



WITH ANDREW WILSON

Talking TATIES

The end for sugar beet

“Knowing where to start with the positives of the 2026

summer beyond an easy harvest isn't particularly easy; the payback time for my dryer upgrade in 2025 has certainly extended.

When it comes to weeds, we have our share, in fact my agronomist declared a while ago that anyone who says they don't have grassweeds on their farm isn't looking hard enough. We're not plagued by excess amounts of any of them, because I view weed control like any other problem in farming – best dealt with while the issue is small. It's cheaper and easier that way, and there are more options.

We have a little blackgrass, canary grass and sterile brome, but we also have some soft or meadow brome, which require a different line of attack. This year though, time has been on our side, and in this instance, so has the weather. It's enabled a full month of undisturbed time for the seed to ripen on the soil surface before a light cultivation in order to get some green shoots on which to apply glyphosate.

We plough on an 'as required' basis, which is dictated by weeds present, time since last ploughed, and the type and time of the next crop to be sown. Importantly, never waste a ploughing – it's better not done if it can't be done well, such as our heavy

land in 2026 where we'd risk dispersing seeds throughout the soil profile rather than neatly laying them in the furrow bottom. Lighter land is less of an issue in this regard.

Fields are treated one by one because with nine different crops and several soil types, that's what works best. Wheat stubbles going into malting barley saw a very light cultivation a few weeks before ploughing in an effort to reduce both wheat volunteers and the odd wild oat. Bean, pea and oat stubbles were nicely cracked, so where the weed spectrum allowed, were cultivated to mix in residue and instigate a chit when rain arrived. Then, land going into spring barley from wheat has had some muck applied and cover crop sown into just enough cultivation to allow easier establishment next spring.

A dry time in beet is never much fun for anything except fat hen, but at least we've just about managed to keep beet moth and virus yellows out of what will be a shadow of last year's record crop. Yield prospects don't look promising, but it's picked up a bit since the rain restarted, so for all it'll be a disappointing last season for us, I don't think it will be a disaster.

Yes, I've searched my soul and crunched and recrunched the numbers, but with a best guess at the likely price we'll be paid after the arbitration process has concluded multiplied by my average yield, the result wasn't appealing. When York sugar factory closed in February 2007, our average yield was

about 75% of where it sits today, but the risks and challenges of growing the crop were much less.

In all honesty, it was the haulage side that was then a part of our business that played a part in supplying beet to Newark factory initially, although that ceased after the 2018/19 campaign. My father's farming diaries started in 1963 when he was 12 years old, and beet was clearly very much a part of the farm then, so we've had more than 60 years growing it without missing a year. It's sad to cease growing a crop that's slowly but consistently improved over the years (much more so than cereals) but I'd be foolish to ignore the economics for the sake of sentiment.

So on we go. I'm fortunate to have several options of break crops with local demand to choose from, but for 2027 at least, we venture back into oilseed rape which apart from a brief unsuccessful dabble four years ago, we've not grown since 2010. The why is important here; why didn't it work back then? Why do I think it'll be any different now? What was wrong, what was right, and how do I lessen the chance of an egg face next spring?

This where the collective experience of CPM comes in. After years and years of being a reader, there are a few things that stick in my head as being consistently positive: strategic muck, establishment, moisture, predator control and nutrition.

All have the same basic common denominator – attention to detail – and as a team, I feel that we are in a

better position to be up for the challenge now. Watch this space I guess... I do have some spring bean and spring oat seed sat in the shed if it all goes a bit pear shaped.

As I write this, we're on the cusp of topping a few potatoes which is a sobering and far less exciting prospect than that described above. Unirrigated determinate crops only justify the topper to close up a few ridge cracks to safeguard what's actually decent quality, even if the yield is nowhere near contract level.

Indeterminate crops have fared little better, but what's clear to see is the value of organic matter and manures of various kinds. Now is the time to do a few more digs, measure some experiments and seek out any solid improvements that can be put in place to increase our resilience and profit prospects in future seasons.

It's a good job I'm a stubborn old wotsit, because Dragons' Den would definitely be a full set of 'I'm out' for potato growers in the current climate. Happy lifting. ●

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