

Old-style harvesting for traditional craft



LOADING sheaves with pitchforks and plenty of muscle power, just like the old days.

SEEING shocks of wheat (better known to me as stooks) standing proud in a roadside field at Winston, near Debenham, provided one of those rare moments to wallow in the nostalgia of harvests past.

The stooked corn was in a small field to the right as I entered the village, and I reckoned it to be for a special purpose.

It belonged to Bill James, said two boys walking along the road, who directed me to Winston

Hall. "Does he always do this?" I asked. "No, but he wants the straw for thatching", said one.

The scene on the farm was one to take old-timers back a few decades, as the Ransomes threshing drum, grunting and groaning went about the job it no doubt once did so efficiently.

Otley hurdle maker and thatcher, Mr. Russell Podd, admitted during lunch break to having had some teething troubles with the old machine, but this was hardly surprising with Mr. James having to think back

the grain continues to ripen in the stook — enabled the crop to be cut seven to 10 days ahead of the combine.

The drum also dresses the corn so that it can be used for seed.

Only certain long-strawed varieties can be used for thatching, and those most favoured by Mr. Podd are Maris Huntsman, Maris Widgeon, Cappelle, Bouquet and Atou.

Bill James is slightly old-fashioned in his farming methods for that is the way he enjoys it and it ensures him a pleasant and interesting way of life.

He told me once that he was a "minimum input" man, and he sticks to methods passed on to him by his uncle.

Over the 500 arable acres he follows a 12-course rotation, which incorporates seldom-grown crops like trefoil, tares and red clover, as well as beans, sugar beet, wheat, barley and a few oats.

This year he has 20 acres each of trefoil and red clover, both undersown in barley and drilled with a 30-year-old Smyth drill.

"I like to diversify", he says. The trefoil is used as part of grass mixture and the seed is mainly for export. The tare crop, a vetch, is grown under contract and fed to sheep in its green state. The Essex red clover is also grown for seed.

The 50 acres of permanent pasture on the farm is for the 60-ewe flock of pedigree Suffolk sheep, some of which he enters in shows.

Their feeding programme is traditional. The ewes come off kale and turnips when they lamb and go on to trefoil and tares until they can get on to the meadows.

The lambs are on red clover and this takes the flock through to October. The ewes are back on turnips a month before lambing.

Like most farmers in the area, Mr. James has completed his winter barley harvest, and he estimates his yield to be just under two tons per acre.

He expects his 150 acres of quality wheats to produce milling grain.

Story by Peter Hopper, our Agricultural Editor. Pictures by Owen Hines and Richard Snasdell.

to the last time his equipment was used.

He was able to pinpoint it at 12 years, and the drum was only used then because he wanted straw to re-thatch an old-fashioned saw shed in the farm yard.

That straw stayed in the stack for 11 years and only last year was the work on the roof carried out. The shed is now transformed into a handsome small building — the only thatched one on the farm.

This year's straw from just seven and a half acres of binder-cut Bouquet winter wheat is wanted urgently by master thatcher Mr. Podd, and his trainee, Mr. Martin Edmonds, who have a two-year waiting list for thatching, mainly cottages with the occasional barn.

Two binders were used on the crop, and the sheaves were then stacked together until required. The threshing work employing nine men lasts only a few days.

Any labour-intensive job on the farm these days has its financial drawbacks, and even though Mr. Podd will be paying £90 a ton for the straw, compared with the off-the-combine rate of £17 per ton, there is really little profit in it for the farmer.

The main benefit to Mr. James has been the early harvest of the crop — for



THATCHER Russell Podd collecting sheaves for straw thatch at Winston Hall Farm.



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