



Countryside Matters

Harry Bott's monthly column on rural Hertfordshire.

June

Wild life report

Butterflies have been on the wing early this year and so far I have seen Brimstone, Comma Large White and Small Blue. We saw Swallows when we were in Cornwall, but I haven't seen any locally here. I do hope that our resident Swallows visit us again, they were with us by this time last year.

Farming report.

I am writing this at the beginning of May and we have had virtually no rain for more than a month. Sarah and I came back from Cornwall recently and the crops on the chalky land of Salisbury plain were looking dreadful. They looked very weak and full of patches with no crop. I fear that the farmers will have a very poor harvest. In spite of the lack of rain, our crops don't look too bad. Winter sown Wheat is still looking green and has obviously got its roots well down into the moisture from the winter rains. Our winter Beans are coming into flower but they have made very little growth due to the dry conditions. The plants are so short that if they produce any beans, they will be so close to the ground that they will be very difficult if not impossible to harvest. Ian is a very skilled combine operator and I think that he will be very tested. Our spring sown crops look much better than the ones on Salisbury plain, I think that is due to Andrew and Ian getting them sown in good time. I also think that it is due to the system that we now have of never letting the ground be bare. We grow ground cover crops between the ones that we harvest and they are incorporated into the soil providing moisture retaining humus. Years ago when I was in charge of the farm and panicking about unfavourable weather, my old Father used to say, "Don't worry Harry, just realise that as each day goes past, it is one day closer to good weather"

After all that gloom we have one crop that is looking superb, our Oil Seed Rape (OSR). I have never seen it look better and this is the case wherever I have been travelling. Normally OSR is attacked by cabbage stem flea beetle at the two leaf stage of growth and then later on hordes of pigeons graze on the crop through the winter. I think that the flea beetle were beaten by early sowing into warm moist soil that gave it a very rapid start that enabled to quickly grow away from the beetle. The lack of pigeons is more mysterious, they must either have been struck by some disease or I have heard that the large flocks that come over from the Continent to feasts on our OSR throughout the Winter, have not appeared this year for whatever reason. A good crop of OSR will be a great help as the oil that is extracted from the seed is very much wanted and this is keeping the price up. It should show a good profit this year in contrast to the white straw crops of wheat, barley and oats that continue in the doldrums with wheat at around £170 per tonne, with barley and oats similar. At this price it is hardly worth growing and certainly not if the price of fertilizer and diesel tractor fuel remains at such very high levels.

Garden report.

Due to my fall in the garden, I have been unable to do anything in the vegetable which has been very frustrating. Emma has been a wonderful help, she has planted the potatoes, now through the ground and looking very well. She will be sowing seeds for me, Carrots, Beetroot, Lettuces and this year we are sowing the sweet corn directly into the garden. It will be interesting to see how they do as in previous years I have always started them in the greenhouse.

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July

Wild life report

I am very sad that our Swallows have not returned this year. I got huge pleasure in watching them fly in and out. I think that part of the problem is that our pond has completely dried up and this means that insect life is well down and also they used to fly low over the pond and have a drink on the wing

Farming report.

I am writing this this on the 2nd June and we have at last had a decent rain! Apart from the Oil Seed Rape, our crops have been looking increasingly under stress. To add to our woes, the wheat crop has been invaded by Aphids. Andrew won't use insecticides on the farm, so the wheat has been sprayed with silicon that makes the wheat very tough and difficult for the Aphids to eat. In the meantime we hope that Ladybirds come along and eat the Aphids, they love them! The wheat changes colour from green to blue under these conditions, but I think that the rain may have just come in time. The wheat was in flower by the end of May, it used to be possible to wear an ear of wheat in your button hole for the Herts Show and that was the case this year. Wheat is self-fertile, but the developing grain will require moisture and hopefully this rain will have come just in time.

In spite of the dry weather, our spring sown crops have looked quite good, as I mentioned last month this is probably due to Andrew keeping the ground covered all the time and the dressing of muck that the fields get from Brookfield in exchange for our straw.. We are growing "Wild Wheat" on contract for specialist flour and spring oats for the cereal market. So your Scotch porridge oats that you have for breakfast, could maybe come from us as they are processed at Camgrain in their special plant. Both the wheat and the oats are being affected by fungal diseases and they are being sprayed with a bacteria that should eat the fungus. Both crops have come into ear very early and this is due to the stress brought on by the drought. When plants are stressed, they tend to rush into flower and then seed in order to make best use of what little stem and leaf that they have. This means that the straw will be very short this year and I have no doubt that grain yields will be well down.

