

Farming Today

By Kevin Prince



Did Covid help us appreciate home baked food?

KEVIN Prince has wide experience of farming and rural business in Hampshire, where he lives near Andover, and across southern England as a director in the Adkin consultancy. His family also run a diversified farm with commercial lets, holiday cottages and 800 arable acres.

THE chronic shortage of flour in household rather than wholesaled-bags during the Covid-19 crisis showed how many people took up baking again.

Lockdown provided a slowdown in pace for many people and this allowed a welcome return to home-cooked and home-baked produce. The reality is that over the last four or five decades many of us have become more and more distant from our food. As a child I can remember boring trips to the high street which consisted of waiting in the butcher's, the grocer's, the baker's, the fishmonger's and then the greengrocer's. All had seasonal, and often local, produce to sell.

Of course to many people under the age of 20 such shops are completely alien and all they have grown up with is a visit to a supermarket (often via an online

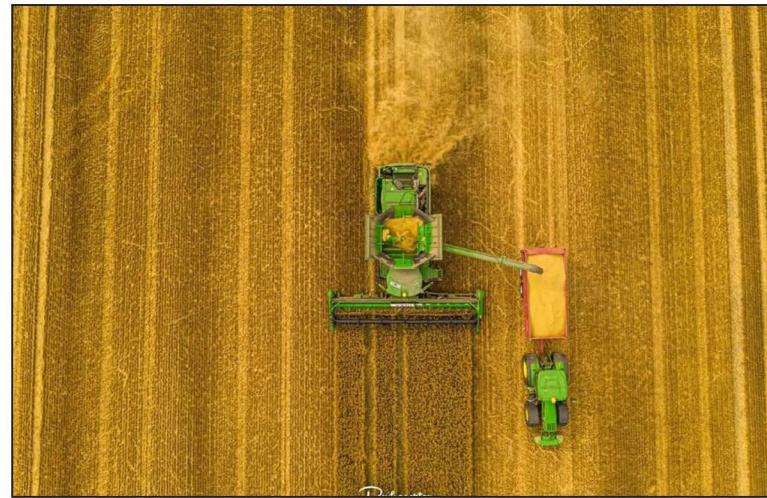
order) with a plethora of produce available from all over the world.

So a raft of people discovering, or returning to, home baking and thus becoming more connected to some of the food we consume has to be a good thing. Many of us living in rural areas would say that if only the same re-connection could be made to the vegetables and meat we consume then many of us would be a lot healthier.

But while they rediscovered spending time bread baking and raising dough, farmers were keeping an eye on the crops and it looks as if rising dough levels will not be boosting their bank balances this harvest.

Of course, many people will say farmers moaning about the weather is as predictable as planting, sowing, and reaping. It's just that most years it happens at different times. Over the last few years the weather seems to have been too dry when it needed to be wet and too wet when it needed to be dry. In fact you could say it's as changeable as the weather and you would be right.

It is an industry that's literally exposed to whatever the skies deliver. No ducking indoors for an inside job if the heavens open or it's



Harvest in Owslebury, captured by Raymond Frampton

so hot the ground is scorched. If you need to be outside getting things done then that's the way it is.

An upside is that since the introduction of tractor cabs, air conditioning has become the norm so it's not quite as bad as it used to be. But sophisticated tractors and combine harvesters – it's easy to spend £100,000 on a tractor and up to

£850,000 on the latest combine – need paying for so the costs can be crippling for the bottom line if the harvest doesn't reap sufficient reward.

Often in times of poor yields in the UK the same applied across the wider world, so what's lost in grain weight and quality coming off the field is compensated by a rise in

world prices resulting in the overall farm income remaining fairly static. This year however, some UK producers are forecasting that their harvest may be as much as 30 per cent down because of the weather. At this level we would have to see a huge rise in prices across the board in order to save this year financially.

The knock-on effect of the poor harvest for milling wheat will be that flour prices will rise and we may well see the price of bread do the same in the shops. It's another reason for those of us who discovered baking during lockdown to continue with the new hobby. Sadly the days of being able to pop down to your local flour mill and pick up a bag of locally-produced flour are long gone and we, as a nation, are at the mercies of global weather and market forces in determining the price of our daily bread.

As we enter September and the new harvest year I am sure that all farmers across the country will be looking forward to, and hoping, for a period of normal, boring, British weather with autumn rain, frosts in the winter, and spring showers – we will all have to see what 2020 and 2021 bring us.