

# Iford Estate News

J & H Robinson Iford Farms Ltd – est. 1895

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## All change on the farming front – part 1 Ben Taylor

It has been said before more than once but 2020 really has been a year to forget. The worst harvest of my career was overshadowed by the spectre of COVID-19 and the long lasting effects it will have on the business. Meanwhile, agriculturally, just about everything that could go wrong, did.

Those with good memories will recall the exceptionally wet autumn of 2019, but you may well have forgotten that, prior to the rain setting in, there was a prolonged dry spell. Oilseed Rape was drilled, as usual at the end of August, and sat for some time in very dry seedbeds. Once it did eventually emerge it suffered an almost biblical plague of the dreaded Cabbage Stem Flea Beetle, an insect once controlled well by now banned seed dressings. Efforts to control the plague were ineffective and by the late winter it was clear that most of the crop was not good enough to make it to harvest. This presented a massive problem of what to replace it with. The logical fallback of spring barley was unattractive because the national crop looked like being huge (more of which later) and prices consequently poor. We therefore decided to have a go at growing Spring Rape, adding a few peas to the rotation as well.

Spring Rape is a crop that historically (at least on this farm) has either been a disaster or the best crop of the year. But it is cheap to grow and

in a good year will yield well and return a good margin. Varieties have improved significantly since the last time we grew it and it seemed like a good idea to have another go.

How wrong I was! The spring drought, persistent and continuing flea beetle attack and poor growing conditions finished most of this crop off too and, for the first time ever, I was presented not just with a crop failure but a double crop failure, and an expensive one at that. In the end we harvested about 20 tons of Rape off 200ha of sown crop, compared to a budget of 600tons.

Back in the autumn, we had also planned about 260ha of wheat. By the time the planned sowing date of 25th September had arrived it was raining, and it rained and rained for what seemed like months. Snatching a day here and a day there we managed to get all but 10% of the area sown, albeit using the old fashioned and expensive plough and power harrow for a large chunk of the work. I was very pleased that I hadn't sold the plough during the occasional clear-outs over the years. I suppose sometimes the old ways are still the best!

Ultimately the wheat established fairly well and ended up yielding a respectable 10.25t/ha. The wet autumn meant that the national wheat area was much reduced, and prices rose to compensate, helped in part by the weak pound. The bulk of our crop sold for £200/t, and there will be a likely average of about £180 over the whole harvest, levels not achieved since 2012.

Of course this bit of good news helps make up for some of the damage done to the bottom line elsewhere, but the bad news continued. Spring barley suffered enormously from the long spring drought, with April and May registering almost no rain. Most of you will have been on the beach (as was I) but the barley was stuck in the field and it didn't like it very much. A very poor crop resulted and, because everybody else chose to plant barley instead of wheat, prices are poor. Once it's all sold I expect to average about 5t/ha against a budget of 7.5t.

I mentioned earlier that we decided to try a few peas in the rotation. We have of course been growing peas for many years on the better land around the village, but haven't grown them on the hill for nearly 20 years, mostly because of variable yields and difficulty combining them. However this year we had little option, and thankfully ended up with a respectable crop on some pretty indifferent fields.

This year was the first year on a reduced acreage, having given up land at Falmer; and that acreage was reduced further by the failed rape crop. Consequently we finished harvest in record time (for me) on 12th August. This enabled everyone to have some weekends off and recharge after a difficult year. I even managed my first summer holiday in 44 years. I hope it won't be another 44 years before the next one!



Cabbage Stem Flea Beetle

## Talking about livestock Ben Taylor



The livestock enterprise has been in decline for some years, and the winter of 2019 was the first with significantly reduced numbers of cattle on the farm. I decided last year that rather than sell the cattle directly to slaughter we would let someone else 'finish' them and sell them as 'store cattle' in the late

autumn. The cattlemen of the Midlands have access to all sorts of virtually free waste products from food factories and processing plants that are simply not economic to transport down south. Their cost of production is massively lower than ours, and it makes perfect sense to bring the mouths to the food rather than the food to the mouths.

