

Thriplow Farms

Are we rich?

Annual Report XLIX - 2022

This was the question I was asked by my just-turned-ten daughter, back in the middle of August. Given that we were sitting in a holiday home on a private island off the east coast of the USA, it seemed like a fairly ludicrous question from an adult's perspective. Thinking about it more, how should she know? Yes, we live in a big house, but it's not fancy. We don't eat off gold plates, drip with jewellery, or drive posh cars. Of course, the answer had to be 'Yes', but this did seem like a moment ripe for further discussion: did Elyse know *why* people are rich - us or anyone else?

Obviously, it's not because we are clever. Yes, some rich people are very smart, but I went to school with thousands of very rich people, and I can guarantee that plenty of them were very stupid. Maybe then it's because we work hard? That must be why nursing is such a highly paid job, and why those people who have to work two or three full time jobs to make ends meet are well on their way to being millionaires.

The truth is, all these reasons we give ourselves as to why we are rich (we work hard and have huge brains), and why others are poor (they are stupid and lazy) are nothing more than self-gratifying hubris. The real reason we are rich is simple - we are lucky. Either we were born lucky, or were lucky later in life, maybe both. People who forget this are well on the way to becoming, well, generally unpleasant. It's something I'd prefer my kids to learn now, rather than later - or never.

So why have I gone from telling stupid stories about how I fall asleep in two person meetings, to handing out unrequested moral lessons? It's because hardly anyone keeps on rolling a 6 *every* time, sometimes your luck is better than others: 2022 proved this more than most years. I sold plenty of wheat 12 months ago, for what seemed like a pretty good price at the time, £188/t. Spring came about, and Putin did his thing. Very soon, I was happy to be

selling wheat at £245/t. Amazing! The price kept on going up, £280, £300, £340 - this was crazy. I pondered on Twitter whether my £188/t wheat would be half price by harvest - plenty of people told me I had been an idiot to sell forward, because, well, you know, it was *obvious* prices could only go up. Perhaps stung by this failure, I kept on waiting for the price to go up some more; £400/t had a nice ring to it. The opposite happened. Down, down, down, and the chance was missed. I remember one phone call from a merchant, “I can still get £300 if you’re interested?”. No, I was going to wait for it to go back up. It never has.

How lucky was I here? As I often tell anyone who listens, it’s better to be good at selling grain and bad at farming rather than the other way around. Any farmer who says they always get their marketing right is a liar - if they were that good, they wouldn’t waste time on farming in the first place. Only hindsight can tell how well I’ve done. But let’s be real - all of us farmers are really very lucky, no matter whether we sold our wheat for £160/t or £320/t, because we can’t forget the reason the prices were so high. Our farms haven’t been invaded, we haven’t had to fight a war, or make the choice between fleeing the country or staying at home with bombs, sirens, and no electricity. The unpleasant fact is that the more money farmers make, the more people are likely suffering elsewhere in the world. Still, I suppose we can sleep well at night knowing that however much money we are making, it’s still a fraction of what the processors, retailers, and the whole rest of the food chain above us is extracting.

Sleeping well is exactly what I did do on holiday for most of August, as we racked up yet another “weird” season, culminating in a harvest so hot that we actually stopped working for two days as the thermometer only just failed to register 40°C. What counts as unusual weather is really an open question at the moment. A six to eight week rainless period in the spring seems to be a non-negotiable regular, and harvest has finished on or before August 5th in three of the past five years. The other two harvests had later finishes only because it rained in August - not because the crops weren’t ripe.

