

Converting the Farm to Organic – Progress Report – July 2008

You just can't avoid hearing about increasing food prices in the media at the moment but as both farming and a processing business, we've been feeling the effects for over a year now and frankly it's been a pretty tough time. It's not just been about the headlines of oil prices, of course; booming world demand for dairy products and wheat are being thwarted by reduced output in from Australia, due to drought, and the USA, due to increased moves toward biofuel crops.

We are working our way through it all, though, and the decision to convert the rest of the farm to organic 14 months ago has been extremely well-timed.

"Conventional farmers will have to think harder about rotations as ways of reducing fertiliser and pesticide input." said NFU president Peter Kendall on the 11th June, as diesel and fertiliser

costs continued to soar and, almost certainly, the biggest challenge so far of the organic conversion of our own Holt Farm has been on the arable and grass growing side.



The farm has always been managed pretty extensively, with generally low inputs of nitrogen and pesticide, but maintaining a system where the 420-strong dairy herd could be fed from home-grown forage and crops was always a core plank of the conversion plan.

Now, 14 months or so into the process, we have to say that the farm is looking as good as we've ever seen it and most of

the doubts and concerns have been ably dealt with by farm manager Jon Wilson and his team.

New rotation plans are in place and some unusual (for us at least) planting regimes seem to be working well. **Sowing peas in with barley** has resulted in an excellent looking crop and there seems to be a symbiotic relationship between the two.

Could it be that the peas capture nitrogen for future crops and, whilst growing in unison, the barley benefits from the mixture?

They will be whole-crop harvested and ensiled for winter feed. Similarly, a mixed crop of **triticale and lupins** is also thriving.

On the farm's Mendip Hills unimproved limestone grasslands, the wildflowers are thriving with a great show of **wild orchids** and there is plenty of wildlife activity to be seen.



British Friesians

Meanwhile the **British Friesians** are enjoying the early summer grass and looking particularly well.

Having expressed a concern about the effects of US biofuel agriculture at the beginning of this article, we do have a small area of the farm now in its third year of **Miscanthus**.

Having harvested some of our 40 acres this year, we can now accurately calculate our yield

and, with the **3kg of dry matter roughly equivalent to 1 litre of oil**, our plan is to convert the heating system at The Mendip Centre office and some of our properties to burn it next year.

An on-site machine will produce the more user friendly pellets that the domestic boilers require whilst the un-pelleted product will be burnt in a commercial boiler at the offices, therefore reducing unnecessary processing costs.

It hasn't escaped our attention that, with oil prices as they are the output value of an acre of Miscanthus is now over £692, certainly making it the most financially productive part of the farm.

Rest assured, though: our long-term plan doesn't involve whole scale planting of the entire farm but it's easy to see why many farmers are considering substantial switches of crops to biofuels, a move that would only drive food commodity prices even higher.



Wild Orchids

Interesting times!