

# Iford Estate News

J & H Robinson Iford Farms Ltd – est. 1895

www.ifordestate.com

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## The changing face of farming

Ben Taylor



As the calendar year draws to a close and thoughts at home begin to turn towards Christmas and the new year, it is a good opportunity to reflect on the successes and failures of the farming year that ended in

September and to try and learn some lessons on what could be improved and what is working well.

As always it is the weather that plays the biggest part in determining our success, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that the patterns of weather we rely on to produce our crops are less and less dependable. For the 5th year running we experienced a spring drought and were only saved by rain at the very last minute at the end of May. The June that followed was actually one of the best I can remember; long daylight hours and plenty of sunshine ended up producing a very good harvest. And the dry August meant that once again we were able to finish in record time and, this time, without having to dry any crops – a massive saving with the current cost of fuel.

Having said that, the turmoil around the world is having a huge impact on our ability to do the day job. Fertiliser, inextricably linked to the price of gas, has increased at least three-fold, that's if you can get any. Merchants take orders sporadically and often none is available. Agrichemicals are equally difficult to obtain and lead times on spare parts are often weeks or even

months, which is not much good if your machine needs them tomorrow!

Consequently the money required to grow the crop has at least doubled and, when you combine this with the weather risk and the danger of a crash in prices, it makes the farming business look very vulnerable.

Consequently my thoughts this autumn are about how to reduce this risk as much as possible without also reducing our yield and output. Crop choice is one obvious area to address. Some crops are inherently more risky than others to pests or diseases or weather, so can we reduce our exposure to these crops? Perhaps the most risky crop of all is oilseed rape. I have written before in these pages about some of the failures we've had and the pests that affect the crop, and this has driven a rapid reappraisal of how we grow it.

Whereas in years past we would invest in the crop from the word go with expensive seed, herbicides and fertilisers as well as intensive cultivation, we now aim to use seed from the shed at minimal cost, sow straight into the previous year's stubble and apply nothing else until the crop is established. Thus if the crop does fail we have lost very little and, if we are lucky, we might have an opportunity to resow before the weather turns against us.

The second thread is to stockpile as much of the fertiliser, spare parts and chemicals as we can, but of course this comes with a big hit to the cashflow – so thank goodness this harvest was good!

## Work on the Cycle Path begins

I hope that by the time you read this, work on the new Iford to Swanborough cycle path will have started. We were fortunate to obtain funding both from Lewes District Council and the National Park to be able to complete this important work, and we are grateful to both those organisations for helping us deliver it.





## The Iford Estate team – 1989 and 2022



We had the photo below taken of the Iford Estate team in October this year. Three of us appear in the team photo (left) that was taken back in 1989 – 33 years ago! Can you spot them?

Our 2022 team below:

Back row (l-r)

Peter Martin, Brian Cable, Aaron Hall, Brian Deeprise, Mark Leivers, Roy Powis, Alan Notley.

Front row (l-r)

JHR, Ireneusz Kosek, Ben Taylor, Suzie Russell, Cathy West.



(Above) The Iford team 1989  
 Back row (l-r)  
 Colin Jenkins, Geoff Wells,  
 Brian Cable, Brian Deeprise,  
 Ron Munt (dcd), Cynl Bates,  
 Jim Vincent (dcd),  
 Les Costick (dcd),  
 Middle row (l-r)  
 Fred Moulard (dcd),  
 Eric Ross (dcd), JHR,  
 George Flanagan (dcd),  
 Tony Warrington (dcd),  
 George Withycombe (dcd),  
 Front row (l-r)  
 Paul Notley, Neil Archard,  
 Dick Welch (dcd), Ian  
 Welch, Tim Field (dcd).



Drone photo of the Iford Brooks taken in mid November 2022

## The defibrillators are here



During the year we have installed two defibrillators, one at the Estate Office and the other at the Swanborough Lakes Reception. They are for public use in the event of a suspected heart attack. In the unfortunate event that you need to use one, you'll find the Iford cabinet is unlocked and Swanborough's is locked with the code number written on the door. Training, though useful, is unnecessary as the machines talk to you and tell you exactly how to proceed. Please let us know when you have used one so that we can make sure that the cabinets, which are checked weekly, are kept up-to-date.

Two White Storks were actually recorded in early November flying over Lewes!

## Three babies and wedding!

It's been quite a year on the farm for babies! We were very pleased to welcome Irek and Sabina's new addition Hania, Pete and Zara's daughter Pippa, and Aaron and Charlotte's Frank – as well as their wedding in September. Lots of sleepless nights for everyone!



Photo: Charles J Sharp, sharpphotography.co.uk

## The flooding of the Brooks

As I write this, in mid November, our Brooks are under water (see picture). This happens most years following a lot of rain in a short time and shows the flood plain working as it should.

In my Grandfather's day the Brooks would have been waterlogged for a large part of the year with very poor grass quality and liver fluke rampant in grazing stock. In the 60's, when it was Government policy to increase food production as rapidly as possible, and under pressure from my Father, the River Board installed a pump on the river bank at Rodmell which pumped water out of the network of ditches and into the river. This revolutionised farming on the Brooks because it allowed my Father, with grant aid from the Ministry of Agriculture, to install clay tile drains in all the fields which

took water rapidly off the fields directly into the ditches and via the pump into the river. This enabled us to sow modern grass varieties and greatly extend the grazing season. It also allowed us to plough every field and grow very high yielding crops of wheat and oilseed rape. When the valley flooded, as now, the pump rapidly got rid of the water and the crops weren't damaged.

Unfortunately, over the years the drains slowly silted up and drainage grants were discontinued. The result is that it is now impossible to grow arable crops on the Brooks, grass quality is deteriorating, and we will soon be back to my Grandfather's time. Additionally, the Rodmell pump, which is now the responsibility of the Environment Agency, is now over 60 years old and nobody is showing much interest in replacing it when it finally dies.

Rightly or wrongly, Government policy is now more concerned about the environment than producing food and we don't see that situation changing in the future. It is strange to think that in my farming career I have seen the Brooks transformed from an unproductive wilderness into highly productive arable land and then back again almost to where we started!

**John Robinson**





## The NEW Swanborough Livery Yard

*Top: the new livery yard with the barns it replaced (below).*

After what seems like many years of planning, both literally and figuratively, we were very pleased to finally be able to open the new livery yard at Swanborough this autumn. The building provides modern facilities for the horses and, over the next few weeks, new horses will be moving in until we are full sometime in December. It has been nice to be able to tidy up that area of the farm, and as many of you have commented it's a great improvement on what was there before. We still have a bit of work to do planting trees and landscaping which will improve things further.



## Halloween children's party



Our thanks go to Marta for all her hard work in making such a success of our Halloween Party for local children at the Hall. It was enjoyed by all and is now in the diary as an annual event!

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**Our lodges receive a top award again!**

We were very pleased to win the **Lodge Escape Award** for the South of England at the recent Hosesasons' conference in Newport. Lodge Manager Cathy West collected the award on stage from comedian Michael McIntyre at the star studded annual dinner, with support from Assistant Manager Caroline Cowan. This is the second year running that we have won this category and it is testament to Cathy and Caroline's hard work and high standards that we were able to beat some strong competition from far larger parks in the region.