

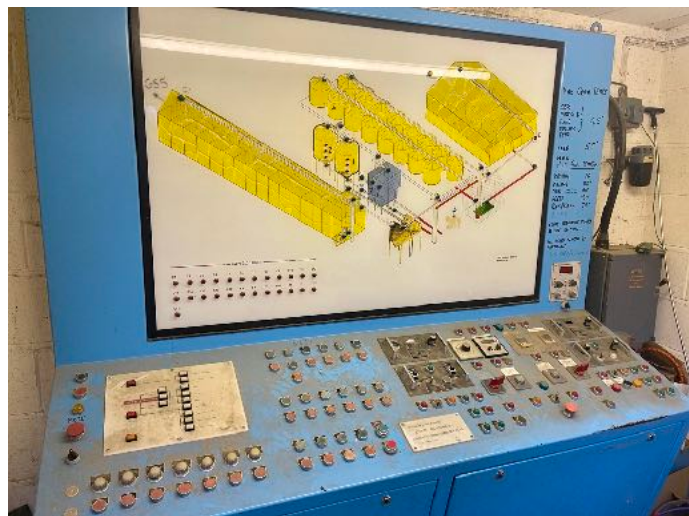
# Thriplow Farms

## S Club 7, hose pipes, and the Leporidae

### Annual Report L - 2023

One good wheeze that I came up with in the late '90s was that, instead of driving tractors at harvest, I should instead learn how the grainstore worked. On the face of it, this was a good idea. The old manager, Dave Gould, had been doing the job for many years. No one else knew nearly as much as he did about the weird and wonderful intricacies that come with operating the Frankenstein's Monster of a cobbled-together, decades-old, pile of junk that is our grain handling and drying system. In actuality, I had seen the TV in the mess room and figured watching that would be more relaxing than driving back and forwards to the fields all day.

I did in fact learn the basics as planned, but I also spent plenty of time eating cake, watching S Club 7 on weekday morning TV, and sweeping up the odd bit of spilt grain with a nice brush. Fast forward a decade or so, and I was back on the farm, this time for good. Once again, after a few harvests of machinery driving I found myself back at the helm in the grainstore. This time, however, I was flying solo. Dave Gould was long gone, and only fragments of information had made it through the grapevine, via Ted and Dick. I was on my own, with a predictably large number of mishaps and chaos to prove it.



*The most modern part of our grainstore*

When everything is working well, running the grainstore is actually a pretty easy and relaxing job. Even in these moments, however, there's always the nagging knowledge that

smoking belts and screeching gearboxes are potentially lurking just around the corner. To be honest, the majority of my most memorable moments have been totally self inflicted. For instance, there was the time, quite late at night, that I spent half an hour chatting to a neighbouring farmer. Having finally hung up, I went for a walk around, only to find that I had overflowed a bin quite significantly - the next morning we had around 20 tonnes of wheat to sort out, sitting on the ground outside the grainstore.

A different time, I'd been asked for some help by a friend. They had harvested hundreds of acres of peas, but these were so low to the ground that the combine had picked up a roughly 50:50 ratio of peas and soil. His question: can we clean the dirt out please? This was fairly simple to do: an HGV filled with dirty peas would tip into our intake pit, then move around to the back of the farm, under a conveyor spout, and fill up with the cleaned peas. After going through a few loads like this, I got cocky. Trying to save somewhere between 15 and 20 seconds, I turned on the conveyor before the lorry driver told me he was in place. A few seconds later, I heard the shouting; my anticipation had been inaccurate. Now I was in a pickle. The conveyor system was brimming with peas, and I had nowhere to put them, because turning everything off when it's full causes serious problems. I tried to finesse it by briefly turning off one conveyor to buy time for the lorry to get into position. As it turns out, finesse is not my strong suit, and what started out as a potentially minuscule time saving ended up with me spending two hours skinning my knuckles, changing a load of conveyor drive belts in the top of a very hot and dusty building.

