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## FARM MANAGEMENT ON MY FARM (An introduction)

By

John Carter

Lashbrook Farm, Talaton, Exeter, Devon, England.

I am anticipating in my paper that the Chairman wont introduce me as a peasant farmer from Devon who started with very little and still has about the same. So, I'll tell you that's what I am. Well fed on cider, cream, apple pie and pasties, which I hope those who came to the South West have sampled.

Unlike those prosperous lean and hungry looking men from the East of this country. As Mark Anthony said "Such men are dangerous"! No, I am an easy going chap with 320 acres growing Spring Barley, potatoes and pigs.

I still find it hard to get my farming priorities right. The banks tell me they can't understand my thinking as I don't have an independant consultant's report geared to their systems and computer printouts. Others that mapping should lead my thinking and with mice who open windows to control my works. The pig technical advice is apparently geared to feed company systems and commercial breeding company thinking is geared to that. I'm sure I'm not alone in seeking advice which is geared to nothing but me as a customer.

I still think that farming and the countryside in which we do it, should be in balance with your own feelings of what makes sense. That those senses are governed by the seasons and that year's seasons. That it's through your timeliness, attention to detail, ability to persevere, but above all, your love and knowledge of the land and the animals on it, that allows you to survive the bad times and enjoy the good.

I always thought it was these things and the comradeship of those who worked with you that were important. It's true innate skills are not always quantifiable but I make no excuses as a farmer for saying I have learnt more from being in tune with nature and my management decisions come better that way.

Of course, it's a different world in which we operate and there is a need for hard commercial decisions to survive and we've got to get it right. However, when you look at so many other walks of life where serious people are seriously unhappy in their work and seriously want to make you the same, I sometimes wonder. Well, I don't propose to follow them that quickly.

For years we have asked the "Gypsy Rose Lees" of British Agriculture (that's you Tony) to look into the future knowing that the mists are as thick for them as they are for us. So many times we've been told that we face dramatic change and disaster and those that changed too quickly often did. But, for most of us, it wasn't too bad.

Keeping pigs out of doors 25 years ago was a lamentable waste of resources. The thought of rotation and farmyard

fertility totally out of date. Change the name to sustainability, to low cost, to intergrated crop management and suddenly 30 years on the fool becomes a wise man. Well, just remember, it was me who told you the King had no clothes on!

Enough of this. I am going to tell you about the main factors affecting the management on my farm and introduce you to my friend Parkinson 1909-1993. Anybody who lives that long must be taken notice of. He said in his book The Law "Work expands to fill the time available for it's completion". I told Tony King that's why my paper was late. My work expanded and left little to complete my paper. He was not impressed.

### THE FARM 600 - 700ft

320 acres 120 spring barley, 50 acres potatoes, 500 sows. 320 of undulating ground, that means hardly a level field on the place. Clay to the left, clay loam in the centre and loamy gravel at the right. 38" water a year. Most fields have access by road. Good farm buildings. Adequate if not modern machinery (machinery repair costs versus borrowing money are watched). Contracted fertilizer spreading combining and baling. Run by three people including me. ( $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) plus my daughter ( $\frac{1}{4}$ ) and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  days a month from our farm secretary.

### THE SYSTEM

At Lashbrook we run a fertility building system centred round a 500 sow free range pig unit which moves around the farm creating fertility for oncoming crops. It uses the barley indirectly in feed and straw for bedding and cleans up weeds and surplus potatoes.

The cereals leave clean ground for farrowing on and from the straw come piles of rotting dung for the potatoes. The pigs in turn "graze" the potato land and get rid of "keepers". We think it's a worthwhile system. We have farmed it for 30 years and because sows move onto different fields every eight weeks and crops rotate, the disease status of both is good. Low levels of spray and fertilizer are used.

The policy of the farm is to maintain a sustainable system, flexible enough to meet the demands of a market that will provide sufficient income to safeguard the future of the farm and it's people, without putting either under destructive pressure.

