



# YORKSHIRE

## THE QUIET FARMING REVOLUTION



### WRITTEN BY MARK HATTON

For the last 19 years, I've been very fortunate to have been able to call Yorkshire home.



Across the broad sweep of the Yorkshire Wolds, the upland fringes of the Pennines and the deep, fertile soils of the Vale of York, farming has always been shaped by both landscape and necessity. Today, however, Yorkshire agriculture finds itself in the midst of a quieter but far more profound transformation. Driven by economic pressure, environmental responsibility and a renewed understanding of soil and biology, farmers across the county are embracing regenerative practices that challenge long-held assumptions about how land should be worked and how food should be produced. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rapid uptake of direct drilling and low-disturbance systems in arable rotations, alongside the reimagining of livestock management through grazing strategies that restore, rather than deplete, the land.

In Yorkshire's arable heartlands, regenerative thinking has moved well beyond being a niche interest. Direct drilling, once viewed with suspicion, is now widely recognised as a practical tool for rebuilding soil structure, retaining moisture and reducing both labour and input costs. From heavy

clay to lighter chalk and sand, growers are discovering that by disturbing less and keeping the soil covered, they are encouraging fungal networks, improving infiltration and unlocking nutrients that had been tied up by years of intensive cultivation. Multi-species cover crops, once trialled on small areas, are now being woven into whole rotations, providing living roots in the ground for longer, capturing carbon and feeding soil biology between cash crops. The result is not just healthier soils, but crops that show greater resilience to drought, waterlogging and disease.

Yet regenerative agriculture in Yorkshire is not confined to arable fields. Across the county's mixed and livestock farms, a parallel revolution is under way. Grazing management is being transformed through the use of rotational and mob-grazing systems that mimic natural grazing patterns. By allowing grass and herbal leys adequate rest periods, farmers are building deeper root systems, improving soil organic matter and increasing forage production without relying on ever-higher fertiliser applications. Cattle and sheep are

becoming tools for soil regeneration, trampling organic matter back into the sward and cycling nutrients through dung and urine. For many producers, the benefits are tangible: healthier animals, reduced feed bills and grass that keeps growing when conventional systems would be running short.

What unites these approaches, whether on arable or livestock farms, is a shift in mindset. Regenerative farming asks producers to work with natural processes rather than against them. It prioritises soil as a living ecosystem, values diversity above uniformity and measures success not only in yield, but in resilience and long-term viability. In a region as large and varied as Yorkshire, this flexibility is crucial. There is no single regenerative blueprint, but there is a growing willingness among farmers to experiment, observe and adapt.

That spirit of innovation is not limited to what happens in the field. Yorkshire is also home to some of the UK's most progressive agricultural machinery manufacturers, many of whom are playing a key role in the shift towards lower-disturbance and regenerative systems. Companies such as Agriweld,



Grange Machinery, Ryetec and Sumo are all based in the region, designing and building equipment that reflects the real-world needs of modern farmers. From strip-till and direct drills to low-disturbance cultivation tools and precision application technology, Yorkshire-built machinery is helping farmers reduce passes, protect soil structure and cut fuel and labour costs. The close relationship between these manufacturers and local farming businesses creates a powerful feedback loop, where practical experience on Yorkshire farms directly influences the next generation of equipment.

At the heart of this momentum sits the Yorkshire Agricultural Society (YAS), an institution that has long been a cornerstone of the county's farming community. Best known for delivering the Great Yorkshire Show, the Society's influence reaches far beyond a few days in Harrogate each summer. Through its year-round programme of events, education and industry engagement, it plays a vital role in connecting farmers with new ideas, technologies and one another. In an era when agriculture faces unprecedented change – from post-Brexit policy shifts to the pressures of climate and public scrutiny – the Society provides a stable platform for discussion, debate and progress.