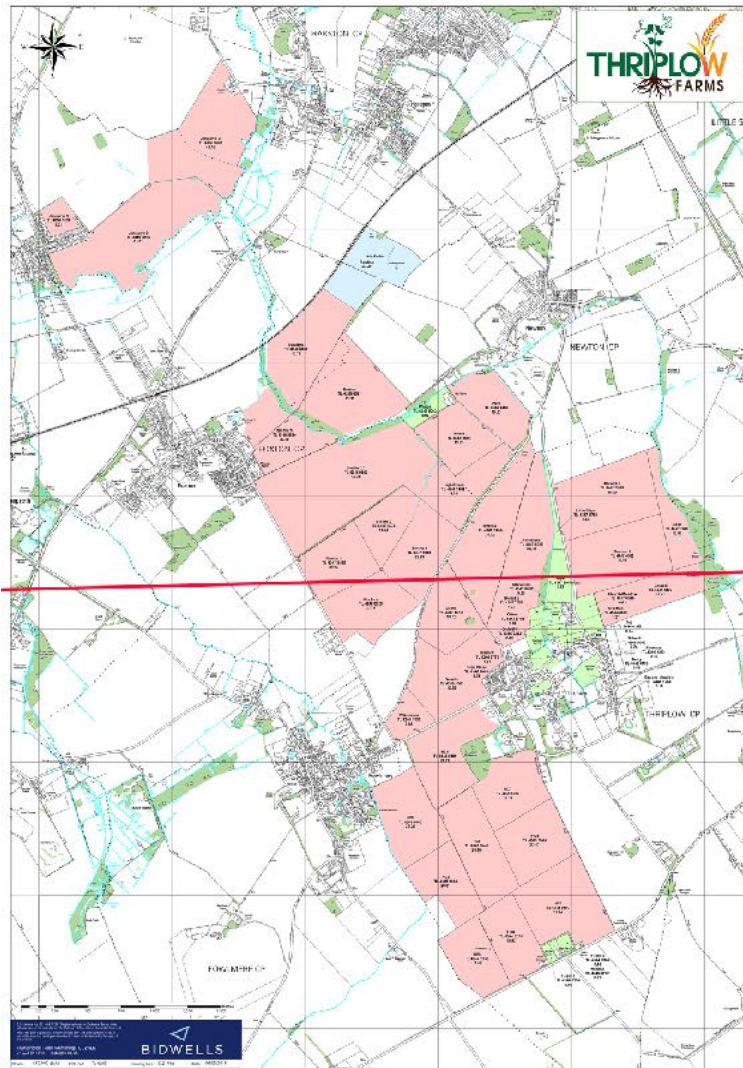
The eventual finish date of July 29th was the earliest since 1976, which ended on July 27th. This record could have been equalled had we not stopped for the hot weather, although the risk of setting fire to either the combine, or the fields, would have been significant. Yet again it was a harvest where instead of thinking about using the crop drier, I was daydreaming about equipment that could make the grain wetter. At one point we did test

some wheat at around 11% moisture, at which point the yield loss becomes a significant problem - around 500kg/ha. As usual, it is tricky to balance the desire to Get Harvest Done™, with waiting for better [wetter] conditions in the future. For me, Get Harvest Done™ almost always wins. Let's take a look at the results.

Wheat - 8.92t/ha (-0.56 from 2021)

Last year my yield projection after the first wheat field turned out to be exactly right, this year my prediction was 8.24t/ha. Luckily, and I like it when this happens, it was a bit of an underestimate. The final result of 8.92t/ha was by no means brilliant, although I suspect this this is actually around par for the course now that we get a serious spring drought every year. The average result did hide some eye-opening variations however, with one end of the farm performing particularly badly, offset by some very decent crops at the other end. On this map, first wheats to the south of the red line averaged 6.95t/ha, whereas those to the north averaged 10.44t/ha. This is a stark difference that once again outlines the futility of trying to benchmark your yields with those of another farmer - even your direct neighbour.

After 2021's glut of wheat varieties, caused by my indecision when it came to choosing what to grow, this year was much simplified. Starting off below the red line, we again grew quite a lot of KWS Crispin, which unfortunately did



not fare so well. A yield in one field of 5.61t/ha was pretty disappointing, even given the season's weather, and the best result, of 8.01t/ha, was not inspiring either. There is no more Crispin for harvest '23, mainly due to me forgetting during harvest to set aside some seed.

Gleam fared better, and was spread across some poor fields, and some OK ones. 6.58t/ha on the drier fields was about what was expected, but only a few hundred meters north of this things were much brighter, with a 26ha field getting up to 10.24t/ha.

We don't really like growing too much second wheat, but sometimes it's a necessity, especially when rotations are thrown out of whack by last minute climatic conditions at drilling (yes, autumn 2020, I'm looking at you). So, this year we had two fields, about 88ha, of Graham which followed wheat from 2021. Actually, it did OK, with yields of 9.07 and 9.68t/ha giving an overall average of 9.23t/ha. I really think that the breeders of this variety, Syngenta, should have been brave and stuck with the naming theme; "This year we are growing Graham, Dave, Ben and Kevin". Much better than all these made-up words, trying too hard to sound cool.

