



IN CONVERSATION WITH THE ALDERSLADES



In the fifth instalment of our **In Conversation With** series, Farmland Asset Managers, Guy Webb and Cameron McKillop visit Peter and Yvonne Alderslade and their daughter, Zoe, at Mundles Farm, on the Commissioners' Tyneside Estate. They discuss gender diversity in farming, the cultivation switch to direct drilling and the improvements this has made to the soil health, and the challenges the family face farming in the urban fringe.

Could you give us an overview of the farm?

Peter: The main farm at Mundles Lane is an Agricultural Holding of around 134 acres, which alongside some Farm Business Tenancies (FBTs) takes our total acreage to 300 acres. It's virtually all arable, with about 50 acres of grass. I also do a little bit of contract farming for neighbouring farmers.

In terms of rotation, we drill barley, followed by oil-seed rape, two wheats, then winter beans or spring oats. We're trying to extend the rotation away from oil-seed rape every three or four years due to weeds and to improve the biodiversity of the soil. We are aiming to reach a rotation of eight crops. Alongside this we incorporate cover crops with our spring cropping and ensure soil is left bare for the minimum amount of time. We've already seen an improvement in our soil health since we started doing this.

Zoe: We're also diversifying and now have 15 stables in the livery yard, which is something that I'm personally responsible for. We recognise the importance of diversified income streams alongside traditional agriculture and there's strong demand in the local area.

Is Zoe fully integrated into the farming business?

Peter: This is something we discussed as a family and decided that it was important for Zoe to gain experience elsewhere to bring some new ideas and perspective to our farm.

Zoe: I went to New Zealand for a year in 2019, working for a grass contractor with six foragers. On my first day, my manager asked if I'd been on mowers before, and I had to tell him I only had 50 acres back home. I was on a triple set of mowers and ended up cutting 3,500 acres in six months, so it was quite the experience to learn from. After that, I came back and worked for a contractor in Northallerton, and a year later, my partner and I set up a tanking business spreading digestate on farms throughout the north-east.

Off the back of the tanking business, we won a tenancy for a 30-acre grass farm on Raby Estates in Durham. My partner and I had been trying to get our own farm outside of the urban fringe for a long time, but it's difficult for new entrants as they look for people with experience as part of the tendering process. Luckily, we'd already made an impression on them because of what we'd been doing with the tankers, and the interview process was tailored to us being new entrants. We believe that this new opportunity will allow us to gain more experience with cropping and harvesting machines before I hopefully return to the family farm within the next year or so.

"The children loved seeing the machinery and understanding where their food comes from. We're often involved in this kind of engagement with the local community."

Do you think gender diversity within farming is improving?

Zoe: Slowly. When I first started at 17 years old, there were only three young women working on a farm within a 50-mile radius. But now, I'd say half of the Young Farmers in Durham are women which shows that the industry is gradually changing.

I remember there was a farm worker I dropped a tanker off for. As I was setting the pipes up, I overheard him talking on the phone, and he said, 'A lass has just dropped this tanker off, so I'm assuming the lads are following to help her with the set up'. He was surprised when no one else turned up and was very apologetic about it. Attitudes are changing but it's going to take time.





Is this change taking place as a new generation of farmers is coming through?

Zoe: Yes, I think so. But while rural areas like Weardale and Butsfield are home to generational farming communities where women are becoming more involved in farming businesses, farming on the urban fringe is challenging and the next generation of farmers are choosing more urban jobs, which means there's less new blood entering the profession.

To tackle this, the next generation of farmers within my area have teamed up with East Durham College (Houghall Campus) where we hold all our Young Farmers meetings. There is a handful of local girls there that were brought up on a farm, but most of the girls attending these meetings grew up in towns and are keen to get into the industry for the first time. Some of them have already started landing jobs as a result, which shows the good progress that's being made in this area.

"Education has been a long-standing part of our approach. Years ago, Peter's mum was part of a group called the Women's Farmers' Union. Even back then, she used to visit the local schools teaching people about the farm."

What have you been doing to improve soil health?

Peter: Switching to direct drilling methods has made a massive difference to our soil health. This was inspired by a visit to a farm in the corner of Northumberland about 12 years ago where the crops always looked spectacular. I noticed that the end of the farmer's drill was triangular, which I recognised was a Claydon direct drill.

I discussed this with the farmer, who told me that by direct drilling I would use less fuel and that I wouldn't take a hit on the yield in the first year. I was surprised, but he was right. After the first year of introducing the direct drill, the yields remained the same and we actually saw some increases in certain areas of the farm. Direct drilling has not only benefitted the soil health, but has massively decreased our input costs, while keeping our yields strong. We've also seen biodiversity improvements, including a phenomenal worm count and bird life.

