

NEW Bespoke Herbal Leys with Charles Hunter-Smart & Sam Phillips



Two neighbouring Cotswold farmers have gone into partnership in an innovative, joint venture with a Cornish dairy farmer and herbal leys are driving the business.

{video1}

The Bradwell Grove Estate, near Burford, totals 3000 acres. Macaroni Farm, tenanted by Sam Phillips and his father, comprises just over 1950 acres. Charles Hunter-Smart manages the Bradwell Grove Estate for the Heyworth family, and explains how the joint venture came about.

‘We’ve farmed organically since 2005, utilising the single farm payment, but in 2016-2017 the reduction of BPS was going to have a big impact. One member of staff was retiring and I was getting older too. We had a simple rotation of three cereal crops and two fertility-building crops. We had a hundred Limousin-Angus cross suckler cows and were running a joint venture sheep business with about a thousand ewes. At that point all our grass crops were multispecies herbal leys which we’d been growing for 6-7 years.

‘Sam Phillips, a young, fourth generation farmer and our immediate neighbour, was exploring the idea behind the new System Cameleon inter-row drill & hoe which looked to suit organic cropping. We got chatting and did some exploratory visits together to look at the drill on a farm in Suffolk. We realised neither of us could afford the drill on our own. Out of that conversation, I thought there might be an opportunity to share a little more than just the machine. Sam is full of enthusiasm, passionate about organic farming and food. I saw it as a way of providing economies of scale, pooling ideas and provide a seamless transition for the Heyworth family to enable me to step back and do a bit less.’

That was the start. Two years into the arable joint venture, Sam and Charles started talking about livestock, as Sam explains:

'The herbal ley element within our rotation is the fertility building stage but we could only afford to keep the leys in the ground for two years because we needed to get back to a cash crop. So we wanted to make sure that when the land was in a herbal ley we were still making money. We were adamant we wanted to be profitable without subsidy. The traditional suckler beef herd wasn't making much profit. We were set-stocking and housing for 6-7 months, bedding on organic straw at £90 a ton and feeding baled silage with the need for lots of day to day labour. So we decided to look at an alternative dairy enterprise that would tick all the boxes in terms of soil, biodiversity and profitability. Because the margin on the dairy is much better than beef or sheep we could afford to stretch the rotation to four years of herbal ley.'

The next major hurdle was securing a contract for the milk. The solution was to create a three way venture - The Cotswold Mobile Dairy. Dave Sanders, based near Bodmin in Cornwall providing the milk contract and cows. Bradwell Grove and Macaroni Farm between them providing the land and infrastructure.

Dairyman, Rob Richmond, now manages 350 cows for the Bradwell Grove and Macaroni Farm partnership, along with 100 heifers and 100 heifer calves. Rob explains the choice of a mobile dairy. 'Because of the size of the land in the Bradwell Grove/Macaroni joint venture we didn't want a fixed dairy - we wanted to spread as much fertility over the 4,500 acres as we could. So we looked at a mobile milking system. We have a 24:48, Herringbone Waikato Milking system on a tri-axle flatbed trailer which follows the cows around the grazing platform.'

The cows are milked in the morning, then go on to fresh pasture. They graze for the main part of the day and in the late part of the afternoon they move to a night paddock, then back round to the parlour. After milking the next morning the parlour moves to the next block.

'The cows are drawn through the parlour because they know on the other side is fresh grass,' says Charles. 'Every time they get moved they know they are going on to something new, palatable and good. In a conventional fixed milking system they are drawn through with feed concentrates but we don't have to do that.'

'The herbal ley has a crucial role in our rotation. The dairy is so reliant on the leys,' Sam explains. 'Legumes fix nitrogen, improving soil fertility and the deep roots make the soil structure ideal for subsequent cereal cropping. I think its better with

livestock. Their manure fertilises the soil and is broken down by worms, bugs and beetles. It creates a soil fertility cycle that enables our farming system to work’.

The four year herbal ley system is a big advantage to help control black grass. ‘Two years of grazing the crop and then putting it back into arable cropping was not enough to kill the black grass seeds, but if we can bury them for four years a lot of that seed will become unviable. So having the cows and being able to run the herbal leys for four years is a great bonus.’

Sam explains how the leys are managed. ‘I go to Cotswold Seeds in late autumn and discuss our seed mix and what seed rate to use etc. Typically, we use the previous mix as a template. We look at what worked and what didn’t. Sam Lane, the Technical Manager at Cotswold, then formulates a mix with a high percentage of sainfoin, as well as clovers and trefoils for maximum nitrogen fixation. Our mix includes a diverse range of grasses to hold the sward together, such as Timothy, red fescue, a little ryegrass and plenty of deep rooting cocksfoot. The thin brashy soil is prone to drying up in the summer, so the mix needs to include drought tolerant herbs like the mineral rich chicory and plantain. We try to mimic the plant diversity of nature, with all the benefits to the soil. Every farm is different and every farmer has ways they want to work - Cotswold Seeds are brilliant at accommodating that.’

The Cameleon Drill, which kicked off the JV journey, offers consistent establishment of herbal leys. ‘We undersow into a spring cereal, typically barley or oats. We don’t reduce the seed rate for the cereal nurse crop. We like to roll it to make sure there is good seed to soil consolidation. Weather and dry spells are not good for spring sowing and that’s a risk we take. But we feel this is the best way to establish a herbal ley. There’s big excitement when it appears. It’s so rewarding.’

The herbal leys remain for four years, then the land is cultivated for cereals for four years.

‘We have a blueprint of an eight year rotation,’ says Sam. The dairy has 4 blocks and the arable has 4 blocks. Every year a new block rotates into dairy. We are building the soil, then using that, but instead of just being sustainable - building and using, building and using - we are building, using a little bit, building more.’

Sam says that setting up the business during the Covid pandemic was stressful but they are now reaping the rewards.

“When we were set-stocking and grazing tighter we felt we were taking more out of the ground than we were putting back. Now we are seeing the benefits of mob grazing and out wintering all stock. It’s amazing how the land has transformed in just a year. By grazing a third, trampling a third, leaving a third, the land is recovering and regenerating.

‘The herbal ley mix will change again next year,’ says Sam. ‘Conservation or regen-ag is about observation and trying different things. If you are learning from mistakes you are progressing. Every day is a school day.’

<https://www.cotswoldseeds.com/seeds/17/herbal-leys>

Date Posted: 22nd April 2024