

Spring Article 2020.

I was once told that once you got to a particular size of farm then you never have a quiet season. I sometimes wonder what exactly that size is as I think we may have achieved it.

Winter time should be our quietest time of year on the farm and a chance to take holiday, plan, do environmental work and maintain the machinery. Normally we have the autumn-sown crops (winter wheat, barley, oilseed rape and beans) planted by mid-November and try to wrap up all the field work before the start of December.

This year, because of the rain, we were still sowing in mid-December and started again in the second week of January. We managed to plant roughly 85% of what we had planned, which is better than a lot of fellow farmers. Our clay soils were just too wet to get it all in so we will have more crops than normal to sow in the spring. Although the rain here hasn't affected us a great deal it is being predicted that the UK's wheat crop will be reduced from around 15 million tons down to between 9 and 11 million depending on the weather we have this spring and summer. Unfortunately this may not result in massive price rises for us as there is plenty of wheat elsewhere in the world.

Despite the weather our sheep managed to deliver their lambs successfully. We had 130 that lambed in October and about 30 that lambed at the end of December, all outside. The young lambs are tough. They don't generally do well in wet weather but ours have been grazing on a mixture of oats, vetch, phacelia and turnips and have grown well so should be ready for sale any time now about when we had hoped. The males will be sold to a buying group whose main end market is the Co-op supermarket. We will keep the October born females to grow on and in two years' time they will have their first lambs.

We do this because most breeds of sheep will only come into season and are able to conceive naturally in the autumn when the days are shortening. As we lamb in October, we have to use breeds that will come into season in April and ideally only use ewes and rams that have been born in September or October as this seems to increase the chances of the ewes conceiving and having twins, which is preferable to singles or triplets. We use the Dorset and Chamois, breeds but trying to find animals that have been born in September or October is very hard as not many people lamb then so it is easier to breed our own replacement stock and just buy in rams occasionally to stop inbreeding.

Between the showers we have managed to plant a new hedge on the right hand side of the road between Crondall and Clare Park hospital. Mark Howard has done an amazing job hedge-laying and coppicing some older hedges for us. We are very fortunate to have him living and working in the village so we can benefit from his skills. You can see many examples of his skill at hedge-laying locally, the road to Well being a great example. We are trying to rejuvenate our hedges and let them grow out so we have taller, wider and thicker hedges to provide more nesting places for birds. At the bottom of the hedge we leave a grass margin of roughly a metre which provides food and nesting areas for birds like the grey partridge, a threatened species on the RSPB's red list. We are very excited as we have a growing number of grey partridge on Clare Park and Penn Croft which is a good sign that we are improving the general habitat for farmland birds. We are very excited to have a new bird expert starting a survey for us so we will be able to see what bird numbers are doing across the farm over the next few years. If we find a particular breed of bird that is rare or needs particular help we could then target our conservation projects to help it. I know that I say this a lot but with the nesting season starting very soon please do try to keep your dogs as close to you as possible on

the footpaths as they can disturb many nesting birds without realising when they are running through woodland, hedges or just across the fields.

We have about 27 acres of wild bird feed areas which are mixtures of small seeded plants and kale that provide food for birds during the winter. By the middle of January all of the small seeds were finished and so the birds struggle to find enough food. To help with this our keeper goes out once or twice a week and scatters wheat on the ground for the birds to eat. During the shooting season we feed from feeders and by scattering grain around the wild bird areas. The cover crops that the sheep graze also provide food and shelter for some species of birds during the winter.

Each year we try and plant a few trees. Some years a small copse or filling in a gap in a wood. This year we planted several trees in meadows and hedgerows around the farm where they will enhance or create a different habitat. It is not only fascinating but a joy to be able to watch trees either individuals or new woodland grow and develop. We have more experts around now who are able to help us manage the woodland that was planted about 20 years ago to create a really valuable habitat. By using tools such as thinning and coppicing we can encourage trees to grow tall and spread out but leave gaps between them to allow the sunlight to reach the ground so smaller plants and flowers can grow and support more insects and fungi.

