

# Field drainage guide

Principles, installations and maintenance



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This guide, funded by AHDB and with a contribution from the Catchment Sensitive Farming initiative, was written by Kirk Hill, Robin Hodgkinson, David Harris and Dr Paul Newell Price, ADAS.

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# Introduction

## What is field drainage?

Field drainage is installed to rapidly remove excess soil water to reduce or eliminate waterlogging and return soils to their natural field capacity. Drains can be used to control a water table or to facilitate the removal of excess water held in the upper horizons of the soil.

A good drainage system will reduce the risk of detrimental waterlogging to acceptable levels.

Where soils are coarsely textured and well structured, the soil may be freely draining enough to support field operations and crop growth without the need for artificial drainage systems. Field drains should be considered in the following situations:

- **Heavy clay soils:** These are slowly permeable and, without drainage, can be waterlogged for long periods, particularly in areas of high rainfall
- **Medium-textured soils in high-rainfall areas:** Drainage may be needed to reduce vulnerability to compression, slaking and compaction
- **Light-textured soils:** These soils are highly permeable, but drainage may be required to provide water table control in low-lying areas
- **Springs:** Drains are used to intercept springs before they reach the surface; this helps prevent erosion, localised waterlogging and poaching, and the intercepted water, if clean, may be used as drinking water for stock

There has been a general reduction in organic matter levels in arable soils over the past 70 years. This makes them more susceptible to waterlogging and more in need of drainage.

## History of field drainage in the uk

Around 6.4 million hectares of agricultural land in England and Wales have been drained with piped systems.

The rate at which land was drained increased rapidly during World War II, as part of the drive to increase food production, and peaked during the 1960s to 1980s, when grant aid was available.

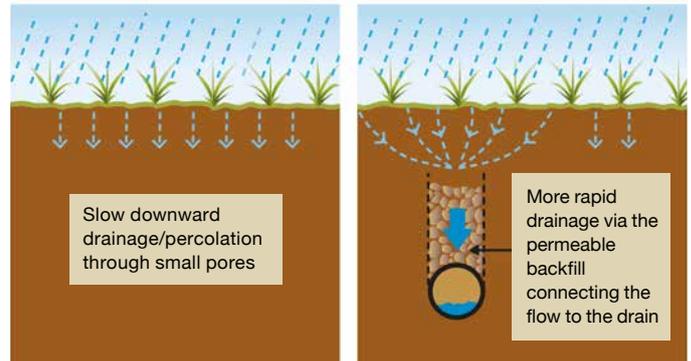


Figure 1. Drainage of heavy soil

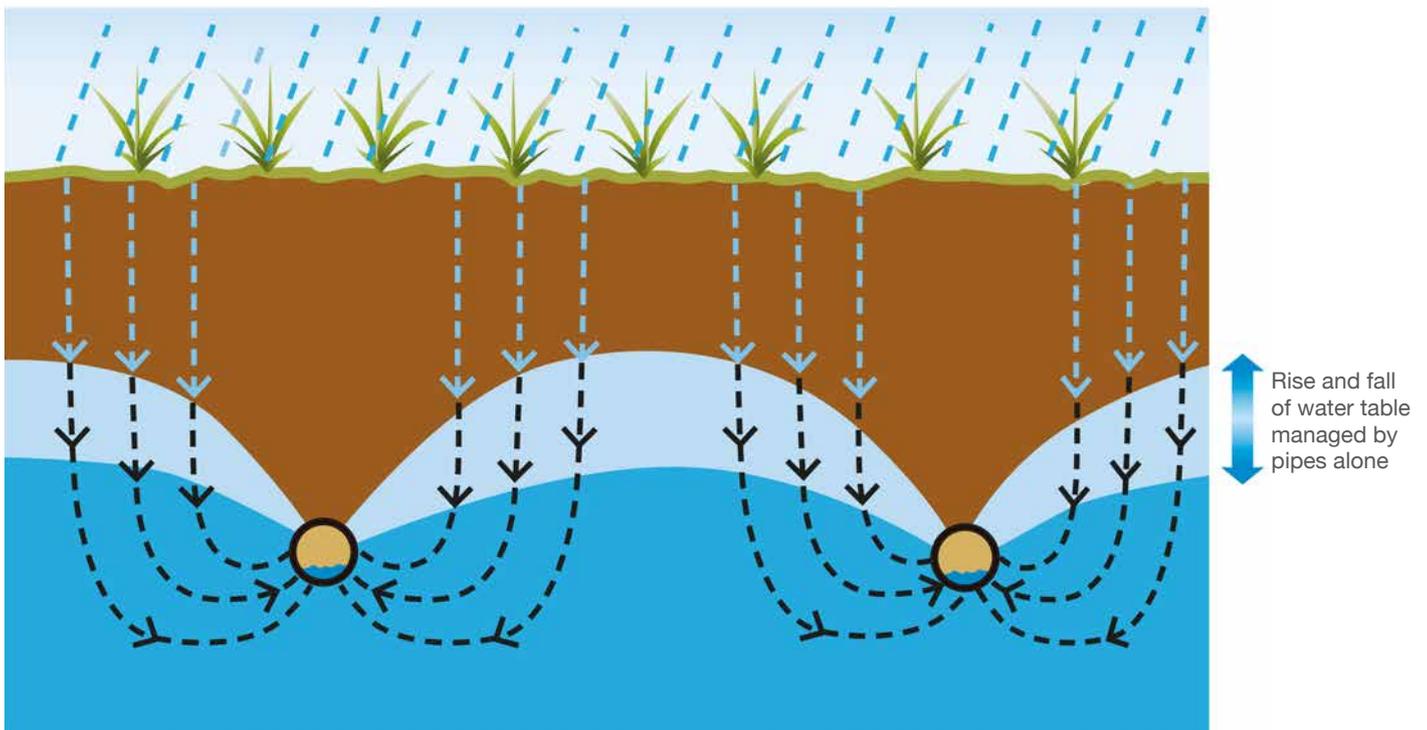


Figure 2. Water table control on permeable soils

# Benefits to the farm business

In some years, drainage can make the difference between having a crop to harvest and complete crop loss; or whether or not the land can be accessed to harvest the crop.

The benefits of field drainage to the farm business are substantial, but installation can be expensive. The magnitude of the benefit varies considerably with climate, soil type and land use, so it is important to carry out both environmental and cost–benefit assessments before installing or managing field drainage systems.

**Drainage is a long-term investment. Given good maintenance, a useful life of at least 20 years can be expected and some systems can last many decades longer.**

Good field drainage reduces the peak surface water run-off rates by increasing the availability of storm-water storage within the soil. Rainfall then percolates down through the soil into the drains, producing a more balanced flow after storms. This reduces the risk of flooding and soil erosion, not only within the field but also further downstream in the catchment.

## The cost of installation

The cost of installing a new comprehensive field drainage system varies greatly according to the scale and intensity of the system.

Based on 2024 prices, typical costs per hectare are around:

- £2,500–£3,500 with permeable backfill
- £1,400–£2,000 without permeable backfill



## Improved plant performance

- Improved crop yield and quality
- More rapid warming of soils in spring, improving germination
- Improved environment for soil organisms
- Better access to water and oxygen for plant roots
- Better crop uptake of soil mineral nitrogen

## Better access to land

- Reduced duration/risk of autumn waterlogging
- Quicker accessibility of fields following any period of wet weather
- Crop inputs more likely to be applied at optimum time
- An extended growing and grazing season

## Improved speed of work and fuel use

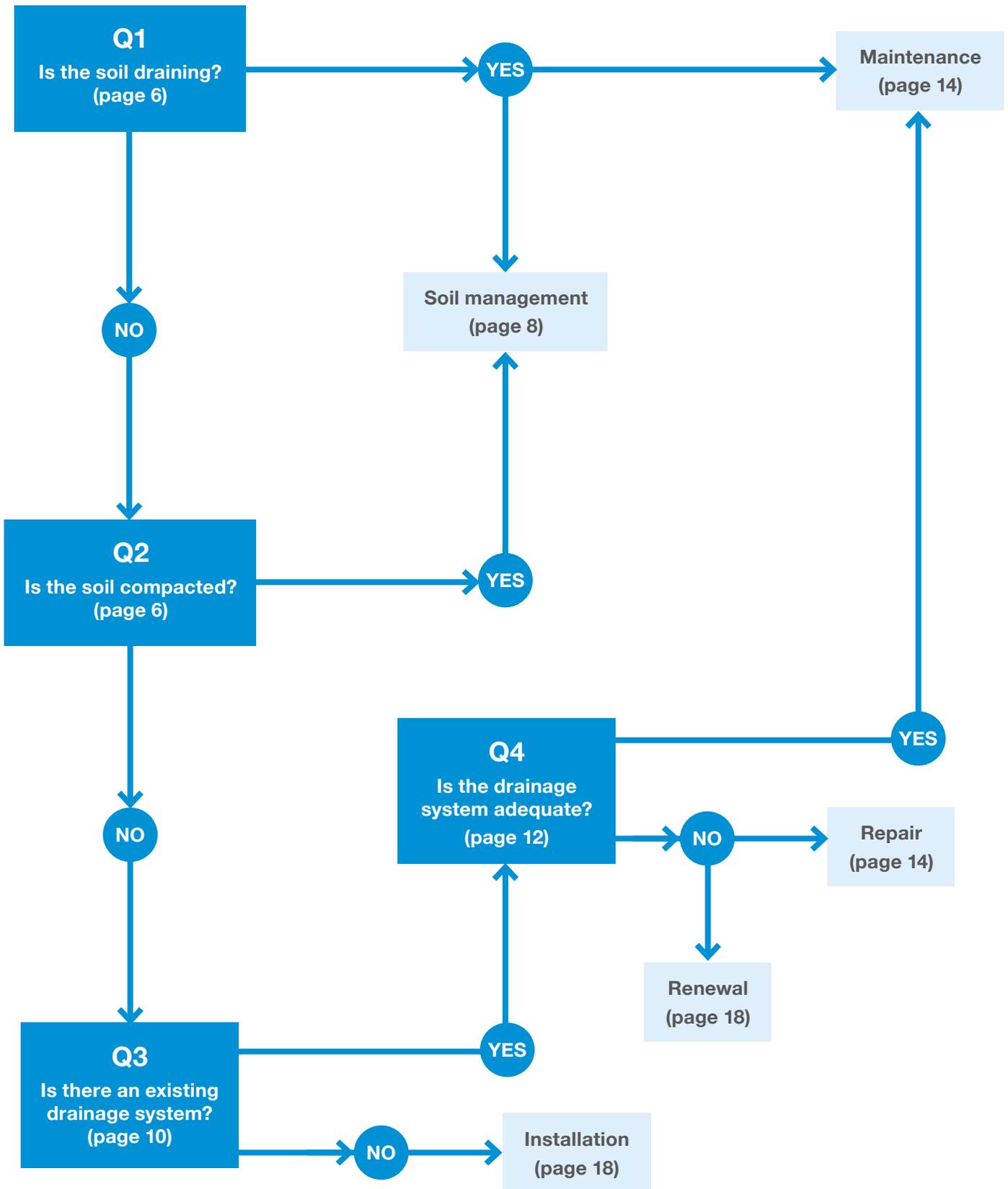
- Better traction
- Fewer cultivation passes
- Reduced draught forces
- Reduced wear and tear
- Fewer wet areas to avoid

