



WITH ANDREW WILSON

Talking TATIES

Anyone sick of irrigators and irrigating yet?

“Our irrigators have tested my patience this time, enough to force a rethink about how we do things here. We’ve adapted over time and will continue to do so, but growing root crops without water looks increasingly unviable, so we’ll have a review of the situation this winter in an attempt to ease the pain a bit.

A look back is often helpful to identify the way forward. When I left school in the 1990s we were ploughing muck down pre-Christmas, burying it in what became a pretty useless anaerobic layer beneath the finished bed. We’d then drag it a few times with the then-industry-standard Bomford superflow, ridge, bedtill a couple of times, sieve it down fine with an old web destoner and plant the crop. It’d then receive water in 25-30mm doses as often as we could, with inevitable ponding in the low spots. Slow, expensive if we put today’s costs to yesterday’s methods, and somewhat compromised regarding getting the best from the muck or the water, maximising the crop or enhancing weather resilience.

After tweaking and experimenting over the years things are different now. Cover crops stepped us forward 15 years ago, and on some farms have transformed the soil health from an almost barren, metallic smelling medium to something that can actually produce a meaningful crop.

It’s not just cover crops alone though. Muck – be it from pigs,

cattle or broilers – strategic variety choices, row damming via a tractor with bespoke wheels, lower irrigation doses in cooler weather, or a high capacity star-based destoner with underweb running at a courser grade than before, all feature. But the most significant change came in 2012, which was as near to a polar opposite season to the present as far as rainfall goes.

We pulled a drag through what was a mucked cover crop stubble in an attempt to get it dry enough to plough; it was quite effective. What we later found was physical organic matter in the planted rows which retained moisture yet allowed percolation, less row slumping than normal, less cracking and greens, and easier harvesting in what was bodied land. The superflow was eventually replaced with a Simba TL, but the practice remains our standard start to operations. Bedtilling is less than a quarter of what we did in time gone by, which reduces the expense and enhances soil life in equal measure.

This year has seen us tweak how we use muck, dive back into the world of drip irrigation, and try a different approach to biostimulants – measuring the magic will be interesting in a few weeks’ time.

Across all of our crops my cultivation strategy is as little as possible but as much as necessary. Admittedly, we can lean too far towards the former, but compared with my teenage years of flat-out in second gear power harrowing clods round after ploughing slumped setaside in August, we’re moving in the right direction.

I find cultivation diversity is as important as cropping diversity. One fixed system isn’t unlike a continuous run of

any one crop – effectiveness invariably reduces as time passes. In a dry summer like the current, we can see parallel cracks in fields that have had a few years of the same operations, which can create problems of runoff, inaccurate sowing depths and reduced grassweed control if we don’t pay attention.

Appreciably, almost everything is cracked this year, but some are in a random mosaic pattern, whereas others are more of a created grid formation. Our land types, cropping and systems – coupled with normal rainfall (whatever that is) – don’t easily lend themselves to a no-till system, although direct drilling is sometimes a rotational option.

I also think cultivation timing has become just as important as the type of soil movement. The plough still has a strategic place here, but is no more or less of a tool in the box than the strip-till drill. Fundamentally, we want to give our crops the best establishment and chance to thrive, and being evangelical about a particular system would invariably set us up for compromise and disappointment.

Muck has always played an important part across our heavy and light land rotations, and I’m pleased to report that the resulting improved workability of soil, water retention, percolation and nutrient delivery is still bearing fruit. Our combinable yields thus far are better than anticipated, with winter barley a good 5% above our five-year average. Wheat has varied according to rotation slot, with that planted after potatoes doing much better than those fields after oats. Wheat preceded by beans

is still to cut, and at the time of writing, the pea vinerers have just finished harvesting our inaugural pea crop. I’m taking so far unripe crops as a positive – my farmer optimism is saying that they’re still putting on yield!

You’ll notice I’ve not majored on the state of our drought-stricken and stressed-out root crops this month? I figured you didn’t need reminding of what looks like a break-even season at best, any more than I wanted to write about it. Physiological age of our crops is going to be high given the day degrees accumulated recently, so it’s vital we look after what we have as best as we can. There doesn’t look like there’ll be surpluses this time next year, and every penny is going to count to stop the minus signs being too prominent in the accounts for 2026.

As for the beet and its prospects for the future, well, that’s a subject for another time. For now, I’ll bask in the joy of another year of rest for the dryer, a few decent cereal yields and a well-behaved combine... and try to ignore limp-leaved root crops and stropy irrigators! ●

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