



IN CONVERSATION WITH JON ROOKE



Jon Rooke and his farming family were recently granted a further 15-year Farm Business Tenancy renewal of White Syke Farm, North of York. Pushed to apply by his late grandfather, the holding has undergone a transformation in the past five years to form a significant part of the potato supply chain, where Jon is aiming to enhance the long-term resilience of the holding together with the Church Commissioners for England.

In this edition of our *In Conversation With* series, Principal Asset Manager, Ciara Williams discusses the advantages of a partnership approach to farming, changing industry expectations, the logistics of dealing with large customers and Jon's aspirations for White Syke Farm. "We're in an exceptional period of volatility", he says. "If food security is high on the agenda the government must support domestic farmers nourishing the country."

You successfully won the tender for White Syke Farm in 2017, and we have just agreed to renew the tenancy for 15 years. What initially attracted you to the farm?

It was actually my late grandfather who first saw the advert. I'm privileged to come from a family of farmers, in a partnership which includes my father and uncle, and we all felt that it was the right step to apply for an additional farm holding to add to two others that we steward. Everything happened over a weekend and before we knew it, our tender had been successful and we were fortunate to secure it.

Whilst we could see the potential of the land, at the forefront of our minds was that White Syke Farm would be a great place for our family. Family was what propelled us, and we've been improving the holding over the five years since we relocated, modernising all types of infrastructure to support potato farming from temperature control systems to new machinery.



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What are your expectations as a tenant of the Church Commissioners? Have they changed since 2017?

When we took White Syke on, it was a little unloved. We took that as an indication that the landlord might be hands-off in their approach, but as we introduced a new management style and began improving the land, we were surprised by the support that the Church Commissioners showed and the encouragement we were given.

Savills and the Church Commissioners have been brilliant in terms of providing guidance. What we need now is patience. Judging markets has never been more important than now in an exceptional period of volatility. We're constantly assessing risk, and while we want to become more sustainable in our practices over time, it is challenging to experiment when financial viability is an issue.

You mentioned that your farm holdings are managed as a partnership. What are your roles on the farm as a family, and as a business?

All of our land is farmed together as one single family farming business. When my grandfather passed, it was my father and uncle who took over the day-to-day practical aspects of its management. I wear another hat looking after seed production, creating new potato varieties for a company active between the UK and the Netherlands, and so my role is seasonal. When we're harvesting potatoes, I'm active in the family side of the operation, while after harvest I'm handling the management of the farm.

How do you farm this holding? Could you talk us through your crop rotation?

It's quite complex due to the variation in the soil type across the holding. Next to the A64 the land is reminiscent of quicksand in Scarborough, while closer to the farm it's a little easier to manage as it's predominantly loamy clay. Potatoes are our year one crop, and from there we transition from oats, to wheat, to maize, and back to potatoes, to optimise its productive efficiency. This diverse crop rotation results in improved soils, something which we review and monitor regularly.



There's a lot more we can do. We could incorporate more cover crops and diversify our crop rotation further. Previously we have grown carrots and parsnips, which are required to be overwintered and covered in plastic, but the critical take-away for us here was to introduce a rotation that enabled a movement away from plastic – the sheer damage to the soil and issues with water run-off meant we weren't farming as efficiently as we could.

Are there any expectations on you as a supplier to transition to regenerative farming practices?

Whilst our potato contract is promoting regenerative agricultural practices, with much of the focus on soil health, we've not been asked to make changes yet – but it's certainly the direction of travel. We're open to the prospect, and it is achievable, but we need additional government financial support and commitment to make it happen. Regenerative practices will enable us to care for our soils more carefully, while maintaining the same margins as we have before, we just need support that extends beyond grants for cover crops.

To some extent we're already in an adoption phase. We're going to start bringing muck and digestate back onto the farm, and the support and investment we've had from the Church Commissioners to upgrade drainage on the farm will give us the confidence to grow more winter crops. Having a landlord who is encouraging us is definitely helping.

"We're quite privileged to have rare birds on site, and relationships with local wildlife and birdwatching groups who are keen to document them."

Is the adoption of new technologies following that regenerative transition?

If we can avoid using a plough we will, but as it stands it's the most effective way to rid the land of weeds without herbicides for the fields being established with potato crop. This reduction of herbicide has also improved the biodiversity on the farm too. We need to be sustainable and more profitable, just like any farm, which makes it a transition that has to be considered carefully. Experimental techniques might jeopardise the sustainability and viability of the farming business at large but we continue to be open to the idea of trialling them out.