## Benefits to soil structure and the environment

- Less structural damage to soils
- Reduced frequency and extent of livestock poaching
- Better water infiltration
- Reduced surface run-off and erosion
- Reduced phosphorus and pesticide losses to water
- Decreased potential for slug activity and reproduction

## Reduced risks to livestock health

- Reduced survival of parasitic larvae
- Snails carrying liver fluke do not thrive
- Footrot and foul of the foot are less common
- Udder hygiene for grazing stock is improved
- Reduced risk of soil contamination during silaging operations



# Identifying the need for drainage

## Evidence of poor drainage

The evidence of poor drainage may be obvious in the form of surface ponding or saturated topsoils.

Prolonged waterlogging under the surface may not be so obvious. Poor drainage conditions may be identified by:

- Poor crop health or yields: overlaying a yield map onto a field drainage map can identify problem areas
- High surface run-off rates and soil erosion
- Limited field access without rutting or poaching (animal hoof damage) compared with other fields in the area
- The presence of wet-loving plant species, such as common rush and redshank
- Susceptibility to drought due to poor root development and limited rainfall percolation into the soil

If drainage problems are widespread across the field, it may be that:

- Soil management is not adequate
- No drains have been installed
- Mole drains need to be renewed
- In flatter fields, the outfall may simply be blocked
- The drainage system requires maintenance or has reached the end of its useful life

## Environment

Surface run-off may occur, which can result in transport of faecal material, sediment, soilborne diseases (e.g. clubroot), nutrients or agrochemicals to watercourses.



Figure 3. Surface ponding



Figure 4. Areas of grassland may become heavily poached at times when soil conditions in other fields on similar soils do not lead to poaching



Figure 5. Saturated topsoils



Figure 6. Areas within arable fields may be waterlogged, resulting in crop loss or soil damage due to wheel ruts

## Is the soil draining?

Examining the soils to determine if they are naturally freely or slowly draining or have damaged structure should be the first action when drainage problems are suspected.

**Without good soil structure, soil drainage will be poor, whether it be by natural drainage or pipes.**

Compacted layers can restrict surface water from reaching underlying drainage systems. If compacted layers are identified, remedial action should be undertaken to remove them before considering field drainage maintenance or reinstallation.

It is essential to routinely assess soil structure. This can easily be incorporated into the farm soil sampling programme and should be completed in spring or autumn. Examine the soil at several points in the field to a depth of:

- Arable land: at least 600 mm
- Grassland: at least 500 mm

### Soil structure

- ✓ Well-developed structure is evident from the ease of digging and if the soil readily breaks down into small structural units with many vertical fissures
- ✗ Soils with poor structure are hard to dig and break down into larger dense blocks, with poor penetration by water, air and roots

### Soil colour

Greyish-coloured soils and soils with rusty or grey-coloured mottles are signs of poorer drainage.

### Soil texture

The higher the clay content, the more likely the soil is to be naturally poorly drained.

### Root development

- ✓ Deep rooting indicates good structure
- ✗ Shallow rooting with many fine horizontal roots and tap roots that are diverted horizontally indicate the presence of compacted layers

## Perched water table

Soil compaction occurs when soil particles are compressed, reducing the space (pores) between them. This restricts the movement of vital air and water through the soil.

When soil water is present, dig a pit (to a depth where the soil becomes drier) to aid diagnosis. Saturated soils overlying a layer of dry soil after a period of heavy rain may indicate the presence of a compacted layer preventing drainage.

It is not uncommon to find both naturally and artificially compacted layers (pans) in susceptible soils. Plough pans can develop if a field is repeatedly ploughed to the same depth.

If the pan, whether artificial or natural, is limiting water infiltration and/or root growth, it should be removed by subsoiling or topsoil loosening.



Figure 7. Natural pans – often very hard bands of soil particles cemented together by iron and manganese



Figure 8. Compaction pans – dense layers caused by farm machinery operation; often 50–100 mm thick, they generally have a platy structure and frequently contain crop residues

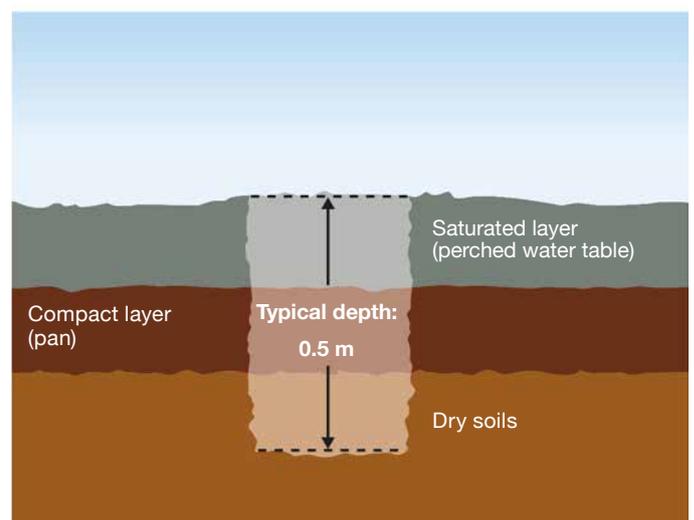


Figure 9. Soil inspection pit extending below the compacted layer

# Soil management for effective drainage

## Effective drainage relies on good soil management

If soil examination identifies compacted layers that act as a barrier to water movement, remedial action should be undertaken to remove them before considering new drainage.

**Maintaining a good soil structure may avoid the need for capital investment.**

Minimise soil damage by reducing:

- Field trafficking
- Weight of machinery
- Tyre pressures
- Poaching of livestock
- Overworking of the seedbed

Other potential solutions include the use of low-pressure tyres, minimum tillage, controlled traffic farming and fixed wheelings, avoiding turnout in poor soil conditions, and considering the placement of livestock feeders and drinkers and livestock tracks.

## Subsoil and topsoil loosening

When soils are wet, they are easily damaged by cultivation, machinery traffic and livestock trampling. If the soil structure has been damaged, subsoil or topsoil loosening (normally referred to as 'subsoiling' and 'sward lifting', respectively) in suitable conditions can be used to help restore the structure of a damaged soil. It can also be used to improve subsoil permeability.

Slit aerators can also be used in grassland fields but should only target the top 10 cm. Research has shown that they can increase infiltration rates, but good conditions are needed below the target area or they can just move water more quickly towards a drainage problem.

## Operating notes

### 1. Suitable conditions

Topsoil loosening and subsoiling should only be carried out when the soil at working and loosening depth is in a 'dry' and friable condition, so that it will shatter rather than smear. Examine soils early in the operation to ensure effective shattering is occurring.

For arable subsoiling, both the soil surface and the compacted layer should be 'dry' to avoid soil structural damage.

For topsoil loosening in grassland using a 'sward lifter'-type machine, the ideal conditions are when the soil surface is slightly moist, to allow disc and tine leg entry while avoiding excessive sward tear, and the lower topsoil is moist to dry, to enable 'lift' and loosening.

### 2. Choice of soil-loosening equipment

Winged subsoilers (as seen in Figure 10), developed in the 1980s, shatter the soil much more effectively than conventional subsoilers. They require higher draught force but can disturb a volume of soil two to three times greater than a conventional subsoiler, resulting in more effective disturbance.

The use of leading tines can result in an increased volume of soil disturbed without increasing the draught, but they are not suitable for grassland as they cause considerable surface disturbance.

Topsoil looseners (as seen in Figure 11) or 'sward lifters' for grassland incorporate a leading disc, a vertical or forward-inclined leg and a tine leg and a packer roller behind to minimise sward tear and surface disturbance.



Figure 10. Winged subsoiler



Figure 11. Topsoil loosener for grassland

### 3. Depth

It is best practice to use a depth wheel or rear packer roller to maintain a constant tine depth.

Aim for tines to be about 25–50 mm below the base of the compacted layer, up to a maximum depth of approximately 450 mm below ground level.

Maximum depth may be limited by shallow field drains, rock or the critical depth of the tine (related to tine width and soil conditions). Normal drain depth is around 700 mm below the soil surface.

For subsoiling to result in improved drainage, the depth to which the soil is loosened must be just greater than the depth down to the top of the permeable backfill.

This will connect the fissures and allow water to move to the permeable fill over the drains.

### 4. Spacing between tines

- Conventional subsoiler: up to 1.5 times the tine depth
- Winged subsoiler: up to 2 times the tine depth
- With leading shallow tines: up to 2.5 times the tine depth

After a trial run, dig down and examine the effect. Spacing can be adjusted, where possible, to achieve the desired degree of soil disturbance.

### Avoiding re-compaction

Recently loosened soils are very sensitive to re-compaction.

