

# smith's soapbox

by Guy Smith



## Hedging your bets

**One of the delights of holding office in the NFU is the train line from St. Pancras International to Le Gare du Midi in Brussels. It's a very swift service and sometimes I've felt a mere two hours to get from the centre of two capital cities is rather short — it can take longer to find a parking place at Colchester station.**

Being a bit of an agro-anorak, rather than doing my homework on the train by pawing my way through Eurocratic papers designed to make binary code look relatively exciting, I'm usually gawping out of the window casting an eye over the French arable agriculture as we speed through the Pas de Calais and beyond. It's always striking how the landscape changes for the worse as you disappear down a hole in the beautiful Garden of England in Kent and emerge on the other side in the dull featureless, grey countryside of Northern France. The difference is striking so don't let anyone tell you that British farmers aren't good custodians of their farmscapes.

Trying to gain an in-depth understanding of the political economy of French agriculture is probably not best done travelling through it at over 100mph, but that doesn't stop me concluding that the French seem somehow to have been exempted from the greening obligations of the CAP. The lack of hedges, margins and

trees seems very pronounced. But having said that, I've noticed from my Eurostar seat that recently this might be changing. Many of the large, featureless fields between Calais and Lille now have lines of freshly planted young trees marching through them. My guess is that this might be 'agro-forestry', which some feel is the future of farming while others dismiss it as the latest fad the French government are wasting money on and French farmers are cashing in on.

I'm no expert of 'agro-forestry' but, as readers will know, lack of knowledge doesn't usually stop me talking about a topic. The principle seems to be that by farming 20-50m wide strips of crops between rows of trees you create rich bio-spheres of genetic diversity which in turn deliver a greater abundance of food per ha. The biodiversity harboured by the trees helps keep the crops clean of disease, pests and weeds and vice-versa.

There are also benefits for the soil in that erosion is limited and leaf litter replenishes organic matter. You also get more spray days as lines of trees provide shelter from the wind. The presence of trees reduces overall crop yield through physically occupying space in the field but the harvest from the trees whether it's from wood or fruit compensates for this. The argument is you're making more use of the environment through tree height and deeper rooting whereas simple arable cropping only exploits the meter above the ground and the meter below.

This is all very interesting, if not a little perverse for a man of my generation, who can remember as a boy that widespread and common farm activity that was called hedge grubbing. Around my parts of Essex it largely took place in the 1960s, so it's in my boyhood memory banks along with JFK,

Bobby Charlton, Jimi Hendrix and Neil Armstrong. The principle behind hedge grubbing was that the larger the field the better the cropping. Suddenly, 50 years on it now seems to be the other way round.

But as someone who has never actually grubbed a hedge but has planted a few I recognise it's actually a bit more complicated than the larger the field the better the profits. For starters new hedges can be planted in geometric patterns that better allows the use of modern agricultural machinery — which was the prime reason why hedges were taken out fifty years ago. The spider webs of small fields could be turned into comprehensive manageable blocks. Today when we plant hedges things are done in straight lines rather than in the way they seem to have been done during the enclosures when they weaved their convoluted way around medieval rights of way and a myriad other legal complications.

Despite the hedge grubbing of the 1960s and 70s, England remains the most hedged landscape in the world with half a million miles of hedges. So the question is: does the presence and proximity of the hedge suggest advantages you might get from agroforestry?

My experience suggests the closer you get to the hedge the lower the yield. It's usually where the rabbit damage is greatest and in most years the hedge tends to drought the land by drawing moisture. There's also the expense of maintenance. But then again there's no income contribution from the hedge unless you're into selling sloes or blackberries. The main income I get from my hedges is by virtue of their greening contribution to my BPS obligations. Which brings me back to the changing landscape of Northern France. You suspect it's government schemes and payments that's driving agroforestry rather than scientifically proven advantages from combining arable agriculture and silviculture cheek by jowl.

*Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely St. Osyth Marsh — officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of.*

**Email your comments and ideas to [gsmith2692@aol.com](mailto:gsmith2692@aol.com)**

*Will silvoarable agriculture draw more interest from farmers, or simply draw more rabbits onto arable land and moisture away from crops?*

