

Parting shot

We all need a helping hand



Philip Bradshaw
Fenland farmer

Collaboration has been an important word in agriculture's vocabulary for many years, and rightly so.

However, looking back to my younger days this was not always the case. My family were fiercely independent, and while they supported each other, and would help others in need, they would never seek assistance from a neighbour or friend.

Indeed, the only time I can recall accepting the loan of a machine was when we had a Christmas Eve fire in the potato store, which necessitated the emergency loading out of 500 tons of potatoes as quickly as possible, and we gratefully borrowed our neighbour's Manitou forklift to speed the job up. This was much to the relief of the combined fire services of two counties!

When Jayne and I took on our first tenancy in 1989, we moved a few miles away to our little 82 acre farm, with several other tenant farmer neighbours around us. We had little money and a single tractor and, although I could hire a machine from the family farm, it needed fetching, and frequently was not available when needed.

Our new neighbours, however, were used to mucking in and helping each

other, and we were incredibly grateful for their generosity. The loan of a tractor mounted forklift made handling seed and fertiliser a doddle until we could afford our own loader, and we were happy to reciprocate.

Two years later, we moved to a larger tenanted farm about 15 miles away at Whittlesey. We now had new neighbours, and new land to get used to.

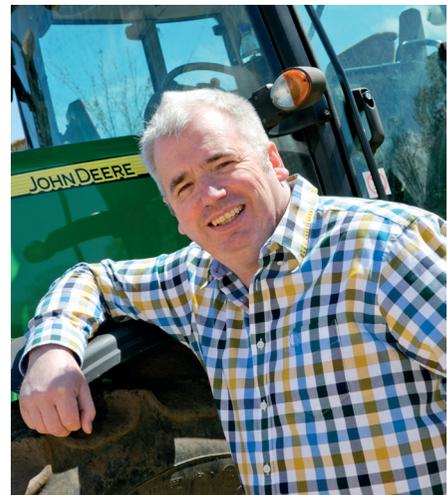
Happily, our new neighbours were equally helpful. On one particularly memorable moment, I got our old single row sugar beet harvester stuck in a particularly wet field.

I drove round to my nearest neighbour, expecting them to be far too busy harvesting potatoes to be able to help, but within minutes the dad was pulling me out with their larger tractor and what appeared to be the national collection of tow chains.

This reciprocal collaborative spirit continues to this day, although significant investment in underdrainage has reduced the frequency of getting stuck.

The principle of collaboration has also evolved for many of us in agriculture over the years. We have had various machinery sharing arrangements, and collaboration between farms has become a routine policy for many within the industry, and indeed, collaboration is also evident with associated industries as well.

Of course, collaboration takes many forms, and another great example is knowledge sharing. It used to take the form of a conversation with another



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farmer at an event, or across a field boundary. When we won some farm competitions and I held some local NFU positions I would cheerfully speak to farmer groups and stakeholder events, happily sharing the secrets of our modest success, and many failures, as we grew our farming business.

In more recent times, on our journey into no tillage cropping, we have been fortunate to gain so much knowledge from our peers, who are on a similar journey. This may take the form of conversations or visits to farmers ahead of me on a 'regenerative agriculture' path, or the more organised knowledge transfer we get from organisations such as the excellent BASE UK – an organisation for farmers and individuals interested in conservation agriculture, www.base-uk.co.uk.

There are many other examples of farmers and country people freely helping each other in so many forms across the country, and it is a huge strength for our industry.

Someone once commented to me that much of this collaboration had a significant downside. There was no logic to someone freely sharing their knowledge with others, or practically helping others, when one could lose a competitive advantage over our peers doing so, and he was probably right.

However, it is this spirit of collaboration and culture of help that keeps us all going through some difficult times, so long may it continue.



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