Avoid running over land that has already been subsoiled. In grassland, avoid grazing after autumn loosening and cut rather than graze in the first spring after treatment.

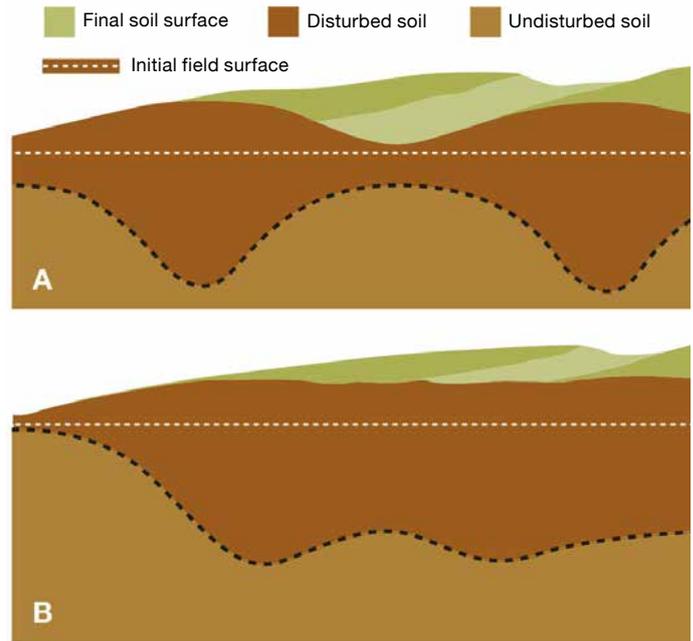


Figure 12. A is an example of tines set too wide and B shows tines correctly set

### Further information

- A guide to better soil structure (Cranfield University) [landis.org.uk/downloads](http://landis.org.uk/downloads)
- Soil management [ahdb.org.uk/greatsoils](http://ahdb.org.uk/greatsoils)
- Think soils (Environment Agency) [gov.uk/managing-soil-types](http://gov.uk/managing-soil-types)
- Principles of subsoiling videos on the Practical Pig app ([practicalpig.ahdb.org.uk](http://practicalpig.ahdb.org.uk))

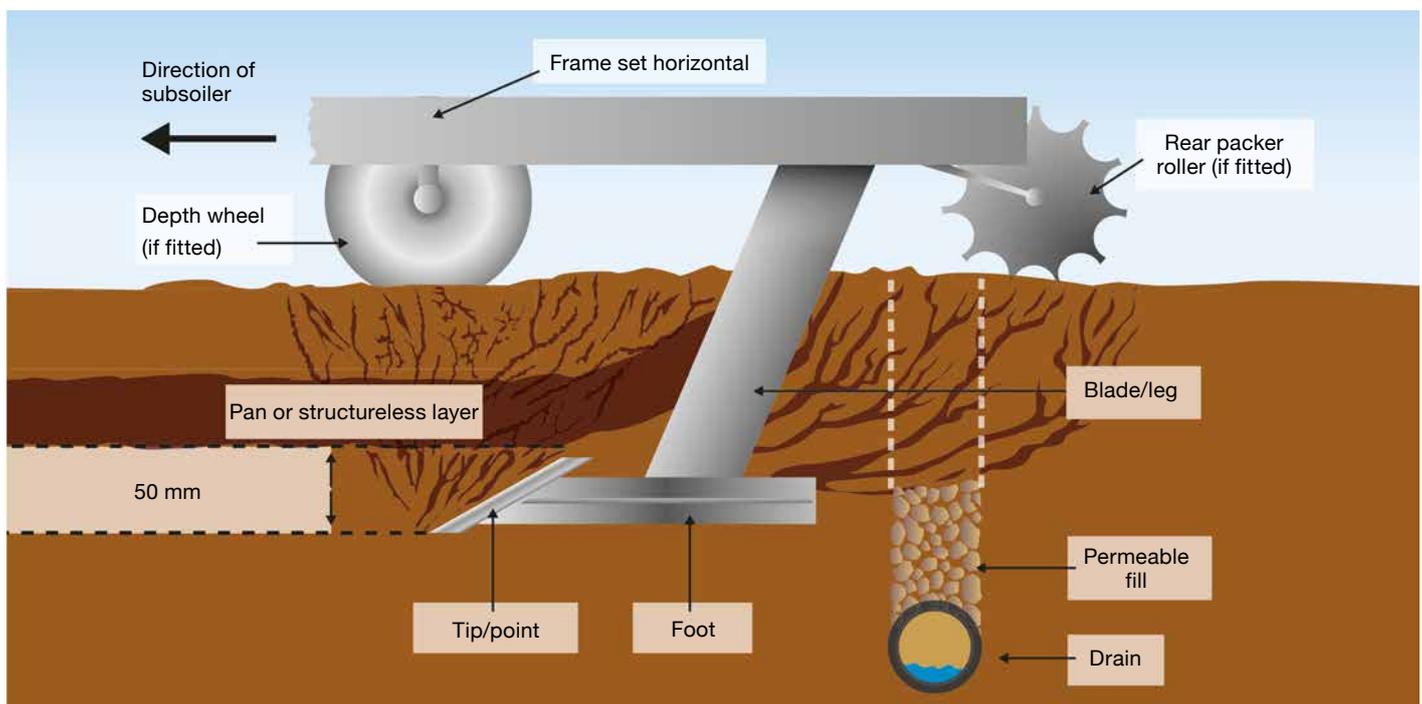


Figure 13. Subsoiler operation

# Identifying an existing drainage system

## Existing drainage

Fields are likely to already have some form of field drainage if they have heavy soils or medium soils in heavy rainfall areas or a naturally high water table. The system may, however, not be functioning properly or may be inadequate for the current farming needs.

## Typical drainage layouts

A field can contain a combination of different layouts or be drained irregularly, depending on the surface slopes across the field. If smaller fields have been merged into one, the outfalls may be found at the low points of each original field and not the current field.

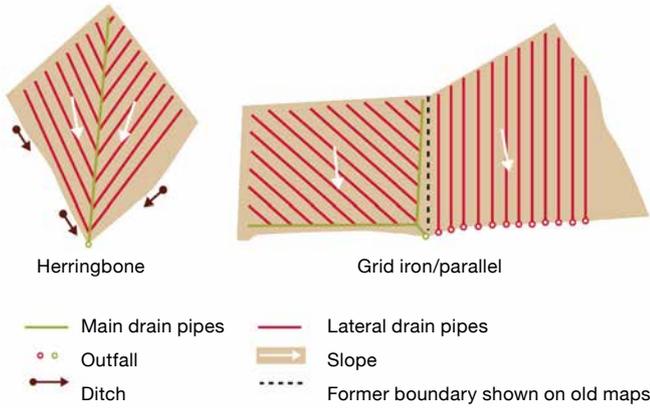


Figure 14. Typical drainage layouts

## Understanding drainage plans

On many farms, final drainage plans are available that detail exactly what type of drainage was installed and where it is within each field. Final plans are normally accurate and, provided the key above-ground features shown are visible, should enable the drains to be found.

Ensure it is a final drainage plan, not a proposal. A final plan may include the words 'completion' or 'as built' and should always be signed.

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the scheme as shown is satisfactorily laid down.

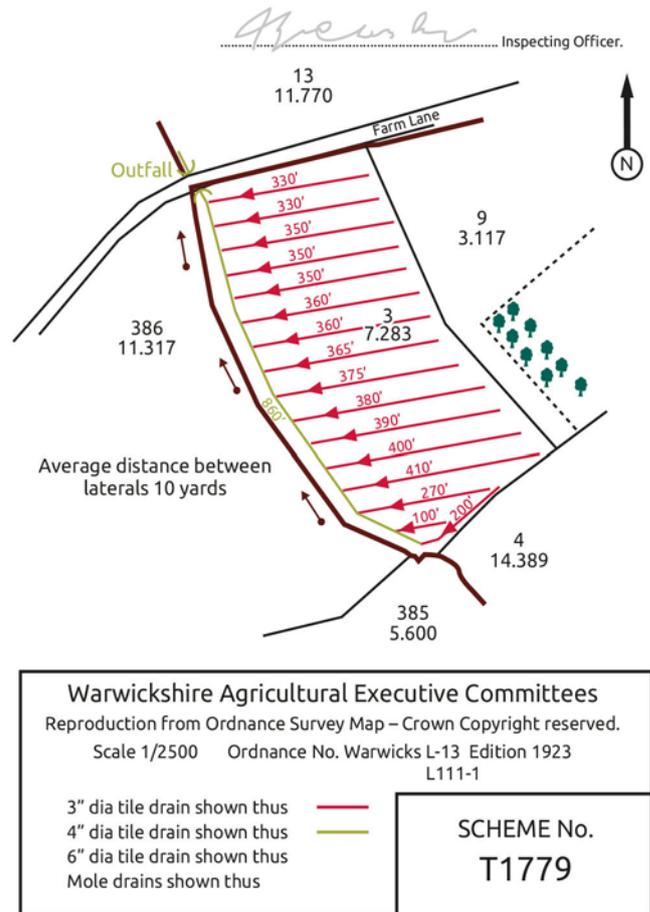


Figure 15. Example final drainage plan

## Standard symbols and colours

### Plastic pipes

Diameter mm	Colour
60 mmØ	Red
80 mmØ	Purple
100, 110, 125 mmØ	Green*
160 mm, 170 mmØ	Blue*
200, 225 mmØ	Yellow*
Over 225 mmØ	Black

\*Indicate diameter

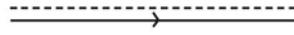
Open ditch



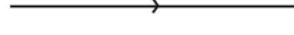
Outfall (in pipe colour)



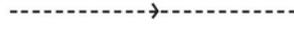
Pipe drains with permeable fill



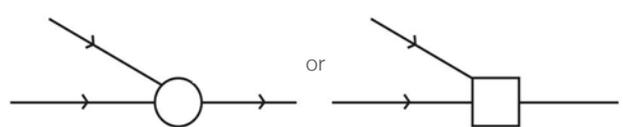
Pipe drains (new)



Pipe drains (existing)



Inspection chambers (in outlet pipe colour)



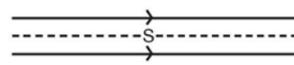
Pipe inlet chambers



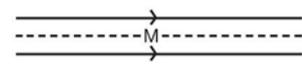
Culverts (include reference No.)



