EFFICIENCY is the key

RTK guidance allows accurate working to fixed tramlines, drilling at a different angle helping to lift out any wheelings that arise from baling and the odd bit of on the move corn carting.

Established just after WW2, H E Rogers and Son began trading as market gardeners on 5 acres of alluvial land in the village of Henlow, Bedfordshire. Diversification into haulage and the purchase of a farm in the mid-50s saw the family run company branch out to undertake contract work, the business seeing steady growth into the 1980s.

Glyn Rogers chopped in a 200hp Fendt 820 for the pictured 300hp Fendt 930. With enough power to pull a 6.0m Claydon Hybrid drill, the tractor works the same 4.5m unit used behind its predecessor. The extra power is not wasted, the 930 not having to work hard with a resultant saving in fuel.

"As children, my brother Lloyd and myself lived on a very busy and active farm", says Glyn Rogers. Now running H E Rogers and Son on his own, he adds he remembers the market garden side growing beetroot, spring onions and runner beans and how he regarded a good number of people in the village as nominal aunts and uncles. The family had five full time employees at the time and he has fond memories of driving tractors from the age of 12.

"My father had grown the farm and contracting service through the 60s and 70s, Lloyd and myself having a keen interest to work in the business. We both studied at Shuttleworth College, I graduated in 1981 and Lloyd in 1984. This coincided with father not being in the best of health, Lloyd and I taking over the business as partners. I was 20 and Lloyd was two years younger."

Between them, Glyn and Lloyd built up the business, investing in equipment to enable them to carry out a full arable contracting service. In 1996, they took out what was one of the first Farm Business Tenancy's on 300 acres of land on the other side of the A1 main road that passes near the home farm, adding a further 200 acre FBT in 2000. By this time, the brothers were farming 700 acres of their own land.

"The business was evolving, with the haulage side taking a decreasing role until we decided to stop in 1998," says Glyn. "When my father properly retired in 2000, we sold some land in the village and moved up the road to where I am now based. We invested in new buildings and grain handling facilities and continued to grow the contracting side, doing around 1,000 acres of contract drilling and combine work a year."

Right from the outset, Lloyd and Glyn printed their contract charge rates on a flyer, Glyn saying he still sticks to the open pricing policy he adopted from his father. The brothers were keen to diversify too, investing in their first Moore direct drill in 2005 and eventually buying a 6.0m variant. Direct drilling worked well and proved popular with customers.

"We were doing well and in 2010 we took the decision to expand further by investing in a sugar beet harvester to meet a new large contract," adds Glyn. "This would have seen us really grow our business. The day after we signed the harvester deal, Lloyd died suddenly. He was 45."

H E Rogers and Son is now operated by Glyn with his wife Sarah as his partner. Since Lloyds death his good friend Tom Kitchener has been driving his JD S680 combine, "I am very grateful for all the support and help I have from the farming community and I am honoured to be part of an industry that works to support each other in difficult times." Glyn decided he wanted to work on his own and it was this that has led to his current business model.

"Back in 2012 I was told that the 200 acres of the FBT land we had farmed 'over the road' and 100 acres at Langford was going to be sold by the owners. I did not have the resources to buy at the time, as I was still sorting out the probate on my brother's estate, so let it go," says Glyn. "Then in 2013, we were approached by the Co-Op to become part of the Biggleswade Wind Farm project. So

Continued over the page

Glyn Rogers pictured next to the straw harrow which is a vital component in the Claydon drilling system.

over a short period the area I was looking after decreased, giving me time to think about the business and the future. I realised I could either cut back on the ground I looked after or improve efficiency. I decided on the latter."

To improve the efficiency Glyn held a farm sale of over 200 lots seeing him dispose of the firm's heavy cultivators, nine-furrow plough and fondly remembered Ford FW30 articulated tractor. This equipment cull saw Glyn re-invest in equipment to include a switch to a 4.8m Claydon Hybrid drill.

"Experience with the Moore direct drill had proven the concept of not needing to carry out traditional cultivation," adds Glyn. "I needed to improve my efficiency but still be able to work soils that ranged from gravel through to really heavy clay. The Claydon system was tested over a range of soils but I needed to prove it to my customers too."

Glyn adds that he was glad he sold the plough as there were occasions in the first couple of seasons when he was tempted to revert to conventional drilling. It took time for the Claydon system to establish on some land. But he persevered, the payoff being steadily improved results impressive enough to see two of his customers buy their own Claydon drills!