Last year I tried to persuade Andrew to have the farm pond cleaned out. It dried out just before harvest and so the job didn't get done. This year, however, the ponds have dried out much earlier and as Andrew had hired Roger Melbourne's Son Clay to make a road on the farm. I was able to get him to clean out the pond before he left and he has made a beautiful job of it. You wouldn't believe how much muck has come out! It is now drying out next to the manure heap and will be spread on the land in the Autumn.

Garden report.

Our Summer vegetables have germinated very well except for the Sweetcorn. I suspect that the ground was too cold and the seed may have rotted off in the ground. We have sown again and hopefully it will soon come through. Sweetcorn straight out of the garden is my favourite vegetable! We are having a very good crop of Broad Beans that were sown in the Autumn, when picked young they are simply delicious to eat

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August

Wild life report

We had a visit from Andrew Wood the other day. He is an expert on butterflies and wrote the book *Butterflies of Hertfordshire*. He identified the following 20 species which is remarkable for such a small area.

Brown Argus, Comma, Common Blue, Dark Green Fritillary, Gatekeeper, Peacock, Green-veined White, Large Skipper, Marbled White, Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Painted Lady, Purple Hairstreak, Red Admiral, Silver-washed Fritillary, Small Heath Small Skipper, Small Tortoiseshell, Small White, Large White

Farming report.

You may remember that Andrew won the National award for the Farming and Wildlife group last year, he held the silver lapwing trophy for the year and this year we hosted the award for the current year. We had an excellent party and the winners plus many others were shown round the farm by Andrew.

The other event that took place during the month was Groundswell. You may have heard of this if you listen to "Farming Today" on the radio early in the morning. It started ten years ago as a meeting of farmers and scientists in a barn at the Cherry Brothers farm at Weston. The idea was to get in one place farmers and experts who were convinced that modern farming with heavy inputs of chemicals was unsustainable, indeed it was reckoned that if we carried on as we were, the soil would only carry about 100 more harvests. Groundswell has developed into a very large event with 10,000 people attending this year. Sarah and I went and we were amazed. There were a number of large tents in which experts in their field gave talks lasting an hour about a huge range of subjects connected with farming, the emphasis being on sustainable farming. Sarah and I attended two of the talks one on farming flowers for sale and the other was about egg production. In addition to the lecture tents, there were hundreds of stalls selling and promoting everything to do with farming and the countryside. It was held over two days and many people camped out after enjoying music and dancing in the evening.

I have been farming for just on 70 years and I cannot remember such an extraordinary season as this. 1976 was a record drought year, but nothing like this one. Autumn sown corn has survived and the winter wheat looks quite well, Oil Seed Rape(OSR) will be the crop of the year as it established well and has had just enough moisture to produce a heavy crop. We will be harvesting it at the beginning of July. I looked at the wheat and was surprised to see that it was ready at the same time as the OSR. Normally you wouldn't expect to harvest wheat until August or even September in a wet year. I have just checked our winter beans and was amazed to find that they were rock hard and also ready for harvest. In a normal year they are the last to be combined at the end of August. This year we are combining them first before they drop out, starting on the 7th July. Spring sown crops have suffered badly. The spring sown oats are well in ear and look as if they will produce a small return. Our Spring sown wheat on the other hand is looking as if it will be a write off, the heads are so small that I don't think that they will produce any grain. This is a major blow as it is a special wheat grown under contract to produce "Wildwheat" flour for a premium bread that is sold in Waitrose.

People have been remarking on the very pretty blue flowers that are growing beside High Elms Lane. They are Chicory and Andrew is growing it as a soils improver on the very compacted ground. Chicory has a very long tap root that penetrates deep into the soil and improves the drainage.

Garden report.

I have been very frustrated as I have not been able to do much in the veg. patch due to my fall. Sarah and Emma have been marvellous however and we have been eating wonderful broad beans and potatoes that they have planted. Our tomatoes have done very well in the greenhouse and are producing lots of fruit, the outdoor ones are flowering and should follow on. I have had to use a lot of water in the veg. garden, I hope that we don't get a hosepipe ban.

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September

Farming report

What an extraordinary year this has been. In 70 years of farming, I have never seen such a long period without rain. It exceeds 1976, which I well remember as being an exceptional year as well, and I don't think that even Trump could now seriously deny that there must be something in the idea of global warming.

We started harvest at the beginning of July with winter wheat. This was very early. I can remember years ago, when I was in charge, telling everyone to be back from holiday by 20 July in good time to start harvest! The wheat was very dry, and so we have saved on drying costs.

A couple of days later, I was out with my dog and thought that our winter beans were getting on, so I picked a couple of pods and discovered that the beans were as hard as bullets and urgently needed harvesting. If the pods get too dry, they can split open and shed the beans onto the ground, where the combine can't get them.

