

# Robust profile from a soft prospect

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## Technical Insiders View

After a period of minimal competition in the Group 4 soft wheat category, there's a new contender on the market. CPM reviews Elsoms' new variety, Bennington.

By Charlotte Cunningham

**Treated yield has traditionally driven growers' choice of variety. However, uncertainty surrounding chemical availability and volatile wheat prices have increased the need for agronomically strong varieties — these days choosing a variety based purely on treated yield could leave farmers vulnerable to risk.**

With this in mind, breeders have been creating new varieties that fit a more all-round robust profile, without compromising on yield. Among these is Bennington — the latest high yielding but robust wheat offering from Elsoms.

“For a long time, the Group 4 soft wheat market has been looking for better choices,” says Agrii's Barry Barker. “When Bennington came up for recommendation, I was very pleased as it gave growers an alternative to the two main varieties: Leeds and Revelation. It was a very good recommendation.”

The variety is the result of a cross

between soft feed wheat Alchemy, and Battalion, a hard Group 2 wheat. Stephen Smith, wheat breeder at Elsoms, says yield was the key driver behind Bennington's parentage. “Alchemy was a very high yielding variety, and Battalion was also quite good,” he explains. “In their day, they were both leading varieties in their groups.”

### Septoria resistance

Because of its parentage, Bennington has drawn a good septoria resistance — scoring 6.2 on the AHDB Recommended List. By using Battalion, it also has a strong resistance to brown rust, says Stephen Smith. “Though Alchemy didn't score particularly well for brown rust, using Battalion has passed on the resistance to Bennington.”

The overall stand-out feature of Bennington is its excellent yield potential, says Barry Barker. “At 104% of treated yields, it puts Bennington within a couple of points of the highest yield on the RL.”

At 103% of controls it appears to do well as a second wheat, although its RL yield in this slot is still 1.1t below its first wheat yield. Untreated yield figures also stand the variety in good stead, scoring 90%, putting it very close to the top of the RL. “Bennington has a good untreated yield which is always a positive indication,” says Alan Hendry at Dalton Seeds.

In terms of agronomic value, Bennington is relatively tall (91cm without PGR), but stiff with a lodging rating (without PGR) of 7. It's also slightly later to mature, and performs

best when drilled in the main window between mid-Sept and Oct, says Agrii's David Leaper. “Bennington has a relatively low tillering capacity,” he explains. “So, we're advising growers to keep their seed rates up.”

But, it's not just all about yield with Bennington. “Growers are looking for bold grain and good standing power — Bennington delivers on this,” he adds.

With a protein content of 11.2%, a Hagberg Falling number of 240 seconds and a specific weight of 76.7kg/hl, quality is an extremely attractive attribute of Bennington, according to Alan Hendry. “Bennington's specific weight really is the key feature, we noted it in the trials and liked what we saw,” he explains. “There are only a couple of varieties that score better on the RL and if we see a difficult harvest this year, this could be a really useful trait to have.”

Bennington also benefits from being a UK soft wheat for export as many of the newer varieties aren't suitable for this. The opportunity for export is particularly important due to the competition to ship grain further afield, says Barry Barker. “Certain markets need a good quality soft wheat, and it's great to have other wheat varieties coming through,” he adds. “At the moment, we're not seeing much premium on milling wheat at all, purely because there's so much about.”

UK soft wheats are something that a lot of people are now looking for, explains Stephen Smith. “There has been a noticeable increase in demand for varieties that fill that



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► slot — particularly along the south coast.”

In terms of availability, there's not a huge amount of Bennington out there, says Alan Hendry. “In the UK there's only about 400ha of C2 seed production — roughly around 2000-2500t,” he explains. “It's been a slow season for selling, however the Cereals Event will give a lot of farmers the chance to see the variety for the first time and will be a watershed as to whether or not it starts selling. What we do know is that there's a very strong demand for soft Group 4 varieties at the moment.”

