

## Client focus: T H Scott



*Robert Scott with some of the New Zealand Romney sheep which were reintroduced in 2020. Since returning home he has focused on building T H Scott & Son into a unique one-stop shop for farm contracting clients in mid-Norfolk.*

## Professional advice is critical to the success of Norfolk family's farming and contracting business

"Professional advice is critical to the management and ongoing development of our businesses, but must add value to what we do," emphasises Robert Scott, whose family have worked with Larking Gowen for more than a decade.

The Scotts started farming in Norfolk during the 1870s, then in 1911, John Bryan Scott purchased School Farm, Beeston, where Robert's parents, Suzie and Hugh, have lived and farmed since 1985. They now farm in partnership with Robert, the fifth generation of the Scott family, who has grown the business into a much larger contract farming operation. A one-stop shop for a wide range of clients, from large estates to small mixed farms, it works with those who

are a good fit in terms of the owner's personality and ethos, as well as from a geographical, machinery and labour viewpoint.

Committed to a more regenerative approach, Robert studied Rural Enterprise and Land Management at Harper Adams University. Starting there in the mid-2000s, he was discouraged, by Hugh, from farming directly as commodity prices were in the doldrums. A qualified chartered surveyor, Robert spent a year on the Sandringham Estate, then seven years with Savills as a Farm Business Consultant, followed by a year as an outside consultant.

Those experiences underlined the importance of fiscal management

and cashflow to any successful business, and of the need to 'think like a customer'. Both have had a major influence on how Robert has managed the business since returning home in 2017.

At that time, T H Scott & Son employed no outside staff, so during the first year he was necessarily very 'hands-on'. Most of the winter was spent operating a hedge cutter, the family having purchased an established local business to provide work during what would otherwise have been a quiet time for the farm and contracting operation. It operates two Shelbourne Reynolds flail-type machines, cutting hedges and verges for farms, estates, households and councils throughout mid-Norfolk.

## Growing the business

Robert has grown the arable operation substantially to 1,800 hectares, 70% of which is light land that can bake hard in summer yet is easily compacted by heavy rain in winter, the remainder stronger clay soils more suited to wheat rather than barley and root crops. Rotational grass leys and livestock finishing has been introduced into the farming mix, including store lambs which are fattened from October until March.

A key element in developing the business has been to recruit and retain professional staff, which now include five full-time within the farming and contracting operation, and a further three working full-time for the family's haylage business, EH Haylage. All are involved in an annual review, where Robert sets out his vision for the year ahead and everyone has an input.

Laurie Hill has played a key role in the development of the Scott family's businesses. Having joined Larking Gowen in 2019, he became a Partner in the firm's Farms and Rural Business Team in April 2023.

"It's important that everyone understands what we are doing, why we are doing it, and where we want to take the business," Robert emphasises. "Quarterly management meetings are attended by Laurie Hill from Larking Gowen, who has been at the frontline of our growth and is a key part of the management team. Without his input we wouldn't be where we are today, so whenever I'm thinking of doing something he is my first call, after my parents of course! Laurie also attends family meetings throughout the year, and we speak at least monthly. It's vital to have a trusted third party critique your business to avoid becoming too insular, so his input is invaluable.

"With Laurie's guidance, we have moved our fiscal year, produce forecasted figures for tax planning, and meticulously plan and manage our cashflow. Knowing our numbers and exactly where we stand financially is hugely beneficial when it comes to discussions with clients, because they see that we are being completely honest and transparent.

"Laurie also advised us on the acquisition of EH Haylage

([www.ehhaylage.co.uk](http://www.ehhaylage.co.uk)), an established supplier, which we purchased in 2021. We had been growing haylage under the T H Scott brand for nine years when the opportunity arose and we've developed the EH Haylage brand significantly. The business takes grass from 182ha of land on crop licences and processes it into haylage, which is sold in 20kg bags and 100kg bales. The operation now has over 50 outlets throughout East Anglia, sells direct to race and livery yards, as well as exporting products as far afield as Indonesia."