Around this time, I also became a member of farmer-led organisation BASE UK and learnt more about soil improvement through them. This is a fantastic group that allows for important farmer-to-farmer discussions on topics like sustainability and regenerative agriculture, and I couldn't recommend it enough.

Do you test the impact of direct drilling?

Peter: That's something Zoe is looking at. But for me it's just visual. You can tell what the impact has been just by looking at the crops.

Zoe: I carry out soil surveys for organic matter, structure and nutrient levels across the farm. The window to test the soil is October to February, but with February being so wet, the quicker you can get it done, the better. Testing the farm's soil allows us to monitor and record the improvements that direct drilling makes.

How important are other technologies?

Peter: We're certainly starting to incorporate new technologies into some of our farming processes. As an example, our new combine harvester uses GPS, and I didn't realise until I drove it just how much more relaxed you are in a day as a result. Seed rates are also adjusted by GPS, and I've learnt that different types of soil will increase the seed rate.

We also use it to set targets for phosphate and potash. That said, I think GPS is more relevant to the new generation of farmers coming through. It's proved useful for me with soil analysis, but for most things I find it more beneficial to rely on my own knowledge. Having farmed here for 40 years now, these new technologies are doing a lot of things I already know how to do from experience. But I can see it being beneficial to the big estates where they have a turnover of people working the land and more room to experiment with different technologies.

What are some of the challenges you face farming in the urban fringe?

Yvonne: I think one of the biggest problems here is the size of the machines, and the issues it creates when we're trying to get them onto the farm with all the cars on the road. When Zoe's coming into the farm with a tanker, she has to ring me up so that I can come down and check if she's able to get through. There's a man who lives locally who used to be a farmer, and he often comes out to help her too.

Peter: Covid was also a massive issue with people taking walks all over the farm. After Covid we had a pathway the width of the room across the farm and it's now marked on Ordnance Survey, but it's not a 'public footpath'.

I don't mind people walking on it. As long as they respect me, I respect them. But unfortunately, some of them don't.

Zoe: Dog walkers are a major problem with people thinking that they can go anywhere. Most of the time it is more about education as they don't realise the importance of keeping to footpaths.

You mentioned the local ex-farmer who helps you get the machines in. Is there a strong community around here that supports your work?

Peter: Definitely. As an example, I got a phone call last week from the local nursery looking for us to bring a tractor down to show the children, and when I asked if they wanted an old one or a new one, they said both. The children loved seeing the machinery and understanding where their food comes from. We're often involved in this kind of engagement with the local community, which is important when it comes to keeping the next generation interested in farming, particularly in the urban fringe.

Zoe: Facebook has been an important tool in helping us explain what we're doing with the digestate to a wider audience. When we first started spreading it, I reached out to a rural farmer, and he told me to go to the village Facebook group the day before we started spreading to explain its benefits. We were met with about 150 comments welcoming what we

were doing thanks to the sustainable nature of the digestate. Without the Facebook group, it wouldn't have been as easy to get the message across.

Peter: The digestate makes me optimistic about the farm's future because it's helping tremendously with fertiliser costs. It's a huge saving for us. It takes in food waste from South Tyneside, which is obscene when you see the scale of it. You're feeding the soil with organic matter that's going back into the food chain. It also provides Zoe with the chance to showcase her experience with the tanker business, which is fantastic.

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Do you try to educate people about issues like food waste?

Yvonne: Education has been a long-standing part of our approach. Years ago, Peter's mum was part of a group called the Women's Farmers' Union. Even back then, she used to visit the local schools teaching people about the farm.

Peter: She visited a school near here, and about six months later, while I was combining on the field, somebody came by and asked if it was for his Weetabix, because somebody at his school had told him that was what it was for. That was my mum.

Zoe: This kind of educational work is something we're looking to continue. I'm very keen to build on the response we have had on Facebook, and I'm proud to say it is working. People now know a lot more about the great work we are doing at Mundles Lane.

In your view, does the future look bright for family-owned farms like Mundles Lane?

Peter: I am optimistic about our future. We just need to increase our scale. With the price of machines these days, you have to spread your costs over a bigger area for it to be viable. Zoe is ambitious and looking to grow the farming business, having already brought in new practices and contacts in the agricultural industry and with the new tenancy she's secured at Raby Estates, which was a product of her great work with the digestate business. I'm more than confident that the farm will be in good hands with her.