Subsoiling



Moling



## In the absence of a final drainage plan

Local drainage contractors may hold copies of any final record plans. If the land has been recently acquired, the previous owners may hold the plans.

## Creating your own drainage plan

1. **Produce a sketch map** showing the ditches and the direction in which they flow, along with the dominant direction of slope in each field. It may also be helpful to mark any removed field boundaries or ditches, as one large field may contain several small drainage schemes.
2. **Locate any visible outfalls.** These are generally found at the lowest points within a field. There may be more than one outfall, depending on the layout of the drainage scheme.
  - Walk the ditches after rainfall: you may hear an outfall running that you cannot see
  - The best time to look for outfalls is in winter when drains are running and vegetation growth is reduced
  - Even if an actual pipe is not visible, seepage from the bank or an area where the bank has receded can indicate the location of a drain outfall
  - If the ditch is badly overgrown, it may be necessary to clear vegetation
  - If the ditch has become silted up or the pipe blocked, the ditch may first need to be cleared – typically, to at least 1 m below the adjacent field level



Figure 16. Drainage ditch

3. **Look for field surface signs.** Some features may only be apparent in a certain light during the day or during particular ground moisture conditions.
  - Aerial photographs available online may reveal the lines of the drains, although they may be confused with other features, such as underground pipelines
  - Slight linear depressions may be visible on the field surface
  - The crop may vary in quality or colour over the line of a drain
  - The soil may be drier directly over the drain than between drains
  - Localised wet areas or small depressions ('blow holes') may be found upslope of a blocked drain



Figure 17. A 'blow hole'

4. If the outfall cannot be found by visual inspection alone, or surface signs need to be confirmed, it may be necessary to **dig trenches across the most likely locations** for drains.

## Health and safety

Before excavating any trenches, ensure that:

- There are no underground cables or pipelines present that may be hazardous or damaged
- Personnel do not enter a trench unless adequate precautions have been taken to prevent trench collapse

Some helpful information can be found at [hse.gov.uk](https://www.hse.gov.uk)



Figure 18. Signs indicating potential underground hazards

# Assessing an existing drainage system

## Risk management

An effectively designed field drainage system should afford a level of protection against waterlogging that is appropriate to the value of the crop, land access and other benefits. It should be designed to drain the field effectively up to an appropriate return period, usually based on crop value.

Thinking of drainage as insurance, a higher-value crop may justify a more intensive field drainage system than, for example, grassland, which may be able to better tolerate a small amount of waterlogging. Equally, improved drainage may attract high-value horticulture crops into the rotation, increasing the rental value.

The degree to which drainage systems provide protection against waterlogging should be matched with the value of the crops to be grown. A typical high-value crop would need to be protected against all rainfall, except very infrequent rainfall events, whereas grassland warrants a lower level of protection.

The following waterlogging risk frequencies are typically used for design:

- Very high-value specialist crops: 1 in 25 years
- Horticultural crops: 1 in 10 years
- Root crops: 1 in 5 years
- Intensive grass and cereals: 1 in 2 years
- Grassland: 1 in 1 year

## Is the existing system adequate?

There are a number of reasons why an existing field drainage system may be inadequate for current needs:

- The scheme may have been designed to work with mole drains that have since collapsed and need renewal
- The drainage system may have reached the end of its useful life (e.g. blocked or collapsed)
- The land use may have changed since the system was installed
- The drains may have been installed without permeable backfill

On soils where permeable backfill is required for optimum performance, the scheme may work well initially due to the soil disturbance during trenching. With the passage of time, however, the soil will return to a more consolidated, less permeable condition that may limit water movement.

It can be difficult to recognise the signs of crop stress on fields where old drains are gradually becoming less effective and where only some crops in the rotation may be affected by stress. When deciding whether the existing field drainage system is adequate, take into account the history of the field and whether it has been deteriorating. Consider:

- Year-on-year variation in yield
- Instances of delayed cultivation or harvest due to field conditions
- Past damage due to poor drainage
- Frequent blow holes may be a sign that pipes are too small or are blocked downstream
- Increases in the presence of moisture-loving plants



Figure 19. Crop loss due to drainage problems

## Assessing the costs and benefits of field drainage

While field drainage can have economic, practical and environmental benefits, installation can be expensive.

Drainage can also exacerbate water pollution and impact negatively on some habitats. It is, therefore, important to carry out an environmental and cost-benefit assessment before installing or carrying out maintenance on field drainage systems.

Production benefits resulting from drainage are most likely to be obtained in areas of high rainfall or on:

- Heavy clay soils, especially where arable or intensive livestock production is practised
- Medium soils where potatoes, other root crops or high-value crops are grown
- Low-lying permeable soils where the groundwater level comes close to the land surface in winter or after rainfall

In many cases, it is better for both agricultural production and the environment to remove excess water by field drainage, but there are cases when the production benefits are outweighed by the costs and there are opportunities to mitigate climate change, flooding, protect water quality or create wildlife habitats by allowing field drainage to deteriorate.

Waterlogged land may be low value agriculturally but it may have biodiversity benefits or help to reduce flooding risk.

Sacrificing an area of waterlogged land may reduce costs by acting as a sediment trap and reducing the need for costly activities, such as watercourse dredging. Suitable areas where drainage might be allowed to deteriorate could include land adjacent to watercourses, natural wetlands and ribbon areas at the base of steep slopes, particularly on intensive grassland on heavy soils in the centre and west of the UK.

For more information for farmers in priority areas at risk of water pollution, contact Catchment Sensitive Farming: [gov.uk/catchment-sensitive-farming](http://gov.uk/catchment-sensitive-farming)

### Environment

In the Mires on the Moors project (a partnership between South West Water, two National Park Authorities and other organisations, such as the Environment Agency), drainage ditches on Dartmoor and Exmoor were blocked to restore peatland. This increases the carbon and water storage on the moor and slows the flow of water off the moor so that storm and flood damage is reduced, sediment settles out and drinking water quality is improved. Read more on [www.exmoormires.org.uk](http://www.exmoormires.org.uk)

## The impact of field drainage on pollution risk

The relationship between field drains and pollution can be contradictory.

### Positive points

Maintaining good field drainage and good soil structure reduces waterlogging

This reduces the likelihood of causing soil compaction through untimely field operations

This decreases surface run-off, soil erosion and the loss of sediment and associated pollutants, such as phosphorus, to water

### Negative points

When soils are wet or dry with deep cracks and rain falls within a few days of agrochemical application...

...field drains can provide a rapid route for water enriched with ammonium, phosphorus, pesticides, fine sediment or other associated pollutants

Drains are most effective at providing a conduit for agricultural pollutants when newly installed or in fields with deep cracking clays

### Remember

- Best practice should always be followed when applying manures, fertilisers and agrochemicals to avoid losses via surface run-off or field drains
- Organic manures should not be applied to land within 12 months of pipe or mole drainage installation
- Organic manures should not be applied to drained land when soils are wet and drains are running
- Organic manures should not be stored within 10 m of a field drain

# Maintenance and repairs

## Ditches and outfalls

If ditches become infilled and outfalls are not kept clear, the field drainage system will cease to function effectively, leading to the need for more expensive maintenance or premature renewal.

In flat areas, in particular, blocked culverts and ditches can lead to waterlogging over large areas of land, restricting drainage upstream. This can cause flooding and soil erosion as the water backs up and tries to find an overland route to escape.

Given the significant cost of installing a new field drainage system, cleaning ditches and clearing outfalls is a simple, cheap and effective method of improving the effectiveness of existing systems.

Ditches are best cleared in autumn to minimise soil and crop damage.

## Ditch maintenance

Fencing off ditches and watercourses from livestock can reduce maintenance needs by preventing bank damage and erosion.

It can also protect water from sediment and microorganisms in livestock manures, which impact water quality and ecology.

## Blocked outfalls

The most common cause of drainage system deterioration is the failure to keep outfalls clear. This can cause the whole drainage system to fail, resulting in poor drainage, pipe siltation and possibly even blow holes across the field over time.

### Environment

Ditches can be an important habitat for aquatic plants, invertebrates, amphibians, birds and small mammals. Timing of clearance operations or ditch maintenance may have implications for wildlife. Avoid disturbing breeding or nesting animals.

Localised over-digging of ditch beds can form small shallow pools that benefit invertebrates. The ditch will function as long as it has stable banks, the overall gradient is consistent such that it does not reduce drainage efficiency and it is deep enough to allow drainage outfalls to discharge.

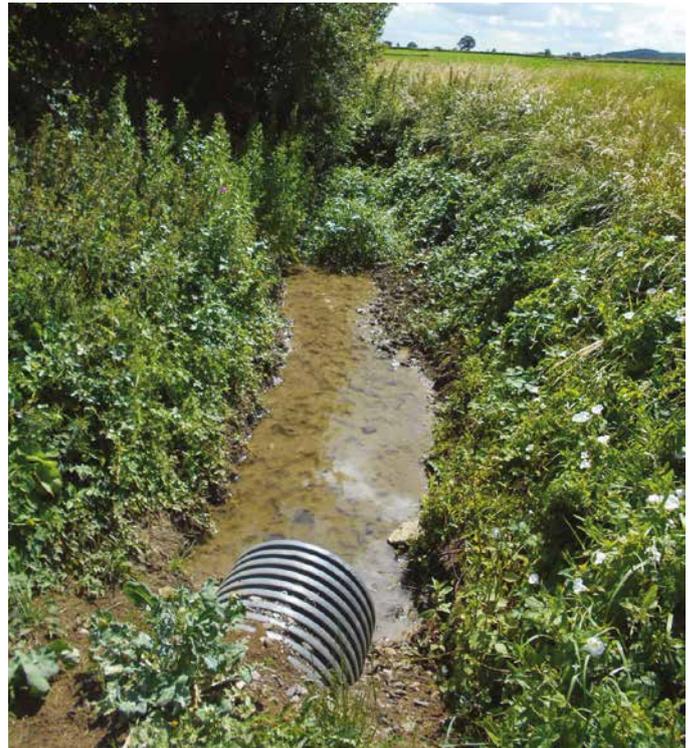


Figure 20. Cleaning ditches is a simple way of improving the effectiveness of drainage systems



Figure 21. A blocked outfall can often be cleared in a matter of minutes with a spade

## Pipes

### Blockage by tree or hedge roots

**When designing the drainage system**, trees and hedges should be avoided wherever possible. When this is not possible, a sealed pipe should be used for any pipes within a tree rooting zone or within 1.5 m of a hedge.