"I did lose some drilling work as a couple of customers saw the efficiency and cost cutting that the Calydon system delivered. But this helped prove I was right to adopt the Claydon concept," says Glyn. "I had invested in RTK based guidance early on as I realised controlled trafficking was key to really protecting the soil and this also helps make the Claydon system more effective. I really focus upon efficiency and accuracy. Back in 2008 we were yield mapping and adopting variable rate fertiliser applications. I have continued to refine and adapt this approach, applying liquid nitrogen through a Bateman sprayer and working down fixed 30m tramlines."

At this point, Glyn adds that variable rate fertiliser application is not so much about improvements in yields as these can be marginal. It is more to do with the efficient use of inputs and controlling costs with the benefit of helping to produce a more even crop.

"As an example, I use a Nitrogen tester to check wheat leaves between growth stages 37 to 51, assessing what the plant actually needs as opposed to just assuming an application of fertiliser is required. This allows me to apply fertiliser before the plant becomes deficient, optimising uptake. I am now looking at the liquid application of P and K, plant uptake of these nutrients through the soil typically being poor."

In 2015, Glyn was confident enough to take on a new 400 acre FBT at Little Staughton near St Neots. Although 20 miles away from his base, as it included grain storage, all the work can be managed, to include corn cart with two 14t trailers. The combine, which runs on tracks, will typically unload on the headland into the trailers although long field runs and other factors will of course see unloading on the move as necessary.

"We keep the stubble height as high as possible to reduce the volume of material passing through the combine down. I do not chop the straw but have it baled by a contractor, the bales going to the straw fired power station at Ely, and some of the barley finding a market for bedding. Baling, plus the bale chaser, is the only traffic to run between the tramlines."

An 8.0m topper follows the combine with a pass or two with a straw harrow helping spread the residues evenly and promote weed and volunteer germination. Crop residues have not proven a problem on any of the land Glyn drills.

All the land is managed in six blocks on a five-year rotation that includes winter wheat, winter beans, rape, winter barley and spring peas, plus linseed for 2017. This system will see two fifths of the land down to first wheat, a fifth to barley, a fifth to OSR or beans, and a fifth to spring cropping.

"The spring sown land is topped and raked and then left over winter to green up. In spring the ground is sprayed off which has helped control blackgrass and other weeds," says Glyn. "I have to admit, it did trouble me when I first started to over winter stubble as it can look scruffy. But it is part of the rotation system and it works. I did consider sowing cover cops but as I now have no need to break up any pans and have plenty of organic matter in the soil I do not see the need. A cover crop can also lock in too much moisture which is a consideration in a wet spring."

A few of the turbines that form the Biggleswade Wind Farm are located in the land farmed by Glyn Rogers but they do not provide too much of an obstacle and are easily worked around. Some stubble is not topped, but all of it will have had a pass or two with the stubble rake. Drilled land is rolled as necessary.

Getting back to drilling, the autumn drilled land is sprayed off ahead of the 4.8m Claydon Hybrid drill, this being pulled by a 300hp Fendt 930. Originally Glyn did this work with a 200hp Fendt 820; the drill does not need 300hp to pull it. That said, the extra power is a real plus in steep and difficult going and, because the tractor is not stretched, fuel use is well controlled too.

"I do not rack up huge tractor hours despite contract drilling an extra 800 acres a year and carrying out around 600 acres of other cultivation work," adds Glyn. "Despite drilling and cultivating as much land now as I did when working with Lloyd, I am more efficient. This is the key."

Glyn also suggests he likes to keep things simple. Spring cropping has proven the best way to control pernicious grass weeds but he says he would have gone with spring cropping anyway. Not to have done so could have put too much pressure on him in the autumn. He also continues to try new ideas and admits some have not worked. As an example, in trying to exploit the accuracy of his RTK guidance to run the drill parallel to the previous season drilling pass, he found putting the coulter into the undisturbed ground between the rows of the previous season was not a good move.

"It did not work, the coulters tending to go to the side and drawing a lot more power from the tractor. I now try and work at an angle to the previous year's pass, this helping to move but not over disturb the soil."

As to other contract work, Glyn continues to offer hedge-cutting work to a few favoured customers, running a recently purchased McConnel power arm equipped with a heavy-duty Omega flail. This unit has the stamina to cope with 4 inches of growth and has proven its worth in getting the hedges on his latest FBT back into shape.

"The heavy flail is a bit barbaric but it does the job. It enables me to get the ditches into shape well, the latter work throwing up the stones that smash cab glass! I have now invested in purpose developed, and expensive, Perspex guards to help reduce time lost to replacing glass."

As to the future, Glyn sees continued investment in reduced trafficking, economical but effective drilling and input accuracy are key. Also, looking at new ideas and systems helps to keep him motivated with the hope he will be able to pass his business on to one of his daughters. ■