

# J.W. GRANT — EVOLVING TO MEET THE FUTURE

by Richard Crowhurst

It was 1979 when **Mr Ted Grant** decided to improve the returns on his farm's cereal crops by manufacturing dry pet foods. Today **Fold Hill Foods Ltd** is one of the largest suppliers of retailer own branded dry pet food in the country. It is still a family business and the farming business of **J. W Grant Co** remains very important to the Grant family. Managing Director **James Grant** is the third generation to take the helm, but his father is still closely involved in the business.

The company farms over 5,000 acres and employs 46 people across Lincolnshire, with land at Bourne in the south, and Spilsby and Wainfleet in the north. J. W. Grant Co grows almost 1,000 acres of brassicas including Dutch white cabbage, spring greens, broccoli, Savoy cabbage, cauliflower and mini cauliflower together with onions, vining peas and potatoes. An associated company, **J.E.G. Farms Ltd**, looks after the outlying farms and the bulk of the arable area, together with further potatoes, peas and sugar beet, as well as carrots for the processing trade.

This diverse operation is coordinated by Senior Farms Manager, **Gary White**, from the main unit at Old Leake, near Boston – a location that has given the business a number of advantages. Unusually for the Boston area, the farm has excellent irrigation facilities. "Traditionally these areas have been saline," explains Gary. "We've been very fortunate that

the drainage network is very extensive." A substantial drain runs along the top of the farm, filling a twenty year old reservoir. In turn, this feeds a pressurised main which runs through the heart of the farm, with final irrigation mostly applied by 72 metre booms. Soil type also plays its part and, here again, the farms are lucky. Grade 1 and 2 silts at Old Leake give way to "skirty" fen and sandy loam at Spilsby, with peat at Bourne. Fold Hill itself sits on a patch of 'toft land'. "That's the top grade silt," adds Gary. "It is just a little bit higher land that seems to have had the better silt when it formed."

This combination of soil type and water availability allows most of the spring cabbage to be drilled, rather than transplanted, helping to reduce the cost of production. In fact, the business's priority is to consolidate "what we're doing and be better and more efficient." The equipment on the farms is utilised as efficiently as possible. The farm harvests the



Gary White, Farm Manager, in front of some of the 1,000 tonnes of onion storage.

peas using its own pair of viners, runs two lorries, "which are kept busy" and operates four 24m self-propelled sprayers. Last year the farm invested in a new **Dewulf** self-propelled potato harvester. "At the time this was the only one offering the option of a bunker, without going to a four-row machine," says Gary White. The machine is kept busy for much of the year, starting with the onion harvest in August before progressing to potatoes and finishing with carrots in December.

The carrots are grown for processing, one outlet that many growers have abandoned over the last ten years due to poor economic returns. "We're quite fortunate," says Gary. "We grow them on a very peaty soil type at Bourne, which is located right next to the freezing plant".

The farm values its staff and efficient labour use is another cornerstone of the business. Gary is ably assisted by a strong team: manager **David Fuller** looks after the arable side of the business while unit managers **Keith Sharpe** and **Peter Orrey** divide responsibility for the vegetables and onions between them. A twelve month contract to supply white cabbage utilises labour throughout the year. The team behind the vegetable harvest commence cutting cauliflowers in June, moving on to harvesting and then trimming the cabbages. This keeps them occupied for the whole year. "We still have seasonal staff for the potato harvesting," says Gary. "And we bring in extra staff for mini cauliflower harvesting and transplanting vegetable crops." Many of the brassicas are grown for, and harvested by a major local packer for retail outlets, whilst the farm's onion and potato grading lines take up any remaining slack in staff utilisation.

The farm tightly controls all levels of production and combines the best elements of co-operation and independence. The attention to detail extends to the production of its own transplants under two acres of fully equipped glass. The brassica transplants are seeded locally, and then moved to the farm after a day or so. Good relationships have been built



One of the farms extensive glasshouses.

with other suppliers and Gary is full of praise for their potato seed supplier, describing them as "really accommodating." As well as Maris Piper for pre-packing and the bag trade, this year some Estima is being grown. The farm also grows Charlotte salad potatoes for a major retailer. They have also been looking at using ethylene to induce multi-sprouting in the seed, and this will be used on some of the potato crops again this year.

The farm works closely with all its customers, many of whom are local. The burgeoning mini cauliflower enterprise is one prime example. The heads are rig harvested, then packed on site in a dedicated facility, including cold storage and modern hand-washing facilities, before being transferred to a nearby packhouse, where they are labelled and despatched to major retailers.

The winter cabbage is stored for up to nine months after cutting. Once taken out of store, it is trimmed and carefully graded to size to meet each

customer's requirements. Food companies producing coleslaw are the main outlets. Nothing is wasted and the undersize heads are netted for the wholesale trade. The grading line typically handles between 60 and 70 tonnes of product a week, but there is plenty of spare capacity for busy periods.

The farm is proud of its environmental credentials, witnessed by the plethora of assurance certificates which decorate the office. Gary concedes that these schemes "create a lot of work," but points out that it "does ensure that the products are safe for the consumer at the end of the day." Last summer J. W. Grant was awarded the **LEAF Marque**, something that was driven primarily by the mini cauliflower business. "We were members of LEAF for two or three years," says Gary. "I think (the Marque) helped us focus on the issues that LEAF is about." Cross-compliance is another important influence on the environmental impact of the farm's activities and more



The glasshouses are used for raising transplants and chitting potatoes.

margins around crops have been good for wildlife. A survey recorded over 120 species of animal on the estate, including water voles, roe deer and nesting marsh harriers, together with visiting ospreys and kites.

The farm continues to look for ways it can reduce its impact on the environment. Both Gary and David are BASIS qualified and both are enrolled on the BASIS Soil and Water Course this spring. A bio-bed is being installed to cope with sprayer washings, although Gary comments that it has "been a long while coming to the final stages because the Environment Agency were a long time approving the planned design". Not content to rest on their laurels, the farm is working closely with **Syngenta's Tom Robinson** to reduce overall spray applications using twin-cap application technology. They have also installed magnets on the water supply used for spraying to change the pH and ion charge in the water. In turn

this reduces the calcium in the water and improves carrying characteristics with promising results.

Crop protection advice comes from three outside agronomists, one of whom is responsible for the vegetable crops. Gary tries to join him to walk fields at least once a week and is still very 'hands-on' when it comes to making decisions about pest and disease control.

Never afraid to introduce new techniques, or move away from less profitable areas, the farm was at the forefront of introducing modules with ADAS in the early 1980's. Formerly important crops, such as spinach, daffodils and red beet have all been abandoned for economic reasons.

"The farm keeps trying to forge ahead with new ideas," says Gary. With this open attitude towards a constantly changing industry the business is ready to evolve to cope with whatever the future is likely to throw at it.



The cabbage peeling line, capable of handling more than 70 tonnes a week.

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