

“This drill just does things you don't think a drill can do.”



# The Sky's no limit

## Machinery On Farm Opinion

Farming with the environment in mind is set to become an even greater area of focus for farmers in the coming years. *CPM* visits a farm in Cambs to find out how investing in a new drill has helped boost both crop productivity and environmental protection.

By Charlotte Cunningham

As Tom Martin walks out across a field on a bright, but chilly, February morning in Peterborough, you'd be forgiven for thinking he must be one of the lucky ones with light, sandy soil that's escaped the peril of the persistent rain over the past few months.

Noticing an unexpected lack of sticky mud on our boots, Tom laughs: "We're actually very heavy clay here. We did some testing which showed we've got about 70ft of clay — and that wasn't even reaching the bottom."

As a self-proclaimed 'conservation farmer', Tom credits this ability to walk out on what should be very sodden ground, to

the work he and his father George have put in to regenerating the land over the past 15 years. "This winter has been a good one to test everything we've been working towards," he says. "Like many others, it's been horrendously wet here and we've had several times our usual rainfall.

### Water gets away

"Under our previous system, I don't think I would've been able to walk across this field, but the water just seems to get away that bit better."

So what's changed?

"About 15 years ago, my father dispensed with the plough, and went to a minimum tillage system with a set of discs," explains Tom. "He made great strides and improvements with this change, but since I've been back on the farm, I've been really looking at what the future holds for us, and one thing I've been really forensic about is our costs."

Tom made the decision to target and reduce tillage in a bid to keep a lid on costs, and he believes investing in a Sky Agriculture EasyDrill has helped him do just that.

"For a number of years, I'd been looking into ways to change what we were doing tillage wise," he says. "We had an old disc drill from a different manufacturer which served us very well, but it was at the end of its life and beginning to cost us more, so

it was a perfect time to change what we were doing."

This — timed with the possibility of government support in the form of a 40% grant — kick-started Tom's research into a new piece of kit, which eventually led him to finding the EasyDrill at Agritechnica a few years ago. "Before this, I looked at a number of different options," he says. "On our heavy soils, I knew weight would be an important factor, so I automatically discounted one particular drill that was ultimately 2t heavier than the EasyDrill."

"I went out to Agritechnica, not specifically looking for a drill, but very much in the mindset that it would be something we'd look to purchase over the next couple of years. But I really liked what I saw in the EasyDrill."



Tom Martin first came across the EasyDrill at Agritechnica a few years ago.

## The bigger picture

While the EasyDrill has been part of a bigger strategy to improve soils and farm with the environment in mind, one particular area it has improved is establishment time and costs. "One of the biggest cost-saving benefits is the reduction we've seen in our establishment time. We've gone from about an hour/ha to establish a crop (tillage, spraying, rolling and drilling) to about 17 mins. That has huge repercussions across the cost spectrum, affecting everything from fuel to labour."

Tom's also noticed a saving in terms of placed fertiliser. "For OSR crops, I did make a calculation and I think it worked out at up to a £50/ha saving because we put a companion crop in and reduced fertiliser usage by 40% with direct placement at the same time."

The farm's desire to protect and promote the environment has brought physical benefits too. "We've seen a massive increase in earthworms over the past 15 years. The soil looks, feels and smells so different."



Drilling into the Peterborough sunset with the EasyDrill.

After months of research, Tom eventually purchased a 6m Sky EasyDrill, which is now two years old and has taken reducing cultivations one step further by implementing a no-till system.

The drill itself comprises three hoppers — two main ones and a mini-hopper at the front — and has the ability to drill multiple products at two different depths in the seeding row thanks to the dual distribution system.

The hardened disc which opens the soil runs at just 3.5° to the direction of travel which means less soil disturbance, less



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► power requirement and less weed and volunteer emergence, according to Sky.

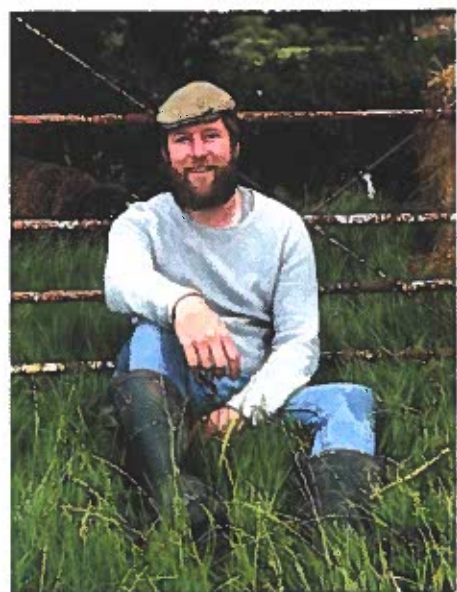
Running alongside the disc and keeping it clean is the carbide tipped monobloc skim coulter.

The carbide face on the skim coulter ensures minimal wear while it cleans the disc and the seed slot in front of the seed tube. The height of the skim coulter in relation to the disc can be altered as the disc wears.

Behind each disc coulter is an angled metal press wheel which itself works in tandem with the one next-door. These press the soil sideways and downwards closing the seed slot and covering the seed.

"We use it a lot for applying fertiliser with OSR or a companion crop. Or, for drilling wheat with a phosphate fertiliser," explains Tom.

But with so many other options on the market, what is it that makes this



Every time you want to do something with this drill, it's like a Frenchman has already thought about it and made it a little bit easier for you, says Tom Martin.

