



WITH ANDREW WILSON

Talking TATIES

Never a dull day

“A year ago I was lamenting light yields, late movement and bad weather... nowt changes! Our potato harvest for 2025 wasn't quite as grim as it was in 2024, but storage is much more of a challenge than 12 months ago.

As predicted, a hot summer resulted in an earlier dormancy break and much more cost in sprout control alone. This time last year we were contemplating a first in store application – whereas this year's crop saw its second dose by mid-January.

The whole industry seems very much on the back foot this year. Movement has been behind for several months and I have all customers wanting to push contracted crop movement back, which adds to cost, risk and workload, and leaves an inevitable hole in cashflow, albeit temporarily. We set our contracts up to suit our workload and finance requirements, and for all there's a bit of slack built in, I'm sure I'm not the only grower feeling a pinch.

Still, it isn't the first time we've adapted to challenge, it's pretty much a prerequisite of farming now. Workload will be shuffled and capacity found one way or another. All working relationships require maintenance from time to time, and mutual

give and take recognised. If I have a crop not storing well, somebody else has to wait so I can move it, so I'm happy to hold sound crop to facilitate similar for others where I'm able, although it's hard when this happens to almost all of my contracts.

A lively crop in-store tells me that this year, seed will be similarly quick to show a sprout, that presents a dilemma. We'd normally crate up seed to be chitted in late-February for planting in mid-to late-May, which in a normal year is fine. High physiological aged seed though may upskittle normality.

We currently lack cold store facilities to hold it in-check should we get a later planting season, but the demand for such is building year-on-year, and the consequences of the crop not getting away well are becoming more expensive. It's maybe a desperate sounding way of justifying infrastructure investment, but it's where I find myself at present.

Not that many years ago, we'd have proforma contracts from customers in the June prior to planting, which made planning cropping and procuring inputs much easier than the hand-to-mouth situation we're currently enduring. As I write this, we don't yet have such information from all of our customers which is making planning difficult. Most require ever more from us in terms of protocol and data, with grower performance being scrutinised far more than I've ever known.

I find this all quite

frustrating; I'm always up for a challenge but I can't work magic. It's hard planning improvements when the basics of variety, price and movement periods are unknown only weeks from the start of the planting season.

In more positive news, sugar beet has come up with the goods this year, with bells on. We didn't lift any crop until January this season, which is quite unusual, and as I write this, have delivered about half of our contract. It's safe to say that there'll be some excess this year, with yields for the first time getting me into the 100t/ha club!

Given next year's price dip, we must repeat this, so I ask how did we do it? Was it the placed nitrogen fertiliser? Phosphate liberator? Muck? Limex? The biostimulant I mixed with the fungicide? Variety? The drop of irrigation? Anything to do with timing? Or just luck with the weather?

Probably a mix of all the above, but it's nevertheless quite motivating to produce a high-yielding crop and turn the tide of what had become lacklustre in recent years. Sunshine has helped sugar content which does assist adjusted yield somewhat.

Just to add to the fun of winter, it appears the roof on my 34-year-old grain store is slowly going porous, which is a long way from ideal to say the least. Grain cooling is something that we struggle with and will see some improvements this year. But, the roof needs will halt any aspirations we had for

grain conveyors to reduce the compaction caused by the grain pusher on the telehandler that I'm sure is contributing to poorer cooling than we'd like.

This year represents 100 years of the Wilson family being farming tenants of the Castle Howard Estate (or as near as I can work out anyway), so given it's also my half century birthday, we plan to celebrate the occasion later this summer.

Consequently, I've been digging through the archives some detail to illustrate the four generations of farming, and found a few gems, not least some previously unearthed drainage plans that go back to the late 19th century. I think my friend and farming neighbour Pete's divining skills might get some exercise on the back of these, alongside my recently acquired classic tractor-mounted digger, and see what's still working.

There's never a dull day at Brickyard! ●

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.

@SpudSlingsby