

Real World Results Fine Tune Cropping Plan

Peter Allen (right) with Agronomist Tom Scotson



With land ranging from heavy clay through to sand, sometimes even in the same field, careful management and sound agronomy play a key role in maintaining yields and margins on the 2000 acres of Bedfordshire/Hertfordshire arable production managed by Peter Allen and his father Derek.

With target yields for Winter Wheat of over 4 tonnes/acre consistently achieved, their policy of vigilance, strategic use of break crops to make maximum use of the different soil types and early pre-emptive treatment of pests and diseases, pays tribute to their management skills and crop protection policy.

Their main tract of 1000 acres adjoins the famous Shuttleworth Airfield and was once farmed by the Shuttleworth Agricultural College Trust. A further 1000 acres in the Stevenage area is contract managed.

"You can see the problem at Shuttleworth quite clearly," Peter points out. "We've got predominantly Oxford clay with a ridge of green sand running right through the centre of the farm.

"It's a challenge, but we've now developed an approach that has actually let us turn this to an advantage."

For the last six years, Derek and Peter have worked closely with ProCam Agriculture agronomist Tom Scotson to develop the best cropping policy and disease management strategy for the challenging conditions.

"When it comes to rotations, our aim is to use a wide variety of break crops including OSR, oats and beans to provide a good entry for the wheat. Our aim is to have only first wheats," Peter explains.

"We're also relying more on OSR than previously now as the figures from Procam's 4cast predictive agronomy system consistently show this to be the most reliable

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and profitable break crop."

"The lighter land obviously yields less, but it's not such a problem as it costs less to grow a crop on it, so as long as we get our rotations right and tackle problems early, it all works out."

Cropping for this year at Shuttleworth is split fairly equally - 500 acres of wheat and 500 acres of break crops with the majority of this being OSR. Within the wheat, 160 acres of Durum wheat is being grown as this works quite well on the lighter land, fits in perfectly from a management point of view and yields a £42/tonne premium over feed.

"We sow the durum right after the OSR and we're actually combining it before," Peter Allen explains. "Last year we sowed it on March 3rd and were harvesting it at 15%/DM on July 15th."

When it comes to disease and pest management, ProCam's agronomist Tom Scotson says the main challenges are Brome and Blackgrass on the heavier land and a more diverse range of broad-leaved weeds on the lighter soils and abundant cleavers are on all soils.

"The aim of all herbicide policy is to reduce or remove plant competition both in the short and long term so as to allow the sown crop to achieve its optimum output. This must be done within the constraint of financial discipline," he explains.

Orange blossom midge is rapidly establishing itself as the main pest problem with last year being the worst on record for the farm.

"Blossom midge is now a problem for many growers throughout the UK and the dilemma is really to spray or not to spray, with what to spray, an organophosphate i.e. chlorpyrifos (Dursban WG) or to use Klartan (Tau-fluvalinate) a more environmentally friendly product.

"In the past we've been able to use a tailored approach to midge control but last year the problem was pretty wholesale, and we had to use a fairly extensive program to control it.

4cast data shows you can quite easily lose up to 10% of yield by not treating Orange blossom midge, so it's not something growers should cut corners with, Tom Scotson says.

"Using variety diversification disease control can be cost effectively managed to maximise the profit from a cost effective disease programme. However on these holdings it is essential to produce good yields and samples from Group 3 varieties to enable the crop to be bulked up for storage. Local mills are regular buyers of biscuit wheats which Peter and Derek Allen are able to deliver on their own transport to the end users."

The ProCam approach not only helps Peter adopt the most cost-effective spray program, it's also invaluable in helping him make the right management decisions through an understanding of how other producers are tackling the same problems he faces.

"ProCam puts a lot of emphasis on feeding back field results from other arable producers through the 4cast system so it's not just based on trial results from chemical companies," Peter Allen says,

"Collecting the data in the way they do from farms across the country means you're working with field scale results and information from real world farming situations. It's based on facts rather than theory.

"For us this is a great help in not only allowing us to benchmark ourselves against other producers so we can see where to make improvements, but we can also look at individual crops and identify which are most likely to work in our own farm situation.

"When you're thinking of growing a new crop, for example, you can find information you can access 4cast to find farms with similar soil types and climates and see how it has worked for them.

"With grain prices the way they are and the loss of area aid, getting the fine detail right is now the difference between making a loss and staying in the game, so this support has become pretty essential to us," Peter Allen concludes.