be at a serious disadvantage. This is the unfortunate position we will find ourselves in, as Team Europe continues on as per usual on our doorstep, and we are hobbled.

But hold on, is it all doom and gloom? The fact of the matter is that BPS is a subsidy for land owners, not for farmers. For tenants, the subsidy is just added onto rent, and it will equalise in time. For land owners (even mortgaged ones such as ourselves), the money goes straight into our pockets. Losing it will be painful, but perhaps it is morally the right thing to do? I suspect the hardest hit will be people in the supply trade, particular Messrs John Deere, Claas, Fendt et al.

One thing that is made possible by the removal of BPS, and the removal of our EU status, is the reformation of our farming laws and incentives. I do believe that there is scope for serious improvement in many farming practices, but I am *much* more sceptical that they can be done whilst maintaining financial viability of farms. There are many evangelical green minded farmers out there who say otherwise, but below the polished surface of Twitter often lies a darker truth. I have been there, smelt the soil, and - more importantly - seen the accounts. Policy makers, be careful!

If that is one possible upside to Brexit, then like Jim Ratcliffe, I do not see many more. As I sit here, a No Deal Brexit (otherwise known as Australian Style Deal to the hard-of-thinking) looks an almost certain outcome. Oh God, how I wish I Believed, but I just can't. Maybe, hopefully, I am wrong, but Boris, Nigel, Michael, and the rest:

Thanks lads, you've fucked it.

David Walston

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The City of Masks