So, as well as a reduced breeding herd, we also had reduced youngstock numbers, and the benefits are massive. We have been able to reduce labour costs (through natural wastage) and machinery costs substantially, while also cutting our fertiliser costs and eliminating the area of arable land devoted to producing cattle food. I remain convinced that this is the right decision and, with TB now rampant in Sussex, it has reduced the burden of TB testing by two thirds.

However we did have a funny moment. When, having agreed a price for the store cattle in the morning, we had a TB reactor in the afternoon and the whole farm was shut down, the sale was lost and we were faced with having to keep 180 cattle we didn't have food for. Luckily after some hunting we found a purchaser who was able to take them despite our TB status and they ended up going for a better price than originally agreed.



## From the archives

Re-shingling the spire of Iford Church in 1929 in the days before 'Health & Safety' had been invented.



## COVID update

Although the effects of COVID-19 will be felt for years to come, to date the majority of businesses in Iford are weathering the storm. For the Estate the biggest effect was seen, inevitably, with the

Lodges. Having been shut for the spring during lockdown I we reopened in time for the peak summer months and were delighted that guests returned in

droves, keen to escape for a staycation. During the first lockdown we were pleased to have been able to offer the accommodation



to keyworkers who needed to isolate from vulnerable family members, or who were on temporary placements away from home. We enjoyed full occupancy until November when lockdown 2 hit, only to welcome guests back for December. We are of course currently shut but are looking forward to reopening in 2021.

## Salve et vale



In December we said goodbye to Sue Brothers, our Farm Secretary of very many years – suffice it to say that she started with us in the last century when the farm office was at the other end of the village in what is now Upperstalls Unit 1. Sue is going to continue working with some of her smaller clients and we wish her well in her 'semi' retirement.

In January we welcomed Suzanne Russell as our new Farm Secretary and in future the office will be manned five mornings a week.

## All change on the farming front – part 2 Ben Taylor

Without beating around the bush the future of the farming enterprises is bleak. A combination of changing climate, Brexit, environmental legislation and the loss of support payments has shifted the balance of risk and reward firmly against us. The crop failures we've seen in 2020 will become commonplace in my view, and without a significant and sustained increase in the price of our outputs or a dramatic cut in the cost of our production the sustainability of arable and livestock farming is marginal. Luckily the diversification we've undertaken over the last 20 years will secure the future of the business itself, but the fundamental problem though is that none of these activities, apart from the shoot, rely on having farmland. They could all function perfectly well without farming, and this is the nub of the problem going forward – how do we make the farm sufficiently future proof in the long term?

To that end I am actively exploring other avenues, and trying to secure income from other sources whilst reducing our costs of production, and with luck these two threads will coincide to create a brighter future.

### Firstly the other income...

We have been in various environmental schemes since they started in the late 1980s, and our location in the National Park now makes them even more relevant. New schemes being launched later in this decade look likely to provide useful income streams. Detail is very thin on the ground though and they are unlikely to replace the entire income lost in farm support payments, increased costs and reduced outputs. We will of course be active participants in these schemes should they prove viable, but the shape of them is unclear as I write.

More exciting is a pilot project the Estate is involved with in developing a Biodiversity Net Gain project. The idea is that developers and/or infrastructure projects will be obliged to not only replace any biodiversity they destroy but actually increase it. To that end the Government is seeking to generate a pipeline of projects that developers can buy into which deliver biodiversity improvements over a minimum of 30 years. At Iford this could involve the creation of chalk grassland, woodland planting and wet meadows on the Brooks. The detail is sparse at the moment and without doubt it will be a massive change of direction for us. It gives us the chance of providing a lucrative 30 year income stream, without significant risk, whilst still allowing us to create other income from, for example, carbon sequestration or tourism.