### The Land, The System but firstly, The People.

The Industrial "Roman Centurean" Pyramid systems. Boss in big chair at top down to worker on orange box are at last changing. The recognition that in this complex world all heads have to work and have a value is refreshing. If industry goes on like this it will soon catch up with us on the farm.

As Parkinson says "The man who is denied the opportunity of taking decisions of importance begins to regard as important the decision he is allowed to take. He becomes fussy about filing, keen on seeing pencils are sharpened, eager to ensure that the windows are opened (or shut) and apt to use two or three different coloured pencils".

At Lashbrook, we work as a team. We have breakfast and lunch together, sort out the problems of the day, discuss the whole farm position, make decisions on financial matters and stock together. We plan the purchase, sales and investments. Memos don't have to pass, strengths and weaknesses and variations to the plan attended to at the time. Problems highlighted and the opportunity is there to control them collectively at the time.

The team has joint responsibility and knowledge of all aspects of the farm, enabling the development of different skills and the ability to stand in for each other. We tend, like most, to find our areas of particular skill and interest and wider knowledge gathering is encouraged.

Over the years a great many young people have spent some time with us and many have gone on to farm on their own.

Salaries are paid and farm success brings extra advantages. We celebrate spring sowing and harvest (though we don't have a big harvest home any more and have a farm Christmas party.

#### Pig Unit - Low Capital Cost, High Output

40 Nucleus Saddleback Sows, producing own hybrid, home brew production gilts for 470 sow commercial herd and for sale.

Production herd produces approximately 9,500 pigs a year. Sales on a weekly basis at 30kg to local unit finishing mostly to bacon. 80-90% grade 12 probe and take 11 - 12 weeks to grow at 750 gms a day. They grow on multiple ingredient mixture so conversion is not easy to quantify. Sufficient to say that the farmer considers ours as good as national company hybrids.

70 - 80 sows farrow each month over approximately 10 days on fresh ground at 6 to the acre. They farrow in simple portable arcs. After 10 days their piglets have free access to the fields, creep feed and water. The mothers are group fed. At 6 weeks the sows are weaned at 8 per day to paddocks where they are rested and then served by 12 boars and stocked at 10 per acre. They farrow at the same dates each year.

The objectives of the unit are maximum pigs per

sow given the constraints of the system; maximum weight piglets at 10 weeks time of sale. Minimum sow feed given winter and summer conditions.

All feed is purchased from two feed companies, delivered and unloaded by them. Piglets are housed in airy straw yards from 6 - 10 weeks, loaded and weighbridged. Each individual pen is rested before re-use. Records consist of field farrowing charts and weekly liaison with the finisher. The vet is a rare visitor.

#### BARLEY

Spring barley which is grown for feed and straw cashes in the fertility left by the pigs and provides clean ground. Mostly the variety Hart is grown. We have suffered from late planting and drought in the past but yields are about 2 tons and 3 tons is not unknown. Fertilizer after analysis - 75 units of N; 48 units potash (we have sometimes used nothing); one simple fungicide and herbicide spray. The crop is floor stored and dried where it is bucketed into lorries and marketed through our grain marketing co-operative. We drill and spray but we don't invest in combine or baler.

#### POTATOES

Potatoes follow the dry sow paddocks and most of the ground is dressed with rotted dung from the high stacked middens. Because irrigation is not available, attention is paid to deep cultivations before destoning and planting.

The potato marketing co-operative of which I am a member has been established for 24 years. It's a 100% commitment co-operative so my point of entry starts with consultation on timing and variety. The choice is the one that suits the farm but it has also to be part of the marketing strategy. Mine this year is Estima with some Fianna.

After choice comes soil analysis, crop spacing, etc., all done by the agronomists in consultation with Cambridge. This year 175 units nitrogen and 40 potash in most cases. So different from the past thinking which would be the other way round.

Seed is purchased by the acre through the company which now has a 25% share in Seed Co., the new seed co-operative.

During the season we meet the scientists and agronomists in whole day farmhouse discussions, 15 farmers in a group, probably 6 times a year; looking at crops, stores, etc. and taking a "hands on" view of each others production.

