

## Harvest 2022 Summary

The conventional image of harvest is of long days out in the fields, making haste to bring in the ripe crops. This year's prolonged hot weather relieved the strain of 'making hay whilst the sun shone' but brought different pressures.



The earliest crop to be harvested is grass, either cut for hay or directly grazed by cattle or sheep. Grazing cattle across our marshes and meadows unsuitable for other crops, produce the more environmentally sustainable grass-fed beef. This year has been challenging, with many fields parched and brown by the end of June. In some situations, the hay and silage usually reserved for winter fodder, is already feeding livestock. The charity Forage Aid is already providing support and expecting a busy few months ahead. Livestock farmers are already looking at the start of next harvest. They are hoping that winter will be short and next spring will come early.

But for our conventional arable farmers that predominate in the Diocese of Chelmsford, harvest usually starts with combine harvesters rolling into crops of winter-sown barley. Over half the barley crops is destined for malting, mainly for the brewing industry. Some may go into distilling.

Early harvests of winter barley often indicate that the crop has died in the heat rather than ripened but this year the crops "hung on in there" long enough to mature properly. The barley grains from the winter-sown crops were bold with high starch content and less protein. Less protein means lower nitrogen levels in the grain, resulting in a clear, more sparkling beer. So things will be looking up when you next raise a glass. The beer should be good this year.

Oilseed rape is the other early combinable crop. Bright yellow fields of Oilseed rape in spring is a less common sight as farmers are no longer allowed to control the Cabbage Stem Flea Beetle that often wreaks havoc. Those who persevered this year, were rewarded with a crop that ripened well but unusually, it was too dry to process and it was often too hot to put into store! Since processors reject any OSR with moisture levels below 6%, many farmers had to harvest early morning or late at night to try to increase the moisture levels. There was a big rush to harvest before the scorching days of mid-July, when moisture literally evaporated.

The processing plants need a million tonnes to keep them running for the full 12 months and so most of the OSR crop has to be safely stored. Reducing the temperature of the crop to enable safe storage was a challenge in July 2022

Wheat remains the most important crop across the agricultural land of the diocese. There are many varieties of wheat grown: some for animal feed and others for flour milling. The soft wheats produce flour suitable for biscuits and cakes whilst hard wheats with good protein levels produce bread-flour. Wheat matures later than barley so was more affected by the dry weather. But yields have been just above average for many, and the quality has been good with high protein levels. Good protein levels in bread-flour promote a well-risen dough and a lighter texture loaf, so bread quality should be good this year.

But there are a wider range of other crops harvested across Essex. Other combinable crops include peas and beans mainly grown to replace soya in animal feed diets. The peas and some beans are spring sown so they suffered during the dry spring. On the plus side, as legumes, they did not need any expensive nitrogen fertiliser (which quadrupled in price this year).

Some other oilseeds you may have seen are the blue flowers of either linseed or borage. The borage is all safely cut while some linseed is still ripening into September. Linseed stems are very fibrous and need a dry sunny day to harvest well.

Root crops like potatoes, sugar beet and onions are grown in some parts of the diocese. These crops are more specialised to grow and harvest. And as the specialisation means greater costs, they are crops that have justified investment in irrigation for many years not just in the drought years like 2022. So, for farmers with reservoirs these crops will have taken extra work to keep the irrigators on the move and to ensure the water is used efficiently. Even with irrigation, managing crops have not been easy in such high temperatures. And if the ground stays hard, irrigation may be needed to get the crop out of the ground without too much damage. Reservoir levels are low so rain would certainly help

The prolonged hot, dry weather has been a mixed blessing. It has eased the work pressure but has certainly brought a heightened fire risk from hot machinery and accidental fires from roadsides or urban fringes.

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