Laurie Hill, Partner, Larking Gowen

## No-till is the way forward

The Scott family's core business, which includes 200ha of in-hand land at two sites in Beeston, School Farm and Memorial Farm, is providing arable whole-farm contract farming services to private landowners in mid-Norfolk, which they have been doing for over 35 years. It produces a variety of arable crops, including cereals, oilseeds, sugar beet, peas and grass for commercial horse feed. Recently, livestock have been integrated into the farming rotation as part of a more regenerative approach to the way in which food and fibre are grown.

Employing a contractor provides clients with access to additional labour, specialist expertise and modern equipment. The business utilises a range of John Deere tractors from 155hp to 250hp and a John Deere S790i combine with a 12m draper header, which complements the 12m drill and 36m sprayer, allowing a Controlled Traffic Farming (CTF) system to be operated. All are supplied by John Deere dealer Ben Burgess, which has a branch in Beeston and provides excellent service. Tractors are mostly operated on five-year hire purchase agreement, supported by a five-year extended warranty package.

More recently, T H Scott & Son has invested in no-till farming, a technique which will play a key role going forward, as Robert outlines.

"Where previously we had grown cover crops in winter, the soil was noticeably better drained, more friable and crumbled beautifully. My 'lightbulb' moment came in autumn 2019 after we had worked down a significant area of land ready for sowing, then had a period of extremely wet weather, which meant that nothing more could be

drilled until spring. And where we had established crops, our sprayer at the time got stuck applying pre-emergence herbicides.

"I was determined that would never happen again, so after much research and visiting other farms, we decided that cover crops and direct drilling were the way forward. Reducing establishment costs was another reason; because farmers are price takers, careful management of production costs is vital to profitability."

The purchase of a 12m Horsch Avatar direct drill has greatly extended the sowing window. Operating with RTK precision guidance, it benefits from a micro-granular applicator and two seed tanks, providing the option of mixing seeds or fertiliser placement with the seed. For varying soils and weather situations, the business also offers customers an Amazone Cayena tine-type direct drill fitted with Bourgault 13mm points.

In 2022, 70% of winter crops were no-till drilled, 500ha of cover crops established, and nitrogen use on wheat reduced by 20%. In 2023, the business introduced a living clover mulch to a field of oilseed rape and conducted seed rate trials suited to the 25cm drill row spacing. It also introduced humic and fulvic acid to all applications to boost microbial activity, trialled its first wheat seed blend and went insecticide-free on the family's own cereal crops.

Robert manages all machinery through JDLink™, a fleet management app on his phone. Designed to make operations much more productive and efficient, it provides machine visibility in terms of location, utilisation, fuel level and maintenance to name but a few. Without it, he says, operating the business would be more difficult, less efficient and more stressful.



## Risk management is key

"At the end of the day, farming profitably on marginal land is all about managing financial and agronomic risk," Robert outlines. "As part of that process, and because its costs are so front-loaded, we have reigned in our oilseed rape area to 110ha this season, about half of what we used to grow. Next year it could be 30ha to 40ha or gone entirely, replaced by clover and grass as part of the Sustainable Farming Initiative (SFI) or grown for our haylage business."

"We should farm productive land intensively and make use of environmental subsidy payments to help put heart back into marginal land and reduce purchased inputs. Some of the non-farming options in the SFI and CSS (Countryside Stewardship Scheme) are competitive with less productive crops on poorer land, so in future we may be cropping less area."

"Food production remains a challenging profession, in no small part due to the framework in which we operate. I am sceptical of any government's intentions as politicians have a poor recent track record when it comes to making good decisions for our industry, making it more difficult for commercial businesses to do their job and be profitable."

"Phasing out the Basic Payment Scheme is going to hurt arable farming financially, no doubt about it. The overall financial pot will be smaller and there's only so many ways to divide it. Farming will carry on, but we will need to consider very carefully what we do and how best to do it. Many will seek early retirement, creating opportunity for contracting businesses such as ours."

