

# Flexibility In Forage



*Tim West runs an agricultural contracting business which includes the cutting of 8000 acres of grass for silage. His fleet of forage machinery includes two forage wagons which give him flexibility in silage-making operations and enable better quality silage to be made at less cost.*

**B**ased in the small village of Rottingham, TW West Ltd was first established in 1985. Tim explains: "It started with just me and a round baler. Then bale wrappers came out and I bought one of them. So I needed someone to come and work with me and before I knew it, I'd employed someone. And the rest is history."

The business has grown and Mr West now employs a team of 8 full-time workers. Customers are predominantly dairy farmers and so the core services are the usual contracting jobs: silaging, slurry spreading, cultivations, fencing etc.

Mr West attributes his success to putting good service before cost. "If a job needs to be done then we do it right and hopefully we make money as a consequence!"

Cereals are also grown by the business, across 300 acres of rented ground. And through the taking of opportunities, Mr West also has a waste recycling and renewables business at Whitehaven and more

recently has invested in biomass boilers.

The contracting business has two self-propelled forage harvesters: a Krone BiG X 480, and a Claas 850, plus 'a number' of Smyth trailers. "You can't have enough trailers!" says Mr West.

In addition, two Strautmann Giga Vitesse 3601 forage wagons provide an alternative method of cutting and carting grass, for around 40% of the area cut.

Mr West had decided it was time to invest in forage 'boxes' four years ago. He explains: "They were a new concept, and I thought if I didn't try them, then someone else would, and they'd pinch my work!"

"In this area, we cut a lot of silage quite early, from the 10th May; the grass is young and lush and it's a struggle to keep its structure. The self-propelled machines can chop the grass too fine. But the forage boxes give a more consistent chop and cause less damage to the grass, so we quickly converted some customers.

"Some farmers are concerned about speed. It's a misconception that forage boxes are slow, they can have a faster forward speed than the forage harvester."

Mr West is a big advocate of silage additives, and around two-thirds of the silage cut is treated. "We've fitted the forage wagons out with mounted applicators, but the self-propelled machines already have one as part of the unit. It's a bit of a bugbear with me, I think forage box manufacturers are missing a trick."

The two Strautmann forage wagons were new to the business this year. Mr West had gone to replace his two old wagons but found that DW Toppin Ltd in Penrith had taken on the Strautmann franchise instead. So after a demo with a Giga Vitesse 3601, he subsequently bought two of the machines.

"I'm glad we gave them a try. We can put 'anyone' on to drive these boxes, they are so simple to operate."

Unique to Strautmann forage wagons is the Continuous Flow System (CFS) which picks the grass up and spreads it out across the width of a helical rotor. This even distribution assures an even wear of the cutting blades which in turn can then deliver a consistent chop. As a result, the machine requires less power and fuel requirement is estimated to be approximately 10-15% lower compared to other wagons.

Mr West confirms: "The CFS system means we don't need as much power to pull, it also helps to ensure the blades stay sharp, and we get a more

consistent chop length."

Some makes of forage wagon are designed with automatic knife sharpeners. But the blades in the Strautmann wagons are double-sided instead. "Our drivers always carry a spare set of blades, so they've four cutting blades in all. But in fact we can go for days without needing to sharpen a blade. And they are quick and easy to turn around or replace, if needed," says Mr West.