So, we were harvesting winter beans at the beginning of July, when we would normally expect to do this at the beginning of September, right at the end of a normal harvest.

Winter-sown crops have done fairly well. Our oilseed rape (OSR) was sown early and got away to a good start in the autumn. The result was just about average. Winter wheat was drilled after the OSR and has produced a below-average result of about six tonnes to the hectare, or about 2.5 tonnes to the acre, but not a disaster.

If you remember, the autumn was exceptionally wet, and both crops became well established with good root systems that were able to carry on chasing the moisture downwards during the dry weather that followed. The winter beans suffered from the dry weather and were very disappointing.

The real disaster has been the spring-sown wheat and oats. The wheat was a special variety grown under contract, and the oats were grown for breakfast cereals. Both yielded about one tonne to the acre and will mean a considerable loss of income.

Andrew has decided to stop sowing in the spring and concentrate on autumn-sown crops. Having said that, the ground has now set like concrete. No drill or other type of cultivator would get into the surface; it would simply bounce along the top, causing horrendous wear to the metal points of the implements.

The weather has caused the grass to stop growing. I am sure that you will have noticed acres of brown fields that should now be green and providing summer grazing for farmers who have livestock. They have no alternative but to start feeding forage that was harvested earlier as hay and silage for the coming winter.

We usually cut some of our meadows for hay. We were lucky and held off just long enough to take advantage of a shower of rain that boosted the grass, and we obtained a good number of large bales from the fields. This will be much needed in the coming winter and should sell well.

We have baled all our straw this year, as it will be needed not only for livestock bedding but also for forage. Oat straw, in particular, can make good feed. It doesn't have a very high feed value, but when fed with crushed oats, barley and beans, it can form part of a balanced diet for cattle.

Garden report

For years, I have had poor germination of lettuce and carrots during the summer months. Sarah suggested that, if I covered the seedbed with fleece after sowing and then watered it twice a day, that might help.

My goodness, it did! I think that every lettuce seed germinated, and I have five good rows of carrots. Planted in early July, they will be clear of carrot fly and should grow on for harvesting in the autumn.



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October

Wild life report

I was very pleased to hear from Tony and Lewis that they had both seen English Grey Partridges with broods of young in different parts of the farm. They are a red listed species and hopefully they will all survive and increase next year. In the past, they were very common. They sometimes had large broods of up to 15 young ones and it is thought that they could have had 2 nests with the cock bird incubating as well as the hen.

Farming report

Rain at last! I was very tempted to take off all my clothes and rush out into the garden in celebration. The rain came just in time with a forecast that Andrew took to be accurate and we drilled our Oil Seed Rape (OSR) the two days before. This was ideal timing and hopefully the flea beetle will leave it alone and we should get a decent crop. Thankfully the weather forecast was accurate and it did rain just when it was needed. The result is a good germination of OSR. Andrew will now spray the young seedlings with a spray based on fish oil and this should disguise the smell and keep the flea beetle away until the crop robust enough to be sprayed with silicone that will make the leaves so tough that again should keep the dreaded beetle away. In the past we would have treated the seed with an insecticide and this would be followed by an insecticide spray if the beetle was still damaging the young plants. Our policy now is to use no insecticides on the farm as they are so bad for the environment. The next hazard is flocks of pigeons that usually start to arrive next month. Last year there were not so many about as usual, I don't know why. Hopefully they will keep away again this year as OSR is about the only crop that sees a decent return at the moment..

We swap our straw with Brookfield Farm and in return get all their cattle muck from the yards. This gives us many tonnes of good manure that will improve our soils when incorporated. We hire two very large spreaders for the job and it only took Ian and George a couple of days to get it all spread on the land. Years ago this would have been a major job needing many man hours and all done by hand using a dung fork. The muck that had accumulated in the cattle yards during the winter would all have to be loaded into horse drawn carts by hand and taken out to a field where it would be stacked in a dung hill to rot down. They could get very hot in the Winter and it was not unusual to see steam rising from that "Dungle" as it was called. The manure would once again be loaded into carts and dumped in heaps in the fields. These dumps would then be spread, again by hand. It was a tough life being a farm worker in those days!

Garden report

I have been watering the Kitchen garden using the exemption for blue badge holders, also I regard it as an allotment and they are permitted to use a hose pipe. With the spell of drought that we have been having, we would have got nothing otherwise. Using fleece on seed beds has helped to retain the moisture and my July sowing of main crop carrots has come through very well. At the moment we are eating sweet corn that I sowed directly into the garden in May and this has been a huge success



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