

Crondall Society Article.

Many of you enjoy walking and driving through the countryside around Crondall and so the editor has asked me to write a few words to hopefully give you an idea of what we do in the fields and on the farms you walk around.

A Brief History.

Our family moved to Clare Park Farm in 1921 from the Cotswolds, where we had been farming for over 10 generations. We were mixed farmers with a dairy, sheep, arable crops, a few chicken and a few pigs. It was traditional farming that used the livestock to build the fertility in the soil that would then be used to grow the wheat and barley that would be used for feed and bedding to keep the livestock. We employed 14 or more staff on our farm of 800 acres and most of the neighbouring farms would work in a similar system.

During and after the Second World War UK farmers were encouraged to increase production in order to feed the nation. Potatoes and sugar beet were introduced to our farm during this time, with the potatoes often being taken to Aldershot for the Army and the sugar beet was loaded onto trains at Farnham station. The countryside changed enormously at this time as we were encouraged to make fields bigger, convert scrub into productive land, cut down woodland and hedges and drain wet fields. Remote cottages with no electricity or running water were knocked down as the farm workers were keen to move into new houses built in the village with all the modern conveniences. However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s farmers had been too successful and food mountains had been created throughout Europe. This led to set-aside, a policy which obliged farmers not to produce anything from 15% of their farm.

In the eighties there was a move to specialise on farms. At Clare Park Farm we sold our dairy in 1985 and cut our sheep numbers back; within a few years all the livestock had all gone leaving us as a purely arable farm growing only combinable crops which are harvested with a combine harvester.

The Farm.

The farm has expanded over the years and we now farm about 3500 acres stretching from Crondall to Well and down to Bentley. Some of the land is owned, some rented, and some farmed in partnership with neighbouring land owners. We grow mainly arable crops, but we also have some grassland for grazing sheep and some grass to make into hay for horses. Scattered around the farm we have areas that are devoted to wildlife and are part of various environmental schemes. Redundant farm buildings have also been converted into offices, workshops and storage barns.

The business is a partnership between myself, my father Antony and mother Honor. Alongside us we employ two young men full time. They are highly skilled and very versatile in what they do. They work long hours, weekends and most of the summer, often on their own in a tractor cab! One minute they could be changing a water pipe, the next operating a combine harvester worth £300,000. They do everything from laying concrete to inspecting the crops and making decisions

about what inputs to apply and when. During the winter months they overhaul all our machinery, load grain lorries and help look after the sheep. We very rarely get quiet periods during the year. Extra hands are always needed to get the harvest in during the summer. We mostly employ agricultural students, but we have employed people who follow harvests around the world, seasonal workers and people who live in Crondall.

Crops.

We grow wheat, oilseed rape, barley, beans, linseed, peas, oats and occasionally maize. The wheat is our most important crop and is grown to be either milled into flour or for animal feed. The oilseed rape (with the yellow flower) is used for oil which goes into many different products from cooking oil to paint and cosmetics. A small amount of our seed goes to The Cold Pressed Oil Company who are based at the farm and produce cooking oil, salad dressings and other flavoured oils. Our barley goes to make beer, mostly in Germany. We hope that the beans are good enough quality that they can be exported to Egypt for human consumption; if not they go for cattle feed. The peas go for pet food, linseed (the very pretty blue flowered plant) for oil production and cattle feed often in France, oats for oat bars and biscuits, and the maize is for cattle feed.

We grow all our crops in rotation; wheat every other year and oilseed rape once in 4 years, peas or beans once in 5 years. The other crops fit in around these rules.

Of course some fields aren't suited to all crops. Beans don't like very chalky soil for example so that is where we would sow peas rather than beans. Another year oats maybe more profitable than barley so we grow them instead. Normally the wheat and the oilseed rape are the most profitable crops so we maximise the areas of these. The most important thing for us is to not grow one crop too often, as this can lead to a build-up of weeds, pests and diseases that only affect that one crop. In the worst case this could mean not being able to grow that crop anymore.

Conservation Agriculture.

As part of a new type of farming called Conservation Agriculture we grow cover crops in between the cash crops. The majority of these are sown in the autumn and then desiccated around Christmas time ready for planting crops in the spring. They are grown to stop water runoff, use up any leftover nutrients from the previous crop and their roots correct any compaction and help structure the soil. The aim is to build organic matter in the soil and increase its health so that we can hand the farm onto the next generation in a better state.

About 15 years ago we stopped ploughing and instead changed to cultivating the ground to about 2 inches. This was the start of improving the health of our soil. Instead of ploughing it all up and then sometimes having to go over the clay areas 3 or 4 times to break down the lumps into a seed bed, we could just scratch the top deep enough to sow the seed. Now as part of Conservation Agriculture we "direct drill" the crop straight into either the previous crops stubble or in to the cover crop. We try to move a little soil as possible while doing this so we don't disturb any weed seeds. It does however require a greater amount of management and expertise as the soil has to be just right; too wet and the seed will rot, too dry and the seed may not go deep enough in the ground. We direct

drill 80% of the farm. There are only a small number of farmers in the country practising Conservation Agriculture so there are not many guidelines to follow, we are doing lots of experimenting and making a few mistakes!