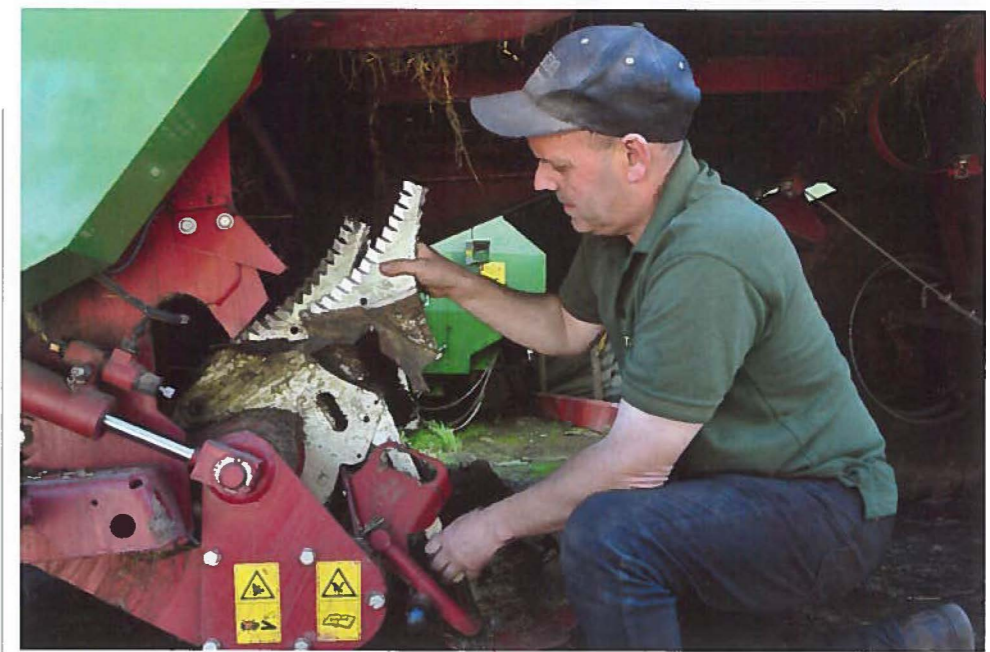
When the cut grass is fed into the forage box it is evenly distributed across the full width rather than channelled down the centre. This enables more grass to be carried in each load as the whole load space inside the wagon is filled to the same density rather than high density down the centre and low density at the sides.

"With our old forage boxes, there was no danger of overfilling because the drivers could easily see the grass heaped into the middle. But the small 'downside' of the Strautmann boxes is that when they get too full, whilst filling on manual, it's easier to spill grass over the sides! This means the driver may have to be more vigilant if filling a full load for a long journey."

Mr West believes silage-making with a forage wagon is more cost-effective – for both him and his customers – than using a self-propelled harvester and trailer combination. "It's the number of man hours that's important, rather than the time taken from start to finish."

He cites the example of a 65 acre farm. "It took one man on a forage wagon 11 hours to bring the grass in. Then there was the one man with a buckrake on the clamp. So that's 22 man hours, and fuel for two machines.

"Compare that to using a self-propelled harvester. It would take seven hours for one man on the forager, plus



*Blades are quick and easy to turn around or replace, if needed.*

three men on tractors and trailers to bring in the grass. Plus there's the man rolling the clamp. So that's five men and 35 man hours, plus fuel and depreciation for five machines.

"So that's 13 more hours of diesel and pay required using the forager and trailer system.

"Not only that, but by using just the one forage wagon, there is more time in-between discharging of loads. In this case, it gave the man on the clamp four more hours to roll the clamp and so enabled a better consolidation to be achieved.

"The silage operation goes more slowly but calmly with less people and less wear and tear of machinery," he explains. "In fact, farmers have commented on how easy it has been to get the job done, and how it's less stressful.

"In one case where both forage wagons were in use, the farmer followed after them with the fertiliser spreader as there was nothing else he needed to do."

Mr West is also of the opinion that forage boxes are not just for cutting fields close to the clamps. He cites another job in which silage leys were 20 miles away. "So I just had one man with one forage box, cutting and carting it back all day.

"The forage boxes actually hold more than a trailer would, so they double up as a fantastic carting vehicle," says Mr West. His field team have reported an average of 2 acres of grass per load with the Giga Vitesse wagons compared to slightly less than an acre in a trailer load. "So there are fewer journeys required with the forage wagon, and less fuel used. The Strautmann boxes have wide tyres, and very good suspension with ABS air brakes. So they are also safer on the road than a trailer would be."

This year Mr West converted more customers into having their silage cuts taken with forage wagons. However he believes his business still needs self-propelled harvesters, as 'each has its place' in silage-making operations. ■