



WITH ANDREW WILSON

Talking TATIES

Gleaning the positives

“The only thing worse than a poor performing year is one that follows

another poor performing year. It's safe to say arable farming and taty growing isn't much fun at the moment.

Firstly, the positives. Spring barley was the best I can remember – this year's crop comfortably averaged more than 7t/ha, made the grade for malting, was sold forward at around £20/t above the spot malting price, and left a decent swath of straw. This success was slightly tempered by there being only 13ha of it, but let's not spoil the glory!

Predictably, our wheat yield was pulled back by some poor second wheat and flooded off areas; our beans looked amazing in June but then scraped a tonne to the acre average. It's a good job the price isn't quite on the floor, and wheat after beans here is consistently good.

Interestingly, the tramline of intercrop beans and wheat did okay and yield matched the best performing beans. I've yet to carry out a full financial comparison, but it looks favourable on the face of it. The trade-off is twice drilling and separating the resulting crop, so we must be realistic.

A minor crop for us is grass for hay which also hit a high of 6.7t/ha and was made with little cost or effort in the sunshine. How, you might ask, in a season of burnt off pasture in many areas? Luck, mostly. I decided to take my first cut the earliest I ever have on 14 May while the weather was

good, albeit early to maximise April-applied fertiliser. We then had decent rain in July meaning a worthwhile mid-August second cut.

It's surprising how well stubbles have greened up over mid-August, allowing a glyphosate clean-up on the majority of land going into cover crops that precede spring root crops and cereals. The main target is volunteer potatoes, beet, blackgrass and brome, but removing the volunteers also removes the competition for our cover crops. From a nematode and general disease point of view, I feel this is important to not ignore.

My sugar beet has been chosen for some root digs and I'm pleased to report decent sugar levels for the time of year and root yields better than feared. Is it enough to keep us growing the crop next year? A top line under £1000/acre ought to be a no this far from Newark, but some of our best beet land is in the rotation next year. Given lacklustre combinable prices, I'm not sure we'll drop it completely immediately.

March-lifted beet before May-drilled vining peas help the numbers stack up, but because I'm mostly making the figures show me what I want to see, it does feel like the writing's on the wall.

So, to potatoes. We were lucky that we had some decent rain in July, because we've pretty much missed the rest of it. It's my view that the high temperatures this summer have done more damage to crop performance than a lack of water, because I think the unirrigated crops would be dead by now if that wasn't the case.

Dry matters are too high

and yields currently look like we're in for a break-even season again, assuming lifting time goes well.

We irrigate about a third of our potatoes with what's fair to say, antiquated kit. Surface extraction and ally pipes are hard work whichever way you look at it, but for all the armour chinks are showing, they do the job. Infrastructure investment requires a long-term view and a few good years to pay for it, which seem to be getting further apart in recent times.

Potatoes appear to like sunshine, if not the heat, and perhaps can manage with less water than we sometimes think. This is particularly true on sandier land that holds the heat more than more bodied ground.

Physical organic matter in our potato rows has again shown me that we must be on the right track regarding cultivations. Row structure is good, moisture is still present in most fields, and we have little row cracking at all. Fat hen is the weed of the season in varieties where we've had to hold back metribuzin rates (also getting past Smart beet herbicide this year) which will be a frustration at harvest.

I've been pleasantly surprised so far that I'm yet to see early sprouting or chain tuberisation in any of our crops, although there is secondary growth in places. We don't normally start lifting until the end of September so hopefully temperatures and dry matters will drop by then to ease the pain of delicate harvesting and another challenging storage season.

In addition to drilling cover crops, we're getting land ready for next year's plantings. A combination of

good ploughing conditions on some of our heaviest land where a slowly increasing blackgrass infestation exists has meant we're turning a bit over in front of beans, which is unusual here.

One of the fields was last ploughed in 2013, the other in 2009, so it's been a while. My intention is to not plough them again for at least five years which together with a more spring-based rotation, ought to help in the grassweed battle. We always plough out of wheat when destined for barley, with a mix of min-till and strip-till, and some direct drilling where appropriate.

Stale seedbeds were created as fields were cleared, but patience is required to hold off drilling and let them green up to avoid expensive weed chasing down the line. Last year I didn't get all pre-emergence herbicides on which cost us dearly in some fields, so I've tweaked things to make sure that happens this year, with double angled nozzles and high water rates the order of the day.

We're still ahead as far as the calendar shows, but September arrived this morning. It'll soon be the back end, we best crack on. ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

Andrew Wilson is a fourth-generation tenant of the Castle Howard Estate in North Yorkshire.

He has a strategic approach to direct drilling on his varied soil types and grows a wide variety of crops. He's passionate about the potato industry and having been utilising cover crops to reduce cultivation and chemical use since 2011, dipped his toe in the water of regenerative potatoes in 2021.

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