

The Sky EasyDrill has covered more than 2,000he in two seasons



Future proofing

The purchase of a 6m Sky EasyDrill fills a gap in the fleet for South West enterprise Alvis Contracting, while also setting them up for any future requirements

Alvis Contracting LLP was established in the 1980s, initially as an machinery department for Alvis Bros Ltd, a substantial dairy farming company based just outside of Bristol. In the 40 years since then, it has become a limited liability partnership, 50% owned by Alvis Bros and 50% owned by Daniel Harding, who worked his way up through the business throughout the 1990s.

It's a significant operation, with 20,000 acres of grass and maize silage made each year, alongside around 28,000 acres of spraying, haulage work, slurry operations and a wide range of cultivation and drilling operations, all done within a 50-mile radius of the farm.

In 2021, Mr Harding took delivery of a 6m Sky EasyDrill, which replaced two 4m Moore Unidrills that had been used in the business since 1996. "We're on a wide mix of soils, everything from thin, brashy ground all the way up to difficult to work, Grade 3 clay, and we get a huge amount of rainfall, so we're always looking for machines that will give us an element of flexibility," he explained.

Describing the EasyDrill as 'a beefed up

Moore unit', Mr Harding noted that he was confident in the machine, having had 15 years of experience with the original Moore system. "It's a robust, easy to use machine and Sky appears to have made adjustments for some of the minor maintenance issues we used to see."

Despite being part of a wider fleet of drills, the Sky has certainly been put through its paces since arriving at Alvis Contracting. Covering more than 2,000 hectares in two seasons, according to operator Craig Babbage, the drill has

BELOW
Daniel Harding says the versatility of the EasyDrill means drilling operations are 'future proofed'



handled cereal crops, grass rejuvenation, forage oilseed rape and stubble turnips. So far, neither Mr Harding nor Mr Babbage have seen any issues with establishment.

"One of the things I really like about the Sky design is that the drill runs on the coulters, instead of on the wheels," explained Mr Harding. "This keeps the weight on the soil and ensures that the slots are closed properly for good soil to seed contact even in dry conditions. With other drills in the past, we would always have to run a set of rolls over the field afterwards, so this saves an operation."

The only adaption that has been made is a harrow, fabricated on the farm, which is mounted behind the coulters to level and aerate the soil. A purely mechanical addition, it moves with the coulters to run at the correct depth.

The right technology

Mr Babbage said that the EasyDrill is, much like the name, easy to set up using the Quartz 800 in-cab terminal. "It's a really intuitive system and you only need a few moments in the cab to get your head around it," he explained.

While he is responsible for most of the drilling with the Sky machine, he is also the main driver of one of the four forage harvesters used by the business, this means that occasionally one of the twenty full-time operators within Alvis Contracting will take on some of the work.

"It's simple enough that I can explain functions over the phone and not have to worry about the quality of work," Mr

Babbage added. "We can easily set up different rates for each of the hoppers and set up default seeding rates for the various crops, so all an operator has to do is pick the correct application."

Supporting the industry

Across its contracting work and stubble-to-stubble contracts, Alvis Contracting must fit into a variety of different farming systems.

Mr Harding explained that while all their customers are looking for ways to reduce costs, they are all at different points of the reduced tillage and direct drilling journey.

"Some larger, ring-fenced farms might have been able to make that transition wholesale, our customers need to guarantee that they will have a crop when harvest comes around so having a versatile drill like the Sky is a must," he said.

Farms in the area are working across the full spectrum of cultivation practices, from the plough, through to reduced tillage and, in some cases, direct drilling. "If we're working on ploughed ground, it needs to be a firm seed bed and if it's particularly stony ground, we roll the field ahead of drilling to stop stones getting caught in the coulters," explained Mr Babbage.

"In minimum tillage situations, putting grass into existing leys or sowing overwinter cover into stubbles, the drill has performed really well."

While the Sky drill has three hoppers – a split seed and fertiliser main hopper and a single Pro Hopper unit at the front – both Mr Harding and Mr Babbage noted that they haven't used the machine to its full capacity yet.

"We put slug pellets down with the Pro Hopper which has worked really well, but we're yet to use the fertiliser application," said Mr Harding.

"I'm definitely keen to try it," added Mr Babbage. "I'm hoping that next year we can run some comparisons and see if putting the fertiliser down the chute helps the crop to get away quicker. One of the reasons we haven't tried until now is that we don't use that much artificial fertiliser, comparatively, because of the abundance of cattle manure available to us."

Nor have they fully utilised the possibilities of the E-Drive Premium system, which enables individual row-shutoff for tramlining and wider row spacings.

"We keep the seed rate high because we are in an area where we typically see some plant losses. We also don't tramline normally as we also handle the spraying,"

explained Mr Harding. "We sow the whole field and put the tramlines in with the Bateman afterwards.

"But we know that farmers are looking at different methods to get their crops in the ground at the lowest cost possible, and we take the advice of five different agronomists, which we believe keeps us on track. Having the Sky drill and knowing that it can handle so many different scenarios, all the way up to direct drilling, multi-crop applications and variable rate, means that we can adapt to our customers' needs without any further investment." 🌱

RIGHT
The Pro Hopper enables Alvis Contracting to apply slug pellets down in a single pass with the seed



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