



FOCUS BERKSHIRE

FARM FACTS

Farmer: Jonathan Holland

Location: Berkshire

Area farmed: 1,000 acres arable

Soil: light loam with flinty chalk and clay cap

Cropping: winter wheat, winter oats, winter linseed, winter beans, spring malting barley



Despite the extremely wet autumn, Berkshire farmer Jonathan Holland established almost 1000 acres of combinable crops single-handedly using the well-proven Claydon Opti-Till® strip seeding system.

Autumn 2019 was the wettest since national records began in 1910, yet during a period when many farms using conventional or min-till methods had an agonising wait for more favourable weather Jonathan Holland strip seeded almost 1000 acres of crops on his own using a 7.5m Claydon Straw Harrow and 4.8m Claydon Hybrid mounted drill.

“The rain started on 23 September and it didn’t stop for weeks, so those with large areas of cultivated land ready to be drilled were in real trouble,” Jonathan recalls. “Soils that had been cultivated never had the chance to dry out between the frequent downpours, so from mid-September onwards many farmers were unable to drill in reasonable conditions, if at all.

“Fortunately, I had established a significant area of linseed in early September and when my Weather Pro forecast indicated persistent rain from the third week of that month onwards I decided to go flat out and drill as much winter wheat as I could. In just four 18-hour sessions I established 340 acres by myself. It was only possible because the Claydon Hybrid drilled directly into the stubbles, which dried out sufficiently after only a day without rain, rather than two to four days for cultivated land. That made a huge difference, because it allowed me to sneak 40 or 50 acres in here and there between the bouts of rain.

“Initially I planned to have 280 acres of winter wheat in the rotation, but because of the wet weather I actually drilled 410 acres. Together with winter beans, linseed, and winter oats, by early December 950 acres had been drilled, which left 80 acres. With everyone talking about the area of spring crops that would end up being planted in the UK, and the detrimental impact that could potentially have on spring barley prices, I decided to keep drilling winter wheat right up to 8 December.

“The 80 acres which were left to drill in the spring went in by the first week of March, establishing well before the weather turned very dry in late March. I was pleased not to have ended up with a large area of spring barley and had it not been for the Claydon System, I could never have established anything like the full area of winter cereals, which would have had a significant adverse effect on profitability this season.



Soils are mainly light loam, with some flinty chalk and clay cap. Despite the tough conditions, the Claydon Hybrid has completed 6500 acres in five seasons with no issues and cost just £380 per year in wearing metal.

“One of my investments this season was a bean kit for the Claydon Hybrid. I normally grow only spring beans, which can be drilled 5 – 7.5cm deep using the standard seeding tine and A Share, but winter beans need to go in 12.5-15cm deep and the single tungsten tine in the bean kit makes that possible. The additional investment more than paid for itself as three neighbouring farmers asked me to drill 160 acres of winter beans for them, with more to come next season.”

Currently, Jonathan has 410 acres of winter wheat, the Group 2 milling variety KWS Extase, the hard-milling feed variety Graham (Syngenta) and Group 4 Revelation (LG Seeds). This season’s cropping also includes 200 acres of Mascani (Senova) winter oats, 150 acres of Boxer (Senova) beans, 150 acres of Alpaga (Linea Semences) winter linseed and 70 acres of Propino (Syngenta) spring malting barley.

GIVING THE SEED THE BEST CHANCE

“My approach to crop establishment in adverse conditions is to think that ‘If I were a seed, what environment would I be most happy in?’ Jonathan adds. “Having drilled 6500 acres in the last five years using the Claydon System I believe that it provides exactly the right growing environment. During that time, I have kept a close eye on every new drill that has come onto the market but been unable to find anything else better or more versatile. The Claydon Hybrid really is the one drill that can establish any crop and withstand the stony soils and operating conditions in this area.”

“Last autumn, a number of farmers who were unable to drill crops because of the weather came to look at it working, but I emphasised that they must avoid thinking ‘I’ll buy a Claydon in case it rains, and I can’t operate my normal system’. The Claydon is a complete system, not just a get out of jail card.”

Until six years ago Jonathan used a min-till approach, running a Kongskilde Vibroflex stubble cultivator ahead of a Great Plains seedbed maker to produce the final tilth. From a conventional viewpoint, the seedbeds looked good, but blackgrass was becoming an increasing problem because the tines on the stubble cultivator mixed the seeds throughout the soil profile. With the efficacy of ag-chem products decreasing he felt this was not the way to contain the problem at manageable levels.



Winter wheat pictured at the end of May while Jonathan was spraying with the one tractor that he uses for all his operations. It shows the uniform establishment of the Claydon System and, despite its speed and simplicity, his crops have never looked better or produced higher yields; headlands are much more productive and rather than just being areas where previously he would have accepted much lower yields because of compaction, they are now just as productive as the rest of the field.



The Claydon Hybrid started the season by drilling linseed in early September, which by June was looking very promising. It is a relatively cheap and easy crop to grow, without the considerable issues which can affect oilseed rape.



“The output of the Claydon Hybrid is extremely high. Jonathan tends to operate it at a forward speed of 9kph, much less than its full potential of 12kph, to maximise the quality of the work. Even so, he can drill 500 acres of winter wheat, roll it, and apply a pre-emergence spray in under a week, so no need to rush!

