

Field scale vegetable growing in South Lincolnshire

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Abstract

Tony Worth's family have farmed in South Lincolnshire since the start of the 20th century and this article describes the development of the business over that time. It well illustrates the adage that successful businesses need to change continuously. Up to the 1930s rotations were simple; clover or beans followed by potatoes and then wheat with cattle and pigs. Peas came in during the 1930s, initially for canning and later for freezing. After World War II labour intensive crops like peppermint, spinach, runner beans and opium poppies were introduced. By the 1950s the business was supplying vegetables to Marks & Spencer and later to other chains and was instrumental in getting farmer co-operatives together to be able to provide the large amounts of produce the supermarkets needed. However, as time went by private business proved to be more focussed and flexible than the co-ops and replaced them. The latest turn the business is taking is to specialise exclusively on potatoes. Land on the farms not growing potatoes is let out for other crops.

There is an area to the South and the East of the Wash in South Lincolnshire that has been gradually reclaimed from the sea since Roman times. The soils are alluvial silts with a low organic matter content, and range in texture from light to medium, with a more or less neutral pH. All of this land is within Internal Drainage Districts, with a network of drains mostly pumped into the rivers or through the sea banks into the Wash. Thus the soils are highly fertile and productive. Historically much of the land was grazed, and there is a reference in Cobbet's Rides of the area being heavily stocked with sheep. Potatoes became an important crop in the latter part of the 19th century, with imports of Irish labour at planting and harvesting times.

The land that my family has farmed since the beginning of the 20th century is fairly typical of this area. It was mostly reclaimed in the 17th century, although we are currently farming other land which was reclaimed in the 19th century. What I write is a reflection of our own farming enterprise.

In the years up to the mid 1930s, rotations on our silts were pretty simple: typically legumes (usually clover and sometimes a cash crop such as beans) followed by potatoes and then wheat. This rotation would be fairly common throughout the area. Sometimes mustard or turnips would be in the rotation, and clover was part of the ley mixture for feeding cattle and sheep, either grazed or made into hay. Straw from the wheat after threshing was used as bedding in crew yards for over wintering cattle, which would be fed on root crops and stockfeed potatoes. Pigs would be fattened on steamed potatoes plus a protein supplement. Farmyard manure from the crew yards was the major source of fertilizer.

In the 1930s the pea viner was invented. This machine was the forerunner of the mobile viner that we see today running up and down fields harvesting peas for freezing. In those days the viner was static and the whole plant had to be cut and transported to the site to be shelled, with the stems and leaves being separated from the peas and made into silage for feeding cattle, or spread back on the fields. The process of freezing vegetables at that time had not been invented but several canning factories sprang up in the district, in Wisbech, Long Sutton, Kings Lynn and Boston. Thus it could be said that the birth of field scale vegetable production in the area started with the canned pea. Having said that, my grandfather had a farm in the black fens around Ely where he grew celery for the London markets, and on the back of that a small acreage of self blanching celery was grown on his silt land. In general, however, Bedfordshire and Kent were the counties which supplied fresh vegetables to Covent Garden, Spitalfields and Brentford markets, as they were closer to London.

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World War II intervened, and my father and his brother went off to serve in the RAF, and my grandfather came out of retirement to run the farms. Commodities such as potatoes and wheat were the order of the day under instructions from the "WarAg" committees, and the land was overworked in the interests of feeding the nation.

After the war my father was demobbed, and he resumed managing the farm, but it took some time to get the land back into good form. Mustard and sugar beet were in the rotation, and tractors were replacing horses at a rate. The potato acreage had been drastically reduced to try and control the eelworm infestations which had appeared, which made the labour force too large for what he was trying to do. As a result, in the 1950s, new, labour intensive crops such as peppermint, spinach and runner beans were introduced. Opium poppies for the oil in the seed were also a feature, and we still see the occasional one appearing in the garden. None of these crops were particularly profitable, and as the workforce began to retire, so we saw the demise of those enterprises. But they served a social service at minimal cost.



Potatoes in flower

Contracts for canning peas were resumed and in the late 1960s an opportunity arose for a substantial contract with Batchelors Foods for their new dehydrated Surprise Pea product. The contract was big enough to require more land than was available in the rotation, and the capital investment was also rather steep. By this time, I had returned to the farm, and we formed a co-operative of local growers. The co-operative was also to operate a potato grading and packing undertaking for the same growers. This fitted well with their six-year rotations for both crops, and the labour profile for the co-operative itself was complementary. Labour was required for the six-week pea vining campaign from late June to mid August, and this fitted in well with the potato business which ran from September to the end of May. Although the ownership and operation of the potato part of the business has changed over the years, rotations for both crops remain similar, and the co-operative is still in existence with a fleet of mobile pea viners harvesting peas for freezing.

Before the war, there had been a small invasion of Dutch farmers into the area, who had brought tulip and daffodil bulbs with them, together with the expertise for growing them. The Geest brothers had settled and started their bulb business in the area in the mid 1930s diversified into fresh produce in

the late 1940s. They also developed a relationship with Marks & Spencer to expand their food offering alongside their very successful textile business. In the 1950s my father was still farming the black fen farm near Ely, and he also had developed a business for the supply of washed and packed celery with Marks & Spencer on the back of the growth in their food offer. The quality from the black fen was excellent, and the supply of that crop led to others. The runner beans, for instance, that were being grown on our silts were packed for M&S, and they were looking for more products.



