

# smith's soapbox

by Guy Smith



same time, I'd readily confess to being not much wiser or cleverer about bringing home a harvest than I was when the Bay City Rollers were in the charts.

It's interesting that my late father could also make this half a century claim, but the changes he witnessed were more fundamental than the ones I've seen. Starting in the 1930s, Dad would have taken part in summer-long harvests involving binders, stooks, cart horses and pitchforks culminating the following winter with steam-powered threshing machines and hessian sacks.

It's a world away from the modern harvests dominated by the utility and capacity of the combine harvester. Admittedly,

during the last 50 years I've witnessed a huge scaling up of the machinery involved, but the technology and the concept are much the same. Similarly, Dad would have seen a tripling of crop yields whereas for me, it's been nothing like that rate of increase.

One of the initial harvests I witnessed first-hand was 1984 when we achieved a wheat yield of 10t/ha across the farm. Given the state of this year's crops I'll be delighted to match that that 40 years on.

This year's harvest will follow some one of the roughest growing years I can remember. Accordingly, my expectations of Harvest 2024 are positively mediocre. Given what some of the wheat has been through since October you could describe it as suffering from PTSD.

Such is my desperation to find a silver lining this year I'm hopeful my milling wheat yields will be low enough to achieve decent proteins. Given we mainly have milling wheat in the ground, the current healthy premiums are probably my one chance of profit this year. Choosing to grow milling varieties has served us well in recent times, but given the battle with rust we had with Crusoe, I'm not inclined to grow it again.

The problem is what to grow in its place? I'm minded to have a look at SY Cheer or RGT Goldfinch, but I'm wary as to how the millers aren't guaranteeing they'll pay full Group 1 premiums for them.

So I'll sign off by wishing you an easy and profitable harvest. Maybe, just maybe, given the contrary weather we've suffered during the past 10 months, we're now due a hot dry harvest rather than it continuing in the same unhelpful vein.



*Herewith a photo of one of this year's curiosities - a self-combusting bale. I've heard of such before but never witnessed it first-hand. In the past, on hearing of such phenomenon the cynic in me used to wonder if such alleged natural phenomena were actually the result of careless discarded fags or boys with matches or, heaven forbid, bogus insurance claims. However, the sight of smoke from a bale of whole wheat silage taken because of a heavy blackgrass infestation, made me realise how very real spontaneous combustion is. When I first saw it from my bedroom window I thought it must be a trick of the light, but closer inspection showed the bale had indeed chosen self-immolation. The sappy wheat straw generated the heat and the blackgrass acted as the tinder. It's nice to still come across little pieces of farming wonder I've never witnessed before.*

Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely

St. Osyth Marsh — officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of.

@essexpeasant

## A PTSD-conditioned harvest

I once read that to claim to have lived a full farming life, a farmer should see first-hand at least 50 harvests. I'd guess I'm far from alone in that given I was handed harvest jobs in my mid-teens, and I'm now in my mid-sixties, I can smugly claim to have now lived a full farming life. At the

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