The last main variety we grew was SY Insitor [should have been SY Ian] which managed the highest yield of the year, with 11.72t/ha, and another field at 11.11t/ha. Parts of these fields were producing over 15t/ha, which goes to show that if you were in the right place and had the right soil type to hold on to the moisture, there was some serious potential. This year we have moved Insitor onto the lighter land, so we will see how it gets on with a bit of a harder life.

On top of the above, we also grew two seed crops - KWS Cranium, and Elicit. These both performed well, at 10.92 and 10.89t/ha respectively. It's a shame that most of the seed remains on farm still, as they seem to be pretty good. Please go and place an order if you're a farmer reading this.

Oilseed Rape - 2.22t/ha (-0.44)

Urggggh, painful, as per usual. It's the same old story, how to control the pests? This year we had not only the usual Cabbage Stem Flea Beetle attack, but also an abnormally voracious and sustained pigeon problem throughout the entire winter and spring. Twice daily trips around the farm, with unlimited quantities of rope bangers, was not enough to keep the winged rats at bay, and some fields were severely damaged. Although there were very few areas where the crop was entirely eradicated, I would estimate that we saw yields reductions of ~35% in some fields.

I had been tempted into growing a fancy new hybrid variety - LG Aurelia - with the hope that a combination of increased plant vigour, and a resistance to a disease called TuYV would give us a noticeable benefit. Unfortunately, this didn't come to pass, with the two fields yielding 2.57 and 2.43t/ha. Even more annoying was that these two fields were right next to each other, and one looked really very good all year, whereas the other looked rubbish. This was until late May, when bits of it started dying off in an unexplained fashion. In the end, the crappy looking, pigeon ravaged field ended up with the higher yield. Yet another reason to dislike this crop.



LG Aurelia, before disaster strikes

The other new, fancy variety was Annika, but this performed no better (1.43t/ha) than the old faithfuls of Elgar and Campus. In fact, the best field of all was the oldest variety, Campus, which averaged 3.17t/ha over 41ha, but with huge tracts yielding almost nothing due to pigeons. This would certainly have been a 4t/ha crop with less avian attention. The fact that there had been no OSR grown on this field for well over a decade is probably not a coincidence.

For the first time in my career, we planted no OSR at all in the summer of 2022 - not because I don't like it (I don't), but because it was so hot and dry, all the way into October, that it seemed too risky to try. Given the state of our cover crops that were planted after harvest, I think we made the right decision. Winter is also much, much more relaxing when not worrying about pigeons.

Oats - 4.34t/ha (-1.22)

This year we stepped up our seed growing production for oats, taking on more Lion, but also Yukon, as well as keeping one field of Isabel for normal, milling oats. With one exception, it can only be said that the oats were poor in 2022. There was not much to separate the Isabel (3.78t/ha) from the Lion (3.17, 3.58 & 4.22t/ha). It was a far cry from the previous year, with our 5ft tall crops - this year it was back to the normal, desiccated 2-3ft. One field of Lion in particular (3.58t/ha) was particularly disappointing, as it is on good soil, that should have done better. For rotational reasons, we grew it after OSR, which for some reason the oats really do not like. We had also seen this effect in 2021 on a smaller scale, but didn't think much of it at the time. Whatever the reason, it's a clear indicator that we should

avoid doing the same in the future.



Spot the rotten seed

The best result we had was the field of Yukon, which made a relatively pleasing 5.84t/ha. This was particularly good as we had been given some decidedly dodgy seed to plant, that had been left in a puddle at some distribution hub, until the grain had started to rot. We cleared out what we could, only to discover that some of the seed then didn't germinate, leaving several hectares of almost bare crop after every time we had filled up the drill with

a new bag of seed. Unfortunately, Yukon has now dropped off the Recommended List, so I'm sitting here hoping that there will be at least some demand for a last hurrah, or else I've rather wasted my time.