**If a blockage occurs**, it may be possible to dig up the pipe on one or both sides of the blockage and use rods to clear the roots, but the section of pipe will often need to be replaced with a sealed pipe.

### Environment

Take care to avoid unnecessary damage to tree roots or disturbing archaeological remains.

### Pipe siltation

If drain outfalls are left submerged or blocked for a long period of time, siltation of the pipes may occur. This can be difficult or impossible to remedy.

Other than as a result of damaged or blocked pipes, siltation most commonly occurs on fine sandy and fine silty soils.

If pipe siltation is not too severe, it may be possible to rod the drains clear or to employ a contractor with specialist drain jetting equipment.

Where pipe siltation is a naturally recurring problem, a drainage system with separate outfall pipes for each drain is best. This allows easier access for cleaning operations.



Figure 22. Silted clay drain



Figure 23. Drain jetting

## Ochre

Ochre is a generic term used to describe deposits that form in drains when soluble iron leaching out of the soil in drainage water comes into contact with air and is oxidised, at which point it becomes insoluble. It can also be caused by bacterial growths that secrete iron.

In some cases, a drainage scheme may fail completely due to ochre accumulation. In these cases, redrainage is only worthwhile if future ochre development is unlikely.

### Preventing ochre formation

- Soils rich in iron may be prone to ochre and there is little that can be done to prevent ochre formation
- There are methods that attempt to prevent the build-up of ochre, but these can be specialist, intensive and often not very successful

### Removing ochre

- Regular rodding or jetting may remove the ochre
- If the pipe slots or permeable fill is blocked, the benefits may be limited or nil

### Design

- Where ochre is a problem, systems with separate outfall pipes for each drain are best, as they allow easier access for clearance operations



Figure 24. Drainage outfall blocked by ochre

### Replacing field drains

When replacing a field drain, the same diameter (or metric equivalent) drain should be used as the drain being replaced. If the drain is a carrier drain or culvert, increasing the pipe diameter would reduce the risk of blockage or excess flows collapsing the pipe in the future. However, care may be needed to avoid increasing flood risk downstream. Expert advice should be sought if in doubt.

## Mole drains

Mole drains are unlined channels formed in a clay subsoil. They are used when natural drainage needs improving in particularly heavy or calcareous clay subsoils that would require uneconomically closely spaced pipes for effective drainage.

Mole drains act as closely spaced pipe drains and conduct water to the permanent pipe drains or direct to open ditches.

Mole drains are not suitable for controlling rising groundwater or areas prone to flooding.

Soils should have a minimum of 30% clay for best results. Clay gives the soil the ability to hold together and reduces the chances of the channel collapsing after the mole is pulled.

Sand content should be less than 30%. The soil should be free of stones at the mole drain depth.

Mole drains are formed by dragging a 'bullet' (effectively, a round-nosed cylindrical foot shaped like a bullet, with slight tapering towards the tail) followed by an expander (a cylindrical plug of slightly larger diameter than the bullet) through the soil to form a circular semi-permanent channel – i.e. a natural pipe with fissuring in the soil above the channel.

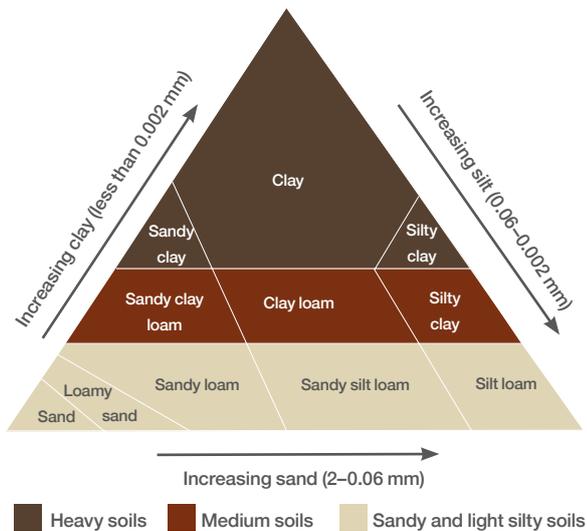


Figure 25. Soil texture classification  
Source: Controlling soil erosion (Defra, 2005)

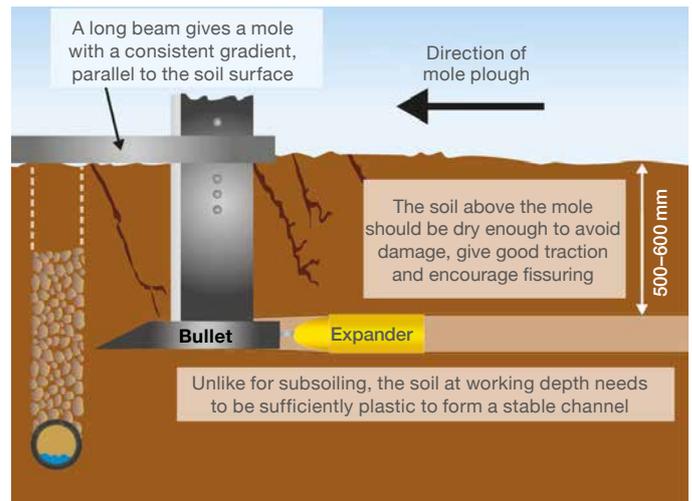


Figure 26. Appropriate conditions for forming mole drains

## How long do mole drains last?

The longevity of mole drains depends on a number of factors, including:

- Soil texture (high clay content is better)
- Soil calcium content (high levels of calcium will increase longevity)
- Climate (wetter conditions will reduce longevity)
- Slope (too shallow or too steep will reduce longevity)
- The moisture conditions in which the moles were formed

Mole channels in very stable, clay soils (clay content ~45%) can last over 10 years, but the method can still be effective in soils with at least 30% clay, particularly calcareous soils.

Typical lifespan in suitable soils ranges from five to ten years, but it can be reduced where patches of sandier soil occur, leading to premature collapse. Bad soil management can seal off the routes by which water reaches the mole drains.

If the pipe drainage system was designed to be supplemented by mole drains, it is good practice to renew mole drains on a cycle of around once in every five years.

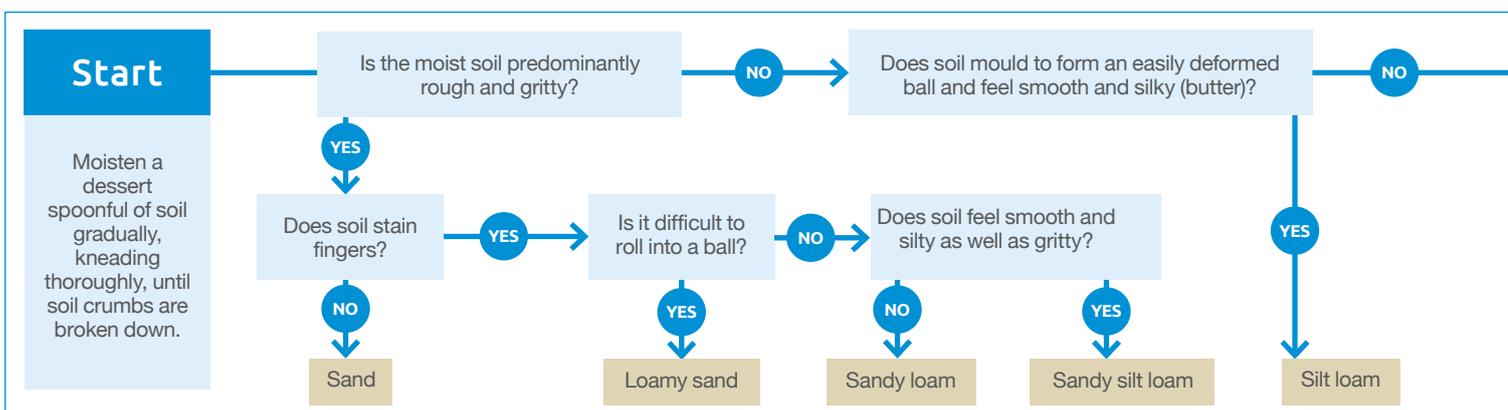


Figure 27. Appropriate conditions for forming mole drains  
Source: Controlling soil erosion (Defra, 2005)

## Installing mole drains

### 1. Suitable conditions

To achieve satisfactory results, the soil in the vicinity of the mole channel needs to be moist enough to form a channel but not dry enough to crack and break up and not soft enough to slough off and form a slurry.

Moling should be undertaken when:

- The soil at working depth is plastic, i.e. it forms a 'worm' without cracks when rolled on the hand
- The soil surface is dry enough to ensure good traction and avoid compaction

The drier the soil above moling depth, the greater the fissuring produced and the more efficient the water removal.

These conditions are most likely to arise during May to September/October, depending on the season and location.

### 2. Depth

Optimum mole depth depends on the soil type and the conditions when the moles are installed.

Generally, moles are pulled at 500–600 mm depth. Often, when first mole draining, the shallower depth is used, due to tractor limitations in tight, compacted soils. As the soil structure improves over time, they can often be pulled deeper, although care must be taken not to damage piped drains.

Moles less than 400 mm deep are liable to be damaged by tractors and animals during, or immediately after, rain and tend to be short-lived.

