OATS - 2020

“A Growers Perspective”

Robert Law
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Robert Law’s involvement with oat crop:

• 44 consecutive years of growing oats

• 1972: As a school boy doing work experience on farms local to home

• 1977 – 80: Studying at Harper Adams Agricultural College

• 1980 – 81: Working on farms in New Zealand/Australia – growing oats for hay and silage – for home feeding and for sale

• 1981 Thrift Farm: Oats grown for on farm feeding and limited sales to millers
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• 1985: Jordans issue their first contract for Conservation Grade Oats to be processed at their Bedford Plant

• Thrift Farm grows 17 Ha in first season and produces 120 tonnes of oats

• 1985 – 2015: Area of oats grown expands to 160 Ha to fulfil a 1200 tonne contract

• 2000: In addition to growing oats under contract for milling, we start to grow oats for seed production, initially 8 Ha on the Royston farm

• 2005: Growing of seed oats starts on Nottinghamshire farm, expands to 100 Ha in 2015
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Where do oats fit into our farming system?

Cropping 2015:

- Wheat: 390 Ha
- Winter Barley: 180 Ha
- Spring Barley: 43.5 Ha
- Oats: 160 Ha – Oats occupy 13% of our cropped land
- Forage Rye for Seed: 70 Ha
- Hybrid Rye for Seed: 74 Ha
- Forage Rapes for Seed: 110 Ha
- Stubble Turnips for Seed: 34 Ha
- Mustard for Seed: 35 Ha
- Sugar Beet: 149 Ha

Grassland (temporary & permanent): 240 Ha

Catch crop of turnips for sheep grazing: 160 Ha
Advantages of oat growing for Law Farming:

• Useful entry/break for wheat:
  1. Assists in maximising our wheat crop area
  2. Reduces levels of soil borne disease present

• Spreads our harvest work load (oats are harvested after winter barley and before wheat)

• Can normally be harvested and stored without drying (unlike wheat)

• Local markets available (Jordan’s Mill within 20 miles)

• Availability of regular contracts
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Advantages of oat growing for Law Farming:

Availability of value added contracts which:

1. Reward high quality and reliability of supply from year to year
2. Pay premiums for environmental work carried out on farm and adherence to production systems
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Disadvantages of oat growing for Law Farming:

• Price volatility

• Quality variations – weather dependant, often beyond growers control

• Lack of alternative markets – if crop doesn’t meet contract specifications there are only a few alternative heavily discounted markets available

• Weed killers – few products available to control grass weeds
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The future of oats growing on UK farms – Opportunities:

• Being part of a growing market – crop has expanded from 250k tonnes in 1980 to 700k tonnes in 2015

• Market for oats on the ascendancy:
  1. Product innovation
  2. Medical research
  3. Move to healthier lifestyles

• Expanding markets leading to – contracts rewarding quality that exceeds specification

• Investment in Research and Development
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The future of oats growing on UK farms – Opportunities:

• Plant breeding – new varieties that are more disease resistant, stand better and yield more

• Trials – crop protection inputs, new and old at differing rates and timings, fertiliser inputs.
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The future of oats growing on UK farms – Threats:

- Withdrawal of weed killers available for grass weed control and lack of investment in replacements
- Means many acres of the country are “no go” for the growing of oats
- Existing growers of oats unwilling to increase their areas devoted to the crop due to risk of build up of grass weeds on their farms
- Risk of AD plants:
  1. Development in past 5 years has caused farms cropping to change
  2. Sharp increase in maize area
  3. Growth also in areas of sugar beet and rye
  4. These could be at expense of oat crops
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