

FARMFOCUS



FOCUS CUMBRIA



(Photo: Paul Witterick, WittWoo Photography)

George Douglas (left) and customer Richard Henderson (Hilltop Farm, Ivegill) inspect the results of Claydon drilling kale into wholecrop barley in very dry, stony conditions.

Contractor: George Douglas

Location: Cumbria

Area contracted: Solway Coast, Dumfriesshire, Penrith, Cocker-mouth

Soil: varied, from sandy loam to black top peat

Cropping: wheat, barley, beans, stubble turnips, forage rape, grass seed mixes, kale

Cumbrian contractor sees bright future for direct seeding as customers look to reduce establishment costs

It was the damage to soil structure and health caused by traditional power harrow/drill combinations which prompted Cumbrian agricultural contractor George Douglas to find an alternative method of establishing crops.

“Regardless of which company manufactures them, power harrow/drill combinations have an intensive mechanical action which pushes oxygen out of the soil and causes compaction.

They allow you to get seed in the ground in most situations, but often the soil is left in poor condition and crops do not perform to their full potential”, George states.

Having read about the Claydon Opti-Till® direct seeding system George considered this approach so logical and the benefits so great that it warranted closer investigation.

Despite spending considerable time researching and discussing it with a local agronomist,

George was unable to see a Claydon drill working because all shows and demonstrations were cancelled during the pandemic lockdown.

The following March George took the plunge, buying a second-hand Claydon M4 Hybrid from a farm in Warwickshire. Operated behind his 250hp Deutz 7250 tractor, its first task was to establish a crop of beans at the request of a customer’s agronomist. Then another customer who normally



(Photo: Paul Witterick, WittWoo Photography)

Drilling beans with the Claydon Hybrid.

used a power harrow/drill combination asked George to drill 50 acres of beans, a task which was accomplished using just 6 litres of fuel per acre (14.8l/ha), a fraction of what a traditional plough, power harrow/drill and roll approach would have used. After that positive experience, the customer asked George to drill all their crops with the Claydon Hybrid.

“I had not realised just how large the time and fuel savings would be”, says George, who offers a wide range of services from cultivations, drilling and drainage to windrowing grass and baling. Operating up to 25 miles from Carlisle, on soils ranging from sandy loam to black top peat, his work takes him west to the Solway coast, north into Dumfriesshire and south to Cockermonth across to Penrith.

As customers saw the benefits of Claydon Opti-Till® word spread quickly and seeing the opportunity it provided George traded in his original drill in favour of a new Claydon M4 Hybrid. Supplied from stock by local dealer Rickerby. Equipped with pre-emergence markers and GPS-based metering rather than the radar-type system on his original machine, it has been used extensively ever since.

“During 2022 I did more drilling than in any previous year, just over 1000 acres, mainly wheat, barley, beans and stubble turnips for a wide range of customers, from large estates to small dairy farms who could not justify buying a drill themselves”, George states.

“Some of the work last spring was completed with my original Claydon Hybrid before the new one arrived in April. I

used it to drill about 600 acres, across a wide range of crops, including stubble turnips and forage rape/grass seed mixes. For the latter I used the twin tine kit, which was ordered for the original drill but still fitted the new machine.

“The twin tine kit was originally designed as a wet weather kit which allows us to work later in the season and in moist conditions, but it’s more recently become part of the low disturbance option on the Claydon drill.

“The new drill is a big step forward and the control box much easier to use. Compared with establishing crops using his previous system the Claydon provides massive time and cost savings. At most I could plough 30 acres (12ha) a day then had to go over the ground again to cultivate and drill. Establishing crops that way used about 18 litres of fuel per acre (44l/ha) whereas the Claydon is a one-pass operation which can cover 60 acres (24ha) per day using just 6 litres of fuel per acre (14.8l/ha).

“The Claydon Hybrid is easier on the tractor too because it causes much less wear and tear. Using the power harrow/drill combination the tractor’s engine operated at 2100rpm. With the Claydon, I normally set the variable transmission to the same 10km/h to 12km/h forward speed, but the engine

runs at 1100-1200rpm, which is its sweet spot.

The drill needs to operate at a certain forward speed to achieve the soil shatter required, but exactly what that is depends on the type of soil and conditions. We have operated up to 14km/h with no negative effects, but I always check seed placement to ensure that it is spot on.

“Power harrow/drill combinations are so widely used in this area that getting farmers to move away from something they have used for decades is difficult. I think that will change as direct seeding has so many benefits and the economic argument in its

favour is undeniable, but it will take time.

“Even though the Claydon System produces the same or better results at far less cost and with significant improvements to soil health it will always have its critics.

“Most farmers complain about rising costs yet are reluctant to change the way they operate and carry on doing what they have always done.

“On one farm, geese and swans had stripped the grass off a field and most of it had been ploughed ready for reseeded. But the owner wanted to see what the Claydon could do in the most difficult conditions, so I drilled

a headland that had been sprayed off.

“Conditions were very challenging in April last year and to start with it looked terrible, but the crop came through just fine and got progressively better. By the time we were taking a first cut of grass it looked great and the results overcame any initial scepticism.

“The Claydon has so many benefits, from greatly improved timeliness and lower costs to improved soil structure and the elimination of soil blows or run-off, that more farmers are now accepting that it is the way forward. I suggest that anyone thinking of adopting it



(Photo: Paul Witterick, WittWoo Photography)

Drilling stubble turnips with the 4m Claydon Hybrid behind George Douglas's Deutz 7250 tractor.



should visit an existing owner to see for themselves what can be achieved. Claydon drilled crops sometimes take a little longer to get away, but in spring they go off like a rocket and deliver excellent results.

“The Claydon Straw Harrow is a key part of the Claydon Opti-Till® System and after reading about the benefits which a farmer in Essex had

experienced from using it, particularly in relation to reducing blackgrass and slugs, I bought a 7.5m unit in March 2022.

“It is a very useful tool for stubble management, and I suggest to my customers that instead of spraying after harvest they use two passes with the Straw Harrow before drilling, which also helps me

to get potential customers interested in having work done with the Claydon Hybrid.

“Direct seeding is still in its infancy in Cumbria, but a lot of people I speak to are thinking about changing as the need to save time and money overcomes traditional reservations.”



cld648-02/24