

We have just completed another farming season, one that has had plenty of parts that are memorable and plenty that we will happily forget, but farming doesn't stop for anything, weather or pandemics.

It has been one of the most challenging seasons in living memory for almost all sectors of the farming industry going from the extremes of very dry to very wet and back again.

For us it started last summer 2019 with very dry weather and so there was no moisture in the soil in August and early September making it very difficult to establish oilseed rape. The rape took a long time to grow in the dry soils and it gave an insect called a Flea Beetle plenty of time to eat and lay its eggs on the crop. If the plant survives being eaten by the flea beetle then the larvae hatch out of the eggs and bore into the stem of the plant. This then stunts the plant and reduces its yield capacity. Fortunately we only lost one field, other farmers had it far worse and lost all their rape crops, but it did reduce our yield this summer.

We started sowing this summer's wheat harvest on 23rd September 2019 and then, that night it started to rain. It seemed to hardly stop raining for weeks, and although it wasn't a record breaking wet winter, it just kept raining enough to stop us getting on the fields. Consequently, we only managed to sow about 80% of what we had planned in the autumn and so we had much more than normal to sow this spring. We were fortunate as some farmers didn't get anything sowed in the Autumn and so had 100% spring cropping which generally is less profitable. It did dry up nicely in March and we were able to sow our spring crops in good conditions and they established well. By the time we had sown our last crop we had been sowing every month, on and off from August to May which was a new experience for us.

Like all farmers we are never happy with the weather. So having hoped for a dry spell to sow the spring crops, which we got, we then desperately wanted rain again. Unfortunately for us it turned out to be warm and sunny from April to August, in fact we only recorded 2 inches of rain in April and 2 more from 1st May till 1st August. Normally from April to August we would expect around 8 inches of rain. Chuck in some late frosts and some very hot days and it couldn't have been a worse growing season.

There is an old saying "rain in May fills the barns with corn and hay" and so the lack of late spring and summer rain resulted in low yields in most of our crops. The best soil is able to hold on to the moisture better than the thinner, more stoney soils but because the roots of the winter crops hadn't been able to develop properly in the water logged soil over winter, when the soil dried out the crops began to die off prematurely. This lowers the yield of grain that we harvest but also of the straw that goes to livestock farms for feed and bedding. Many livestock farmers were very short of grass to graze and ended up grazing grass that should have been made into winter feed. This has now left them short of feed for this winter. Consequently, some livestock farms will cut back the amount of animals they will keep this winter because straw and feed is either too expensive or just not available. It takes 18 months to raise a beef animal to the weight the market wants it at or a year to grow a crop, so this harvest will affect farmers' incomes for the next couple of years.

Having such an extended sowing period meant that the crops were developing at different speeds and at different times. This makes the management of the inputs (e.g. fertilizers) we use much more challenging. The timing of the application is critical to feed or protect the plants at the different

stages of its growth cycle. The variation in growth stage leads all the way through to harvest so we had crops ripening at different times, often in the same field. I spent a lot of harvest just checking if fields were ready to cut; if they were, great, if not I would go back and look in a day or so time. It is amazing what 30 plus degree heat with a wind can do to a crop. One day it can have a moisture content of 28% and be slightly green still but by mid day the next day it can have dropped to 11%. We ideally want it at 14.5% as it has to be below 15% to be sold, any drier and it reduces the weight and so we have less to sell.

In the end we managed to harvest 90% of our crops dry and in relatively good condition so although the yield was down, harvest was easy and we didn't have to spend a lot of time or money on drying the crop. Also as reported on the news the price of wheat has gone up from about £140 per ton to £170.

We had a really good team of people to help get harvest in and I have to thank them for their help. As always they come from different areas and backgrounds, 1 from Tasmania, 1 from Exmoor, a local vicars son (not ours!) and of course Mark Howard and a couple of other local guys. They bring an energy and buzz that keeps everyone going during the long days. They also enjoy a beer or two in the local pubs to help wash the dust down!

Having been a typical farmer and moaned about the wrong weather at the wrong time, we have been fortunate that Covid 19 hasn't affected us very much. We were able to carry on working throughout the lock down, with precautions, in much the same way as normal and our suppliers kept us going with minimal disruption all while the rest of the world seemed to be changing around us.

During the last few months and especially during the lockdown period, it has been good to see so many people out on the footpaths enjoying the local countryside. Some parts of the country have had big problems with littering, people walking where they want, damaging crops and general anti social behaviour. We have been very fortunate having had very few problems despite a massive increase in the amount people being out and about around the farm.

Just before lock down we welcomed a new guy called Edward to the team. Spring is never an easy time to start on a new farm as it is pretty busy out in the fields so you have to get to grips with the field names and locations of nearly 100 fields, spread from Bentley to Crondall and down at Overton. You also have to get to know the different machinery and the routes that some of the bigger equipment can and can't go (our crop sprayer was directed down the M3 one night during harvest by a team repairing the A30 which was a first and probably a last!) He has fitted in brilliantly and got to grips with everything really quickly aided i think by not being able to do much else other than work when he first started because of the lock down

Just as things seem to be quietening down we are due to start lambing during the last week of September. We put 200 ewes to the ram but unfortunately we only have 135 to lamb in September and October. The rest didn't get pregnant so we have put the rams back in with the ewes and they will lamb in January.

Lambing in September works for us with our pasture and winter cover crops but even with a breed (the Dorset) that is meant be able to breed year round it can be difficult to get them in lamb. They still naturally conceive better in the autumn rather than in May or June. Having taken some advice in the future we will only be keeping ewes that are born in September and October and will only use rams that are autumn born. This seems to increase the chances of the ewe coming into season in May which is when the rams go in to do the business. We also use Teaser rams. These are rams that

have had the snip and are put in with the ewes a couple of weeks before the rams go in. They help bring the ewes into season together which has the benefit of shortening the lambing period and getting more ewes in lamb.

They will be lambing in September and October, so hopefully it will be dry, in a field called Shamble Hatch that runs from our farm, down around the football field to the village. When they have lambed they will stay in Shamble Hatch for most of the winter so if you are walking up the footpath from the back of Chaudlers Croft you will be able to see the lambs over the hedge. Please do keep an eye on your dogs though.

We will start sowing our wheat and barley at the end of September and so another farming year will begin. It will be an interesting one for farmers as there is a lot of change happening. Firstly, at some point soon we will find out what trading arrangement we will have with the EU which could have some major impacts on where our produce goes. Secondly, DEFRA are redesigning our subsidies and the environmental schemes which we belong to. We are expecting to lose a lot of our financial support over the next 5 years but some of it may be redirected into more environmental support. I am sure it will change the way we and most farmers manage the land, hopefully for the better but at the moment we have to carry on without knowing what the outcome of these two major factors is likely to be.

Once sowing and lambing is done we will all have some well earned time off and settle down into our winter routine. Hopefully by the time we get to harvest next year life will be a little more normal again.