Yet another mishap came only a couple of years ago. It was one of those very hot, very dry, harvests, where we lose loads of yield from not having enough water in the grain. It is possible to fix this by using a piece of equipment called a moisture screw, to gently add water to your crop as it comes into the grainstore. I don't have a moisture screw, but what I did have was a hose pipe, and a dream. It should be fairly obvious where this is going, but as it turns out, putting a hosepipe into your intake elevator is *not a good idea*. Cue yet more blocked conveyors, skinned knuckles, and belt changing.

I have to say, though, that what happened this summer tops the lot. It was the very start of harvest, the first load of barley had just been tipped at the grainstore. You're never quite sure how the first bit will go, as the intake system has lain dormant for the best part of a year,

exposed to a wet and windy winter. To mitigate this, you don't start everything up at full blast; you let a little through, to see what happens. All went well, and the a few hundred kilos of barley turned up in the correct bin. All systems go: I started the intake elevator at full speed. About a minute later, I heard a sound - and not a good one. Without getting into too much detail, the intake elevator has a very clever system so that if there's a blockage at the top, instead of bunging everything up, there's an overflow pipe that takes the grain round in a circle and back into the pit, where the trailers tip. This is a very, very rare occurrence, but it was the sound of the grain coming back out again that I'd heard. This could mean only one thing - a blockage in a very specific part of the system. Clearly not a complete block though, or else my test run wouldn't have worked. I went to investigate.

The only place the problem could be was up a tall set of stairs, near the top of the elevator. I left the system on and went up to take a look. There is a small inspection hole, covered in perspex. Sometimes, over winter, water leaks into this bit and residual grain can



grow, blocking the system. I didn't think this was the case now, however, as we always make sure it is cleaned out before harvest. I could see through the window that grain was flowing around something unusual. Surely not? I went down the stairs again and shut everything down. Back up once more, and I opened up the inspection hatch to see if I had really seen what I thought I'd seen. Four meters above the ground, in the elevator, just chilling (having recently been showered by approximately a tonne of barley), was, as if by magic...a rabbit. Of all the things I'd expect to find bright-eyed and bushy-tailed up there,

this was very, very low down the list. I was just wondering what to do with it, when the problem was solved. Out it hopped, onto the platform, before half running, half falling down the stairs, and off into a hedge. What a story for supper in the warren that evening!

Harvest in 2023 was as wet, slow, and annoying as harvest in 2022 had been quick, easy, and relaxing. Which is to say, very. For the first time in around five years, we actually had rain in the spring, with a whole 75mm in May. This was brilliant, although a very dry June spoiled

the party somewhat. In general, it was a strange growing season for all plants, not just our cultivated ones. Weeds in the hedgerows grew taller than the hedges themselves, and our cereal crops joined in by producing massive amounts of straw. Come harvest, this caused a serious headache, as all that straw has to get through the combine somehow; our throughput was down by around a third compared to normal conditions. Couple this with very rainy conditions for much of August - at one point we went eight days without cutting anything - and it was a relatively late finish, on August 26th. Harvest had been a battle of nerves, as the decision of whether or not to fire up our grain dryer was a big one. In the end I waited it out, and with the exception of a few loads of oats, we didn't dry anything. As it turns out, this was the right call, prompting my smug-o-meter to go off the scale. At least I get the occasional decision right.

### **Wheat - 9.74t/ha (+1.01 above 5 year average)**

This was actually our sixth best ever wheat harvest, which was a very pleasing result. As per usual, relative results were predictably different between fields that are drought-prone, versus those on heavier land. We grew exclusively SY Insitor on our lightest land, after it did so well last year. There were a couple of poor fields, but also some good ones, with a yield range of 6.53 to 9.62t/ha. This is the one variety we grow that doesn't have good disease resistance, but I like it all the same.

Graham made up another third of our total for 2023, but it's the last time we'll see it here. It was no disaster, but there was a definite underperformance compared to other varieties in similar fields. The yield range of 9.57 to 10.21t/ha was fairly tight, but what was particularly notable was the combinability, which was poor, making it a very slow job. We got on much better with Gleam, which yielded from 10.25 to 11.14t/ha as a first wheat, and a not great 8.92t/ha in a small field of second wheat.

