



Steps to success in potatoes

“The best businesses have great timing and most of that’s driven by having the infrastructure and capacity to operate on the right day.”

HARRY BARNETT

What makes a successful potato business? According to Nuffield Scholar, Harry Barnett, there are five key areas which can make or break an enterprise. CPM shares his thoughts.

By Mike Abram

Successful global potato businesses stand out in how they manage five core areas, according to conclusions drawn by Nuffield Scholar, Harry Barnett, following 10 weeks of international travel.

The Holkham Emerald director visited farms and potato businesses in Poland, Germany, Belgium, France, Ireland, USA and Canada to research how to counteract the agronomic and market challenges facing the UK potato sector.

He says the experience gave amazing insight. “And the following five core areas are what I think make the best businesses around the world – where they stand out compared with their rivals and even their neighbours.”

The first is water, which Harry

believes will shape the global potato industry during the next few decades. “This is because too much water when we don’t want it during planting and harvesting, and not enough during growing periods, is defining where we are today,” he continues.

INVESTMENT IN IRRIGATION

It’s one of the reasons why Holkham Emerald – a joint venture between the 10,000ha Holkham Estate in north Norfolk and Emerald Produce, a produce marketing company specialising in importing and exporting potatoes including growing its own – has invested heavily in irrigation infrastructure during recent years, says Harry.

Formed in 2009, the business has

grown considerably off the back of extending irrigation infrastructure to allow potato growing on new blocks of land in Norfolk. It’s also been a part of a shift in the business’s strategy, moving from what was a cash-orientated enterprise with no storage or other capital assets to one that’s invested heavily in machinery and a 6500t storage and grading facility.

The investment in irrigation is helping to maximise marketable yields, while machinery and storage mean the business is better positioned to take control of weather-related and other operational challenges than when relying on contractors, he comments. “It’s vital we take control of those risk areas and have an ability to affect change.”

That includes managing soils more effectively to build resilience to more extreme weather events, while also helping with the next core area Harry has identified – operational timing and capacity. “The best businesses have great timing and most of that’s driven by having the infrastructure and



Nuffield Scholarship tour

Harry Barnett travelled to farms and potato businesses in Poland, Germany, Belgium, France, Ireland, USA and Canada as part of his studies.

Photo: Beanstalk Global.

capacity to operate on the right day.

“With tighter weather windows, it’s vitally important to plant potatoes and harvest them in the best conditions to maximise outcomes. It’s why we took the plunge to move away from contractors and third-party storage to putting facilities onto the farm so we can hit timings. The difference in yield potential if you get good timings is huge,” says Harry.

But switching away from contractors didn’t come without its challenges, he highlights. “We underestimated what good value we had from contractors – they could do things cheaper than we could in the first couple of years and we made rookie errors as new operators of machinery,” he admits. “But, I think we had to go through that process to get to where we are now – it’s been a huge step forward.”

Taking more control of the rotation is another success factor, as per all the best businesses, believes Harry. “I’ve seen farms in North America and even Belgium to some extent where they’re growing potatoes every year, or every other year, and the model is very fragile – it’s propped up by ag chem use, but you can see cracks starting to appear.”

Although such rotations are very infrequent in the UK, Harry says potato businesses have to look at how individual crops in a rotation complement each other to help avoid pest and other agronomic challenges, which can be often linked to poor rotational management.

WIREWORM PRESSURE

He shares that wireworm in particular has been a challenge at Holkham, exacerbated by the introduction of cover crops and leys into the rotation. And with a zero tolerance to wireworm damage in the high value set skin salad potatoes the business mostly specialises in, it’s meant they’ve decided against including

leys in the rotation, says Harry.

“Controlling the rotation is a challenge for many potato growers as they don’t have full influence on it. But as an industry, money talks, so we have to step into our landlord’s rotation and try to offer some form of control.

“If landlords aren’t receptive, we don’t have to rent that land. That’s the message we have to put across to get better rotations.”

At Holkham, one of the first farms to adopt the Norfolk four-course rotation, land and soil management remains important to the landowner, Lord Coke, shares Harry. “We’re even toying with the idea of a ‘potato holiday’ to rest land for long periods because Lord Coke wants to hand land on in

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ROOTS Potato business strategies

► the same or better condition than it is today. He doesn't want to be known as the one who degraded that soil."

Seed and breeding make up the fourth pillar identified by Harry. "The best businesses are able to procure seed early and have a clear plan of what they require – building relationships with their end user and seed grower, so you can trust the quality of seed that's being delivered onto farm and that it has an end market."

He says he's encouraged by the advances in technology which breeders are using to generate new varieties. "It's making it so much easier to bring through material with resistance [to agronomic challenges] even than five years ago. But as an industry, we have to make our voices heard regarding what we want in the varieties of the future. I don't think we've been clear about that and talking to breeders, they're a little unsure."