### Operator's outlook

Despite how great the EasyDrill has proven to be to Tom, it's actually main operator, Joe Porteous, who gets to push this drill to its limits.

"Two weeks before Tom bought it, we had another similar drill out on demo. I thought that was good, but then when the EasyDrill arrived it was an absolute game-changer and just made everything ten times easier," he says.

According to Joe, it's both the simplicity and the usability that's made the EasyDrill such a hit for him. "Once you're used to the controls, it's so easy to use. It's incredibly user-friendly and every detail and function has been thought about."

particular bit of kit so great?

"I always say to people that every time you want to do something with this drill, it's like a Frenchman has already thought about it and made it a little bit easier for you," laughs Tom.

The drill is easy to use and has impressed with its ability to perform in a number of situations, he says. "It's sold as a no-till drill, but it really is wonderfully versatile.

### Immaculate field

"A couple of instances spring to mind. One was a friend pointing out that he thought I was going to drill a certain field when in fact, I already had. The field was immaculate with no soil pulled up and no smearing, so it looked like it hadn't been touched with any piece of machinery, let alone a drill.

"Another occasion was where we

He's also noted a significant difference within crop establishment too. "We've been placing DAP fertiliser at the same time as the seed and it's made a huge difference. So much so, that we did a few trials where we turned the fertiliser hopper off, and you could clearly see a contrast in the crops."

Thanks to the three hoppers, Joe says his workload has been dramatically reduced. "It means I can do three jobs at once which cuts down my own workload and reduces the farm's labour cost. It really is a great bit of kit."

decided to sow a winter barley crop into a patch of spring barley volunteers. It was a pretty dense covering — top of the boot kind of height — and my uncle said he didn't think it would work, but it came up beautifully. This drill just does things you don't think a drill can do."

If money was no object, Tom says he'd love to add coulter sensors to his drill, which don't come as standard, but are available as an optional extra. "These sense any kind of blockage and when you're doing contract work and carrying out operations for other people this is really critical to ensure you're not leaving anything in their fields."

For those growers toying with investing, Tom points out that it's important to remember that though it's incredibly versatile, it is a disc drill, so there are some conditions that won't allow it to operate to its full potential. "My other point would be

### Jack of all trades

According to Opico — the UK distributors of Sky Agriculture drills — the EasyDrill is one of very few direct drills that can truly be advocated as a direct, a min-till, a grassland and a cover crop drill.

"One of the reasons for the EasyDrill's success is its versatility," says Joe Redman, Sky Drill product specialist at Opico. "It's proven time after time to work into multiple seedbeds — whether that's into ploughed pressed ground, stubble or even into cover crops, this drill can do it all.

According to Joe, this versatility is credited to the drill's weight transfer system. "On each wing, there's a hydraulic cylinder, and this allows users to manage where the weight of the machine sits — with an allowance of up to 250kg per disc.

"That weight can be placed over the front

rubber wheels — if growers want to drill into cultivated ground — or it can be put over the discs, to give good penetration in hard conditions."

If operators are looking to achieve good slot closure and soil to seed contact, the weight can be distributed back over the rear closing wheels, he adds.

Furthermore on well consolidated ploughing it can also be used in conventional systems. "Its low disturbance disc coulter and press wheel not only ensure minimal weed seed germination, they also keep hp requirement to a minimum," says Joe. "A 6m EasyDrill typically takes 200hp to pull which reduces fuel consumption, tractor weight and therefore damage to the soil structure when drilling in damp conditions."

to keep in mind that the parts are made in France. If you live near a dealer and are used to having parts delivered the next morning, this may not always be the case with the EasyDrill."

While the firm is based in France, Opico are the UK distributor and do keep an array of parts in stock to make the replacement process as smooth as possible for growers, he adds.

### Teething problems

While most new bits of kit experience teething problems, this proved not to be the case for Tom. "For us, the early days were more just about learning what the drill did and how to use it, so we just needed some assistance there.

"But the beauty of Sky is that they're a small enough company still to get direct support. Opico's Sky Drill specialist, Joe Redman, is utterly remarkable and was on hand for whenever I had a question."

With the recent unveiling of the Agriculture Bill, it's evident that farmers are going to have to up their game when it comes to environmental care. But with this particular farm already looking to be



One of the reasons for the EasyDrill's success is its versatility, says Joe Redman, Sky Drills specialist at Opico.

### Farm facts

- Village Farm, Haddon, Peterborough
- **Crops:** Wheat, barley, oats, beans and OSR.
- **Mainline tractors:** 2x John Deere tractors (150hp and 195hp)
- **Cultivations:** 36m Knight trailed sprayer, John Deere combine.
- **Soil type:** Very heavy clay
- **Staff:** Tom, father George and operator, Joe Porteous.

Placing DAP fertiliser at the same time as the seed has made a huge difference in terms of crop establishment, says operator Joe Porteous.

ahead of the game, what's next for Tom? "I like to think we're relatively progressive, but I don't think any farmer would admit to being ahead of the game," he laughs. "Our focus for the coming years is on trying to consolidate what the future may bring, as well as maintaining a diversified income stream and working hard to protect the environment by being as efficient as possible.

"Going forward, things are going to be tighter and the top performing businesses will be the ones who survive. For us, that's where we're aiming, and hoping, to get to." ■



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