Precision technologies will improve. While they have not changed a lot over the last decade, and we don't need ultra-accuracy for what we do, we are now using tractors that are automatically programmed with GPS, under certain parameters to support fuel and carbon efficiency. We also use precision application methods to limit spray use on the land.

It's exciting what the future holds.

Decarbonisation weighs heavily on the minds of farmers across our portfolio. Are you undertaking carbon audits on White Syke Farm?

We don't at the moment, but as a business we've committed to doing this as part of our tenancy renewal on the farm. It's not something we've done before, either, and there's some confusion over who to select to do it to ensure we meet the requirements of the Church Commissioners as well as fulfilling the requests that form part of our supply contracts.

We are working with the Church Commissioners to ensure that we chose a credible carbon

auditor so that we can work together to minimise emissions on the farm and to make valuable environmental improvements.

Looking to government support, do you receive any funding to support your transition to regenerative farming?

As it stands, our drainage enhancements are being paid by the Church Commissioners for England – which has been crucial to the financial viability of the holding. Now, we're looking to tap into government funding to secure the farm's long-term prosperity, particularly for a reservoir as water availability is critical to the resilience of the farm. It hasn't been the most straightforward experience.

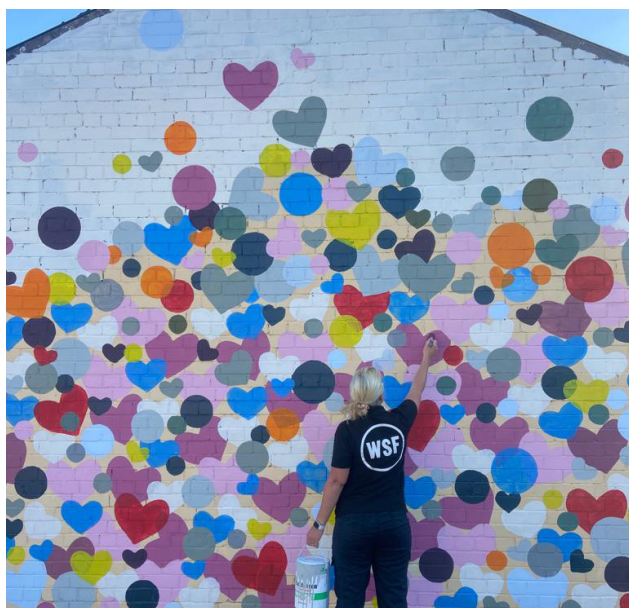
In the short term, we're working towards the second phase of grant application as without the improvements to water and drainage we probably wouldn't have looked to renew our tenancy.

Funding needs to be accessible, and if food security is high on the agenda the government must support domestic farmers nourishing the country.

On the topic of support, do you have close connections to the local community?

We're quite privileged to have rare birds on site, and relationships with local wildlife and birdwatching groups who are keen to document them. We also have a relationship with the community as a farm and as a wedding venue, holding workshops on-site supporting local independent businesses.

My wife Charlotte is the brains behind our diversification on the farm, and she currently has events lined up including craft workshops; community seasonal events on the farm



for the surrounding villages and she is in conversations with neighbours to use nearby woodland for outdoor education on the farm.

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Do you see room for further diversification?

A few years ago we decided to create a wedding venue on-site repurposing traditional buildings that were not required for the agricultural side of the business. There are host of benefits, but most essential to us was a diversification of revenue. It's been a necessity given the challenges with the soil variety and the risks inherent in farming.

Of course, we hope to adjust that balance going forward, but we'll always stay agile and entrepreneurial. Farmers always are.

What are your aspirations for the next five years?

We face the stark reality that the costs of inputs are increasing. This is limiting the decision-making we can do at this time, but in a period of extreme uncertainty our primary goal is to keep farming – profitably and sustainably.

In the next five years, we want the farming business to be more resilient and are delighted that the Church Commissioners is supporting that. We want to diversify and be ahead of the curve.

What will the future of farming look like over the next two decades?

We face monumental challenges in the face of climate change, and shifting weather patterns put pressure on our business model. It's very different now; an all-or-nothing from a climate perspective, and there is nothing gradual in terms of rainfall or droughts. Uncertainties are limiting the decision-making we can do at this time. This will mean more communication between producers, contractors, landowners and supermarkets. This has to happen for the supply chain to remain smooth.

We'll also have to be innovative as a sector. I'm seeing new approaches to crop management in the Netherlands and internationally and trying to translate this into practices we can use here. There is always something we can improve, and other farms will be aware of the need to make marginal gains in the face of change.