

Best of British: Claydon Drills still a family affair

By Mike Williams

The Claydons have farmed at Gaines Hall in Suffolk for more than 100 years. But the farm is also home to the family's fast-expanding machinery business.

The farm grows 400ha of combinable crops on a clay soil, and the machinery business is built mainly on equipment Jeff Claydon developed to boost efficiency at Gaines Hall, including their direct strip seeding system.

Mr Claydon's career as part-time inventor began in the 1970s when he designed a yield-measuring device for combine harvesters. He wanted accurate yield information to assess changes in crop production methods and the Claydon Yield-o-Meter was made on the farm from 1980, achieving accuracy within 1% and winning a 1995 Royal Show silver medal. Sales totalled more than 1,000 and the company's official name remains Claydon Yield-o-Meter, although it is usually called Claydon Drills.

The Yield-o-Meter was joined in 1995 by the Furrow Cracker, a plough attachment that broke up furrows as they came off the mouldboard. It was made in Germany and distributed by Claydon in the UK, where it won a Royal Show silver medal and achieved more than 1,000 sales.

The Furrow Cracker was early evidence of Mr Claydon's aim to reduce crop establishment costs, and pressure for cost savings with-

out reducing yields increased when wheat prices fell in the late 1990s. This was the incentive for developing the direct strip seeding drill, easily Claydon's biggest machinery success so far. Work on the one-pass establishment system started in 2000 and the first V-Drill was working in 2002.

"Prices were so low that we were struggling to make a profit on our farm, which is why I decided to find an alternative to ploughing", Mr Claydon explained. "The V-Drill worked directly into stubble and since we started using direct strip seeding in 2004 we have not used the plough. We can establish crops for about one-third the cost of a full cultivation system and, with better timeliness, our yields increased by about 10% compared with our previous traditional cultivations."

Further developments based on the original band-sowing technology included the SR drill, in 2004, with better straw clearance and stone protection, and in 2009, the Hybrid mounted drill arrived in widths up to 6m. Additional

T-series trailed versions introduced this year in 6m and 8m widths carry up to 4,500kg of seed and fertiliser. Output figures for Claydon's one-pass system can be impressive, and a 6m Hybrid drill, one operator and a 300hp tractor cope with 400ha of autumn-sown crops at Gaines Hall, plus more than 1,100ha of contract drilling.

One result of the sales success of the drills, plus the recently introduced tined harrows and cambridge rolls, is a big increase in employment at Gaines Hall. The machinery business employed 10 people in 2010 but the current figure is 40 plus two vacancies, and further employment is created in companies with subcontract work.

Although Britain remains the biggest market, export business is growing rapidly, covering 24 countries and producing about 40% of total sales, and Mr Claydon believes there is plenty of scope for further expansion in the UK and overseas.

Rapidly increasing sales have brought a major change in marketing policy, with the previous direct selling arrangement in the UK being replaced by regional dealers – or partners as Mr Claydon calls them. These are established machinery dealers supplying service support and with local knowledge to generate additional sales.

CLAYDON YIELD-O-METER

- * **Address** Gaines Hall, Wickhambrook, Newmarket, Suffolk
- * **Owned by** Claydon family
- * **Employees** 40
- * **Principal products** Claydon system drills, straw harrows and cambridge rolls

Jeff Claydon with the Hybrid mounted drill.

