



## FOCUS KENT



## Strip seeding helps to reduce blackgrass on Kent arable farm.

Reducing blackgrass was the primary reason why A. J. Strand & Sons moved away from a plough and min-till-based approach to crop establishment in favour of direct strip seeding.

"It seemed a logical progression because experience had shown that instead of helping to control blackgrass, inverting our heavy London clay soil just made matters worse," says Joe Strand, who farms with his father, Neil, and brothers, Adam and Brett at Burgess Farm near Whitstable. "Too much of the seed remained in the clods which would then break down over the winter and allow blackgrass to flourish."

"We operate a small family farm and provide a range of arable-based contracting services for others within a 25-mile radius, from silaging, wrapping and clearing, to combining, spraying, and mowing," Joe adds. "Most of our land is drilled in the autumn, but we also grow spring beans and barley for the cattle."

"Our rotation had to move away from just wheat, oilseed rape and barley, but on the very heavy clay it is almost impossible to get break crops to perform to the standard that we require. With beans, for example, controlling broad-leaved weeds is an issue and bruchid beetle is a particular problem in the South East."

"Instead of using arable break crops we decided to grow more grass and increase the size of our mixed-breed beef suckler herd, so this year we have 100 cows calving. We do not keep sheep ourselves, but another farmer brings them in to graze our grass, stubble turnips and forage rape over the winter."

"Aside from the time and cost involved in ploughing the other problem is that if we go more than 150mm deep the mouldboards turn up big slabs of orange clay which is impossible to work. To avoid that we switched to a Vaderstad TopDown multi-purpose cultivator, followed by a RexusTwin press and Rapid drill. However, we found that the tyre packer caused a lot of smearing on the headlands and in spring-drilled crops the wheelings from the rolling tractor were clearly visible."

"Disc-type direct drills will not work reliably here, so we wanted a method that would allow us to produce a stale seedbed, plant with little disturbance and provide consistently high yields. Strip seeding seemed a good option."

### FARM FACTS

**Farmer:** Joe Strand, A. J. Strand & Sons

**Location:** Whitstable, Kent

**Soil:** Heavy London clay

**Cropping:** Wheat, oilseed rape, barley, spring beans, spring barley, grass, stubble turnips

### CONCERNS WERE UNFOUNDED

"At the time we decided to consider it the Claydon OptiTill® System had been on our radar for some time, but we had heard rumours of a possible yield drop in the first year and that was obviously concerning. To find out more about OptiTill® we went to one of the company's annual open days in Suffolk and that set our minds at rest."

"To try it out we had some spring wheat drilled with a Claydon Hybrid. The results were good, but the youthful side of me liked the idea of putting 2.5 tonnes in the



Joe Strand, pictured with A. J. Strand's Claydon Hybrid T4 drill which has brought significant benefits to the family farming and contracting business in Kent.



**The Strands' Claydon Hybrid T4 is fitted with opening discs, batter boards and twin rear harrows.**



**Reducing blackgrass was the primary reason why A. J. Strand & Sons moved from a plough and min-till-based approach to direct strip seeding.**

Rapid's hopper and covering a big area, whereas the smaller hopper on the 4m Claydon Hybrid mounted drill had to be refilled more often.

In 2017, Haynes Agritec at Birchington brought their Claydon Hybrid T4 4m trailed demonstration drill to the farm and subsequently we borrowed a Hybrid to establish 8ha of wheat that we had not been able to get in with our Rapid. Despite the adverse conditions it achieved a reasonable result and that got us thinking again about changing to strip seeding.

"What pushed us over the line in terms of buying our own was that we were moving towards more spring drilling to help contain blackgrass, which was proliferating under our existing system. We spent more time looking at the OptiTill® System and for comparison had a contractor drill 15ha with a Sumo DTS, but did not like the sealed hopper, or the number of adjustments required. We also found it necessary to subsoil ahead of the DTS otherwise it bounced along the surface or dug in too deep, which made us question its ability to work in all conditions.

"In spring 2020, we bought Haynes' Claydon Hybrid T4 demonstrator drill, fitted with opening discs, batter boards and twin rear harrows, because we felt its trailed design and greater inter-tine clearances better suited our situation than the mounted version.

"Our New Holland CR9090 is larger than we need for our own farm but having reserve capacity means that we can wait for grain moisture to fall below 15% and don't need to dry. It also allows us to contract for others and in 2020 we combined 1200 acres for farmers around here, plus 700 acres in Northamptonshire.

"Immediately after combining we go across the stubbles with our 7.5m straw harrow at 16km/h to create a very shallow tilth, leave it for a week to 10 days to chit weeds and volunteers, then go again to take them out.

Last season, we drilled all our land and another 300 acres on contract with the Hybrid T4 behind our New Holland T7.250, which normally delivers a maximum of 250hp but has been remapped to 280hp. Last autumn was extraordinarily wet, but

we still managed to drill all but one field of winter crops that were planned.

"I do most of the drilling with the Hybrid T4, which gives us another string to our bow in terms of the contracting business. In the autumn we did all the drilling on our own farm plus another 500 acres on contract and by mid-March this year already had 500 acres of spring drilling booked, which subsequently increased.

"One of the fields that we drilled on contract last autumn was after maize and the trailers had made a real mess of the field. The Claydon Hybrid worked well because its leading tines were able to remove compaction and level the field, so it got the job done in a situation where neither a Sumo DTS nor John Deere 750A had been able to operate.

"Another contract customer with a Sky drill had tried to establish beans last autumn, but it wouldn't work in the knee-high stubble on heavy ground. The drill just kept blocking up, creating big heaps of stubble and mud, whereas our Hybrid T4 was able to operate perfectly. We also drilled a field where sheep had been on stubble turnips and because of the soil damage it looked like nothing would grow there, but the Claydon-drilled crop came up well.

"The Claydon is by no means a no-disturbance drill, but its leading tine design is the reason it works so well across a wide range of conditions and situations, which is important for us as contractors. We have been amazed at how well it performs even in exceptionally difficult situations, and by the crops.

"The other thing that has surprised us is how well following machinery travels on Claydon-drilled land. Because most of the plant roots from the previous crop are left undisturbed the soil is much more supportive, a huge advantage when it comes to spraying and applying fertiliser with our 2500-litre self-propelled machine early in the season.

"The key factor for us is that the Claydon avoids all the unnecessary preparation work that was required with our previous system, so it saves a huge amount of time, labour and expense. That is extremely important as we are expanding our contracting business and do all the work ourselves.

"Initially, the T4 did cause a few raised eyebrows amongst the farming community around here, but most have been surprised by how well it performs and the crops it produces. We've only had it for one season, but the results have been excellent, with no evidence of any downside in yields, so our initial concerns were unfounded."