We grew new (to us) varieties in two fields this year, and both did very well. They were Champion - 10.76t/ha (compared to Graham @ 9.57 over the hedge) and KWS Dawsum - 11.19t/ha (compared to Graham @ 10.21t/ha over the track). These look like two good packages, with both good yield and disease resistance. I hope they can do something similar next year, where they feature as a much larger part of the rotation.

Finally, we grew a seed crop of a new soft wheat, called Blackstone. It was planted in a funny field, on a hill. The brow of the hill is almost pure chalk, and doesn't generally grow great crops. With that in mind, the end result of 10.90t/ha was highly satisfactory. Again, it compared very favourably to Graham in the supposedly better neighbouring field, which could only manage 9.95t/ha.

### **Barley - 10.03t/ha (+2.19)**

Well, now this is the section I've been waiting to write. Winter barley is not my favourite crop, although I do very much enjoy the early start to harvest it gives us, on this occasion July 10th. We never planned to grow it at all, but the parched summer of 2022 meant that planting oilseed rape seemed way too risky. Instead I decided to go for two fields of KWS Tardis barley. This proved to be

a lucky choice, as instead of a semi-disastrous crop of rape, we ended up with the best barley yield this farm has ever seen. I found this fairly surprising, as we hadn't done a brilliant job of establishing the crop last autumn, and it looked a bit uneven throughout the entire spring. The first field produced 9.61t/ha, which was a pleasant



shock, and the second, much larger field made 10.20t/ha. Whenever we get a record yield, I put it on gold on that year's harvest mug. I like putting gold on the mug.

### **Oats - 6.21t/ha [spring] (+1.11) 7.87t/ha [winter] (+0)**

For the first time in quite a few years we grew both spring and winter oats. Springs are commonplace, and fairly successful, but winters are a rarity. I find that winter oats not only seem to yield less than wheat, but they are also way worse for controlling weeds, mainly because we do not have many herbicides that are compatible with them. Nonetheless, for



rotational reasons, we did have one field of Mascani winter oats this year, grown as a seed crop. They looked fairly magnificent throughout the spring, growing into a thick mass of chest high plants by the beginning of June. Unfortunately, they flattered to deceive somewhat, and although 7.87t/ha is *technically* a farm record, I feel that having only grown winter oats three times in total, I can't really claim it (or, more importantly, put it on gold on the harvest mug).



*Typical harvest 2023 weather*

Spring oats were much more successful, at least from a yield standpoint. Again, we tried growing seed contracts, both for Lion and a new variety called Asterion. This all went badly awry in early summer when, due to a botched field inspection, all three fields were rejected for seed. This was highly annoying until it became apparent later in the autumn that, due to a combination of the good quality of what we had harvested and a general European shortage of milling oats, I could sell the crop for the same premium that my seed contract would have commanded. All three of the 'seed' fields yielded close to 6.3t/ha, whereas the rest of the farm, growing KWS Isabel, made between 5.21 and 7.06t/ha. This was our first ever 7t+ crop, which was a nice benchmark to cross. Overall, this was our second best ever spring oat harvest, beaten only by the first year we grew them, in 2016.

## **Beans - 2.67t/ha (-0.79)**

As far as I can tell, beans only really have one redeeming feature: you get a great crop of wheat in the following year. Yields have been generally disappointing over the past decade, which is probably related somehow to the fact we harvest them roughly a month before the ‘traditional’ time of early September. Perhaps this is just a changing climate, or maybe we



*Bean-killing weather*

have grown them too often in the same fields - I’m not sure. This year the fields fell into three categories: Light land (about 2.65t/ha), medium land (around 3.4t/ha) and land where the -15°C spell last December killed 90% of the plants (1.23t/ha). This was actually quite considerably more yield than I had been expecting,

given that we had written off most of the field several months before and had spent no money on keeping it disease free. At least it definitely paid for the combine to do its work. Next year may be the last beans we see for a while on Thriplow Farm.

## **Sugar Beet**

For the first time since 2018, there is a sugar beet heading in the Annual Report. Tempted by a long overdue increase in the beet contract price - roughly doubled, to £40/t - we decided to plant one field. Not long after making that decision, there was an unprecedented extra offer from British Sugar, who wanted us to grow more beet, for a fixed price per hectare (not per tonne), to be harvested in the first week of September. As it happened, this spring we had a rotational headache, with an empty field and no firm plan. I was even vaguely considering linseed, which shows how desperate the situation was. Anyway, some low risk sugar beet seemed to fit the bill perfectly, so I signed up.