Beans - 3.39t/ha (+0.03)

Not much to report here. Last year we were middling - 3.36t/ha, and this year the result was almost identical, at 3.39t/ha. The variation between our two fields of Tundra was minimal, but it should be said that the crop did flatter to deceive somewhat; the plants looked tall, and well podded, but in the end there was not a lot of seed in the combine. Due to the hot conditions, we had very early starts to make sure the seed pods had soaked up some dew and weren't too brittle, and this worked well, making for some very quick and easy harvesting.

Peas - 0.35t/ha (-0.68)

“Will we grow [peas] next year? Probably, I appear to be a masochist.” - David Walston, 2021

Well, my masochism certainly got the better of me here. I think I'll have to choose to laugh over cry, but this was a complete and utter disaster. Once again, we thought that establishment had been good, and once again, the dry spring ruined us. There is not much to say about it all really, except that a yield of 0.35t/ha of Tomahawk peas is very close to a complete crop failure. I think it was just about worth spending the time & diesel to harvest this, but it's a close-run thing. Never again.

Machinery

Actually, a pretty big year for machinery at Thriplow Farms. We sold two tractors, and bought one, which is an excellent (if eventually unsustainable) ratio. The first tractor to go was an 8 cylinder Schlüter which had done little other than sit around and deteriorate for the dozen or so years it had been on the farm. Amazingly, it has stayed in the UK - I had been sure it would head off either to Germany or the Netherlands. Hopefully one day in the not-too-distant future we can see it in full refurbished and working condition.

The second machine to leave us had been a great servant to the farm, having arrived shortly after I did, back in 2010. Having completed only about 6000 hours work in that time, the Fendt 930 was almost flawless, with no major problems working as our main drill tractor, as well as being very useful at harvest with the 60kph gearbox.

The replacement tractor is a blast from the past, as we haven't had a John Deere on the farm since they were replaced by Fendts in 2010. This 6250R is a very nice place to spend time, and it pulls the drills well, even though it isn't quite as powerful as the 930 it replaced.



Out



Out



In

So far the biggest problems are the fuel usage (some 40% higher than the Fendt when drilling), and the requirement to change the diesel filters when they block up every 150 hours. This is particularly annoying as we haven't had a single fuel filter problem with any tractor in my time on the farm, until now. Apparently we just have to live with it.

Experiments

We have really struggled to get positive results from any of our trials this year, which were mainly focussed around trace elements, and various types of additional crop nutrition. Of course, a negative result is still a result, but we haven't yet found that magic potion which will suddenly make everything better (most likely because it doesn't exist).

The future

I've touched on these themes already earlier, but the ongoing global situation means our situation is murky. Whilst commodity prices haven't yet dropped to the point that we cannot absorb the huge inflationary pressure on our inputs, they are currently heading in the wrong direction. Once again, fertiliser is incredibly expensive this year, and it is also impossible to buy it in advance for next spring, as has always been the way previously. Electricity has seen an even bigger price increase, although luckily we are not very intensive users.

Climate change, and “the new normal” for weather is of equal concern. The immediate effect this year is the lack of OSR for harvest 2023, meaning we have winter barley back in the rotation, along with a return for sugar beet after several years absence, and possibly even some spring linseed. How bad will the drought be in 2023? The feeling that we are “due” for some good weather in the spring and early summer seems more and more farfetched the longer we go without. It certainly makes growing spring planted crops much less profitable, although on the flip side it does bring August holidays into the realm of possibility.

We recently heard from ex-minister George ‘Useless’ Eustice that the UK’s free trade deal with Australia, signed in 2021, was

“not actually a very good deal for the UK”

I think this falls very firmly into the *no shit, Sherlock* category, as it was very obvious to anyone with half a brain; perhaps this explains why no cabinet minister was able to spot the problem. The government’s plan to abolish BPS subsidies is now roughly halfway through implementation, with 2027 as the final stop date. The scheme for partially replacing this with payments for environmental goods (ELMS) seems sound in theory, but at this point seems to be in total chaos. Rumours are flying that it may be shelved entirely, and if the current state of environmental schemes is anything to go by, far from paying farmers to improve the environment, it will actually cost us money to implement.

So aside from war, climate change, and a government which seems actively intent on screwing over farming, the future looks bright.

Having said that, 2021/22 will probably end up being quite a profitable year, so we go into Christmas happy in the short term, but unsure of the medium term. No change there then!

David Walston

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