



Our business is growing

Case Study: Brixworth Farming, Northamptonshire, UK



Charles Matts, Managing Director of Brixworth Farming, was one of the farmers featured in the recent BBC radio series about the future of agriculture; his contribution highlighted the importance of innovation in preparing for changes to the industry. This commitment to innovation is evident in the structure and stance of Brixworth Farming. Bringing together five farms, the company focuses on the long-term stewardship of the land, achieving economies of scale and the sharing of risk by pooling crops, wherever possible growing for specific markets and opportunities. Brixworth Farming's strategy is underpinned by an experienced and qualified team, who receive the full support of the company directors and shareholders.

Gaining access to economies of scale

The central insight that sparked the formation of Brixworth Farming was gaining access to economies of scale without individual farmers losing control of the autonomy of their own business and assets. Founded in 2000 by three family farms coming together to collaborate, and since joined by another farm and an Estate, Brixworth Farming farms over 2000 hectares of land and provides contracting for others. The benefits of this approach were seen between 2000 to 2001, when the horsepower required to farm the land was more than halved, as larger and more efficient machinery was introduced. Similar benefits have been found in creating a crop pool, so that risks can be mitigated and the work of marketing can be conducted by specialists on Brixworth Farming's behalf.

The governance structure of Brixworth is overseen by an independent chair and operations are supported by a small administrative team. This approach allows shareholders considerable flexibility, as they can continue with other enterprises on or off their farm, while reducing capital and staffing costs, with improved marketing.

A common framework



Brixworth Farming is a LEAF Marque certified business, with the shareholders taking their land into different levels of agri-environmental agreement, until recently three were in Entry Level Schemes and two in Higher Level Schemes, reflecting their individual businesses and land. LEAF offers a common framework for

conservation, efficiency and community engagement that ensures a consistency of operations across the different farms within the collaboration. They were approached by ADM to take up a premium contract to grow OSR for Hellman's Mayonnaise, but a precondition was being LEAF Marque certified. The premium available was £15 per tonne, which for Brixworth Farming was worth £30000 per year. Although the initial appeal was financial and transactional, Charles Matts began to see the benefits as being broader for the business:

"I think I get it now, although it could be seen as a bore writing these things down, and then going back and reviewing it with the whole team, making annual improvements, thinking about it once a year does sharpen us up, it does nudge us in the greener direction we want to go, I'm not saying we are the greenest business, but I have confidence that we are making improvement."

Much of the cost of becoming LEAF Marque certified had been off-set because the stewardship, and the two now "work very well together".

Focus on energy efficiency

A focus on energy efficiency had developed before entering the LEAF Marque assurance system. A saving of £17000 had been achieved through a simple change of machinery:

“We realised there was significant effect - still not very good at measuring fuel use per operation we are getting there, with the advent of telematics.”

Further savings have been identified, although a carbon footprinting tool was not as helpful as it might have been:

“Carbon footprints provide a useful footprint to benchmark - it won't be completely accurate but providing you are making the same assumptions, measuring the same way you can make improvements and that is helpful. 6-7 years ago, we decided that we would measure our carbon footprint, but we got bogged down in the detail. But it helps us understand what difference some of our management practices are making.”

The approach of combining sound business with the environment is part of a wider strategy: “we are not making maximum profit, but profit with due regard to the environment and our people.”

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As part of this regard for the environment a precautionary approach had been taken to stopping using crop protection chemicals, looking to the longer term:

“We have lost a lot of chemistry because it has been found in the water, and if we lose it what are we going to do? Will we be able to produce crops effectively? Glyphosate - rather than wait for that ban to happen we are talking to our merchants, and through them, their customers in a bid to understand each other's requirements.”

As part of the process of understanding risks on the farm there has been a consideration of them with regard to water pollution:

“As part of risk register on the farm we consider pollution, we are taking part in voluntary ban on metaldehyde. Further to that we have been talking to Anglia Water about testing internal ditches so that we have a better understanding of how we can avoid contaminating water.”

In this way, Brixworth Farming continues a pattern of innovation by anticipating changes in the industry as part of its remit of long term stewardship of the land.