As we stopped growing beet a few years ago, we no longer had any machinery to plant the seed, so asked a contractor to come in. It was a very wet and tricky March and April, but the fields did get planted just before the deadline; I think it was April 12th. This is a pretty late drilling date for a crop that will be harvested less than five months later. Sure enough, come September 1, the yield was not extraordinary (not in a good way, at least), and ended up at 44.3t/ha. However, with a fixed price per hectare, this was still a good crop to have grown.



*September 1*

Whether there is any similar deal or not next year remains to be seen. Our second field of beet is still in the ground as I type this, and will be for probably another two months. I pray for no serious frosts.

## **Machinery**

No big purchases this year, but there were a few small ones. First of all, it's finally the end of the line for our old Sanderson loader bucket. This is of unknown age, but it's estimated at around 40 years. This is a seriously long time for something that sees so much abuse - scraping floors, loading hardcore, and having a hydraulic bucket brush strapped on. We will actually keep it, just for the brush, but for everything else a brand new Albutt rehandling bucket has been ordered.

On a slightly related note, for the past 10 years or so we have been tipping grain into one of our grainstores (imaginatively named the 'Big Shed'), and then using the loader with a grain bucket to push the piles up into one bigger heap. I was, of course, aware of the existence of a specific tool for this job (imaginatively named a "Grain Pusher"), but hadn't felt it necessary to buy one. This year, we had a new grainstore built (imaginatively named



‘Grainstore 6’), with a capacity of roughly 2000t. All of this needed to be pushed up, as there were no conveyor belts to feed it. How much better, I wondered, was a grain pusher than a bucket? Luckily, I have a kind neighbour who let me borrow their pusher to try it out. I’d estimate it took roughly 23 seconds to realise that not only was it better than a bucket, it was *much, much* better than a bucket. I have ordered a nice orange model from Ceres for full time use next harvest.

## **The future**

Looking into the near future, I’m not terribly optimistic for next harvest, due in large part to the conditions from 2023 spilling over into 2024. First of all there was the dry autumn of 2022, which meant very few weeds germinated, and could be killed, before planting the 2023 crop. More weeds in that crop has, in places, left us with some fairly significant problems going forward into 2024. This is particularly frustrating as we had been in a pretty good place previously. Secondly, as mentioned already, the 2023 crop of wheat produced massive volumes of straw. Not only was this a problem for the combine harvester, but more significantly the straw has caused us huge problems when it came to establishing crops this autumn for harvest next year. Mainly this has been a mechanical problem, but it will also be an agronomic problem as the straw breaks down and robs nutrients from the new crop. In hindsight, I should have baled all of the wheat straw and had it removed from the fields. Hopefully, we will know for next time.

The biggest change that is coming - not this year, but from autumn 2024 onwards - is the effective return of setaside to the rotation at Thriplow Farm. It’s not called setaside, and it’s not for the purposes of reducing production per se, but the effect is the same. I have recently signed up for a new Mid Tier Countryside Stewardship scheme, where we will be paid over £500/ha for leaving fields fallow for a year. The idea is that these bare (actually, hopefully a bit weedy) areas will provide food and habitat for wildlife before re-entering the farming rotation 12 months later. I have friends who have turned over half their farms to these schemes; I have put in a relatively modest 25%. This is half of our break crops every year. It feels strange to voluntarily stop growing something that goes through a combine, but when you look at the numbers, it’s a no-brainer. I mentioned earlier how poorly beans had been performing for us; the gross margin for beans is, on average, less than the payment we

will soon receive for growing bird feed. Not to mention the reduction in tractor hours, man hours, and stress hours. As my dad presciently wrote in 2004,

*“The next generation that farms on my land at Thriplow will have to accept that they are park keepers as well as farmers.”*

Finally, those of you who are good at Roman numerals will have noticed that this is a milestone report - the 50th. I suppose it's possible, technically, that I be around for the 100th, but perhaps somewhat unlikely.

Have a good Christmas,

David Walston

December 4 2023