Farm potato grading prior to storage

A lot of work was done by ourselves, the Horticultural Research Institute, Wellesbourne, and a neighbour, on small carrots grown on the silts. That became the basis for our neighbour, Tinsley's, to grow into one of M&S' major suppliers. As time went by, the over cropping of these carrots brought soil borne disease such as cavity spot and purple root rot, which were difficult to control, and as quality standards moved more towards the visual, prepack carrots gradually became a thing of the past in this area. The only carrots grown on the silts today are large ones which are peeled and diced before freezing.

The relationship with Marks & Spencer continued for us in both the pea and the potato sections of the co-operative. The frozen pea was in the ascendancy, and the Batchelor Surprise peas were to lose out. The co-operative joined with others to freeze their own peas in the 1970s and 1980s, and the first supermarket customer was Sainsburys, quickly followed by Marks & Spencer. The freezing plant also required work in periods of the year other than during the pea season. Various other crops such as brussels sprouts, french green beans, broad beans and carrots were grown for that outlet. Gradually the business grew over the next 20 years, supplying most of the major supermarkets, but the nature of the enterprise meant that working capital was tied up for long periods of the year, and as margins got tighter and storage costs escalated, it was no longer a business for a co-operative, and it was disposed of in the late 1980s. The only surviving crops now going into freezing contracts are peas and carrots.

The potato side of the co-operative continued to expand. By the late 1970s, it had successfully developed a market in the London terminals for dry-brushed and graded material from the Lincolnshire silts. This was known to M&S, and to improve the potato offering in their stores, they wished to develop a baking potato. They wanted us to be their supplier. At the time, the weights and measures insisted that potatoes could only be sold in a bag which had a minimum weight. With only four potatoes in a pack, the giveaway had the potential to be huge, as one potato was 25 per cent of

the weight of the pack. Thus, we had to wash them, weigh them individually, put four on a tray, and overwrap. This was the first time that the public had seen potatoes presented in this way, and although there was an outcry at the retail price, and questions were asked in the House of Commons, this was a very successful product, which has developed into a commodity item.

In addition, as time went by we developed other fresh potato products for Marks & Spencer, and our business developed with both Sainsburys and Tesco becoming customers in turn. Gradually, the dry brushed product to the London terminal markets declined with the rise of the supermarkets and the decline of the local greengrocer. All this meant a 12 month business, without the two months when the labour had been devoted to peas. The business had become structurally unsound as a co-operative, and in the 1990s my farming company, as the largest grower member, bought out the other growers, leaving just the pea section which was itself restructured to cater for the labour peak in the summer

Meanwhile the rise of the supermarkets, with their centralised distribution systems, encouraged the formation of vegetable co-operatives in the area, as the silts were highly fertile, particularly around Boston, and a route to market was establishing itself. Several co-operatives became successful suppliers of fresh vegetables to the likes of Sainsburys, Tesco, Safeway and ASDA. However, as time went by, margins began declining, and the supermarkets started rationalising their supplier base. It was almost impossible to run a competitive business where all members of the board were shareholders and suppliers at the same time. As shareholders they wanted the co-operative to prosper, but as suppliers they wanted higher prices than the markets would provide, and discipline was a word which was hardly recognised, let alone understood. This was a situation which would inevitably fall apart in time. And it did. All this made it difficult, if not impossible in some organisations, for the "hired hands" to operate efficiently and supply their customers with a credible service and there is hardly a co-operative left.

We had started growing brussels sprouts for our freezing outlets in the early 1970s. This was in the days before in-field stripping, and the usual method of harvest was by hand by casual labour in the freezing cold, and these mostly went to be netted for the fresh market. We started single destruct harvesting of sprouts in the 1970s bringing in the whole stalk to a central trimming station where armies of women neatly cut the button from the stalk so they were perfect for the premium frozen pack. As well as our own outlets we were also supplying Birds Eye. As usual with these things, costs escalated faster than returns, and machinery was required to strip the stalks in the field. But the quality of the resultant button was not good enough for the freezers. Although we introduced trimming machines to smarten them up, the freezers paid less for the product, consumption of frozen sprouts declined, and by the end of the 1980s we had ceased to supply. We had seen the writing on the wall and had forged a relationship with a co-operative in Bedfordshire, and continued to supply into the fresh market for a number of years at little better than break-even, until our machinery was worn out and we restructured our own business.

We had also been growing a relatively small acreage of cauliflower, again originally for the processing market. The economics of that enterprise led us to supply through a local co-operative into supermarket outlets, but eventually, that operation was "rationalised" by the customer, the co-operative was wound up, and again we needed to cease growing ourselves.

Today, things have moved on, and the survivors of a fragmented supply base are now, in the main, private companies growing the crops themselves on hired land or buying from growers who will grow under contract. The supplier will supply a complete range of vegetables, often to just one supermarket, either from the UK or from outside the UK if out of season.

We have concluded that it is not possible today to be an expert in many enterprises, or to be big enough to have influence over the multiple retailers. Our strategy is to focus on what we are good at, and where we have a route to market. That means potatoes in our case. We let land on a short term lease for brassicas to a local firm that manages and supplies the category for ASDA. In addition we let land for salad production which ends up in mixed salad packs. We also rent land outside our own land base to grow potatoes. With continually increasing margin pressure on all we do, we have to be big enough to be a "lowest cost" producer, whilst at the same time having a robust route to market. The evolution of the field scale vegetable enterprises in South Lincolnshire bears witness to that conclusion.



Multi-coloured salad crop

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