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CROP INPUTS
Special Inside

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STRIP TILLAGE TRANSFORMS MEMBER'S FARMING BUSINESS

Adopting strip tillage has transformed crop establishment for Fram Farmers Member and award-winning family farming partnership R & H Edgeley in Suffolk, bringing a wide range of benefits.

Breaking the bond with tradition is never easy, but following the challenges of the wet autumn of 2012 followed by a wet harvest in 2013, and looking to the possibility of lower levels of agricultural commodity prices, Richard and Hugh Edgeley decided there must be a better, more cost-effective way to establish crops than the conventional methods they had used for years.

"Other farmers tell us we were brave to take what they perceive to be a huge risk in changing to strip tillage," Hugh states. "Our view is that with huge uncertainty and price volatility in the agricultural sector we would have to have been brave, even foolhardy, to have carried on doing what we had been doing. It has made a considerable difference to our business."

Farming Haymarket Farm at Little Waldingfield, Hugh and his father Richard jointly manage their arable farming business, which won the 2015 Challenge Cup in the South Suffolk



The cost savings achieved by strip tillage enabled Hugh Edgeley to invest in guidance systems, saving more time and making field work more accurate.

Crops Competition for farms of 526-999 acres. The business produces first and second winter wheat, winter oilseed rape, spring malting barley and spring beans or peas depending on markets and contracts. Soils range from Hanslope series clays to sandy clay loam.

"As a family farming business we have to compete with larger producers'

economies of scale and three years ago we identified three ways to help us do that," Hugh explains.

"Firstly, joining a true farmer-owned cooperative has provided us with greater buying power and independence. Fram Farmers has reduced our input costs, with far less time and hassle required to buy all of our agchems,

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STRIP TILLAGE TRANSFORMS BUSINESS

seed, fertiliser, fuel and other necessities such as electricity, 'phones and building materials. We also benefit from totally independent advice from their product specialists, which is a real advantage when you are dealing with complex areas such as generic agchems and you want sound advice with no commercial bias.

Secondly, using an independent agronomist, Andrew Blazey at Prime Agriculture, allows us to buy key inputs through the cooperative, which we have found to be cost effective.

Finally, adopting the Claydon System of crop establishment has brought dramatic benefits. Apart from reducing costs, it has improved timeliness, produced higher yields and increased gross margins, while the huge time saving gives us more opportunity to manage the business and for family life."

A NEW APPROACH

Focused on producing mostly added value crops which generate a premium at the optimum cost, Hugh adds:

"Three years ago we reached a pivotal stage, when a number of things were happening. Achieving timely crop establishment was becoming a real issue; after a series of wet autumns we were starting to lose the battle with blackgrass, and our previous cultivation system was simply mixing blackgrass within the top layer of soil and not dealing with the problem. Slugs were also on the increase, which was worrying because of increasing regulations over the use of Metaldehyde.

Strip tillage represented the unknown, largely because it was so different to what we had been used to, but then we realised that what we were using was not



Strip tillage has dramatically increased the worm count, leading to much better drainage and structure.

working too well. It all came to a head in 2013 when harvest was late as a result of the wet, cold growing season. We didn't start combining until the second week of August, when we should have been drilling oilseed rape. We had to get the crop in the ground quickly and had few options.

Purely for timeliness we hired a contractor to drill our oilseed rape using a 6m Claydon Hybrid, having seen him working on a neighbouring farm in previous years and been impressed by their crops. He drilled 85 acres in a day and despite poor soil structure following the wet autumn of 2012 the crop looked good from the word go. So good in fact that we asked him to drill 9ha of winter wheat on heavy land with a history of blackgrass to see if and how it worked. We were amazed at how quickly the crop emerged and how well it looked throughout the season. The oilseed rape and wheat which were drilled in this way fully surpassed our expectations and made us increasingly

interested in adopting the concept across the whole farm.

In November 2013 we had a Claydon Hybrid on demonstration and the following year invested in our own 3m unit, together with a Claydon Straw Harrow. This creates a fine tilth which encourages weeds to chit, as well as killing slugs and destroying their eggs. Since using it routinely we have used fewer slug pellets and seen the least number of slugs post-drilling.

Initially we intended to use the Claydon System solely to establish oilseed rape and first wheat, but were so impressed that we now use it for everything. We have been amazed at the much wider drilling window that strip tillage gives us. Whereas conventional cultivations present significant risk from the weather, the Claydon System is so efficient we know that we can wait until conditions are just right for drilling and still get the crop in at the ideal time."



The cost savings achieved by strip tillage enabled Hugh Edgeley to invest in guidance systems, saving more time and making field work more accurate.



This crop of Santiago winter wheat, photographed just before Christmas 2015, was drilled on 28 September 2015 at 165kg/ha.