One thing Harry is sure about is the importance of people – his fifth and final area which successful businesses excel in. "It's overlooked too much in agriculture, but the



CUPGRA conference

Harry Barnett (L), shared his learnings at the CUPGRA conference in December. Pictured with Greg Colebrook, John Bubb and Jack Smith. Photo: Beanstalk Global.

best potato businesses around the world have the best people.

"It doesn't matter what soil type they're working with or the challenges they have to overcome on the farm, the best people can

react, recognise problems and resolve them," he concludes.

Material for this article was obtained during the CUPGRA conference in December plus subsequent interviews. ●

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A core approach to business

Simplifying the business structure to focus on the most profitable core activities is helping potato grower and supply chain group, Greens of Soham, to take the enterprise forward

Following a period where there was an emphasis on growth, financial and historic yield data analysis highlighted some areas of Greens of Soham were less profitable and proving to be a distraction.

That's according to the firm's farming director Greg Colebrook, who says as such, they went back to basics. "We looked at what we excelled in and removed the aspects we were less good at, whether that be varieties, soil types or crop types."

Not only did that mean focusing solely on potatoes and red beet, but also simplifying what was grown, stopping higher risk activities, while continuing to innovate. "We dropped some potatoes grown for long-term storage and on soil types that are difficult to manage. The cost and risks of these crops wasn't being rewarded," adds Greg.

Wireworm in particular is a challenge, which led to the business pivoting away from some rented land blocks. Instead, more focus has been placed on salad potatoes on Breckland soils which are direct supplied. "Our USP [unique selling point] with these is we can always harvest through the summer, and maintain a good capacity to serve lots of customers during that period."

The second largest market for the enterprise after salad potatoes is seed. Greg says most of these crops are now grown in Northumberland and Scotland to reduce virus

risk while helping to bring high quality seed into the business.

"We have a good understanding of the quality we're growing – higher health status seed is one of the factors we consider for yield improvement along with varieties, irrigation management and cultivations."

No longer growing the lowest performing 5% of varieties would perhaps be the easiest way for the business to improve average yields, he points out. "There's more than a 100% difference between the best and worst – that range is too big."

But rationalising variety choice isn't easy, with long-term decisions required within seed production, he raises. "We're growing fewer varieties than we did, but across all the different crop types it's still 30 plus varieties, rather than the 50 we used to grow."

"We're very specific about either growing a variety we can market more widely, or being tied into a supply chain where the end user, ourselves and the variety are all linked."

According to Greg, both routes have advantages – a relationship growing a unique variety ties the customer into any problems so Greens isn't managing that risk alone. Equally, a variety the business can sell more widely can be selected based on yield, quality and marketability attributes which Greens can assess.

The disadvantages are the risk of if a variety isn't given exclusivity, it doesn't get used, while partnering with the wrong customer can leave the variety going nowhere, notes Greg.

It might be easier to grow 1300ha of potatoes with a blanket approach, but it's attention to detail that brings success, he says. "We're bespoke with how we grow each crop and make decisions based on what's best for that crop on that soil type."

The firm works closely with its landlords to manage decisions which affect the potato crop, whether that's irrigation – where Greens is taking on management that traditionally would have been the landlord's responsibility – cultivations or cover crops.

Decisions regarding cover crop



Business analysis

Financial and historic yield data analysis highlighted some areas of Greens of Soham were less profitable and proving to be a distraction, explained farming director, Greg Colebrook.

species and destruction timings are often made in collaboration, particularly with various schemes incentivising landowners to include them in rotations, shares Greg. "In the past we might have drilled them ourselves at our own risk and cost. Now it's more advice to avoid unintended consequences."

Mitigating wireworm pressure remains particularly important, he says, with a short brown bridge between cereal harvest and cover crop drilling, plus a decent kill before potato planting in the spring, helping to reduce risk.

Greens also partners with landlords on long-term infrastructure projects, for example storage, which guarantees the landlord an income while giving Greens some decision-making power. "We're looking for long-term relationships which are sustainable rather than transactional," comments Greg.

As with any successful business, innovation is also at the fore – Greens has been involved in projects in the processing sector using low carbon fertilisers to understand the practicalities of growing crops with slow-release type products, while it's also investigated different planting patterns after successfully innovating a similar change in its beetroot crop.

"We're keen on the idea of a 50cm quad arrangement where every potato is exactly 50cm away from each other. But the cost of developing bespoke machinery is a barrier, while we also can't afford to fail on any of the area we grow because of the tight margins we operate under," he concludes.



Rationalised approach

By going back to basics, the farm could cease aspects it was less good at, whether that be varieties, soil types or crop types.