

A State Of Change



The features and versatility of the 6m Sky Easydrill are central to the Cheyney Farming Partnership's long-term objective of future-proofing the business by producing the same quality of grain for less through greater efficiencies.

In Hampshire, the Cheyney Farming Partnership is in the process of simplifying its establishment system and investigating the benefits of cover and companion crops, the long-term objectives to improve cost-effectiveness and soil structure, and reduce its input bill.

“We are in a period of transition,” Will Cheyney says, describing the changes that are being instigated by the Cheyney Farming Partnership. The partnership underwent a name change recently; from LHN Cheyney & Sons on Will joining his father, Peter, in the business.

He is the fifth generation Cheyney at Hydes Farm, where his great grandfather moved to in 1899. Today the partnership farms around 1700 acres, 760 acres under tenancy agreements, with 920 acres contract farmed split between a 400 acre dairy farm and a 520 acre arable holding.

Cropping on the arable acres is based around winter wheat, winter barley, oilseed rape, spring barley, and winter and spring beans. In addition, there are 100 acres of maize and up to 50 acres of Hybrid Rye for a local AD plant. “We grow for the home market,” Peter says. “We concentrate on Group one and two wheats with the spring barleys for malting.”



Peter (left) and Will Cheyney say that although they are now doing less on the ground, assessing the type and the level of cultivations fields need on a field-by-field basis involves a greater amount of background work.

It is on the arable side where the transition is taking place. “We are paying greater attention to looking after our main asset, our soils, by moving over to a simpler, more cost-effective establishment system that involves less traffic on the ground,” says Will, who had first hand experience of the approach, a combination of direct and combination drilling, while in New Zealand.

“It is a simpler, more cost-effective system, as it doesn’t need as much kit,” he says. Until last spring the business had employed a number of establishment systems based around discing and tined cultivating before sowing with a number of different makes of drills, which gradually increased in width: a 4m Vaderstad, a 4.8m Kverneland Evo, and a 6m Amazone Cayena.

The change in direction had a direct impact on the machinery fleet. “The Cayena is a good drill with low running costs but it wouldn’t direct drill,” Will says. “We did a lot of research. The John Deere 750A could direct drill but it only has one hopper. We wanted a combination direct drill so we could cut out one pass, and so reduce the field traffic and the time involved in establishment. Oakes Bros suggested Opico’s Sky Easydrill. It ticked the boxes and, crucially, it has three hoppers – seed, fertiliser and a micro-granule - which would

Farmer Profile

enable us to drill a combination of two inputs in one pass. Also, each input can be placed in three different positions. We had a demonstration two years ago – on November 11th in awful weather – and it was an eye-opener seeing it work in rough conditions. We also visited the Sky farm in Cambridgeshire and saw it working in heavy clays similar to ours. There were further benefits; it combines established technology, Sulky hoppers and the Moore Systems sowing elements, and a Leader Grant up to 40% was available, which was a massive attraction.”

The Easydrill put in last autumn’s and this season’s spring crops and Will and Peter say that the crops are definitely standing better - “from hedge to hedge” - with the potential for good yields: “but the weather will dictate the final outcome”.

However, the Cheyneys have not jettisoned all other forms of cultivation. Sets of Simba DTX and 6m Opico discs, a 6m Kockerling allrounder tined cultivator and Cambridge rolls enable them to manage different situations.

An additional advantage of the new system is that it has enabled the Cheyneys to “get away from one big tractor”. A John Deere 6215R and a 7530 do the lion’s share of the work, the 6215R on the drill. They are supported by a JD7290. “It goes on the wider cultivators but it’s a compact tractor so we can put it on a trailer,” says Peter, who adds: “With the reduced traffic there are added efficiencies, fields are definitely more level and smoother so we can cover more ground during the day, we can now spray at 14kph, for example.”

Trial

Direct, combination, drilling is not the only new element the Cheyneys have introduced. They are also investigating, through home trials, the benefits and viability of other methods, such as cover crops and companion cropping, that have the potential to further reduce field traffic, lower establishment costs and improve soil structure.

“We don’t want bare soil over the winter,” Will says. “Establishing a cover crop provides the benefits of less cultivations as there is reduced water logging and the soil biology is active throughout the winter. But it’s a question of finding out the mix which is the most cost-effective for our system and how to best manage it. We have drilled spring barley into stubble turnips and put Round-Up in the pre-emergence spray mix. The turnips are dying back and there is good barley emergence.

“Last autumn we also drilled a beans/oilseed rape mix, the beans at a lower depth than the rape. The results have been good, other than flea beetle, which is out of our control. This season, when drilling the maize, we’ll place the DAP just lower than the seed so the plant will grow into the fertiliser.” This year, on a trip to Canada, he will be investigating the technique of growing two crops together, which are harvested and then put through a specially modified separator. “Individual yields will be lower, but this could be offset by the reduction in establishment and harvesting costs,” he says.

In the quest for greater efficiencies there will be more in depth use of the data provided by the Starfire GPS system; the 7530 and 7290 tractors, and the combine, are on SF1, the JD6215R operates to an RTK signal. “The information



The JD6215R/Sky Easydrill combination direct drilling winter wheat after maize and (inset) the uniformity of germination and establishment.

will enable us to calculate more accurately what each job is costing,” says Will, who adds: “With direct, combination, drilling we haven’t needed to use the other cultivators as much which has saved man-hours and fuel. Dad and I are farming 1700 acres with only the need for seasonal staff. We believe ‘less is more’. But doing less in the field requires treating every field individually and does need more background work: digging holes across the area to establish the best approach for that particular situation. It’s a different mentality, looking after the soil more rather than just burying seed in the ground. In time, when we’ve got more data on the cover and companion cropping, we’ll be using them on the contract farm.

“We are in a state of change but on the way to achieving our objective with the new system: to future-proof the business through the ability to produce the same quality of grain for less through greater efficiencies and improving our soil structures with the potential added benefits of the use of less inputs.” ■

When Will has a Choice

Dream Car – Land Rover Defender.

Dream Tractor – New John Deere 6250R.

Favourite Operation – Drilling.

Greatest Achievement – Running the farm with my father.

Machine You Wish They Would Make – One to control the weather.

Biggest Change in the Industry – Technology allowing bigger areas to be farmed with fewer people.

Operator or Autosteer – Autosteer.

Power or Versatility – Versatility.

Hobbies – Cricket, Young Farmers’ Club (YFC), shooting.

Best Advice – Ask for help, there is never a bad question.

Perfect Weekend – Cricket on Saturday followed by a YFC party, and a BBQ on Sunday.