

Taunton Monitor Farm meeting report

Meeting 1: Launch Meeting

Date: 3 July 2018

Location: Manor Farm, Heathfield, Taunton, Somerset TA4 1DL

For more information, visit: cereals.ahdb.org.uk/taunton



Taunton Monitor Farm introduction

Richard Payne farms near Taunton, Somerset. The land is mostly owned, with 58 ha rented on FBTs.

Farm facts:

- Total farm hectareage: 267ha (1st and 2nd wheats, winter oilseed rape, spring barley, potatoes, winter beans, spring beans, game cover and woodland)
- Farm buildings: 1500t store, 900t store, farm workshop, light industrial units
- Soil type: silty clay loam

The aim of the Monitor Farm is to help the industry to be more profitable and viable going forwards. Over the next three years, the group will debate a range of topics including agronomy, machinery and finances. The Taunton Monitor Farm will consider issues using a whole farm approach beyond gross margin.

The new Taunton Monitor Farm joins a network of 35 arable farms across the UK. In the South West region, The Cossins family host the [Blandford Monitor Farm](#) and Howard and Anne Emmett host the [Truro Monitor Farm](#) and Roger Wilson hosts [Malmesbury Monitor Farm](#).

Taunton Monitor Farm steering group

Richard is joined by the following local farmers and advisers as steering group members, who will help to guide the programme over the three years. If you have any questions or suggestions, please feel free to get in touch with the Steering Group members – they sense check the meeting topics, bring ideas and are the gateway to the programme:

From left to right: Tom Dart, Agronomist; Richard Payne; John Farrington and Martin Waldoock, local farmers



Launch farm walk

Rotation

Richard grows 1st and 2nd winter wheat, winter oilseed rape, spring barley, potatoes, and spring and winter beans.

Winter wheat

Graham winter wheat was established using 1 pass of the Vaderstad Carrier followed by the Horsch drill. Richard believes that this achieves better depth control and is hoping that this system will result in fewer weeds being brought up from depth in the soil profile. The winter wheat has received a full programme of three fungicides, although Richard is now considering whether he could have got away with two.

Skyfall second winter wheat is grown because if it doesn't hit milling specification it is still a good crop. In 2017, 50% of the wheat grown for milling hit the spec. This year's crop has received a full fungicide programme, and slightly more nitrogen over the 1st winter wheats to get it going. Where more cultivations were done to establish the 2nd winter wheats, there are fewer first wheat volunteers.

The group visited a second field of Skyfall which had been established using minimum tillage systems. Richard is hosting an establishment trial, and has found that there are more first wheat volunteers in this field compared to the first, and feels that strip tillage is not the panacea to weed control. Next year this field will be in potatoes, and this will allow for 2–3 weed chits before it is cropped.

Oilseed rape

Until Richard implemented a minimum tillage approach to the field, it was the worst field on the farm. DK Imperial is a Clearfield variety, which initially Richard was hesitant to grow because of the yield penalties but it was necessary due to hedge mustard and charlock pressure in the field. All OSR is drilled with the Sumo which creates a fissure for the tap root at a seed rate of 40-50 plants per metre. Richard's take home message is *"don't give up with rape, it will compensate. It is an infuriating crop but it fits into the system. We have fewer concerns about OSR compared to other crops, but future PPPs are still a concern"*.

Spring beans

The plan with the spring beans was to use the Sumo in the autumn to allow water in and drill in spring. But 15 inches of rain meant that there was only 1 window of opportunity to get them in this spring. They went in in pretty good conditions, but nothing came up for 3 weeks.

Next year Richard will be splitting the field 4 ways: stubble, subsoil, cover crop (50% sheep grazing, 50% destroy cover crop at drilling).

Cover crops

Richard looks to find the cheapest cover crop he can, but is conscious that it doesn't conflict with beans and rape. His priorities for cover crops are to increase organic matter, nitrogen, rooting and provide sheep feed.

Crop protection

With our crop protection inventory ever diminishing, we need to achieve more with less. This might mean that we have to change our farming practices. In order to do this we need to keep an open mind about how we establish, grow and treat our crops.

Richard mostly used home saved seed which is cleaned and dressed with a mobile cleaner. Seed dressings are used as a management tool, alongside cultural control methods such as rolling for slug control.

“Are we keeping crops clean but not holistically healthy? We all want prescriptions, but it is our job as farmers to make decisions on the day – to maintain flexibility in a hard market. You’ve got to be flexible to react to any situation but be prepared to not see your return on investment for 18 months”

Soil management

The soils at Manor Farm are generally free working soils, and there is plenty of topsoil. Richard believes that establishment is 90% of growing a crop. There is potential for no-till at Manor Farm, but Richard is hesitant to change all of his machinery. Although these systems might save money at establishment, there needs to be more understanding on the impacts later in the season.