A central part of that mission is its Future Farmers programme, which is nurturing the next generation of Yorkshire agricultural leaders. YAS

Future Farmers brings together young people from across the region, providing them with networking opportunities, business insight, technical knowledge and exposure to innovative farming systems. Many of those involved are already actively engaged in regenerative practices on their own farms or in their professional roles, whether that means trialling cover crops, adopting new grazing strategies or analysing data to improve efficiency and reduce inputs. By giving these future decision-makers a voice and a network, the Yorkshire Agricultural Society is ensuring that progressive, regenerative thinking

becomes embedded in the county's agricultural DNA.

All of these strands – regenerative practice, engineering innovation, institutional support and generational renewal – will come together at the forthcoming Yorkshire Agricultural Conference on 28 January. Set against a backdrop of shifting policy and tightening margins, the Conference promises to be a focal point for discussion about how Yorkshire farming can remain both competitive and sustainable. With sessions expected to cover soil health, grazing systems, technology and the economics of low-input farming, it will provide a timely opportunity for farmers to take stock, compare experiences and chart a course for the years ahead.

For a county that has always punched above its weight in British agriculture, Yorkshire's current embrace of regenerative farming feels less like a radical departure and more like a natural evolution. Rooted in a deep respect for land and livestock, but informed by modern science, farmer-led innovation and home-grown engineering, it is shaping a future in which productivity and stewardship go hand in hand. As our Farmer Focus contributors will attest to, Yorkshire is not just adapting to change, it is helping to lead it.





# THE YORKSHIRE AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

The Yorkshire Agricultural Society (YAS) is best known for organising the Great Yorkshire Show each July but perhaps is lesser known for the work it does throughout the rest of the year

The new Yorkshire Farming Conference, taking place on Wednesday 28 January at the Great Yorkshire Showground, will help to change that. YAS is organising this major event for the first time, in collaboration with its Farming Networks, as part of its annual circa £500,000 investment to deliver support and promote agriculture and rural industries across Yorkshire and the North of England.

Aimed at everyone working in agriculture, the Conference features a full programme of inspiring talks and workshops, covering everything from farming smarter, policy implications and strengthening supply chains, to the world of livestock showing and wellbeing support. A packed trade show will also mean farmers can scope out new machinery and technology, speak to rural advisory and professional

service providers about a range of issues, and find out more about support available to them.

Allister Nixon, CEO of YAS, said:

“Tickets are on sale now for the Conference, which will spotlight big topics with leading lights from across farming. It is an event for everyone in the industry, backed by a trade show





Allister Nixon, CEO of YAS

and with a full day to make connections with others in farming, hear and take part in topical talks and find out more about what YAS offers.”

A registered charity, founded in 1837, YAS was established to promote agriculture in Yorkshire, and its first objective was to run a major agricultural event. The Great Yorkshire Show was born as a touring show at sites across Yorkshire, with the first show held in Fulford, York, in 1838. This remained the case until 1951, when the show took place for the first time at its new permanent home, the Great Yorkshire Showground in Harrogate.

This investment to purchase the Showground and the subsequent establishment of its Showground businesses (Fodder, The Great Yorkshire Events Centre, Pavilions of Harrogate and Harrogate Caravan Park), whose profits are invested back into the charity, helps YAS to flourish. What’s more, an independent analysis in 2019 found that businesses and events held at the Great Yorkshire Showground contributed £73.7 million to the economy.

With these firm foundations, YAS’s work has grown considerably over recent decades. YAS supports and promotes the farming industry through events, training, grants, bursaries, scholarships, education, scientific research, practical support and stakeholder engagement. It does much of this work through its Farming Networks.

Future Farmers of Yorkshire is the

group for forward-thinking farmers, vets and industry supporters, which offers events and activities to promote professional development and provide networking opportunities.

The Farmer Scientist Network brings together scientists and farmers to explore how science and technology can both solve practical problems on farms and underpin innovation in agriculture for future generations.

The Yorkshire Food, Farming and Rural Network is made up of local stakeholder groups, representing different areas of the region, to identify and feed back issues and concerns to government.

The Yorkshire Rural Support Network connects farming organisations, charities and voluntary agencies that work with and support Yorkshire’s farming community by promoting and providing sources of help – practical, financial, medical and emotional – to those who live in farming and rural communities.

The Women in Farming Network brings women from farming and related industries together in the spirit of celebration, support and collaboration.