A rule of thumb is that the expander to mole-draining depth ratio is 1:7 (for example, a 70 mm diameter should have a mole depth of 490 mm).

### 3. Points to note

- It is essential that the 'bullet' is drawn through the permeable backfill over the pipe drains
- The mole plough should be in good condition, with minimal wear to the 'bullet' and tip
- Set up the mole plough so the 'bullet' is parallel to the ground surface when at working depth; a poorly set up mole plough will produce a poor channel and increase the draught requirement
- If the soil is liable to smearing, removal of the expander will reduce channel smearing, increasing the potential for water to enter the mole drain and reducing draught requirements
- When moling, dig a pit to expose the channel formed; it should be round and there should be fissuring above it
- Install moles at 2–3 m spacing, or closer on unstable soils
- Moles should be drawn up and down the slope across the lateral drains, making sure that they cross and connect with the permeable backfill over the drains
- Pull the plough out as soon as the mole plough has crossed the last drain: blind ends accumulate water
- If large stones are encountered, pull all the moles uphill and pull out after the channel has been disrupted

To aid decision-making, keep a record of where at least one of the most recent mole drains was pulled to allow examination of the mole drains by excavating a profile pit. This should be done just downslope of a lateral drain and, if still functioning, the mole drain should be reinstated afterwards with a short length of pipe.

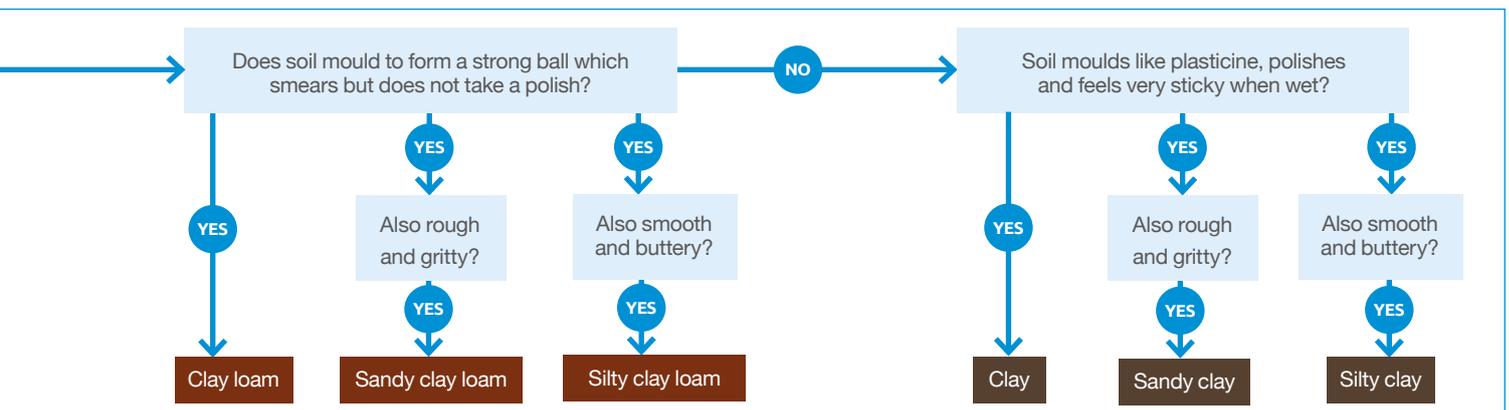




Figure 28. Installing land drains and stone backfill

## Factors to consider when designing a new drainage system

### Drain depth

**In slowly permeable soils**, research has shown that (unless there is a specific crop need) lateral drain depths greater than 0.75 m give no additional benefit. Drains simply need to be deep enough to avoid damage from soil implements.

**In permeable soils, where the drains control the depth of the water table**, deeper drains allow the spacing between drains to be increased. Drain depths in such soil types are typically 1.2–1.5 m.

**Maximum drain depth** is often limited by the depth of the ditches or watercourses into which the drains discharge. These can be deepened, but only to the level of the downstream channel.



Figure 29. Recently installed drains

### Drain spacing

Drain spacing has always varied according to local custom, but it has become more standardised in recent years. The correct spacing can be calculated using theoretical equations, but this is not often done in practice.

**In heavy clay soils**, the theoretical correct drain spacing will almost always be so small as not to be economically viable. Where soil conditions are appropriate, wide-spaced drains with permeable backfill supplemented with mole drains are the best choice. Pipe drain spacing for a mole drainage system can be as wide as 80 m, although 40 m is more typical. The main limiting factors are soil stability and landform.

**On land with soils not suitable for moling**, a modern system would have a spacing of 20–25 m with permeable backfill over the drains. The effectiveness of this type of system will rely greatly on maintaining good soil structure, sometimes aided by subsoiling.



Figure 30. Installing mole drains

If permeable backfill is not used, drain spacing in the region of 10 m will be needed, but this is unlikely to be as effective as a scheme using permeable backfill.

In permeable soils with a rising groundwater, the drain spacing will be determined by the depth of the drains and the level at which the groundwater is to be controlled. Permeable backfill is not usually needed.

### Outfall availability and gradient

Outfall availability and gradient have an impact on the efficiency of the drainage system. As a comparison, a bath/shower is designed to slope and has a strategically positioned plughole (outfall) to drain the water. Lack of available outfall and/or gradient to enable water to drain away materially affects the efficiency of the field drainage system.

### Drain diameter

In the UK, drain diameters are calculated using the procedures set out in MAFF/ADAS Reference Book 345 (The design of field drainage systems). This method takes account of:

- Soil type and slope: speed of water movement
- Land use: the degree of risk that is acceptable depending on the crop value
- Climate: rainfall intensity
- Type of drainage system: for example, mole drains must not be left submerged for more than 24 hours and, therefore, excess water must be evacuated rapidly

The rainfall figures used in the method set out in MAFF/ADAS Reference Book 345 are now outdated and in some areas may not match current rainfall patterns. They also take no account of potential future increases in storm intensities due to climate change. However, these remain the current guidelines.



Figure 31. Installing land drains with laser gradient control



Figure 32. Install drains at an appropriate depth and constant gradient (fall)

# Renewal and installation

## Use of permeable backfill

Permeable backfill refers to the gravel/stone chippings applied to the trench above the drain, typically to the base of the topsoil.

The use of permeable backfill has been a long-debated subject, primarily due to the significant associated cost. There are many examples of very old drainage systems without permeable backfill that still have some function; however, research indicates that on drained clay soils without permeable backfill, while the drains may initially function well, the permeability of the soil in the drain trench decreases with time.

Best practice is to install sufficient permeable backfill so that a connection exists between the drain trench and the cultivated layer. As a minimum, the permeable backfill layer should connect with the mole drains or any fissures caused by subsoiling.

If mole drains are to be installed over the pipes, the use of permeable backfill is essential to provide a hydraulic connection between the mole channels and the drain.

The performance of drains installed without permeable backfill cannot be rejuvenated by subsoiling.

The one circumstance where permeable backfill is never required is where the function of the drainage is to control a rising water table in a coarsely textured soil.



Figure 33. Mole plough

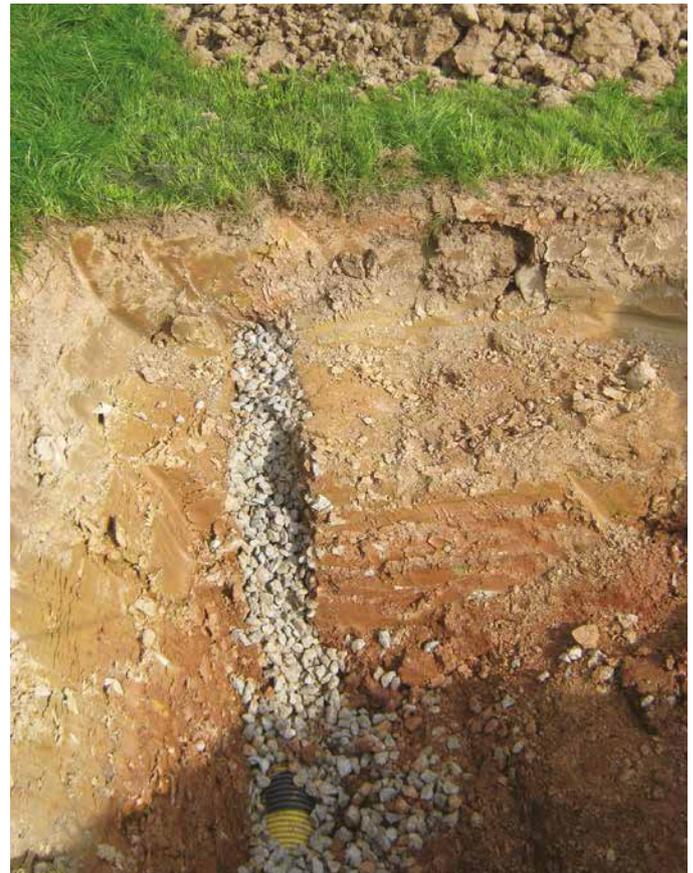


Figure 34. Permeable backfill in trench over drain

## Site

Field drainage should be planned carefully to avoid negative impacts on water bodies used for drinking-water abstraction, fisheries or Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) sensitive to raised nitrate levels. Field drains and outfalls could be designed to discharge into a wetland buffer area before flows enter a watercourse or be directed away from sensitive water bodies. Field drains should not be installed within at least 10 m of a slurry or silage store.

Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) or novel approaches, such as bioreactors, can be used with field drainage systems to trap sediment and slow water/soil run-off and to filter pollutants in drainage water.