Demand may be increased by growers moving away from other wheat groups, says Alan Hendry. “If the premiums aren't there, we may see growers deviating from milling varieties.”

Barry Barker agrees: “We're not seeing much premium on milling wheat in current markets as there's just too much about.”

Though it's hard to get a feel of just how well the variety may do until it's more widely grown, there's a lot to like, says Alan Hendry.



*Alan Hendry reckons the variety's good specific weight is a key feature.*

## Robust disease performance stands out

Farming 202ha in the heart of Cambs, Matt Smith is now in his second year of growing Bennington.

Cropping on the farm includes potatoes, sugar beet and combinable peas, as well as spring and winter wheat. Among this is 18ha of Bennington. The variety is grown on a seed contract for Elsoms which helps increase margins, says Matt Smith. “Growing wheat for this purpose adds value for us as a seed grower.”

He's found Bennington drills particularly well in mid to late Oct. “When it comes to establishment, we tend to miss the plough and instead use a Simba Xpress disc cultivator and a combi drill.” Being later to mature, Bennington also helps to split the disease risk.

The seemingly robust disease resistance was the stand-out characteristic that attracted Matt Smith to Bennington, as well as its high yield.

“In this area, our main pressures are from rust, mildew and septoria,” he explains, “However, with



*The seemingly robust disease resistance as well as its high yield attracted Matt Smith to Bennington.*

just a standard fungicide programme, Bennington has performed well all round.”

In terms of yield, the crop produced about 8t/ha last year, following low nitrogen input. “This year we've given Bennington two nitrogen applications of 40kgN/ha each and it seems to be doing well — the benefit of growing it following a crop of potatoes is that there's a lot of nitrogen retained in the soil.”

“There's certainly an appetite for soft wheat again — we're very pleased we have it and are very positive about the future of the variety.”

Where Bennington has the potential to fall short is with its yellow rust resistance, which

has declined across the board, particularly in the past year, says Barry Barker. “The resistance has dropped back a bit lately. This is an issue we're seeing in a lot of varieties and is mainly due to the virulence of new strains of yellow rust and a lot of

## New wheat impresses in Lincs

Lincs farmer Anthony Campling has been impressed by Bennington's yield and disease resistance and is now into his second year of growing the variety.

Farming 405ha on the Loveden Estate, Anthony Campling is including 20ha of Bennington among his rotation of potatoes, sugar beet, peas, wheat and triticale.

“We started growing Bennington when we became involved in growing seed for Elsoms,” he explains. “Prior to that, we'd tried all the usual varieties such as Evolution and Cougar but we wanted to try and get away from anything that was reliant on fungicides.”

Using a mid-range fungicide programme, including spraying at T0, T1 and T2 and an SDHI — Anthony Campling has found this is enough to keep disease at bay, minimising costs on farm. “In this area, the main disease pressures are rust and septoria,” he explains. “Interestingly, we've seen build-ups of these diseases in varieties with the same programme applied, but not in Bennington — it appears to be quite good all round.”

The crop is drilled through minimum tillage using a Väderstad drill and has good standing power as well as stiff straw. “Bennington does,



*Anthony Campling is looking to get away from varieties that are reliant on fungicides.*

however, appear not to be the most tillered crop,” he explains. “Increasing seed rate can improve this; we drilled at 150kg/ha and this seems to be a reasonable amount.”

In terms of output, Bennington provides a reasonable yield, coming in at 10t/ha last year, after 150kgN/ha. Though the weather this season has undoubtedly hampered crop growth, Anthony Campling is hoping to get back on track in terms of yield. “It's not unheard of to get 11-12t/ha.”

common parentage in varieties. Our advice to growers is to ensure they get their T0 on."

Stephen Smith agrees and says despite scoring 7 for yellow rust, this is an area growers should watch for and manage if necessary. "It's important to keep an eye on yellow rust as ratings are under threat this year," he explains. "However, a standard fungicide programme should keep on top of it."