YAS also offers the Goodall Agri-Development Pathway, a fully-funded training programme to develop farming’s next generation, open to those aged 23-40 who work in farming and allied industries in the North of England.

Since 1980, YAS has supported professional development in farming by sponsoring Nuffield Farming

Scholarships, which enable farmers to travel internationally, report back on an industry issue and inform progressive change.

Its education programme includes Countryside Days, offering hands-on activities all about farming, food and the countryside to thousands of schoolchildren, free of charge, at the Great Yorkshire Showground over two days in June.

YAS small grants are available to individuals and organisations to: support and promote agriculture, rural and allied industries throughout the North; advance and encourage agricultural research and greater understanding and empathy with farming and the countryside; and, to advance and encourage the protection and sustainability of the environment.

The Tye Trophy, awarded by YAS at the Great Yorkshire Show, recognises conservation and environmental improvements in commercially successful farms and is judged across the North.

Tickets for the Yorkshire Farming Conference, priced £25 + VAT, are available to purchase in advance only, online at [yorkshirefarmingconference.co.uk](http://yorkshirefarmingconference.co.uk). A discount is available for group bookings of 10 or more. Tickets can also be purchased in-person, subject to availability, from Russells farm machinery outlets in Boroughbridge, Eggborough, Malton and Northallerton. BASIS and NroSo (CPD) points can be claimed at the event.



The Great Yorkshire Showground

Yorkshire

# FARMER FOCUS PHIL ROWBOTTOM



## A FIVE-YEAR JOURNEY INTO DIRECT DRILLING

Phil Rowbottom - Woolley, West Yorkshire.

It's been five years now. Five years since we parked up the plough and put our faith in direct drilling. It's a big leap of faith, I can tell you. You go from a nice, clean, ploughed field to drilling into what looks like a right mess of stubble and trash. It's not an easy transition to make, mentally. You've got to trust the system, trust the drill, and then, to a certain extent, walk away until March.

Of course, you're not really walking away. There's still spraying to be done, and you're constantly watching and wondering. But that initial shock of seeing your wheat coming up through all that stubble...it takes some getting used to. But it does.

We're now heading into our fifth harvest from direct-drilled crops, and I can honestly say, I don't think we'll ever go back. There would have to be a very strong reason to bring the plough



out of the nettles, and I can't for the life of me think what that would be.

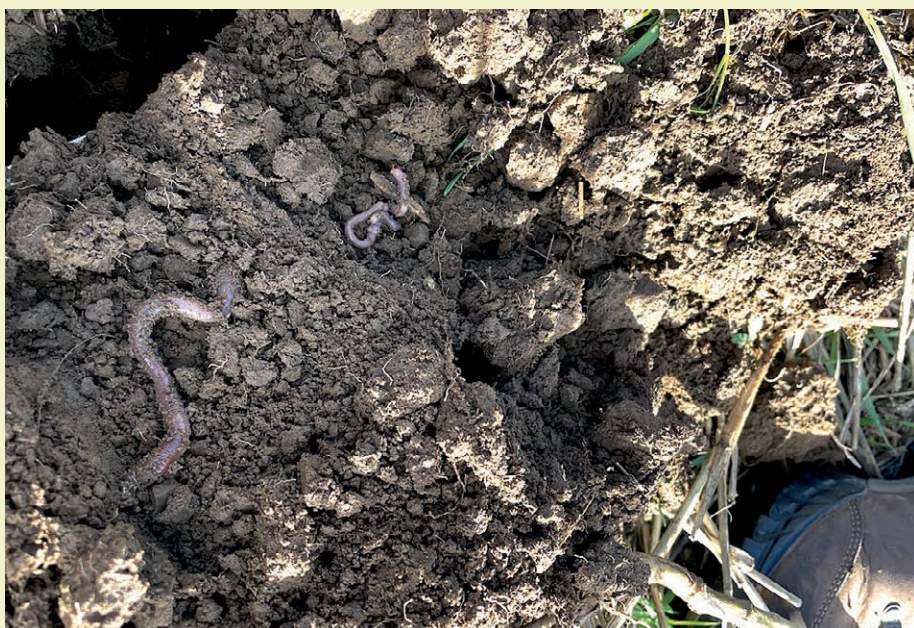
When you get a spade in the ground, you can see the difference. The soil is different; it's got a bit of a sponginess to it, a bit of life. It's friable, it breaks up, and you can see the wormholes and the root channels. We've had no metal through this land for over five years, and the soil is thanking us for it. I know some of the neighbours still lean on the gate and scratch their heads, wondering what on earth we're up to, but I'm convinced we're on the

right track.