Despite being ‘min-till’ the old system was time consuming, involved lots of labour and burned huge amounts of diesel. It tore through wearing metal at a rate of knots on the flinty soils. It was expensive, albeit still cheaper than ploughing.

“Our rotation was focused on winter wheat, winter barley and winter oilseed rape, with a little spring barley,” Jonathan explains. “There was so much work to get through in the autumn that we had to start drilling earlier than the optimum time to maximise blackgrass control, oilseed rape was grown too often in the rotation and producing winter barley didn’t help.

“Even though yields were good and the business was profitable, I had to reassess how I did things to help future-proof my operation. This meant simplifying the system and significantly reducing costs whilst maintaining yields and gross margins.

“I had actually ordered a Sumo DTS but seeing the results a neighbour was achieving with the Claydon System made me realise that I’d not looked at it in enough depth. I went to see Jeff Claydon, who invented

the Claydon Opti-Till® System, saw the equipment being made and toured his family’s farm. When he explained how the unique tine system avoids mixing weeds and volunteers throughout soil layers, providing an opportunity to control them using a Claydon Straw Harrow, the whole system made sense.

“It seemed a much more practical solution than the one I was using, as well as being far less complicated and adaptable than anything else I had seen. After thinking it over carefully and looking at crops drilled with Claydon, Mzuri and Sumo equipment I cancelled the Sumo DTS and ordered a 3m mounted Claydon Hybrid, but then decided that a 4m version would provide reserve capacity in the event of adverse weather or taking on more land.”

MEETING GOALS

“Since adopting the Claydon System yields have improved, fixed costs are much lower, the labour bill is zero, the annual cost for wearing metal is £380 across 1100 acres and diesel use is a fraction of what it was

before. The structure of the soils has also improved significantly, but that took two or three years for that to begin to happen – and it gets better each season.

“Some will just buy a Claydon Hybrid drill and expect immediate results, but to do so would be a mistake. The Hybrid is certainly a very versatile all-rounder and can sow a wide range of crops, but it is part of a complete system and getting the full benefits takes time.

“Since I bought my Claydon Hybrid a lot of new drills have come onto the market and I have looked at them all in detail, but still can’t find another that is as versatile. It is ideal for my situation, highly manoeuvrable and allows me to drill 110-120 acres a day on my own, with no support. Not once in six years have I needed or wanted a cultivator, because the Straw Harrow and Hybrid drill cover all conditions and situations.

“The leading tine is a fantastic piece of design and engineering and I often wonder how it works so well across all soil types and conditions. Despite the very abrasive, stony soils in this area, I have had no structural



Jonathan Holland started farming in 1994 after graduating from the Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester. Last autumn he was able to establish all his autumn-sown crops as planned, and drill some for neighbouring farmers, single-handedly covering up to 120 acres a day with this Claydon Hybrid.

issues in 6500 acres and the operating costs have been insignificant compared with others. Had I bought a drill with rubber-covered closing rollers they would have shred very quickly on the flints and constantly need replacing.

“With all the changes and uncertainties in farming it is important to keep fixed costs as low as possible whilst maintaining yields and profitability. I am glad that I decided to invest in the Claydon System when I did because it has given me time to adjust to a new way of doing things, rather than being forced into it.

“Having sold all of my other equipment when I committed to the Claydon System I don’t even have a cultivator now, so there’s no chance to cover up any mistakes. The system allows me to do everything myself, with just a 215hp John Deere 6215R, 7.5m Claydon Straw Harrow, 4.8m Claydon Hybrid drill and a trailed 24m 3400-litre sprayer, which is also used to apply liquid fertilisers. To drill, roll, fertilise and spray costs just £2.50 - £3.00 per acre in diesel, making the system cheap and highly

effective system. Despite saving £60,000 per year (£60/acre) by using the Claydon System, my crops have never looked or performed better.

“Part of the reason is that headlands are now just as productive as the rest of the field, because I only work in ideal conditions, the number of passes is greatly reduced and the Claydon’s leading tine removes any compaction before the seed goes in.

“The Straw Harrow is a key component of the system, but its importance is often misunderstood. This fast, low-cost operation evens out crop residues, shaking out the seeds and heads missed by the harvester. It creates a micro-tilth in the top 10-15mm of soil to germinate volunteers and weeds, at the same time killing slugs and destroying their eggs. The brushing action also kills cotyledon weeds and grasses by breaking off the growing shoots.

“Operating at up to 25km/h I can comfortably cover 200 acres in six hours during the middle of the day when conditions are dry, and temperatures are

at their highest. Little soil is moved so if wet weather follows this mini tilth will quickly dry out and not delay subsequent operations, either another pass with the Straw Harrow or drilling. Since adopting the Straw Harrow, slug populations have dropped dramatically and now they cause little damage.

“I am often asked how it is possible to produce highly-productive crops, so consistently using just a Claydon Straw Harrow and Claydon Hybrid drill, but the system works superbly. Others are now seeing that the Claydon System offers a viable and reliable way to significantly reduce costs, maintain or improve yields and maximise profit margins.”

