

FARM DEMANDS RESPECT



The switch to the Clayton crop establishment system has brought numerous benefits for one Yorkshire farmer.

Dig down 25 to 30cm into the heavy soils at Duckitt & Sons' at Wormley Hill, Sykehouse in East Yorkshire and you'll unearth the sort of stuff that could be used to make bricks.

Situated just two metres above sea level, the 185-hectare farm has always been difficult to cultivate. Wet, sticky and prone to compaction, it would be a nightmare if not treated correctly, but having farmed there all his life Mark Duckitt knows the land like the back of his hand. He prides himself on meticulous attention to detail and says the 3m Clayton Hybrid drill, now in its fourth season, fits with his philosophy of how best to farm, being straightforward, efficient and economical.

"Here, the key thing is to work with mother nature, not go against her by thinking that power and technology will give you the upper hand, because in the long term she will always win," Mark states. "Less is more on this land. A timely, delicate approach which produces less wheelings works best."

The farm has been in the Duckitt family for nearly a century, with responsibility passing down to Mark from his father, James and uncle, Barry. Everything, from crop establishment

and care, through to the combining is done in-house, as well as some contract spraying with a Clayton self-propelled. The land is primarily arable, with a small amount of grassland (alongside three miles of riverbanks, maintained for the council) where 150 sheep are grazed.

This year, the cropping consisted of 80ha of wheat, 35ha of oilseed rape, 30ha of barley and 30ha of spring beans, with an additional 10ha of linseed as a trial. Since using the Hybrid, Mark says that wheat yields have gone beyond 10t/ha, the long-standing benchmark and now reach around 12t/ha; spring barley has increased as well to 9t/ha, while the spring beans are expected to produce 6t/ha.

When it comes to wheat, the target is maximum yield, varieties being the Group 2 KWS Siskin, together with Evolution (LG) and Costello (Senova).

With winter oilseed rape, Mark aims for a 5t/ha average, sowing Elgar (Elsoms) and the Clearfield variety DSV Veritas which is grown where charlock, cranesbill and runch have been a problem in the past. Spring barley (RGT Planet) has been introduced into the rotation to help alleviate issues with blackgrass, a weed which has always been present on the farm and became more prevalent after the wet winter of 2012, but which is now being tackled

by drilling winter cereals later and increasing the level of spring cropping. For the coming season a combination of spring oats, vetch and linseed will be used as a cover crop over winter.

"To continue reducing

blackgrass numbers, I use the 9"-wide A shares instead of the 7" ones to get a bit more seed coverage and reduce the distance between the rows," he says.

Yield has not been the only factor



Digging down into the heavy clay soils reveals the sort of stuff that could be used to make bricks.

which has improved; ground conditions are markedly better – something they've been trying to achieve on the farm for nearly 15 years. No ploughing has been done on the ground since 2003, with Mark using non-inversion techniques to try and maintain the soil structure and stop the spread of weeds. Even so, with 'soft autumns' becoming more prevalent, the Clayton system has further improved compaction and drainage (along with three yearly rotational mole ploughing).

"My agronomist has noticed that the workability of the soil is greater," he says. "This allows machinery to operate more efficiently, while the ground is easier to walk on after heavy rain and the farm is generally much cleaner than it was four years ago."

Testing its Suitability

"Claydon came onto my radar because I know Phil Redfearn, a farmer near Doncaster who had been using the system with good results," explains Mark. "I also visited the Clayton family's farm in Suffolk to see how the system worked on their land, although it's nothing like as heavy as what we have here and before investing, Phil drilled half our area of OSR to give us a better idea of how the drill would work".

Since buying the Clayton Hybrid there have been two wet years and one dry, so Mark has operated in all conditions. "When the weather has been fine and dry after harvest we have drilled almost straight away, as we cannot afford to be working when the land is wet. If necessary, we scratch a very shallow tilth, to a maximum of 5cm deep so that we don't disturb any heavy clay, and then drill. Occasionally, we also run over the headlands with the drill empty just to break up the top 20cm or so to relieve any surface compaction, then drill the complete field."

Power is provided by an 180hp



The moisture left in the ground from not over-cultivating means that crops establish early quickly and evenly and continue to grow in this way all the way to harvest.

Valtra, seemingly overpowered but Mark says it's a necessity on the farm. "The land here is so heavy that any implement takes a lot of pulling and the Clayton Hybrid is no exception. The reason for choosing the 3m version was so that our tractor could stay on top of it. Besides, with the Clayton Hybrid you can cover the ground very quickly in one pass. I drill at 9 km/h, never more than 5cm deep, and cover 17ha to 20ha a day, so timeliness is never an issue and this has helped me delay drilling to tackle weed control. I'm also saving over 50 per cent on my fuel bill and in the time taken to establish crops."

Continuing, he says. "One of the best things about it, is the even crop growth. Because you don't dry the ground out by over-cultivating there's always moisture in the seedbed. Crops get off to a good start, keep growing throughout the season and ripen evenly, which makes harvesting easier and produces a higher-quality sample. The straw is also of better quality, which is important because there's a good market for bedding straw and current prices are not to be sniffed at."

High levels of organic matter are incorporated, making use of sewage sludge and gypsum. Any straw that isn't sold is also put back into the soil and Mark explains that the Hybrid can deal with high levels of trash. "I do all the combining and don't worry about chopping the straw short because that takes a lot more power and reduces the combine's output. In any case, because the clearance between the tines is so great that it makes no difference and if there is a lot lying on the surface I use the Straw Harrow just to spread it evenly. On occasions, I might also run over the land with the Straw Harrow a day or two after drilling just to level the surface and improve the seed to soil contact, then let the soil haze over and roll the following day."

Concluding, he says that after three full seasons the Clayton Hybrid is showing few signs of wear and that he wouldn't change the specification while the crop rotations remains as it is presently. "If we grow more cover crops I might replace the leading tines with front cutting discs, or even look to trade it in for a slightly larger model and do more contracting." ■



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