We're using cover crops to do the cultivation for us now. This year, we've got a mix of black oats, radish, vetch and a bit of ryegrass in our overwinter cover. We've upped the seed rate and the mix to get a good, thick cover, and it's doing a fantastic job. The radish, in particular, is brilliant. I dug up a taproot the other day that was as long as my arm. It's blasting through any old plough pans and creating drainage channels deep into the subsoil. It's amazing what a plant can do.

We've also got some sainfoin that's been in the ground for three years now. It's had all sorts thrown at it – Roundup, weedkillers, you name it – but it just won't die. I'm not bothered, to be honest; it's a fantastic plant. It's got a massive, woody taproot that goes down for feet and it's doing a brilliant job of improving the soil structure. It's also great for the bees.

Speaking of bees, our beekeeper has had a fantastic year. He's got nearly 100 hives on the farm, and he made 12 tonnes of honey this summer. It's great to see. We've got more and more food available for them now, with the buckwheat, vetch and other things we're growing in our cover crops. It's a nice little by-product of the system.



One thing we're not growing this year is oilseed rape. There's hardly any rape grown in the area now. Ten years ago, we were putting 5,000 tonnes of it into the store. This year, it was 300 tonnes. The flea beetle and the loss of neonicotinoids have just made it an impossible crop to grow. It's a shame, but we've had to adapt.

We're using the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) to help us with the transition. We're in a scheme that pays us for using cover crops and for having a certain amount of our land in bird-friendly habitats. It's helping to bridge the gap and it's encouraging us to do the right thing. We're seeing more skylarks on the farm now than I've seen in years, which is fantastic. It's a sign that we're doing something right.

But it's not all plain sailing. The government and the policymakers don't make it easy for us. They come up with these grand schemes and ideas, but they don't seem to understand the reality of farming. They don't seem to get that we're running businesses, and we need to make a profit to survive. They're quick to ban chemicals and impose new rules, but they're not so quick to provide us with viable alternatives.

The government has also announced an uplift on the inheritance tax threshold, but it doesn't address all our concerns. For many family farms, especially those with significant land holdings, it still means facing substantial tax bills when we pass the business on to the next generation. We've spent generations building these businesses, investing in the land, improving the soil, and now there's still uncertainty about whether our children will be able to afford to keep the farm in the family. It's not just about the tax itself – it's about the principle. Farming is a long-term business, and these sudden policy shifts create real anxiety for families planning their futures.

The whole glyphosate debate is a prime example. How many times does it have to be tested and declared safe? And yet, the pressure to ban it is relentless. If we lose glyphosate, it will be a disaster for no-till farming. We need it to control our cover crops and to manage our weeds. There's talk of mechanical weeding, and I'm looking into it, but it's not a simple solution. It would mean changing our row widths, and I'm not sure if it would be as effective.

It's a constant battle. But we're farmers, and we're used to that. We're a resilient bunch; we have to be. We're always looking for new ideas, new techniques, new ways of doing things. That's what makes it interesting. That's what keeps us going.

And it's not just about farming. It's about the lifestyle. The move to direct drilling has given me more time. I'm not spending all autumn sitting on a tractor seat, ploughing and cultivating. I've got more time to spend on other aspects of the overall business, more time with the family, more time to enjoy life. And you can't put a price on that.

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# FARMER FOCUS

## ANGUS GOWTHORPE



### A FARMER'S REFLECTIONS: RESILIENCE IN THE FIELD AND PRIDE IN THE HERD

Angus Gowthorpe, Approach Farm, Riccall, York.

