

# LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

As you stand on the ridge of Garden field and look South West across the Medway valley towards the Ashdown Forest with the sun rising over your shoulder you could be forgiven for thinking that all was right in the world. The future looks clear and bright. If you look closer there is a cloud forming, at this distance it looks innocuous enough, but it's forming and given the prevailing wind it will be with you by sunset with wind, rain, thunder and lightning. All decent storms these days have a name, this one is called Blue Michael. Michael may well blow himself out but he will quickly be replaced by Red Sue and the message is clear and preparations need to be made.

Faced with the prospect of receiving only 10 or 20% of your current BPS payment what will you do? To use a Churchillism, "Keeping bugging on" isn't an option. In most cases that involves digging a self centered hole large enough to swallow the farm. The banks have to a man been very patient, but the mood is changing as the fiscal landscape changes. Take note of Mr Eustice, When asked where the cap would be set, he said: "The honest answer is we have not taken a final decision yet. We have done some analysis and we could have a cap of £25,000 and 75% of farmers would be unaffected by that. We are doing a White Paper in the spring and we will be asking for your views on that."

There is no need to panic. Michael has at least announced his intentions early and Sue has backed

him up with some well worn rhetoric. The wind of change is coming and the forecast is gloomy unless you prepare to weather the storm.

At a recent farmer's forum, the question was posed 'What do you think the future for farmers will hold post Brexit?' Faced with a room full of successful entrepreneurs it can only be positive but when some of those are starting to look nervously at the storm approaching then the seriousness of the situation cannot be ignored.

Co-operative farming is not new nor does it sit comfortably with the UK farmer who has been weaned on the individual success of his forefathers but we must remember that those that preceded us had a safety blanket that is just about to get pulled from under our feet.

The impressive successful entrepreneurial farmer standing on one leg in a pub in Sussex clearly has a firm grip on a broad based large scale business and yet in amongst the individualism and drive is a glimmer of what we need to see more of, 'we use Tom's drill for drilling that' he does it better. A ray of co-operative light. Not an over complicated members scheme but an acceptance that to do the job more economically and indeed agronomically better, he has looked to his neighbour. And shock horror rather than go and buy an expensive piece of equipment that works at best for 20 days out of 365 he hires it. It is not novel thinking but it is thinking and accepting

a change of style and mindset. Machinery sharing should not be the sole domain of the small farmer and Storm Michael is going to hit the larger business harder.

The South East Farmer often has the comfort blanket provided by property to weather a storm but there is at last amongst the enlightened an acceptance that farming at decreased profit levels or at a loss is folly in the face of an inevitable fiscal damage.

Initiating change and getting it right takes time and the positive from the view on the top of the hill is that we have time to make those changes and to tune them before the storm hits. Individualism can still flourish among the rich and varied landscape before us but the view must be broad and open. Closed thinking will lead to failure and storm damage. History and human nature demonstrates consistently that when a storm hits, neighbours work well together. Could we be bold enough to start working together before the storm hits? Could we consider applying 'Sigg's Law' and swapping fields/acreages with our neighbours to reduce travelling time? To prepare for the inevitable fiscal damage and by standing together be able to weather the storm or even take advantage of it. The future like the horizon is bright for entrepreneurial thinkers. Could it not be brighter still, stood alongside one's neighbour rather than in their shadow cast simply because they are there.

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➤ Ashdown Forest

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