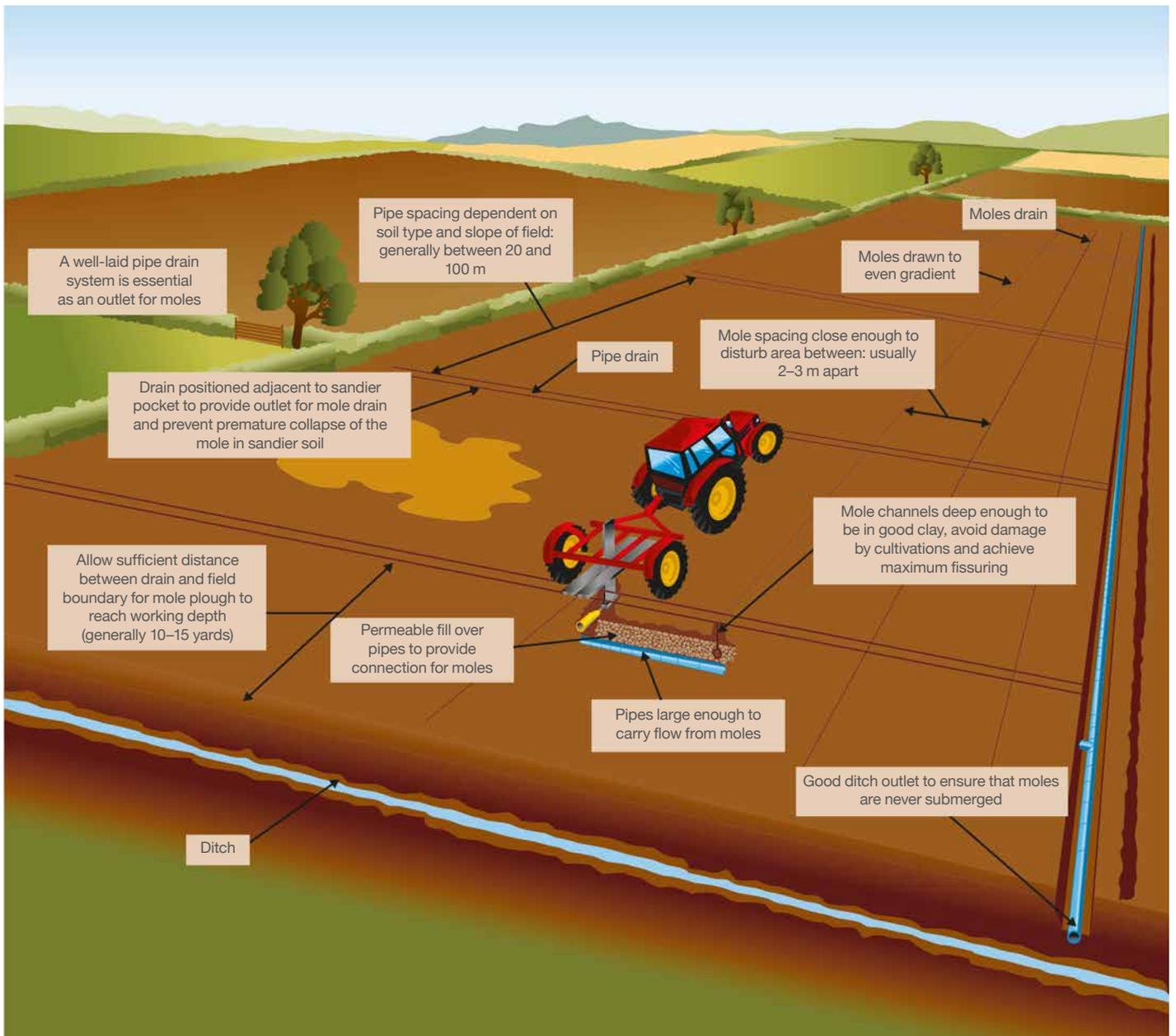


Figure 35. Layout of piped drainage and mole drains

## Environment

### Outfalls

New outfalls should be positioned sensitively at ditches and ponds to avoid damaging habitat. Land drains should not divert water away from areas that may depend on this water for drinking, washing or habitat. Diverting flows can also increase the risk of flooding and infrastructure failure.

### Conservation

A new drainage scheme can provide an opportunity to create new conservation features. Old farm ponds that have silted up could be reopened to provide a habitat and catch pit for eroding soils, and ditches could be over-dug into localised ponds.

Government-funded schemes may be available for a range of land management options and capital items that can be used to reduce the negative impacts of field drainage on water quality or to create/improve wetlands and ditch habitats. These include the creation of wet grassland, ditch management and buffering of water bodies. For more information, see [gov.uk/guidance/countryside-stewardship-manual](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/countryside-stewardship-manual)

## Selecting a designer

Before engaging an independent field drainage consultant, it is important to determine if they have adequate experience and qualifications. A specialist designer will have a thorough understanding of the needs and management of the soils, as well as of field drainage.

To enable them to determine if a new drainage system is required or whether maintenance of the existing system and/or improved soil management may be adequate to resolve the problem, a designer should always:

- Discuss any problems you have with the site and how you intend to manage the site in the future
- Survey the soil types, soil conditions, existing drainage systems, field topography, proximity to utility services and other features that may affect the final design
- Consider potential environmental impacts, drainage law and economic feasibility

Given the scale of the investment that a new drainage system represents, it is recommended that independent advice is sought with regard to the design.

**Using an experienced consultant designer will ensure that the scheme is the best and most economically appropriate to meet the requirements.**

### Environment

Archaeological features can be damaged by field drain installation and drains may conflict with the conservation of a wetland or water habitat or species. Where relevant, contact Natural England, the drainage authority or a county archaeologist before commencing work.

## Selecting a contractor

To install a new comprehensive field drainage system, it is essential to employ a specialist land drainage contractor with access to specialist machinery that can install and backfill drains rapidly. A drainage machine shapes the trench bed and can set a consistent gradient, even in the flattest of fields. A specialist contractor should fully understand field drainage requirements and employ the approved standards and materials.

The National Association of Agricultural Contractors (NAAC) is a trade association and has a list of members on its website ([naac.co.uk/findacontractor](http://naac.co.uk/findacontractor)) which can be a useful starting point for selecting a land drainage contractor. Not all drainage contractors are members of the NAAC, however.

Recommendations from others in the local farming community can be another helpful source of information.

Contractors may have different approaches to dealing with the scale, access and physical aspects of the location, so quotes may vary.

## Health and safety

It is advisable to request:

**From the contractor:**

- A risk assessment and method statement (RAMS)
- Verification that they have sufficient public liability insurance cover

**From the designer:**

- Verification that they have sufficient professional indemnity insurance cover

## Land drainage law

A landowner has an obligation to accept the natural flows of water from adjoining land and must not cause any impedance to these flows that would cause injury to adjoining land. 'Natural water flows' refers to water that has not been diverted from its natural path, artificially increased or had the run-off flow rate changed (e.g. by the construction of unauthorised paved areas within the catchment).

This means that if a landowner neglects or fills in their ditch, such that water may not freely discharge from higher neighbouring land, the landowner is guilty of causing a nuisance. In this situation, the landowner or occupier of the higher land may ask the Agricultural Land Tribunal to make an order requiring the landowner guilty of nuisance to carry out the necessary remedial works. It must be emphasised, however, that it is usually far better to attempt to resolve such situations by amicable discussions with the offending party first, as they may be unaware of the nuisance.

If the neglected ditch in question runs directly along the boundary between respective ownerships, the assumption that would be made is that the owner of the original hedge is also the owner of the ditch. On watercourses, the ownership boundary is assumed to be down the middle of the bed. Only clear evidence to the contrary, such as the deeds to the land, will rebut this assumption.

No ditch or watercourse should be piped, filled in, restricted or diverted without the approval of the regulatory authority, for example, the local authority or the EA, NRW, SEPA, NIEA or the local internal drainage board. Consent may be needed for works within 8–10 m of the bank top of a watercourse. Uncultivated or semi-natural land is protected under the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (Agriculture) and should not be drained without prior approval from the relevant national body.

## Standards, materials and quality

There are two fundamental standards to which any designer will be working:

- Reference Book 345: The design of field drainage pipe systems (MAFF/ADAS, 1982)
- Technical Note on Workmanship and Materials for Land Drainage Schemes (ADAS, 1995)

Within these primary standards, there will be a number of decisions to be made about the design specification.

### Pipe type

Currently, all new drainage schemes are installed using plastic pipes, although many older schemes were installed with clay pipes and may be replaced with the same.

**It is essential that a material designed for use in field drainage is used.**

Consideration should be given to the use of twin-wall or ductile iron pipes or gravel pipe surround where there is a risk of pipe crushing.



Figure 36. Modern perforated plastic drainage pipe

### Permeable backfill type

- The material used must be hard and durable when wet and when dry
- The bulk of the material should be in the range 5–50 mm
- The material should not contain more than 10% fines



Figure 37. Washed gravel permeable fill over drain

### Outfall type

Most modern outfalls are installed with glass-reinforced concrete headwalls; however, the actual outfall type may vary according to its location.



Figure 38. Precast concrete headwall (type K)

### Filter wrap

Filter wrap is a geotextile barrier around the outside of the pipe to prevent soil particles entering the drain. It is not commonly used in the UK, as research has shown that pipe sedimentation is not usually a problem if the pipes have been laid and maintained properly. There are, however, some cases with fine, sandy soils when filter wrap can be beneficial.

Filter wrap should never be used where there is a risk of ochre.

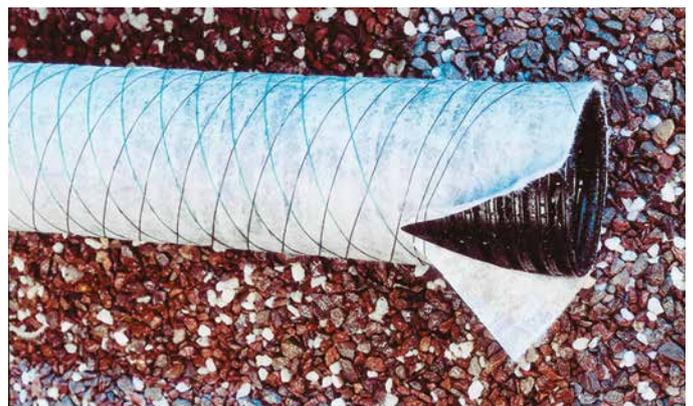


Figure 39. Single-wall pipe wrapped in geotextile

# Case studies

## Molescroft Farm, Beverley, East Yorkshire

### The farm

- 485 ha farm with deep loam and alluvial clay soils
- Land is at or below 5 m above sea level and suffers from waterlogging
- Arable cropping: wheat, barley, oilseed rape, field beans and vining peas
- 10% of the farm is in Higher Level Stewardship and grazed by cattle and sheep appropriate to meet the requirements

### The problem

The problem field had a full tile drainage system installed in the 1980s, but:

- Wet patches had started to appear
- Crops had to be drilled early to avoid soil damage and poor establishment
- The cost of weed control had increased due to the lack of opportunity for stale seedbeds
- Recent wet seasons had resulted in patchy crops with increased weed problems and soil damage

The main drain was found to be completely blocked by willow roots and some tiles were misaligned.

