

Smith's SOAPBOX



WITH GUY SMITH

Fifty year low point

“Not for the first time, February finds me in a reflective mood. It occurs

that I'm now of an age that I can claim to have seen some 50 harvests. In deference to my father and his staff at the time, I wasn't exactly a vital cog in the first few; the most I was to be trusted with was a broom and a shovel.

I could claim to be in charge of grain-store vermin control, but that was the responsibility of a Jack Russell terrier called 'Sandy', whose all-consuming hatred of rats

was only surpassed by the dog's ability to dispatch a mischief (the collective noun of rats) in a matter of seconds. So strategically effective was this Jack Russell, that it'd optimise its impressive kill rate by merely disabling the first few so it could return to them having dealt with the tail enders.

One harvest job I was given back in the day was being in charge of the weighbridge. For reasons I'm not quite sure of, dad, in the 1970s, went to the trouble of installing a pucker, pit-mounted, 12x4 yard table, Avery weighbridge. As a teenager, I had the job of recording the loaded weight then tare weight of every tractor and

trailer that returned from the harvested fields.

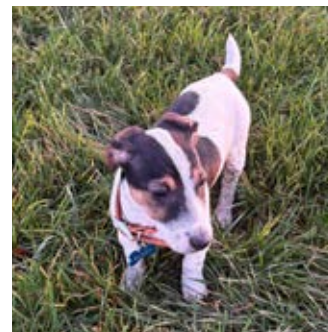
At the end of the day I took great delight in telling dad what the tonnage for each field was to the nearest kilogram or pound. In this role I felt like 'the brains' of the operation, whether anyone else in the harvest team thought so is doubtful.

Looking back at my weighbridge notebook, 1984 stands out as we averaged more than 4t/ac across the farm. That same notebook records the wheat varieties, which had names from some sort of Camelot playbook – Galahad, Avalon and Longbow.

What concentrates the mind now is that we've never really surpassed that yield milestone. Even more, is the fact that in 1984/5, wheat was worth £110/t, giving a gross margin of £440/ac. If you factor inflation into that number, you get the rather eye-wateringly figure of £1730 in today's money.

When I compare that with last year's harvest at a miserly £635 (this includes a rather paltry de-linked SPS payment), you wonder if arable farming has slipped into some kind of terminal death throe.

To cheer myself up, I thought back to those 50 harvests to speculate if 2025 is some sort of low point. I seem to recollect that the wheat price in the early years of the new millennium sunk to the depths of the £70 mark. Yields at that time on this farm were around the 3t/ac, giving a gross margin of £210. For contextual accuracy, we should add onto this the IACS cereals acreage payment we received of £90/ac, equating a gross figure of £300.



I thought I'd introduce 'Buddy', our new Jack Russell terrier. Apart from having a life-long admiration for the breed, a key driver was the news I can no longer purchase rat poison strong enough unless I return to the class room to pass an exam. So I've opted for a four-legged soon-to-be 7kg rat killing machine.

If we adjust that £300 for inflation, the figure is £630. So the good news is, that in terms of gross margins, by a very slim £5/ac, we aren't currently at a worrying nadir in my harvest memory when it comes to wheat production.

The bad news is, if you consider in the early 2000s land prices were around £2500/ac, ammonium nitrate fertiliser was £135/t and wages were £5/hour, then 2025 probably is a low point when it comes to the profitability of an acre of wheat. Looking on the bright side things can only get better from hereon – can't they? ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

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

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