As we settle into 2026, it's a natural time to reflect on the year that has just passed here at Approach Farm. 2025 tested our resilience, particularly on the arable side, but it also brought immense pride through the continued success of our livestock enterprise. The story of last year is one of contrasts – of challenges posed by Mother Nature, and the rewards of careful breeding and management. It's also a year that has been overshadowed by concerns about inheritance tax and the future viability of family farms like ours. As I write this in early January, with the winter crops established and the new year stretching ahead, it's worth taking stock of what we learned, what we achieved, and what the future might hold.

#### The arable enterprise: A tale of two seasons

Our arable operation, spanning around 330 acres, is a rotation of wheat, barley, beans and oilseed rape. When people ask about last year's harvest, it's a nuanced story. The actual combining process was relatively straightforward: the weather held, and the machinery ran well. The real damage was done much earlier in the season. The prolonged period of high temperatures and dry weather in the run-up to harvest hit the crops hard, significantly reducing potential yields. It's a stark reminder that so much of our success is determined by factors entirely out of our control. You can do everything right, but you can't

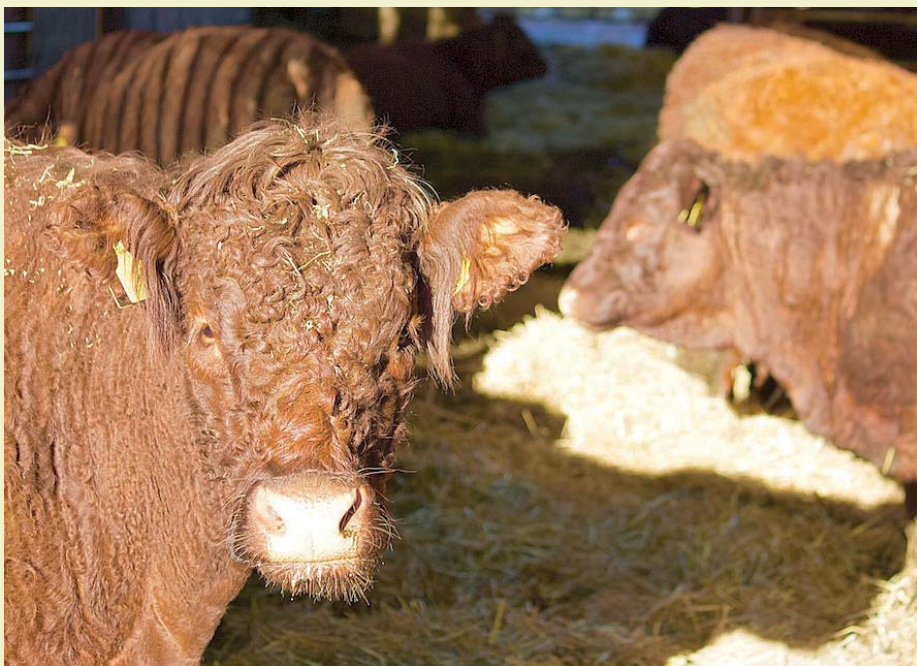


make it rain. The heat stress affected grain fill, particularly in the wheat, and we saw yields that were well below what we had anticipated when the crops were looking promising in the spring.

Despite the disappointing yields, we press on with renewed determination. Autumn planting is a time for restored optimism and an opportunity to implement improvements to our farming system. This year, we've been putting our Horizon drill through its paces, and it has been a game-changer for us. The move to direct drilling has been a learning curve, but we are convinced it's the right direction for the health of our soils and the long-term sustainability of the farm. The Horizon drill has performed exceptionally well, allowing us to establish the winter crops in good

time, even with the variable conditions we experienced. The precision of the machine, combined with its ability to handle residues effectively, has given us confidence that we're on the right track.

We're hopeful that this investment in soil health will pay dividends in the years to come, building more resilience into our system to better withstand the kind of weather extremes we saw last summer. Direct drilling reduces soil disturbance, which helps to preserve soil structure and organic matter. Over time, this should improve water retention and nutrient cycling, making the crops more resilient to both drought and excess moisture. It's a long-term strategy, and we're playing the long game. The commodity prices remain challenging, but we're exploring every avenue to



year-round. This integrated approach – combining grassland management with careful breeding – is key to our success.

