Controlled Traffic Farming at West Mains of Kinblethmont

West Mains of Kinblethmont, managed by Robert Ramsay in partnership with his family, covers 750 hectares and grows winter wheat, spring and winter barley, oilseed rape and both ware and seed potatoes.

After using min till (minimum tillage) techniques and linking this with yield mapping, Robert identified that even light trafficking was having a measurable impact on crop yields. Robert saw controlled traffic farming (CTF) as a way to protect farm soils and improve yields if it worked for his farming system.

This case study looks at the idea behind controlled traffic farming, explains some of the pros and cons and looks at how Robert moved towards controlled traffic farming and some of the benefits seen at West Mains of Kinblethmont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Robert Ramsay</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>West Mains of Kinblethmont</td>
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<tr>
<td>Locality</td>
<td>Angus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farm type</td>
<td>Arable</td>
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<td>Size</td>
<td>750 ha</td>
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How might climate change affect Kinblethmont?

Climate change is predicted to alter our ‘normal’ weather patterns. Robert said “Currently the main issue for us is rainfall. We are getting very dry and/or very wet summer conditions – this is especially an issue on the lighter land, however on the heavier land the winter rainfall doesn’t always get away. Flash flooding events can be a problem for us, especially as we are on a floodplain.”

Following the switch to controlled traffic farming, Robert has found that both the water holding capacity and the speed of water percolation has improved. Protecting and improving farm soils should go some way towards reducing the risk of yield losses compounded by unpredictable weather events.
West Mains of Kinblethmont

What is Controlled Traffic Farming?

Using set tracks identified by GPS, controlled traffic farming keeps vehicles in the same pre-set areas of the field. This keeps machinery and trafficking off the majority of the ground, protecting farm soils from compaction and damage.

The move towards heavier farm machinery has increased the risk of damage to soil structure; it can be hard to keep tyre pressures low enough avoid compaction getting deep into the soil profile, compressing soil pore spaces and causing issues for the growing crop. This is especially an issue on wet soils.

Controlled traffic farming is a way of minimising trafficking, and reducing associated yield penalties due to poor root penetration, reduced water holding capacity and restricted nutrient access within compacted ground.

CTF at West Mains of Kinblethmont

Robert saw first hand the negative impact routine trafficking had on soil structure and the affect this had on crop yields.

Robert said “We moved gradually across to controlled traffic farming; we wouldn’t have wanted to go straight to into it. First we had to prove there was merit in it via min till and yield mapping work. Through ploughing and drilling separately, versus ploughing and drilling at the same time, then comparing yield data from these different treatments within the same field, it helped us to quickly build confidence in the system and give it a go. Monitoring was key to help inform our decision. When we investigated controlled traffic farming we found we could get most of the benefits we were looking for without too much of a change to existing machinery”.

Where crops are sown in the controlled traffic line there is a marked difference in plant performance, both above and below ground, allowing for better root structure and development (see photo).

At Kinblethmont, the wider track for the harvester is on a 9m base whereas drilling is done on a 6m base. The Baler has to go where the straw is so naturally follows the CTF line.

Aside from added yield benefits, Robert has estimated that the move to CTF has saved around 40% of fuel and time when establishing a crop compared to the old plough and till system.

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