



## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **COST EFFECTIVE OILSEED RAPE ESTABLISHMENT BOOST TO CONTRACTING SERVICE – June 2008**

Cost-effective establishment of oilseed rape using minimum tillage techniques has been well documented, but try reducing that cost by a further two thirds without compromising performance and farmers really start to listen.

Such was the interest by neighbours and farmer customers of arable farmer and contractor Robert Pickering of F Pickering and Sons Harpswell Grange Farm, Harpswell in Lincolnshire that he had to turn away business last year because of demand. This year he intends to increase capacity and take on an extra 500 acres of contracting land.

Mr Pickering farms and contracts 3,500 acres of which 1200 acres is oilseed rape, with his son Matthew. Three years ago the decision was taken to replace the plough with a Simba Flatliner 500 cultivator fitted with a Horstine Farmery small seed applicator to reduce cost and improve timeliness.

When he first switched from the plough to minimum tillage he was very nervous because he had been brought up to believe that cutting corners would cost money in the long run.

"Of course we know now that it is not about cutting corners, it's just a different approach. We started small just to make sure we were comfortable with it and could see the results. There is no difference in performance, only the cost is much less and so we have never looked back."



On seed rates alone he says that he is saving farmers about 1kg/ha worth about £10/ha, which is equivalent to half the cost of contractor established oilseed rape.

"Since adopting this system of establishment all our rape has performed extremely well. Land that has been established using a traditional system tends to dry out on this farm, but we had a field last year that was out of setaside and was water logged, but it established well using our new approach."

Mr Pickering puts better establishment down to an improved root system. Normally when checking rooting he says it is possible to pull the plant out of the ground, but last year when he tried he could not.

"We have found that even where the rape looked as if it was struggling, it all compensated well and came good at harvest," he says. "We now have customers that are switching to the same system of establishment as us because they have been impressed with how much better our crops look and perform."

Three years ago Mr Pickering used to plough everything, but with many customers switching to minimum tillage systems there was very little work left for the plough. His business was expanding as well and so an establishment system that would provide greater timing flexibility and speed of operation was necessary.

The Horstine Farmery hopper attached to the Simba Flatliner 500 is small and so does not affect visibility through the back window of the tractor. Mr Pickering says other Flatliner mounted seed broadcasting hoppers are too big and can obscure visibility. Compared to other similar establishment systems such as Opico, he calculates that he has reduced the cost of establishment by two thirds. For a start he says there is nothing to breakdown on the Horstine applicator.



"Some farmer's like a bigger hopper, but it is not an issue for us," he says. "Every hour or every 20 acres we check that there are no blockages. The problem with a bigger hopper is that you would check it less frequently.

"Horstine drill applicators are easy to fit and cheap to maintain," he says. "But, because we offer a contractor service we also include a Simba Horsch seed metering system, which is more expensive than the Horstine equivalent and so the extra cost can be justified. If we were only on our own farm then the most cost effective metering unit would be the Horstine."

Mr Pickering believes his contract drilling charge of £15/acre plus farmer fuel is very competitive. The customer then rolls his own fields afterwards.

"Using farm fuel means we do not have to carry a bowser around with us which is time consuming and costly," he says. "Our oilseed rape establishment technique has proved very popular and last year we had to turn work down.

"This year a neighbour is going to buy a Flatliner with Horstine's seed attachment, which we will then use as part of the contracting arrangement to significantly boost capacity. We are now looking for another 500 acres of land. "

Mr Pickering highlights several benefits associated with his establishment system over the plough. Top of the list is cost, with the plough costing at least £35/acre more than the minimum tillage system. He also says that with the plough a pan develops at about 8 inches deep and this needs to be broken with a deep subsoiler to about 10 inches.

# Chafer Machinery

"We have also found that with shallow rooted blackgrass Kerb is excellent. Where the plough is used blackgrass is germinating far deeper and is more difficult to control. Slugs are no more of a problem than with a conventional cultivating system either. Slugs can be a big problem on our soils and so on our farm we are going to buy a heavy roll with slug pelleter attached.

"The key point is that it's what you do after the crop has been drilled that is important," says Mr Pickering. "Some agronomists don't like this system because they say that without turning the soil some chemical residues are left in the soil, but over 3000 acres we have never had a problem. If it ever turned out that there was a problem it is more likely to be that the agronomist has not been thinking about the following crop and chemical carryover."