Early focus on yellow rust is the key to maximising Bennington's potential, says David Leaper. "Yellow rust is a problem across the country and we recommend a triazole at T0 to reduce inoculum in the spring. Brown rust is also something to watch, especially in the South. It tends to develop later — particularly under warmer and drier conditions — and is best controlled using a protectant approach with either triazole or SDHI chemistry."

So, which growers will like Bennington? Those who are currently growing varieties like Leeds will benefit from making the switch, says Stephen Smith. "It's a massive leap in



*Elsoms Wheat now has a pipeline of varieties coming through, including a new Group 3 Elicit, up for recommendation later this year.*

terms of yield and agronomics."

David Leaper agrees and says Bennington would also suit those who have previously grown Revelation as well as Leeds. "It's a huge step up in yield and performance. Compared with Leeds, we've seen an 8% yield uplift in our trials with Bennington."

While Bennington doesn't look to be showing any specific regional preference — producing consistent yields across board — it has been recommended for the East and West regions and isn't advisable for growers in Scotland, purely as it doesn't suit the distilling market, explains Barry Barker. Similarly, the variety is suitable across all soil types, however looks to be performing particularly well on lighter soils.

Of course, with such a new variety, it's hard to estimate how successful Bennington will be in terms of market share. "Based on how crops are looking now, growers will get a good result from Bennington, providing they keep an eye on disease," says Barry Barker. "I'd be surprised if it doesn't get a decent market share. I'd estimate it'll potentially take 1.5-2%, which would put it in the top dozen varieties in the UK."

"Overall, there's a lot to like," he adds. "It's a good replacement for Leeds and great for growers looking for a high yielding export soft wheat."

In the pipeline for next year is Elsoms' new variety — Elicit. It's set to be an exciting prospect for the Group 3 market and is up for recommendation this year. Elicit is a high yielding variety with particularly good disease resistance, says Stephen Smith. "Elicit looks to be an a strong all round variety and is attracting a lot of attention already." ■



*Bennington has drawn in a good septoria score from its parents, Alchemy, and Battalion, says Stephen Smith.*

## Bennington at a glance

Treated grain yield (% control)	104
Untreated yield (% control)	90
Protein content (%)	11.2
Hagberg (seconds)	240
Specific weight (kg/hl)	76.7
Resistance to lodging (with PGR)	8
Mildew	7
Yellow Rust	7
Brown Rust	7
<i>Septoria tritici</i>	6.2
Eyespot	[5]
Orange Wheat Blossom Midge	-

*Source: AHDB Recommended List 2017/18; [ ] limited data*

## Elsoms and Ackermann combine forces for UK barley breeding

Elsoms Seeds has joined forces with German barley breeder, Ackermann to form Elsoms Ackermann Barley. The new venture will focus on breeding varieties specifically for the UK market, aiming to combine strong disease resistance and market-leading yield characteristics with quality malting and feed barley varieties.

"By joining forces in barley breeding, we will expand the impressive and comprehensive breeding programme established by Ackermann and focus it on the UK market, using the resources of the plant breeding, research and trialling facilities of Elsoms Seeds," says Roger Keeling, chairman of Elsoms Seeds.

Ackermann is a member of the Saaten Union group of German breeders who have already been

working closely with Elsoms over the past four years, for example in developing the new spring barley, Chanson.

Alexander Strube, managing director of Ackermann says, "We have established a global trialling, production and customer network but realised that to be successful in the UK, we required a strong UK partner and are delighted that Elsoms has agreed to join us."

Ackermann's breeding programme currently produces two-row, six-row, spring, winter, feed, distilling and brewing barleys, as well as being part of Saaten Union's hybrid barley programme. Elsoms Ackermann Barley products are expected to follow Ackermann's own varieties onto the AHDB Recommended List by 2020.



*The new venture will focus Ackermann's barley breeding prowess on the UK market.*