

*July 2012*

Harvest has begun! This morning the combine headed out of the barn, freshly cleaned and serviced, to have a nibble on the oilseed rape that is on top of the Barton Hills. With the sun blazing overhead and warm winds blowing (I hardly dare mention the weather at this point) the rapeseed was of a low enough moisture to carry on, seemed to be relatively high quality and with a good yield.

The variety of oilseed rape that we were cutting to-day is called PR46W21 and it is a hybrid. We chose it because it supposedly has a high gross output compared with other varieties, as well as high oil content.

Two lorries have already been to the farm and taken away a total of around 60 tonnes of oilseed rape that was freshly cut this morning. From one tonne of rape you get approximately 450 litres of oil, which means that from our two lorries alone the end product will be 27000 litres of oil. On a larger scale, in total this year we have grown 570 acres of oilseed rape. If we average 1.5 tonnes per acres, that gives us 855 tonnes of rape, which produces a whopping 384,750 litres of oil!

We're intrigued to know how our wheat harvest is going to be in a few weeks time. The strange recent weather means that our milling wheat might not meet the necessary specifications, as the quality will have been affected by the drought and the deluge of rain that we subsequently had. Hopefully it won't be as bad as in other areas though, such as America and Eastern Europe, where entire crops have failed and their harvests have been disastrous.

In the past we used to have to spray our crops with pesticides to reduce the numbers of aphids that attack the crop and damage the grains. This was a fairly blanket treatment and it was assumed that nearly all our fields would have to have this application. Now, however, we very rarely do this and if we do, it is only in small patches, spot treating the exact area where the aphids are in residence. This is largely because the majority of our fields have grass margins around them. It is thought that the beneficial insects that live in these margins venture into the field up to a distance of around 200 metres, eating the aphids as they go along and they therefore keep the crop relatively pest-free.

We have just finished our annual stint of farm walks. This year they were particularly successful and we welcomed at least one hundred new visitors to the farm. The age range was from four years old to eighty four, with a great deal of enthusiasm from everybody through the age spectrum! We found that there was particular interest in the types of crop that we grow, as well as the explanations of our environmental work. We have a spectacular array of orchids on one of our chalk banks and people were thrilled to see them. Every year we cut the bank with the hedge-trimmer, as instructed by our local wildlife advisors, to encourage growth the following season. It is working really well and together with the suitable weather conditions, this year has been one of the best floral displays we have ever had.

At home, the garden is also flourishing. We have had our best crop of tayberries to date and we won the battle with the birds thanks to the rather extravagant net that I set up around the fruit. We have also had more gooseberries than expected so I've bagged them up in the freezer ready for some warming crumbles in the autumn and winter. Unfortunately our spuds are not as good as hoped so we have to dig a couple of roots for one meal.

I have my two "helpers" when I'm foraging in the vegetable patch. Squeals of delight can be heard from the swing as our little girl flies through the air, watching me pick things for her supper. Wellie, the ever enthusiastic labrador, is less helpful and is often seen darting off guiltily with a potato in her mouth. She then flings it around the lawn, together with a couple of windfall apples and the odd stick, keeping herself entertained for hours.