

Silage is golden for Gloucestershire contractor, despite a difficult season
While the sun may not have shone last summer, Mike Morrissey's new fleet of machines certainly did.

Mike Morrissey runs a successful contracting business from the Gloucestershire village of Ewen which lies just over three miles south west of Cirencester.

The area he works stretches from the edge of the Cotswolds towards Swindon in the east to the river Severn in the west; and from Cheltenham, in the north, to as far down as Bristol in the south. Most of the farms he services lie within a thirty mile radius of Ewen.

This slice of rural England boasts a diverse range of landscapes and soils: As you head from the Cotswolds to Swindon, the area is characterised by a very thin and stony brash and, but as you get closer to Swindon itself, the soil becomes much heavier and clay-rich.

Mike's client base is as diverse as the environment he works in. He has around fifty clients and farm size is anywhere between a small holding of 50 acres to estates of up to 5000 acres. Mike works with his wife, Caroline, two full-time employees and, in the height of the season, a team of up to seven others who are drafted in to help when the business is going flat out.

Mike's business has been trading since 1977, and is now centred on silage making which starts in late April, followed by grass, then wholecrop before the maize in the autumn. Ploughing, combine harvesting and drilling is also catered for, alongside the baling of haylage, hay and straw.

The machines he uses obviously play a pivotal role in the work he does. And, as Mike says, the reliability and productivity of his machines is 'absolutely paramount' to provide the service he demands for his clients.

In April last year, Mike took delivery of five brand new machines from New Holland. He chose a FR9060 Forage Harvester, a CR9080 elevation Combine Harvester, and three new tractors: two T7030s and a T6080.

It was a big investment and one that Mike says is part of his ongoing business policy. But did the deepening economic gloom that has engulfed the country ever tempt Mike to put this major investment on hold?

"To be honest, although I'm aware of the credit crisis, I believe that agriculture is a base industry: People need to be fed. It is not something that can be turned on and off. I would hope that our business would be able to carry on in the same vein as in years gone by. And I think when you plan a purchase like this, it's obviously not a decision you make there and then. It is part of a process that has developed over a number of years. I have never made such a large purchase before and I admit I was apprehensive. It was just the way it worked out – I guess you could call it a one-off. I needed the three tractors and the combine and I had been waiting for the latest New Holland forage harvester model to come out."

The FR9060 was a key purchase for Mike as it has a major role to play:

"In our business, we focus on silage making so our forage harvester needs to be ultra reliable: to that end the intention will be to replace it after two years, and the tractors after three years.

"I guess I started planning this in April 2007. I began to talk to TH White and also the local dealers that sell light and dark green machines. It gave them time to organise some demonstrations so I could look at the new models in action during the season.

"I dealt with Andy Taylor at TH White in Tetbury. Apart from talking about the machines and how I would be able to use them, we discussed in detail how they would be serviced. We also talked about the weaker aspects of each machine. I wanted to know what facilities there would be in terms of parts back-

up and fitters. And because I was planning to buy brand new machines, a key concern for me was their resale value.”

“There are so many points to be considered. It wasn’t an easy process, but in the end I felt the New Holland package was right for me.

“I decided to buy new models: it was a bit of a gamble, particularly with the Forage Harvester which was a brand new model. The tractors and combine were new models - just improved models to their predecessors. All equipment was financed on hire purchase through New Holland Finance - making use of subsidised rates available.”

So how did Mike’s fleet of New Holland machines fare in this very difficult season we’ve had?

“You know, it was bloody difficult last year. We lost sixty days of work between May and mid September because of the weather. It was very frustrating. The only thing you can do while you wait is to make sure all your machines required later in the season are fully serviced and the operators are fully trained and raring to go as soon as the telephone rings. After you’ve done that, all you can really do is start looking around for other jobs to do.

“What made it even worse last year were the inaccurate weather forecasts. A couple of times the forecast was abysmal, but actually the sun shone every day for a week. Well that’s no good to us. For grass silage, you need to cut the grass and leave it for up to 48 hours before you can harvest it. No farmer wants you to cut the grass if he’s been told its going to rain. So we lost lots of time in perfectly good harvesting weather.”

But finally, in late autumn, the weather improved. Mike and his team were able to put their new machines through their paces.

“I have to say that I was very pleased with them all. These machines are in a process of evolution and the new tractors performed very well. The adjustments New Holland has made to these new models have been very successful. We found that they were quieter, used less diesel and the operators liked them, which is just as well, because the tractors were clocking up 1300 hours by November. I think the FR 9060 is a vast improvement on the machine we had before.

“And I noticed our new CR 9080 combine increased productivity dramatically. I would think somewhere between 10% and 15%. The GPS steering really helped to push the machine along and the full nine metre cut was being used the whole time. It’s got more HP, the cleaning area is better and rotor speed is up... it’s a vast improvement.”

In this day and age, fuel efficiency is something every farmer and contractor takes very seriously – how did Mike rate this aspect of the New Holland machines?

“We do check our fuel quite closely but in the area we work it is very variable – that’s down to the different soils and crop conditions. And, of course, there’s no such thing as a ‘standard day’ as no day is ever the same. I would say fuel consumption, when ploughing, varies from 9 to 15 litres per acre. Having said that, we certainly noticed very early in the year, when we started ploughing, that we were able to go for a couple of hours or so longer without having to fill up.”

After those hectic few weeks, Mike finished the cereal and maize harvesting. In fact, with the new machines, and despite the bad weather, he says he did finally catch up everything. He even found time to take a well-deserved trip to Barcelona to recover from those last frantic few weeks.

As for the business, presently Mike and his team are enjoying a relatively quieter time with their new machines: Hedge trimming; muck spreading and ploughing....until it all starts again, in earnest, in April.