Seeing our cattle perform well in the show ring is a source of immense pride, but the real satisfaction comes from seeing them thrive in their new homes, whether that's in other pedigree herds or in commercial suckler operations. We know that we are contributing to the improvement of this fantastic breed and providing customers with cattle that will perform for them. The herd is more than just a business; it's a family passion that involves everyone on the farm. From the daily chores to the excitement of the show ring, the cattle are the heart and soul of Approach Farm.

### Looking forward

Farming is a life of constant challenges, from unpredictable weather and volatile markets to the ever-present burden of regulation and the ongoing threat of disease. Yet it is also a life of immense rewards. The satisfaction of a well-established crop, the pride in a championship-winning cow and the privilege of being custodians of this small part of the British countryside are what keep us going. As we look to the year ahead, we do so with a sense of realism about the challenges, but also with an unwavering optimism for the future of our farm and our industry. We're committed to continuous improvement, to sustainable farming practices and to producing the best livestock and crops we possibly can: that's what Approach Farm is all about.

add value to our production, whether through The Green Farm Collective marketing scheme or other new markets for our grain.

### Grassland and livestock: The Approach Farm herd

While the arable enterprise pays the bills, our true passion lies with our livestock. The farm is home to the Approach Farm herd of pedigree Salers cattle, a breed we have been dedicated to since 2010. We were initially drawn to the Salers for their hardiness, maternal qualities and docile nature, and they have proven to be the perfect fit for our system. They are a breed that thrives in our environment, requiring minimal inputs while producing cattle of exceptional quality.

We run a herd of around 45 championship-winning breeding females, and our focus is squarely on producing top-quality genetics. The show ring is an important part of our calendar, providing a valuable benchmark for our breeding programme and an opportunity to showcase what we believe to be some of the finest Salers cattle in the country. Over the years, the Approach Farm herd has enjoyed considerable success at major shows, including the Great Yorkshire and Lincolnshire shows. These accolades are a testament to our rigorous

breeding philosophy, which combines carefully selected AI sires with top-quality stock bulls, to produce cattle that are not only show-winners but also commercially relevant, with excellent conformation, growth rates and performance traits.

Our breeding programme is underpinned by a commitment to genetic improvement, selecting sires that complement our herd and move us toward our breeding objectives. We're looking for cattle that are correct to the breed standard, with excellent maternal traits, good growth potential and the ability to convert forage efficiently. The grassland enterprise is crucial to our system: we dedicate approximately 85 acres to forage production, ensuring our herd has access to high-quality feed



Yorkshire

# FARMER FOCUS

## JAMES PICK

### RESILIENCE, ROOTS, AND REGENERATION IN NORTH YORKSHIRE

By James Pick - H. Sutton and Son

Standing on the cliff tops a few miles south of Filey, looking out over the North Sea, you quickly realize that farming here is as much about managing the elements as it is about managing the soil.

I'm James Pick, H. Sutton and Son, a three-generation family farm, and like many of you reading *Direct Driller*, our journey over the last few years has been one of constant evolution, trial, error, and a fair bit of soul-searching about what it means to farm "conventionally" in a changing world.

Our operation is built on a foundation of diversity. We manage approximately 240 hectares of arable land alongside a significant potato enterprise, ranging from 155 to 180 hectares and a finishing unit for about 60 Aberdeen Angus cattle. Our soils are a real mixed bag, predominantly

silty clay loams but with pockets of everything from sandy loam to high organic matter peat. It's glacial deposit land, which means we're often dealing with everything from golf-ball-sized stones to rocks that require a pallet tine to shift. This variability is one of our biggest hurdles; what works on the cliff tops might be a disaster just a few miles inland.

#### The Potato Conundrum

Potatoes have transformed this business over the last 20 years, but they also present our biggest challenge when it comes to soil health.