As the days lengthen everyone on the farm feels a little more optimistic. The short cold days in January are behind them and on sunny days there is a hint of Spring in the air. No one minds cold or rainy days too much but constant rain, and wind in particular, can be very draining when a lot of the work is outside. The guys on the farm look forward to getting back out in the fields in the Spring, whether to plant or fertilise the crops they are keen to get on and are rewarded by seeing the crops grow and develop almost daily.

We are fortunate to have two really good guys Nick and Tom that help us on the farm full time and by the time you read this hopefully we will have employed a third one. They are integral to the smooth running of the farm and are as far from being the traditional story-book type of peasant farm worker as you can imagine. They are highly skilled and have to be resourceful, so they can tackle anything from fixing a tap, to lambing a ewe, to understanding why and when to apply fertilisers and crop protection products, and all while operating tractors that have enough screens and technology in them to rival a Tesla! They work long hours often on their own and in relatively remote spots.

On a farm like ours it is normally thought that one man to about 1200 acres of cropping is about right. We then we will bring in people to help with the sheep and at busy times like spring sowing and harvest. Our three guys, my father and me have to cover all the cropping area as well as helping with the sheep, doing work on the environmental stewardship areas and any farm repairs to things like buildings, tracks and let property. Even just thirty years ago, a 1200 acre mainly arable farm would have probably had a minimum of 4 people working on it, so we are all kept fairly busy.

Nick, who has been with us just over 5 years, isn't from a farming background but grew up in Wiltshire and developed a passion for farming while helping out on dairy farm in the village where he lived. He is based, and lives, on a farm that we look after at Overton the other side of Basingstoke. His primary role is to look after the crops and the farm at Overton but also to walk the fields and help me and the agronomists manage the crops around Crondall. Nick spends time in the office creating plans for what we have to apply and when, creating the maps which tell the machine how much product to put where and making sure that we have the correct product on the right farm.

Tom has worked with us on and off for 7 years. His father has a beef farm not too far away where Tom grew up and so he knows the area and most of local farmers well. He does most of the crop protection and fertiliser applications and is responsible for all the sowing on the farms we look after around Crondall. He also deals with all the collection and deliveries and helps manage the part time staff. Tom spends more time fixing the machinery and overseeing and helping contractors when they come in to do jobs for us. Loading lorries with grain lorries out of our stores takes up a quite a lot of his time and also unloading seed and fertiliser. He also helps with our sheep and looks after a herd of cows for one of our neighbours and clients.

They both operate machines worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, sowing the crops, applying fertiliser and crop protection products again worth thousands of pounds and then finally harvesting the ripened crop. They are experts (thankfully because I am not!) with the various guidance system that we have in the machines that enable us to drive in the same place year on year with an accuracy of 2cm, and that vary the inputs according to where they are needed in the field. The particular skill is not so much in the using this technology day to day but the setting-up before we go out into the field. When these go wrong then between them they can normally get us going again which is a huge help.

When they are not in the fields working with machinery they could be called upon to weld up a broken piece of machinery or modify an existing machine. After some stormy weather they may have ditches to clean out with a 360 digger or cut up a fallen tree. They have regular training on all different subjects from metal cutting to transporting livestock to again the necessary qualifications and have to complete a certain number of days training to be qualified crop sprayer operators. We also offer them the chance to do additional training if they want to.

It is an extremely skilled but varied job which keeps it interesting. We are however at the mercy of the weather which can make the working hours unpredictable. We sometimes have to work a lot of weekends and bank holidays to get crops sown or harvested which can put pressure on all our social lives.

We are passionate about what we do and so if you see any of us out and about please feel free to ask us questions. Normally we are delighted to talk about what we are doing, there are of course days when things are not going well and we may have less time to chat.

We hope to have recruited the third person by time this comes out. He will be there to help Tom and Nick and drive one of our combines at harvest time. We have also been looking for seasonal staff to help at harvest. If you think you maybe able to drive a tractor for 6 weeks in the summer and are physically fit then maybe we will have a job for you!