"Looking ahead, I think that as an industry we will be farming more like we did a hundred years ago, namely, more extensively, with much more fallowed land for wildlife and using legumes to build fertility as part of a more regenerative approach. But we will need to adopt an even more technical, more precise approach, supported by highly skilled and well-rewarded operators."

As part of the process of change, the family are growing a trial area of pesticide-free wheat for Wildfarmed, an organisation which aims to provide a viable alternative to the current industrial food system. The Scotts continue to fine-tune cover crop establishment with a new shallow cultivator/seeder unit and have been trialling sunflowers to reduce inputs when growing break crops. The home-bred New Zealand Romney flock also continues to grow as the family begins to consider life post BPS.

## A regenerative farming journey

The Scotts view regenerative farming as a direction of travel rather than a set-in-stone system which involves considering and improving the natural environment for future generations, whilst producing food and fibre for the present. The approach takes many forms, but generally follows five principles: minimise soil disturbance, protect the soil surface, keep living roots in the soil, grow a diverse range of crops and integrate livestock.

The introduction of over-winter cover crops in 2014 to improve soils has had a big effect in reducing compaction by dissipating the energy of heavy rain, creating a wider drilling window and improving soil condition.

Free-range turkeys were introduced in 2017 to provide additional organic matter, the site being rented and run by Traditional Norfolk Poultry (TNP) Ltd. Utilising fallow and woodland, the Norfolk Bronze birds are a source of manure, reducing the requirement for synthetic fertiliser. Truly free-range, Red Tractor and RSPCA freedom-food assured, they can be found as premium brand whole birds in supermarkets at Christmas.

In 2018, the area of rotational grass leys was doubled and the following year, the Scotts attended their first regenerative farming event, while vining peas were introduced to increase legumes into the rotation.



Successive wet winters in 2019 and 2020 provided a better understanding of climate change and carbon capture, while escalating production costs sped up their pursuit of change.

The year 2020 saw the first purchase of store lambs, sheep were reintroduced to the farm, and the business joined Base UK, a farmer-led knowledge exchange. It also began evaluating bio-stimulants in place of synthetic sprays, experimented with reducing fungicide use and their removal at the T1 timing, as well as carrying out crop termination trials comparing glyphosate versus grazing.

Sheep provide a way of better managing grass leys grown for haylage and cover crops in their regenerative system. Grazing livestock allows land to be rested from arable production by growing grass or multi-species cover crops. This land use sequesters carbon, whilst grazing allows the landscape to be managed

without the need for synthetic chemicals or heavy fertiliser use for that part of the rotation. Grazing animals tread the soil, provide manure and eat weeds, diseased leaves or unwanted volunteer crops. They also provide a farm with soul!

The year 2021 brought the introduction of large-scale lamb grazing of cover crops and grass leys, the purchase of the two direct drills, and over-winter grazing of cereal crops with livestock was adopted. The business continues to rear some 1,500 Red Tractor quality-assured lambs per year on contract for farms in the north of England. The farm also has its own flock of New Zealand Romney ewes which graze herbal leys. By managing livestock themselves, the Scotts have complete control over their haylage and farming systems for better crop management, whilst allowing them to offer a one-stop shop for landowners wanting to pursue a mixed regenerative approach.



## EH Haylage

EH Haylage was developed by event rider Ed Howard for his horse Basil, who became allergic to the dust in hay and developed COPD, prompting Ed to develop a dust-free alternative forage to traditional hay. EH Haylage has gone on to produce over a million haylage bales over a 16-year period with multiple product lines for horses' differing nutritional needs. In 2021, Ed handed the EH Haylage

reins over to his cousin's family, the Scotts, marking a new chapter in both haylage brands, with production being consolidated under the single banner of EH Haylage at new purpose-built premises in Beeston. Ed continues to advise on grass growth and production, while in September 2023, Ian Gibson, who has over 25 years' experience in the equine feed industry, joined as General Manager.



*Despite seemingly endless rain in the preceding weeks, this crop of winter wheat was emerging well during the second week of December, having been direct drilled into a cover crop in October.*



*This field of oilseed rape was looking extremely healthy, having been direct drilled into wheat stubble during August.*