Richard tries to keep organic matter going back into the system and this is achieved by a muck for straw deal with local livestock farmers. In the past he has used wood chip which improved the workability of the field. To minimise traffic induced compaction, Richard operates all equipment on low ground pressure tyres either increased flexion or flotation tyres.

After 1st wheats, when the soil is not as well structured, Richard uses the Sumo to move the whole soil profile, but conserve moisture.

For more information on soils, visit ahdb.org.uk/GREATsoils

Weed management

Black-grass has been topped, but Richard was challenged during the launch meeting whether he has a zero tolerance approach. From now on we are having to diversify our rotation. On black-grass land Richard is implementing a double spring break. In 3 years time, he want the worst field down to a rogueable level or levels that can be managed using targeted herbicide applications. Ploughing for black grass requires good ploughing otherwise it is not worth it, and because Richard doesn't have a plough on the farm this would need to be done completed by contractors.

Labour

Richard employs one member of staff full time, and recognises that people are important to a farm business. The business succession plan is an issue which requires planning.

Machinery

Richard is conscious of not purchasing new machinery which is a reinvented system. Timeliness is a key factor in the machinery policy of Manor Farm, but Richard is currently exploring the opportunity of a joint venture. To discuss the machinery review at Richards farm, come along to the first winter meeting on 13 November 2018 at 10am. Book online at: cereals.ahdb.org.uk/taunton

Farm analysis

The group conducted a SWOT analysis of the business and the wider industry at the launch meeting. This, alongside a look at key issues and topics that the group would like to cover, will help guide the Monitor Farm programme of meetings over the term and provide a focus for business improvements for Richard.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of trafficking damage to soils • Passionate, attention to detail, tidy and open to change • Farm location: close to market; diversification • Good soils • Timeliness • Good management & trust/ value staff • Ring fenced area • Well equipped • Capital base • Good farm, good farmer • Little black grass • Good field sizes • Good access to knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No plough on farm for flexibility • Rotation: too many winter cereals and questionable profitability of beans • Grain and rape sales are cash and storage driven • Straw sales are cash driven - could value be gained on farm incorporating • Rented ground - does it make money? • Where is the profit - farming, diversification, off farm employment? • Organic matter and soil health in the absence of livestock • Age and lack of succession plan: how can the farm progress long-term? • Only 1 member of staff • Perfectionist • Machinery replacement • Variable cost spend • Farm debt • Recreational tillage • Not enough cost analysis
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make more use of cover crops • Get greater understanding of soil biology and interactions • Consider Stewardship options • Added value crops - Taunton population • Invest in a weighbridge and on-farm technology • Expand units/ invest in storage – optional use for diversification • Reduce capital for better return • BREXIT • Joint venture/ machinery share • Let land for potatoes • Look at more marketing opportunities • Grow oats • Buy chemicals independently • AD • To be the first/ early adopter • Staff re-structure (part time or full time) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has succession been openly discussed with staff and family? Is there a plan? • Market • Climate/ weather • Future chemicals • No livestock • Rise in interest rates • BREXIT • Black-grass • Retirement of key workers • Politics • Profit • Pressure groups • Uncertainty • Subsidy

Benchmarking

There are always going to be challenges in farming, and regardless of what these changes will be we should be running our businesses in the best way. Benchmarking using [Farmbench](#) allows you to scrutinise and make informed decisions on your fixed costs and variable costs at both enterprise and whole-farm level.

For more information contact: David Pett, Regional Officer
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“We all think that we are doing a good job, but benchmarking is a real eye opener. I am guilty of working in my business rather than on it. Benchmarking allows me to focus on where I can save money without compromising performance”

Richard Payne, Taunton monitor farmer

Find out more – Links to AHDB information sheets or research

[Encyclopaedia of pests and natural enemies](#)

[The encyclopaedia of cereal diseases](#)

[The encyclopaedia of arable weeds](#)

For information on soils, visit ahdb.org.uk/greatsoils

AHDB's Brexit impact calculator, resilience checklist, toolkit and Horizon documents can be found at ahdb.org.uk/brexit



Next meeting

Winter meetings will take place at 10 am, The Anchor, Hillfarrance, Taunton TA1 4AW on:

- 13 November 2018
- 12 December 2018
- 13 February 2019
- 13 March 2019

For more information contact: Philip Dolbear, Knowledge Exchange Manager Arable

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