The move was a necessary evolution, growing potatoes on contract, we wanted to push further into the environmental and regenerative space, but let's be honest: potatoes and "no-till" aren't natural bedfellows. We've been part of the Potato LITE (Low-Intensity Tillage Enhancement) program, testing everything from conventional setups to direct planters. While we've found that a full direct-planting system isn't yet viable on the bulk of our stony land due to quality and storage concerns, it has fundamentally changed our mindset. We're constantly looking



for that "middle ground" where we can maintain the quality required for long-term storage while minimizing the mechanical impact on our soil structure.

#### Moving Away from the Plough

We haven't pulled a plough through our soil in probably three years. It's still there, sat at the back of the shed like a museum piece, but I don't see us going back. We used to work land at 14 inches; now, the thought of the fuel and the structural damage that causes makes me wince. The transition wasn't just about saving diesel; it was about recognizing that our soils were becoming increasingly fragile.

Instead, we've leaned heavily into cover crops. For the last five years, every single acre destined for a spring crop has been put into an overwinter cover. It's not just about "doing the right thing" for the environment; it's about resilience. This year was a perfect example. While the yields weren't record-breaking, they were steady and better than expected. Why? Because our well-managed land, the stuff that's had regular manure and cover crops now has the water-holding capacity to cope with the dry spells. We spread 8,000 to 9,000 tonnes of manure a year, and the difference in organic matter is where the real "dividends" are paid. When the sun is beating down and the potatoes are threatening to "shut down" at 25°C, that extra moisture in the soil profile is the difference between a crop that survives and one that thrives.

#### Tech, Tines, and Timing

On the cereal side, we've been running a four-metre Horsch Sprinter for about five years. I'm a bit of a machinery geek at heart, and finding the right setup for our "high mag" soils that like to cap has been a process.





the first time the son makes a real decision is when the father passes away. Here, we've had those difficult conversations about inheritance and the future of the business early on, which has allowed us to move forward as a cohesive unit.

### Looking Ahead to 2026

As we look toward the 2026 season, the challenges aren't going away. We're still experimenting, I'm currently trying to source a maize header to try some grain maize on our lighter, sandy land. It's a risk, and we might be messing about in the mud in November, but that's the nature of the beast. We're also looking at how we can better integrate our livestock into the arable rotation, perhaps through more diverse legume fallows or grazing cover crops.

The biggest joy for me is still watching things grow. There's nothing quite like the race of a wheat crop through its growth stages in the spring or seeing the transformation of a potato canopy from one week to the next. We'll keep attacking the challenges with positivity, driving the family farm forward in a way that's both ecologically sound and financially viable. We're not just growing crops; we're building a legacy. After all, we're only as good as the land we leave for the next generation.

We've settled on three-inch Dutch openers as a happy medium. We tend to err on the side of caution with higher seed rates it's our insurance policy against a heavy inch of rain right after drilling that can seal the surface.

The tech has been a game-changer, but it's a double-edged sword. With GPS and modern LED lighting, there's no longer the excuse of "I can't see, I'm going home." I've found myself drilling until midnight more often than my girlfriend would probably like! But that accuracy knowing your AB lines are consistent across every tractor and every pass is vital for minimizing compaction, which is the silent killer on these silty loams. We're also looking at the next evolution of our spraying setup, moving from a 28-metre to a 36-metre boom to further reduce our footprint and improve efficiency during those narrow weather windows.

### The Nuffield Influence and Global Perspectives

A lot of my drive for change came from my time as a Nuffield Scholar. Traveling through Canada, the US, Australia, and Europe opened my eyes to what's possible when you stop looking at the farm as a factory and start looking at it as an ecosystem. I remember drinking beer with a soil

scientist in Wisconsin proper dairy country and talking for hours about soil biology. He was absolutely nuts, but his insights into how biology drives chemistry were revolutionary for me.

Those conversations are the reason I can't just "farm by the book" anymore. If I didn't have a say in moving this farm toward a more ecological and sustainable future, I wouldn't have lasted three years back home. I'm incredibly lucky that my dad and granddad have been supportive of this shift. In many family farms,