The agronomists regularly walk the crops and monitor progress with the growers.

The co-operative markets on a broad front, stores and works in partnership with graders and packers, each playing a professional role. The one that's good at marketing, at packing and at growing all, working together in trust. The need to work together to satisfy and hold the big buyers has brought great benefits and new understanding. Regular cross director meetings should hold contracts for 150,000 tons this year.

Our personal objective is optimum yield of quality bakers with minimum waste. The co-operative markets early through to long term, storage contracts, processing the low quality, crisping, chipping and everything in between. Fax information comes back on grading to enable adjustments to be made in the field. Farm storage, central storage and grading, prepacking, investments I could never afford and don't need to.

Our harvest is handled in 1 ton boxes, buffer stored up to 400 tons. The company transport system collects in bulk or boxes, drivers loading boxes themselves. We invest in specialist field equipment as no contractors are available.

Though our potato team is small now, we still have a bottle of champagne in paper cups at the end of the last row and a Spudders Supper in the pub.

#### FINANCE AND THE OFFICE

My friend Parkinson says "The person who is devoted to paperwork has lost the initiative. He is dealing with things that are brought to his notice having ceased to notice anything for himself. He has been essentially defeated by his job."

I have a secretary for 1½ days a month, a fax, basic crop records and enterprise analysis. Pig records are kept by one of the team. The paper may be put into a computer in the future to satisfy my friend Parkinson.

Like many others we have found ourselves looking to specialist finance arrangements tailored for particular needs rather than overdrafts, lately.

The playing hard to get attitude of the National Banks and their desire to have their umbrella money back when the black clouds arrive and dodge projected problems has sadly left a yawning gap in understanding in many cases. Perhaps they also regret the changes that have taken place. The days when muddy boots or not, you sat down and knew each other and trusted each other and talked man to man had a lot going for them.

There are a number of bridges to be built and progress is through trust in each other's ability, not computer printouts and rigid adherence to cash flow guesses.

Like most farmers, I spend more and more time on forms, welfare, politics, the role of women, etc., but the community in which I live and the quality of life there is our biggest long term concern.





Just recently I've been involved in starting a community shop and helping to provide homes for young people in the village. There is an increasingly dangerous lack of understanding and isolation of the farming community and it is up to us to continue to be an important part of the countryside and help to preserve the way of life. Most of us are unhappy with the bureaucratic muddles and increasingly concerned at the power of the market that manipulates customer tastes and fears to their benefit and expect us to follow and possibly take the blame if it goes wrong.

These issues are increasingly part of our management thinking, as well as our professional business approach.

The wisdom and humour of farming life must not be lost in an otherwise soulless quest for efficiency.

So, from me and Parkinson, thank you!

## GROSS MARGIN £s/unit - Lashbrook Farm

Year								
	PIGS		SPRING BARLEY		SHEEP		POTATOES	
1974	78		47		17		226	
1975	163		42		13		552	
1976	168		9		18		<b>696</b>	
1977	131		65		34		86	
1978	279	<i>Number</i>	108	<i>Acres</i>	40	<i>Number</i>	165	<i>Acres</i>
1979	161	355	139	231	34	553	453	39
1980	141	374	130	206	25	687	349	38
1981	182	378	64	226	50	590	<b>546</b>	38
1982	213	327	124	247	50	485	378	40
1983	58	292	97	226	50	506	648	43
1984	257	294	146	197	16	605	150	42
1985	214	275	129	213	45	527	183	42
1986	172	278	87	179	39	436	242	44
1987	200	320	151	80	50	250	460	50
1988	157	383	95	80	39	236	( - 66 )	55
1989	294	450	29	80	36	210	<b>767</b>	50
1990	267	423	46	53	15	152	377	49
1991	214	420	101	74	27	135	578	52
1992	298	450	61	103			200	50
1993	151	490	137	143			242	52
1994	166	460	190	120			1316	53

Drought  
year



# Lashbrook Farm - Devon

## MARGIN OVER FIXED COSTS

Total Gross Margin £,000

£,000

