



# IN CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD CASTLE



For over 70 years, several farms on the Church Commissioners' Rochester Estate have been under the custodianship of the Castle family. Richard Castle, the third generation to farm on the Estate, brings with him an entrepreneurial spirit and inventive streak that is shared with two generations before him.



Having presided over a growing arable farming business intermixing land where he is both a tenant and owner, Richard's eye is on economies of scale and cost-sharing as he looks for greater efficiencies.

"Collaboration", in Richard's view, "is the natural way forward to streamline costs". In the third instalment of our *In Conversation With* series, we explore Richard's relationships with local landowners, RSPB and Natural England in the pursuit to preserve and enhance natural marshes, while running a successful business that is underpinned by a variegated take on conservation agriculture.

### **How did you get into farming?**

My grandfather arrived at the Rochester Estate after the Second World War, taking on several tenancies with the Church Commissioners, including Burneys & Nord Farms, Manor Farm and later Mackays Court Farm. The size of our holdings grew under my grandfather's management and in the 1950s my father took on the farming mantle.

I've been farming on the Rochester Estate for 30 years. After college I travelled and worked on farms abroad, but I always knew I wanted to farm and thought it would be a missed opportunity not to do this on the Rochester Estate.

### **You've always had an entrepreneurial farming spirit. Where does that ethos come from, and has it been passed down through the family generations?**

My father was by his very nature entrepreneurial. He knew to think long-term about the area he farmed and its people. In the 1970s he built reservoirs and underground irrigation before others were really thinking about it – an area many wish to invest in today. He also introduced new crops to the rotation, such as broccoli, that were scarcely on the radar of the wider farming community at the time, with the help of our farm manager who has been with us now for 48 years.

We enjoy experimenting with new equipment and looking for ways to optimise yields. We like to think we are carrying out that ethos my father passed on of constant evaluation of commonly held practices.

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### **As a longstanding tenant on the Church Commissioners' Rochester Estate, how does the Church Commissioners' land fit into your wider farming business?**

Across our business we have a mixture of land we own and rent, but we run it as a single unit. It makes sense to achieve economies of scale in cropping and irrigation to increase farming efficiency, especially when in most cases the arable land we farm is mostly interlinked.

### **You mentioned your farm manager who has been with you for nearly 50 years. Who else is employed in the farming business?**

20-odd years ago there were 15 of us. Now there is only me, the farm manager and one other undertaking the same role. This is only possible with improvements in technology and farming efficiency. We are also establishing a joint venture with another local farmer to support the cereal enterprise through labour and machinery sharing.

Collaboration with the wider farming community feels like the natural way forward to streamline costs. We have a lot of expensive equipment on-site that could be more efficiently used.

The principal of cost-sharing to spread the load is even more important in the current climate, where the price of inputs necessitate a rationalisation of operational expenditure.

### **You have a particular interest in conservation and have focused a lot on marshland. Could you run through what this looks like in practice?**

A passion for protecting and enhancing the marshes across the farm is what launched us into the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme. In many ways it's the most enjoyable part of the farming business because we receive occasional grants to carry on the good work which we have always done.



We have carried out numerous improvements over the last decade, creating the right environment for new breeding habitats through flooding, creating scrapes, arable reversion and sensitive grassland management. This has seen substantial increases in the number of ground nesting birds making an appearance across the farm, including the Lapwing. This work is something that we're progressing onto the Church Commissioners' ground as there's still more we can do, especially in collaboration with the Church Commissioners and Natural England on the Medway Estuary & Marshes SSSI.

Funding from schemes should follow those who are delivering results for the wider environment. We're in between the Thames and the Medway, two huge estuaries. This is the right location to take control of land and water management, which provides some very exciting opportunities.

**How does livestock play a part on the farm and do you think that mixed farming with livestock will become more important in the future?**

I think for certain areas of the country it will be.

For biodiversity, mixed grazing is always a good thing, but some holdings are more suitable than others. We are fortunate that across the Rochester Estate we currently have cattle and ewes grazing, with varying numbers depending on the amount of grass we have and who we're dealing with. On the marshes we purposely keep stocking densities low to encourage biodiversity.

**On the arable side, do you carry out soil surveys to assess its composition and structure?**

We carry out soil surveys every year or two, which involves an assessment of both organic matter and nutrients. It's essential. Without a good quality soil, you cannot expect healthy crops and high yields. We're also looking at undertaking a carbon audit to review our use of fertilisers, other inputs and our practices. I can't see why you wouldn't be doing it when profitability and conservation agriculture are one and the same.

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### Should food production and conservation agriculture align?

It's worth remembering that these two principles have always worked hand-in-hand. For the land we cultivate to remain healthy in the long-term, we'll have to ensure that food is produced in a way that sustains and nurtures good quality soil. We're prioritising practical changes first, such as improving the drainage and the introduction of nectar mixes around the farm to increase biodiversity.

### On the topic of collaboration, your joint venture with another local farmer and your ongoing dialogue with the Church Commissioners are two examples. Are there others?

We're working closely with the RSPB to build the infrastructure that will be used to further help with flooding the marshes, extending the breeding season for birds. I might add that Natural England and the Environment Agency are visiting the marshes on Burneys & Nord Farm and my own land to consider a more holistic approach to their management, recognising that we're restoring marshes that were once drained for food production many years ago.

I'm also very keen on landscape scale improvement and incorporating the Church Commissioners' land in this.

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### Looking to wider economic trends and the cost of living crisis, does renewable energy generation feature anywhere on your farms?

We have 60 acres of solar power on some of the land we own. It's a haven for wildlife; quiet, undisturbed, and integral to the farm. I'd totally disagree with the contention that they disrupt wildlife, having seen the benefits to insects and native bird species first hand. As solar panels continue to become more economically viable, we'll look to install farm rooftop solar where it makes sense.

### How has your relationship with the Church Commissioners changed over your tenancy?

I've had brilliant communication with the Church Commissioners. Showing an interest in what we do



and seeing the Church Commissioners' team face-to-face is really important to our farming business, and when we need support we know where to go for help.

An active landlord is a good thing. I'd encourage it, particularly on project work. For example, a lot of our hedgerows died in the past as they were Elm and subject to Dutch Elm disease. We'd be interested in replanting and we are already engaged with the Church Commissioners on this, which will help see further biodiversity improvements across our farm.

### Where do you see the next generation fitting in to your farming business?

Succession is a funny thing, but I hope we can carry on the legacy for future generations. Either way, it's going to be an interesting few years where UK farming will need to grasp new opportunities as they arise.

