

*September 2012*

As I was looking out of the window this afternoon I saw a magnificent rainbow, stretching from the Pegsdon Hills all the way over the village to Kettledean Farm. The sun was blazing from the West and yet to the East, the sky was black and threatening. An impressive sight but typical of the weather at the moment. One minute it is warm and sunny and the next it is pouring with rain and chilly.

You may have noticed that our Weetabix sign has disappeared. We have taken it down so that we can put it up again once we have planted next year's wheat crop that will hopefully be good enough quality. Admittedly this probably won't be far away and the sign may even pop up on the opposite side of the road!

We were greatly relieved that after such a strange harvest, the wheat at Rectory Farm, Pirton, was good enough to send to the Weetabix factory at Burton Latimer. We have already loaded 145 tonnes onto lorries and there should be approximately 450 tonnes left. This summer, the combination of very wet and dry spells resulted in it being the worst wheat harvest in living memory, not only for quality but also low yields. The UK is normally an exporter of wheat but this year it is forecast that we will be a net importer, as there was not enough wheat grown to sustain the national demand. This could result in higher food prices as the price of wheat as an ingredient will go up. This has a knock-on effect on the meat industries too because livestock farmers are experiencing jumps in the price of wheat-based animal foods.

At the other end of the scale, we found that the barley yield was the highest we have ever managed and the beans were good too. This just shows that each crop reacts completely differently to weather patterns and what must have been ideal for the spring barley was far from perfect for the wheat.

The wildlife on the farm has also been affected by the weather. The local barn owls struggled early on in the season but thankfully have managed to squeeze in a late hatch of chicks in the last few weeks. The wild English partridge, which have been doing well over the past few years, have had a bad year. The chicks had to battle with the wet weather when they were tiny and few of them would have survived. Every spring and autumn we do a partridge count and send the results off to a national organisation. They are creating a national database of the numbers of wild partridges and we will no doubt see how the population size has fluctuated.

The new crop of oilseed rape is in the ground and growing well now that we have had some rain. We aim to plant it by early September so that it gets a good start before the temperatures drop too much. This weekend we will start the wheat drilling and you may well see our tractors buzzing around in the fields around Shillington.

Fuel prices have been so high recently that we have been trying to do the minimum cultivations possible. We have a piece of equipment called a "Tiger", which is a combination of tines and discs. It is pulled by one of our larger tractors and it slices, loosens, aerates, levels and packs the ground all in one pass. It's a fierce bit of kit! We can put it straight onto the stubble after the combine has done its work, or it can work on land that has already been cultivated. If the conditions are right it does a very good job and manages to do what previously, we would have needed several implements to have done.

I am heading out for the day on Saturday, leaving Dave in charge of the household. They have a very important job to do, which is, of course, picking our first batch of blackberries and sloes. Luckily the baby carrier, which is a cross between a rucksack and a piece of serious structural engineering, leaves Dave two hands to pick fruit. Our little girl's favourite activity at the moment is eating blackberries from the hedgerows so no doubt she will get her fair share and Wellie will be scampering around below, catching any that happen to fall her way. I'm rather envious of their expedition but I hope there will be many more like it this autumn!