

# Farming Today

By Kevin Prince



## Tricky making the figures all add up

RISHI Sunak wants everyone to do maths until they are 18. Farmers will tell you that they do maths their whole lives and it's always difficult to make the sums add up.

All sorts of things get into the equation in addition to figures. Pythagoras never had to factor in the weather, for instance, although his theorem does come in useful when triangulating awkward field shapes to work out an area to put on the multiplicity of Defra and Natural England forms!

The extremely wet March has deluged the arable farming community with a few headaches because it was impossible to get on the land to cultivate or sow. Heavy machines destroy soil structure when it's too wet so instead many were sat indoors hammering away on calculators as they tried to figure a balance between input costs and what they can expect to get from this year's harvest.

Grain prices have been falling fast since last year's spike caused by the war in Ukraine and the shortages it brought to world markets. Those who kept their grain in store are probably wishing they off-loaded it earlier and that they hadn't banked on continued high prices to help offset the cost of fertilisers they ordered forward of delivery at higher prices



Filling in forms and balancing the books all part of modern farming

than they would pay if ordering now.

The big puzzle now is what to put in the ground. There are lots of relatively new "crop" names to ponder AB15, RP8, or TE13 may sound like tractor model

numbers but in fact they are ways of managing the land in order to receive payment for non-food production via form filling. Working it out demands knowledge of square roots rather tap

roots.

So the biggest pre-occupation of many farmers and landowners is the question: "Should 2023 and 2024 be primarily about producing food or producing

habitat?" In reality the answer for the vast majority of British farmers, despite what the TV and press evangelical conservationists would have you believe, is that it has always been about both.

Yes farmers take pride in a truly weed free crop of winter wheat, but I can assure you that take the same amount of pride in that covey of grey partridges or the sight of a barn owl hunting a hedgerow.

Paying farmers to create habitat may seem strange to some people, but in my book I think it is long overdue, the beautiful countryside of England's southern counties only looks beautiful because generations of farmers have taken pride in that field of wheat and that barn owl quartering it at dusk to catch the mice that can devastate a crop. That's a prime example of farmer and nature working together that's often occurring yet seldom seen in our vast rural acreages by urban visitors and deskbound tractor jockeys.

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