

# smith's soapbox

by Guy Smith



## St. Margarets field under new holy orders

Harvest 2024 is erased from the fields but probably not from the memory, for all the wrong reasons. The record wet that fell in both the autumn and winter left its scars – cereals don't like standing in waterlogged soils for month after month particularly on our heavy

### unstructured marshlands.

Even out of the wet holes the crops didn't seem to yield. On top of that, rust in the Crusoe and blackgrass everywhere else proved further body blows leaving yields on the floor. And just to complete the litany of woe, I've never seen so much pigeon damage in the wheat. From early July the blue army seemed to make camp around the patches made bare by standing winter water and work out from there with enough devastating sorties to make Napoleon proud. All in all, even my pub yields were nothing to shout about.

Hopefully all of this misery has cheered some of 'schadenfreuden' you up.

During a bad harvest it's always nice to hear about other people's disasters rather than their barn busting triumphs. Meanwhile, I'll take heed from Kipling who counselled in his poem 'If' – that I should treat triumph and disaster just the same.

On the bright side, it was an easy sunny dry harvest with no need to get out the giant, gas-fired drying pot. Quality was also okay with good proteins – which was the silver lining of the cloud that is low yields.

I'm minded to mention the 'e' word, but the first rule of the ergot club is to not mention the ergot club. Nor is it a good time to remember Albert Hoffman – the Swiss chemist who in the 1930s synthesised artificial LSD by copying the chemical compounds found in natural ergot. It's enough to put a whole new meaning on the phrase 'taking a trip to the bakers'.

So Harvest 2025 beckons as we lay down its foundations this coming autumn. But in the new world of SFI payments there'll be quite a few hectares on this farm where the annual cropping cycle will be broken, for the first time in living memory.

One of this year's better yielding fields is called St. Margarets. I'm not sure why it's called that, but you'd guess it's something to do with a monastery or church. Either way, St. Margarets field has a special place in my heart in that it's the first field in which I was allowed to drive a combine as an 18-year-old.

I can remember my dad's withering judgement on my first in field performance – 'you drive about as straight as a dog piddles in the snow'. Despite my early wayward struggles when it came to keeping the combine header full, I've continued to drive the combine



Harvest is cleared from St. Margarets field. Next year it'll be in NUM3 – the first time the field won't be cropped in living memory.

on St. Margarets field every year for several decades.

But next year I won't be, because it's going into NUM3. It's an end to an era of continuous cropping that probably goes back centuries. I'm sure the break will do it some good but I'm not so sure as to from where the UK will replace the hundreds of tonnes of milling wheat, oilseeds and protein that St. Margarets field produced on a regular basis.

It's worth noting our new farming minister is now titled 'Minister for Food Security'. I wonder if he'll be interested in what's happening on St. Margarets field?

*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.*

**@essexpeasant**

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