



FOCUS HERTFORDSHIRE



Claydon helps counter effect of climate in challenging year

Having invested in its own Claydon drill to avoid the need to hire in contractors, for one family farming business on the Herts/Beds border the result of long-term commitment to the Claydon system was far better yields than anticipated during harvest 2012.

The constraints of running a business with no employed labour motivated Madeleine Palmer four years ago to purchase a Claydon drill, following the retirement some time previously of her farm's only employee. The decision not to replace him led to Madeleine, who runs a large livery yard alongside her family's 140ha arable enterprise at Astwick Bury Farm, Stotfold, hiring contractors for most tasks, while she and her father Jim Struthers focused on harvesting operations.

But with her contractor switching to a wider drill, which would mean a wider tramline system, and the same contractor's success sowing oilseed rape on the farm using a Claydon drill, the Claydon system came under consideration as a tool for establishing the farm's own winter wheat as well as its rape, as an alternative to the existing wheat policy of ploughing and combination drilling.

"We had actually tried direct drilling some years previously, but found the drill we used moved too much soil, exposing it to moisture loss," says Madeleine.

"But the Claydon twin-tine system minimises this, and as I wanted to take more of the farm work back in hand while continuing to run our livery yard, the prospect of being able to keep hours in the tractor seat to a minimum was appealing.

"A lot of people tried to put me off, but Claydon suggested they and many of their customers on land as heavy as ours were successfully establishing wheat."

A 3m Claydon SR was delivered for autumn 2009, and worked behind a 155hp Claas Arion 640 for four successful seasons, until being replaced for the coming season by the latest design of 3m Hybrid model, featuring

QUICK FACTS

Farmer
Madeleine Palmer

Location
Hitchin, Hertfordshire

Area Farmed
Circa 140ha

Soil Type
Clay

Average Rainfall
Circa 500mm

Cropping
OSR, Winter Wheat.



numerous improvements including batter board press units rather than blockage-susceptible wheels.

"Last autumn showed me how important it is to drill early where possible," says Madeleine. "Harvest delays meant I started sowing wheat a week later than ideal, on September 25. Direct-drilled crops need the warmer autumn soil temperatures, and I think it's important to drill as early as circumstances allow.

"That's not to say that, early on, our crops didn't look under the weather. Delays to



combining meant our rape drilling carried on into mid-September, and early on it looked probably the worst we've had. Slugs were a problem, but we made judicious use of slug pellets, and the crop came through the winter well, producing a good plant stand."

Wheat and rape are both sown at 30cm (12in) rows, with seed rate being gradually reduced. First wheat rates are currently 275 seeds/sq m (140kg/ha) and second wheats are sown at 325 seeds/sq m (170kg/ha), while the usual rate for oilseed rape is 2.75kg/ha. There is scope, acknowledges Madeleine, to further reduce these rates and widen row spacings. But she believes the biggest benefit of the Claydon system is its flexibility, and isn't afraid to consider adapting her strategy if required.

"We are in a bad blackgrass area, and if resistance makes it necessary, I wouldn't be averse to ploughing for one season in bad areas to turn the seed under if we absolutely had to. The Claydon is as capable of working on ploughed and power harrowed land as it is into untouched soil. But as a system, the fact that the Claydon enables us to establish a crop in couple of passes – the first with a straw

harrow to distribute chaff evenly and disturb slugs – has cut our establishment time considerably, and we can cover 20ha/day in oilseed rape and 12ha/day in wheat, working between other farm/livery duties. With our other enterprises and our lack of staff, we simply wouldn't have time to plough all our ground and then work it down and drill it."

While an old set of old zig-zag harrows was first used to improve shopped straw distribution, a dedicated straw rake was soon seen to be more suitable for the job, and a secondhand unit has since been purchased. In a good season, fields are raked at least once – twice if possible/required – and sprayed off following a weed chit, rape drilling then beginning around August 19, and wheat drilling a month later. Crops get two passes with an ATV and pelleter after drilling.



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Despite the difficult conditions of harvest 2012, last season saw the farm achieve its highest ever bushel weights, with crops of Cordiale and Claire producing figures of 79-80kg/hl. Mrs Palmer believes much of this is due to the long-term benefits of direct drilling, with one third of the farm now having been under the system for five years, and the remainder for four. In addition to the yield gains, though, it's the reduction in passes, and hence establishment costs, which have had the most marked effect on the business.

much better, which was especially beneficial last season. But the system has had a wider effect in that, while we've had insufficient grain storage on the farm for some time now, the accumulated savings we have made from direct drilling – in our first season alone we saved £9,500 in contract drilling costs – have helped us to be able to invest in a new grain store for harvest 2013."

To find out more, contact CLAYDON on +44 (0)1440 820 327 or info@claydondrill.com www.claydondrill.com

"We can be more timely with spraying and spreading, as the tramlines bear the traffic