### The solution

The solution was to drain a 6 ha area of the field, with new plastic pipes installed between the existing tiles and gravel backfill used to improve effectiveness.

### The outcome

- New drainage has made the field far easier to work and manage
- It was the highest-yielding field in the following harvest year
- Lower inputs of herbicides were required

### The cost

The total cost of the upgrade was £14,500 (£2,417/ha).

Maintenance costs estimated at approximately 1% of capital cost (£25/ha/year).

Benefits estimated at a total of £229/ha/year:

- Typical yield increased from 7 t/ha to 8.75 t/ha, a total of £175/ha/year
- Herbicide costs were reduced by £30/ha/year
- Better soil structure reduced subsoiling costs by 25%, saving £3/ha/year, and cultivation costs by £21/ha/year

### Simple payback period

$$\frac{\text{Cost}}{\text{Benefits}} = \frac{£2,417}{£229 - £25} = 12 \text{ years}$$

### Comment

Once the investment has been paid off, the benefits may continue to be received for many years (provided maintenance is sustained).

These calculations assume average changes to costs and returns; however, extreme weather will have a far greater effect. It is difficult to factor in random occurrences, such as the avoidance of significant crop loss due to waterlogging, and the decision to invest in drainage should be made on a field-by-field basis. The costings do not take into account the cost of finance or increased land value.

## Evershot Farms Ltd, Melbury Osmond, Dorset

### The farm

- 1,500 ha farm, largely on heavy, poorly drained soils
- Rainfall is over 1,000 mm/year
- Stocking: 900 cows and 2,500 mule ewes; heifers are contract reared off the farm
- Cropping: mainly grassland with about one-third cut for silage; maize is no longer grown
- The farm has a 750 kW biogas plant

### The problem

The aim is for cows to be turned out in late March and housed from mid-September, but the grazing season can be very variable from year to year.

Maize was causing significant soil damage.

### The solution

The solution was to replace maize with Italian rye-grass, introduce whole-crop wheat to balance the ration (and save on purchased straw) and drain a 10.2 ha field, including:

- A main drain with laterals and headwalls at outlets
- Digging out the ditches downstream to obtain sufficient fall
- Mowing to increase connectivity every five years at reseedling

### The outcome

- Soil problems are now avoided and increased rainfall infiltration minimises run-off
- The field is accessible two weeks earlier and for two weeks longer
- The Italian rye-grass has increased yield (from 37 t/ha to 45 t/ha) and forage value
- Reduced risk to operations and increased forage quality and dry matter yield

### The cost

The total cost of the drainage was £5,245/ha (£48,500 for the drainage, plus £5,000 on ditching), plus maintenance at £52/ha and additional annual silage-making costs of £132/ha.

Benefits estimated at a total of £595/ha/year:

- The change from maize to grass silage has produced a higher dry matter yield and greater forage value from four cuts
- The change to Italian rye-grass resulted in an increase in forage value
- Cultivation savings:
  - Moving to grass, the cultivation savings were £105/ha/year
  - The average annual cost of mowing was the same as subsoiling
- Forage savings (total of £490/ha) from:
  - Increased value of silage (at previous yield level): 37 t/ha at £4/t gives £148/ha
  - Increased yield of silage: 8 t/ha at £34/t gives £272/ha
  - Value of additional grazed forage: £70/ha

$$\frac{\text{Cost}}{\text{Benefits}} = \frac{£5,245}{£595 - £52 - £132} = 13 \text{ years}$$

### Comment

Once the investment has been paid off, the benefits may continue to be received for many years (provided maintenance is sustained).

These calculations ignore the potential for extreme weather, without drainage, to result in significantly lower forage yields, soil damage and increased housing and forage requirements. Wet conditions during silage making can result in contamination from soil, leading to poor fermentation, poor milk yield and potential health problems. The costings do not take into account the cost of finance or increased land value.

# Glossary

<b>Compaction</b>	The process by which the soil density increases due to trafficking or soil working when conditions are unsuitable, i.e. too wet
<b>Culvert</b>	A short length of pipe installed to allow access over the ditch or watercourse
<b>Drain jetting</b>	Removal of deposited sediment from a drain using a high-pressure water jet
<b>Field capacity</b>	The moisture content of the soil after excess water has drained away
<b>Filter wrap</b>	A geotextile barrier wrapped around the pipe to prevent particles entering the pipe
<b>Friable</b>	Soil where the aggregates crumble easily into smaller pieces
<b>Infiltration</b>	Water entering the soil e.g. through rainfall
<b>Laterals</b>	The drains installed, usually parallel to each other, to intercept soil water and transport flows to the main drain
<b>Mains</b>	Drains installed to collect the water from several laterals and transport it to a ditch
<b>Mole drains</b>	Unlined channels formed in a clay subsoil
<b>Natural water flows</b>	Water that has not been diverted from its natural path, artificially increased, or had the run-off flow rate changed, such as by the construction of unauthorised paved areas within the catchment
<b>Ochre</b>	Insoluble deposits that form in drains when soluble iron leaches out of the soil, into drainage water, and becomes oxidised. It can also be caused by bacterial growths that secrete iron
<b>Outfall</b>	Point at which the main drains or individual laterals discharge into a ditch
<b>Percolation</b>	The process of water moving down through the soil to depth
<b>Perched water table</b>	Saturated layer above compacted soils
<b>Perforated drainage pipe</b>	A slotted drainage pipe, which is used to collect water from the soil
<b>Poaching</b>	Damage to the soil surface caused by animal hooves
<b>Slaking</b>	The collapse of the soil aggregates as the soil wets up rapidly
<b>Water table</b>	The saturated zone of the soil

# Further information

## Other sources of information

Catchment Sensitive Farming:

[gov.uk/catchment-sensitive-farming](http://gov.uk/catchment-sensitive-farming)

Catchment Sensitive Farming officers provide free advice and support to farmers in priority catchments to reduce water pollution. This includes information on soil and water management and a review of field drainage.

National Association of Agricultural Contractors (NAAC):

[naac.co.uk](http://naac.co.uk)

Think soils (Environment Agency):

[ahdb.org.uk/thinksoils](http://ahdb.org.uk/thinksoils)

A guide to better soil structure (Cranfield University):

[www.landis.org.uk/downloads](http://www.landis.org.uk/downloads)

Geographic information for Great Britain:

[magic.gov.uk](http://magic.gov.uk)

Countryside stewardship manual (Natural England):

[gov.uk/guidance/countryside-stewardship-manual](http://gov.uk/guidance/countryside-stewardship-manual)

Environmental permits for flood defence:

[gov.uk/permission-work-on-river-flood-sea-defence](http://gov.uk/permission-work-on-river-flood-sea-defence)

Guidance on owning a watercourse:

[gov.uk/guidance/owning-a-watercourse](http://gov.uk/guidance/owning-a-watercourse)

Flood and coastal erosion risk management R&D (Environment Agency):

[gov.uk/government/publications/national-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-strategy-for-england--2](http://gov.uk/government/publications/national-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-strategy-for-england--2)

Pinpoint best practice information sheets

(The Rivers Trust):

[theriverstrust.org/our-work/farm-advice/best-practice-advice-sheets-for-farmers](http://theriverstrust.org/our-work/farm-advice/best-practice-advice-sheets-for-farmers)

Constructed farm wetlands: A guide for farmers and farm advisers in England (Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust):

[wwt.org.uk/farmwetlands](http://wwt.org.uk/farmwetlands)

Sustainable drainage systems: Maximising the potential for people and wildlife (RSPB and Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust):

[www.wwt.org.uk/uploads/documents/2019-07-22/1563785657-wwt-rspb-sustainable-drainage-systems-guide.pdf](http://www.wwt.org.uk/uploads/documents/2019-07-22/1563785657-wwt-rspb-sustainable-drainage-systems-guide.pdf)

Godwin, R. J. and Spoor, G. (2015). Choosing and evaluating soil improvements by subsoiling and compaction control. In Ball, B. C. and Munkholm, L. J. (eds). *Visual Soil Evaluation: Realising Potential Crop Production with Minimum Environmental Impact*. CABI, Wallingford, UK.

## Video demonstrating the principles of subsoiling

AHDB Pork has produced a series of videos demonstrating the general principles of subsoiling. The videos look at cultivation depth, choice of machine and the effects of tines and wings.

The videos are available to watch online at [youtube.com/AHDBPork](http://youtube.com/AHDBPork) and on the Practical Pig app ([practicalpig.ahdb.org.uk](http://practicalpig.ahdb.org.uk)).



# Further information

## AHDB GREATsoils

AHDB provides a range of practical information on improving soil management for farmers, growers and advisers. Whether you need an introduction to soil biology or a detailed guide to soil structure, AHDB has the information and guidance to support you.

Information for grassland, pig producers, arable and horticultural crops is available at [ahdb.org.uk/greatsoils](https://ahdb.org.uk/greatsoils)

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### Produced for you by:

#### AHDB

Middlemarch Business Park  
Siskin Parkway East  
Coventry  
CV3 4PE

**T** 024 7669 2051

**E** [comms@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:comms@ahdb.org.uk)

**W** [ahdb.org.uk](https://ahdb.org.uk)



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