Cost reduction is another important theme and, whilst we've made strides towards this by cutting machinery costs and reducing labour, 2021 will see the beginning of a new zero tillage conservation agriculture system of production. By reducing tillage, large cost savings are possible. By using 'roots not iron' to perform our cultivation, and by incorporating green manures into our production systems, we should see a big reduction in costs, as well as improvements to our soil health and a general benefit to our environment. It's a big subject which I will report on more fully next year.

If we can combine these two approaches of conservation agriculture and biodiversity net gain, add in some carbon capture and improve our soils at the same time, then there is a potentially exciting and rewarding way forward. Fingers crossed!

*"If we can combine these two approaches of conservation agriculture and biodiversity net gain, add in some carbon capture and improve our soils at the same time, then there is a potentially exciting and rewarding way forward."*



# The new South Downs Forest School to open soon

by SDFS leaders  
Lynne Shersby  
and Lynn Clark



**Our mission is to:**  
*'Inspire curiosity and develop the physical and mental well-being of young people and the community. Through our stunning woodland and what nature provides, we offer a safe, inclusive space to open senses, discover, have fun, be free and connect with those around us and our natural world'.*



*"I am delighted to introduce the new South Downs Forest School that will be opening in 2021"*  
**Ged Robinson**

We are so looking forward to starting our Forest School in the beautiful woodland on the stunning South Downs opposite Iford, by the Hill Lodge. We are immensely grateful to the Robinson family for giving us permission to use it.

We have been very busy getting the area ready, buying equipment, gathering resources, completing paperwork, risk assessments, etc. Unfortunately, due to Covid 19 restrictions, we have been unable to start yet but are hoping to do so as soon as it is safe.

### The South Downs Forest School (SDFS)

The SDFS is a not for profit Community Interest Company. This means that any profits gained have to be put back directly into the company SOLELY for the purposes and benefits of the community. Our aim is to provide an inclusive Forest School with access to all young people. We want to be able to provide free or heavily subsidised Forest School/ Outdoor Learning sessions to young people in our community who are disadvantaged and vulnerable, who would otherwise be unable to pay for these sessions and young people who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

### The team leaders

**Lynne Shersby:** I live locally in Swanborough. I have a B.Ed (Hons) degree, a PG Diploma in Specific Learning Difficulties, as well as other qualifications such as Certificates in Sensory and Autism Awareness. I trained as a secondary school teacher and have been teaching for over 30 years in a variety of educational sectors including working with children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). I decided to set up this exciting new venture with Lynn, after qualifying as a Leader and being inspired by the huge benefits for young people from connecting with nature.



**Lynn Clark:** I live 'over the hill' in Balsdean. I have degrees in Countryside Management (FdSc) and Biogeography and Ecology (BSc (Hons)). I have extensive knowledge and experience over many years in delivering Forest

School programmes, training courses (for adults and new leaders) and have expanded in recent years into also delivering a

wide range of Woodland Wellbeing courses and events. I have always thrived on sharing my skills and knowledge with others.

We both hold the Forest School Leaders Level 3 Award and a current Outdoor Paediatric First Aid Award. We both share a real passion for being outdoors, working with young people and see the huge benefits of connecting them to the wonderful, nurturing and natural environment around us.



### What we'll be offering

- Forest School sessions for young people, which will usually be for two hours, once a week, for a minimum of six weeks.
- Adult skills workshops/training for the local community.
- One-off Outdoor Learning sessions for young people in the local community.
- Outdoor Learning/Forest School sessions for vulnerable groups including young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, poor mental health and from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### Activities

Activities will include using tools (saws, knives, hammers, hand drills, etc), woodland games, building shelters and dens, natural arts and craft activities, nature walks, team games, using ropes (making swings, dens, spider webs, using knots, etc.), building and lighting a fire and cooking on one, foraging, stories and songs, climbing trees, hunting for minibeasts and evidence of other animals, making bug hotels, mud kitchen and sensory play, plant and animal identification activities, etc..... the list is endless.... and very importantly – we will have fun!

**Please do contact us if you would like further information. We will let you know re forthcoming events/sessions, as soon as we are able to start.**

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