FARMING OUT THE WORK

Pooling resources at two farms in Kent has created a new contracting company that is going from strength to strength, discovers **Samantha Whitaker**

Matt Solley needed a reason to come home. Following the success of Gilston Crop Management, a large-scale limited liability partnership (LLP) formed by three businesses in Essex, where Strutt & Parker managed to drastically reduce power and machinery costs, Matt was named *Farmer's Weekly* Farm Manager of the Year in 2008.

Back at his family home of Grange Farm in Kent, Matt's father, David, was struggling with falling margins. Matt saw an opportunity to replicate the success story of Gilston in Kent, so armed with the experience of achieving efficiencies through joint ventures, he headed home. Overseen by Strutt & Parker's Will Gemmill, the Solleys' 800-acre farm joined forces with neighbouring Northbourne Farming Partnership's 1,700 acres. Together they formed a new contracting business, JS Crop Management.

'It's a fantastic success story,' says Will. 'Both parties were trying to expand, but because they were a certain size, proportionally it was too tough to take on more land.' The joint venture provided sufficient acreage to achieve economies of scale that now save each farm around £40-50 per acre in production costs. The parent businesses, Grange Farms Limited and Northbourne Farming Partnership, have both maintained their business identities, but the machinery and contract labour is from JS Crop Management, which Matt now runs.

Combining resources enabled the business to invest in a single fleet of superior machinery, with the total acreage justifying the very best in new technology. JS Crop Management uses real time kinematic hardware and software to achieve a high level of precision that serves to reduce overlap, diesel costs and operator fatigue while increasing accuracy and work rate. It also runs combine harvesters with yield-mapping capability, and uses this data to form the foundation for variable-rate fertiliser applications to ensure product is used effectively where it is needed most. 'The inability to move forward with agricultural technology on a smaller acreage was a key to establishing the joint venture,' explains David.

Since the business was set up in 2008, it has been able to gradually increase the acreage by tendering for and winning other contract farming opportunities, moving up the county towards Canterbury and Faversham, and is now looking after 5,600 acres in total. 'We're expanding significantly,' says Matt. 'We're now able to compete in the market and win contracts, but it's not all about size. We pride ourselves on doing a good job. I can't bear things not being done to perfection.' ➔



From left to right: James Hole, the Hon Charles James, Matt Solley and Charlie Ireland



‘Structured expansion is critical for the farm and the income has to stack up for JS Crop Management,’ adds Strutt & Parker’s Charlie Ireland. ‘There’s no point being a busy fool.’ It’s this sense of professionalism that has been key to the success of the business so far. ‘You can’t just have the best machines, you also need the best people to operate them,’ explains Matt. The workforce has been streamlined and he now heads a team of five, with two extra during the summer months. And, having already built up a solid working relationship with Will and Charlie at Gilston Crop Management, Matt has continued to make the most of their advice and support with this new venture. ‘We’ve created a company that’s got fantastic support from above, works well from within, and seems to tick along nicely,’ he says.

At Northbourne Farming Partnership, the new set-up inspired a restructure of labour and a simplification of the entire business, which includes a number of let properties. ‘Previously, the estate was quite complicated in terms of ownership and tenancies,’ explains James Hole of Strutt & Parker’s Canterbury office. Working with his colleague Ralph Crathorne, James brought all aspects of the business into one partnership with one set of accounts, one budget and one bank manager. ‘In this way, we can pull it all into one simple document, which shows at any time where the business is at,’ he explains.

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Since the team took charge of the let property, a series of refurbishments has taken place, resulting in a rent-roll growth of more than 50%. Any work is carried out with a mind to increasing rental growth and the potential to fit renewable energy solutions such as solar panels.

At Northbourne, Charlie advises on agronomy and has helped to increase yields, improve standards and achieve variable cost savings by purchasing inputs through the Strutt & Parker Buying Group. ‘Fundamentally, we’ve made the farm work efficiently,’ he says. ‘Timeliness of operations is critical. By starting early with the right establishment, getting the cultivations right, the crops drilled correctly and the optimum rotation at the right time in terms of months, we have improved the yield significantly, which improves the bottom line.’

He has also introduced specific crop management, where the concentration of inputs is matched to the soil and crop requirements in various mapped zones within a field. ‘Charlie comes in one day a week but we talk every day,’ explains Matt. ‘It’s about having your finger on the pulse. And Charlie is often out walking the fields so he can see for himself exactly what’s going on.’



JS Crop Management uses the latest in smart farming technology to cultivate a range of combinable crops



Charlie also helps to make sure that the farms comply with regulations, particularly at Northbourne, where there is a Higher Level Stewardship Scheme that protects around 200 acres of marshland for wading birds. This holistic approach is important to the estate’s owner. ‘For me, it’s a huge relief and takes away a lot of worry,’ says the Hon Charles James of Northbourne Farming Partnership. ‘Strutt & Parker deals with the environmental issues, energy-saving, and health and safety, and they have professional advisers who are always up to date with the latest developments. I’m not going to turn around one day and find myself being sued because I’ve made a terrible mistake.’ The team provides Charles with a monthly overview of his business, and is available on the phone as and when things crop up. Matt also gets a monthly email from Strutt & Parker’s farm health and safety specialist to help keep him abreast of the latest news and developments.

Matt is keen to stress that professionalism and quality will continue to be the core principles on which JS Crop Management operates. ‘We’re always seeking out new opportunities, but they have to be the right opportunities,’ he says. ‘The most important thing is that every bit of land is farmed at 110%, otherwise it’s not worth it.’

Thanks to this ethos, the company has a strong reputation in the region. ‘The expansion isn’t just down to price,’ explains James. ‘It’s also about the way JS Crop Management farm the land, and the way they do their recording, which is a step above the local competitors. The fact that they do it at a competitive rate is a bonus.’

Charles, who, as one half of the partnership holds a great deal of power over the future of JS Crop Management says that, for him, a prerequisite is to have Strutt & Parker standing behind the company at all times. ‘As the business grows, and we inevitably take on more and more risk, it’s very important that we have solid, professional and hands-on advice at every turn,’ he says. ■

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