Sheep.

We have just recently reintroduced sheep to Clare Park Farm. There are many reasons for this (other than my own romantic view of farming!) but the main two are to graze the grass meadows we have and to graze the cover crops.

Unusually we will be lambing them in September rather than in the traditional spring time because we have more food for them over the winter and more time to look after the lambs when we are not quite so busy. The lambs will then be sold in February when there is very little English lamb available and before we get busy with the arable crops in the spring. Look out for our lamb on supermarket shelves next year!

The added bonus is that the sheep fertilise the soil and tread some of the crop into the ground. Both have many beneficial effects which are difficult to measure scientifically but my Great Grandfather's generation and those before would have known this as sheep were referred to as "the Golden Hoof" and were an extremely important part of their rotations.

Environmental Schemes.

We have been part of various schemes since they were first launched in the mid 1990s and encourage all our farming partners to join a scheme.

Over the years we have planted nearly 5 miles of hedgerows, over 15 acres of woodland and done lots of woodland maintenance. We have also taken land out of production to create buffer strips next to woodland, hedges and ditches and created areas of rough grass. We have lots of hares, deer badgers and foxes on the farm, and an increasing number of owls, both barn owls and little owls, red kites and buzzards as well as many other species.

On one the rented farms we have a very large scheme that has created new wild flower meadows, dug and cleared ponds and requires us to have 25 acres of stubble over winter for farmland birds to feed on. Alongside these we have a number of buffer strips, wild bird feed and pollen and nectar-rich areas. This adds up to nearly 12% of that farm's area.

On the home farm we have just finished one scheme and are going to start a new one next December. We will be focusing on pollinators and farmland birds. 7 acres will be planted with a pollen and nectar-rich mix of plants, and about 14 acres with a seed mixture that will produce small seeds and feed for birds especially over winter. Alongside this we will keep in place the buffer strips we already have and commit our grassland to not applying any extra inputs with the aim of letting wild flowers come through. This provides habitat and food for bees who play an important part in pollinating our crops. We also work with a local bee keeper who keeps hives on the farm to boost bee populations in the local area.

Our hedges are normally cut every 2 years but under the new scheme we will cut some every 3rd year and ley some of the hedges that were planted 10 years ago using the same technique that has been used along Well Road. We will plant some new hedges around fields to join up existing habitats and are also allowing all our hedges to thicken out and grow taller and wider thus providing a better place for birds to nest.

To try to measure how successful the schemes are we work with a local bird expert who walks the fields and records the species he sees. Spring time is an important time for birds nesting both on the ground and in the hedges. Dogs that are allowed to run through field margins and hedgerows have a significant impact on the number of birds that successfully breed so it is particularly important at this time of year to keep your dogs under control.

Machinery.

I am sure many of you would have met one of our tractors and machines on the narrow lanes around the village. In many cases the lanes are the only way we can access most of our fields – thank you for your patience!

Over the years machinery has got bigger and more technical. Thirty years ago there were probably 11 or more combines on the farms that we now farm and they could have been fixed with a spanner and a large hammer. Now we have two combines, and while there is a certain amount you can do with spanner there are thousands of electric sensors monitoring and measuring the performance of the combine and the crop. If they do go wrong we have to get an engineer with a lap top out to fix them!

For the past 6 years all our tractors and combines have used GPS technology to steer them on a pre-set path that can be planned either by the operator or on the computer in the office. This reduces overlaps and operator fatigue during busy periods resulting in more efficient use of the machines and so reduced cost.

We have also started using similar technology to not just plan the route but also map the yield in the field. This technology, and the combination of the yield mapping and our own knowledge, now enables us to vary how much seed, fertilisers and sprays we apply to different areas of the field. These areas can be as small as 10 metres square if we wished.

If we vary the amount of seed we plant then we get a more even plant count across the different soil types in the field which means that our yield should be more even across the field. We can then vary the amount of nitrogen and sprays we apply so that we don't use any more than the plant needs. If for example an area is always lower yielding then we can cut back on the amount of inputs we apply. Commercial Units.

The various governments over the last 15 years have encouraged farmers to diversify their businesses. So, at Clare Park Farm we have converted the redundant farm buildings into commercial units. We have 4 offices we let out and over 12000 square feet of workshops and storage. These

complement the rest of the business by making use of building that are not easy to use in modern agriculture. The traditional brick buildings of the cattle yard were converted into offices and the concrete frame buildings are workshops and storage. We currently have one office and a storage barn vacant.

The Future.

Our aim is to enhance the farm and hand it on the next generation so it continues to be a viable and sustainable farming business for them to enjoy, but we do face a few challenges.

Brexit will bring about a lot of challenges but also opportunities for us. The recent fiasco over the re-licencing of the common weed killer glyphosate by the EU and the debate about neonicotinoids poses questions about our ability to use chemicals in the future. We are pursuing a type of farming that is aiming to reduce our dependence on chemicals but without going fully organic. I believe that what we are doing is a sustainable way of producing safe nutritious food that is affordable to everyone.

By Giles Porter

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