

# Farming Today

By Kevin Prince



## Ukraine war poses challenge for all farmers

THE farming community is made up of extremely resilient people and I don't mean just in the UK.

A year ago, those living in Ukraine were hoping their own government was right and Russia would not invade. It turned out to be a forlorn hope.

Now, a year down the line they look on as world grain prices have soared after the Russian invasion of their country while their own grain sits largely worthless on their farms or on docksides where, far from being exported, it is as the mercy of the next random missile strike. The lack of that grain means many in poor countries are going without their daily bread.

Despite all this, Ukrainian farmers are facing up to the reality of clearing their land of abandoned bodies, downed helicopters, and destroyed military hardware, left behind by marauding invaders who instead went home aboard stolen tractors, combine harvesters, and whatever else they could plunder. The farmers have been using their skills (a good farm workshop is the base for many inventive creations) to revitalise whatever military equipment they can salvage and send it back to the front.

Somehow it makes the situation facing UK farmers seem somewhat trivial although, to be fair, if we can't sort ourselves out then our own



Our problems pale compared to those facing farmers in wartorn Ukraine

population faces even greater hardship than that currently being experienced by users of food banks, now sanitised as 'pantries' to make the politically squeamish feel better without realising that only the better off really recognise what a pantry is.

Last year saw a good harvest and healthy grain prices in a world market driven by shortages in the same way as the energy and many other commodity

markets. UK farmers who had bought fuel and fertiliser before prices rocketed created a healthy margin for themselves but it's not wealth they can afford to squander.

Fuel and fertiliser prices remain high while commodity prices are shrinking. It will need a careful 2023 balancing act between input costs (the money it takes to grow the crops) against output margin (the post-

harvest surplus after costs are deducted).

About this time final decisions will be made on what to grow for the 2023 season. If the weather keeps up its 2022 performance such decisions could soon involve considering crops not seen in the UK before, just as oil seed rape and sunflowers have grown in popularity in recent decades.

This difficulty in choices will be

accentuated by uncertainty over government policy going forward despite ministerial appearances at the recent Oxford Farming Conference. There is still strong ambition to focus on environmental improvement but equally there is pushback from some in the rural community about growing trees or other plants they may see as weeds on land that could be growing much-needed food if we are to achieve the increasing self-sufficiency that the Ukraine war has taught us we need.

Farming is growing accustomed to such dilemmas and has been doing so since the end of World War II when the mantra became almost "grow food at any cost". Recent moves have been trying to reverse the post-war grubbing up of woods and hedges while pressure also grows with more demand for natural energy and crops for anaerobic digestion plants pushing food production aside.

Compared to Ukraine, our current problems pale into insignificance.

● **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.**