



Long-gone elms in the eponymous Elm Lane which runs up to the Downs along our southern border with Northseas. Taken c.1968 in the snow

What a waste of money!

John Robinson

In 1970 when I joined my father at Iford I noticed that, while we were walking around together, he spent a lot of time looking up at the tops of trees. When I enquired why, he explained that there was a new tree disease called Dutch Elm Disease (DED) which had been imported in unbarked elm logs from the continent in 1968 and which was now spreading rapidly across the country and which needed very quick treatment if it was to be controlled.

The disease is caused by a fungus *Ceratocystis ulmi* which is spread from tree to tree by bark beetles of the genus *Scolytus*. Control is by the rapid removal of diseased trees before the beetle has a chance to spread the disease to other trees. The first signs of infection are leaves wilting and then turning yellow and then brown which is what my father was on the lookout for. If an aerial infection was caught quickly enough however, the tree could actually be saved by the rapid removal of the affected limb, so speed of detection and treatment was essential.

Initially East Sussex County Council (ESSC) took this matter very seriously and instigated a rigorous control programme, whereas every other council in the country took the view that the disease was unstoppable and decided not to waste any money trying to do what they considered to be impossible. The result of all this was that across the land the countryside became littered with dead mature elm trees which in turn infected young elms and resulted in the virtual elimination of the English elm from the English countryside.

ESSC decided to try and preserve the elm population in an area between Brighton and Eastbourne which, with the sea as a southern barrier and a large urban conurbation at each end, was thought to be an area worth defending. It was soon the only part of the country where mature live elm trees still existed thanks to the foresight and vigilance of the members of the ESSC at the time. As soon as an infected tree was spotted either by their own tree officers or land owners, it was inspected and dealt with quickly by a whole battery of tree surgeons at the County Council's expense. I felt really proud to be living and farming in the only part of the country to be making an effort to save the elm tree. By removing the infected wood as rapidly as possible the spread of infection was being kept under

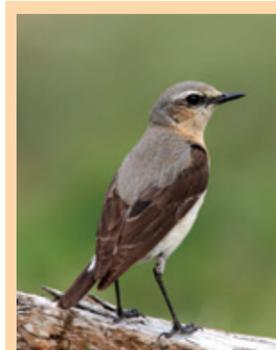
control and – the point to emphasise – the scheme was definitely working.

However, this was something that either had to be tackled 100% on an ongoing basis or best not be started at all (as every other council had decided).

The rot began to set in when the Council passed on the responsibility for DED control to the newly formed South Downs Conservation Board (SDCB) who said that they had little money and who cut the funding from 100% to 50% with the result that a lot of the owners of trees on private land refused to cut them down and the spread of the disease started to pick up. Our funding was cut along with everyone else's and I ended up paying the tree surgeon privately to get infected elm wood removed as soon as possible. Sadly it was too late because the dam had burst and the disease was getting the upper hand.

When the South Downs National Park (SDNP) was formed with its big increase in funding I thought that this would be our saviour. The whole of the control area was in the National Park and what was a National Park for if not for preserving the natural landscape? Not a bit of it. Despite my lobbying we were told that, even though they had a vastly improved budget over the SDCB, they didn't have enough money and it wasn't a priority. Well, it should have been and, although the SDNP is now doing a lot of good works, this will always be a big black mark against their name because they let the disease get out of control and wasted all the money that the ESSC (funded by taxpayers) had spent controlling the disease since 1970.

In my garden we had what was reputedly the largest elm tree in the area. It was bigger even than those in Brighton (where their mature elms are still being actively controlled) and therefore presumably was the largest in the country (because there aren't any others left anywhere else) and possibly, because the English elm only grows in England, the largest English elm tree in the world! We injected it with fungicide every year and were religious about treating aerial infections immediately and for a time I thought that it would survive; but with so much infective and untreated material about it became a losing battle and it eventually died. What a crying shame and what a waste of tax payers' money.



Look out for the Wheatear

An attractive and not uncommon summer visitor to the Downs around us. Look out for the bobbing tail and, as it flies away from you, the white rump from which its name derives – white arse. You can just see a hint of it in this photograph.

Iford Estate News

J & H Robinson Iford Farms Ltd – est. 1895

www.ifordestate.com

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Young Sussex calves on the hill above Swanborough this April

Decisions, decisions!

Ben Taylor, Estate Manager



One of the many management problems with farming is the long lead times associated with the production of both cattle and crops. The decision to plant a particular crop is hampered firstly by the crop rotation, which can be a six-year cycle.

The decision is then taken at this time of year as to which crops to plant in both the coming September and the following spring. These are then harvested the year after and the crop itself might not be sold for a further year. I am therefore trying to decide and predict now what will be the best crop to grow, based on price and rotation – a crop that might not be sold until June 2018!

The same problem applies to the cattle. The bull is put in with the cows in June and we aim to calve at a time when the grass is growing and the fields are dry enough to turn the calves and cows out. If you can't turn them out the whole system very soon falls apart as the barns get filled up with animals. Normally you are fairly safe to calve at the beginning of April, but this year the Brooks are still far too wet to put animals on and pressure on the system is rising!

With the arable side there are a number of measures you can take to try and mitigate the risk of prices falling or changing. Forward selling is the key element of risk management. By doing this you commit to supplying a given crop at a given specification anything up to two

years in advance. Of course, having agreed this, you then have to actually produce the crop, so one has to be careful not to overcommit.

I mention all this because prices today are at levels not seen for ten years. The world has had three record wheat harvests and there is simply too much supply and too little demand. As I write, wheat is worth about £98/t for delivery now, £110 for November and £118 for the following November, while barley will be about £10 less. Given that the cost of producing the crop is about £110 this doesn't leave much by way of profit, and there's always the risk of low yields. By way of illustration, in 2012 I was getting about £230/t, and in 1975 the price was about £100! If wheat had followed the RPI then it should be worth about £300/t today, which illustrates the driving forces within the industry for economies of scale and higher yields through the application of technology and improved plant breeding.

Meanwhile, back on the farm, the spring planting campaign has nearly finished, the barley is all up and, by the time you read this, I hope the peas will be sown and the maize ground ready for sowing. With prices at such a low point some difficult decisions have to be made about how much money to spend protecting the crop from weeds and disease. Spraying is almost always aimed at protection rather than cure and therefore there is an element of insurance about it. You could happily use cheaper chemicals or lower rates, unless a particular pathogen has a good year, or it is wet, at which point you have missed the opportunity to do anything about it and yields suffer. I have always taken the approach that if a job is worth doing it's worth doing properly but when each decision is the difference between profit and loss it can be hard to stick to your principles!

AN INVITATION



“Who were J & H?”

You are invited to a talk about the origins and history of 'J & H Robinson' who have farmed at Iford since 1895. Illustrated with original photographs.

IFORD HALL
Friday 3 June 7.00pm

'Bubbly' and canapés

A commemorative plaque will be unveiled by Lord and Lady Baker.

If you would like to come please RSVP by 25 May to

john@ifordestate.com
or 07785 278892

Another expanding national and international business thriving in one of our converted farm barns.

Imago Photographic



It's always good to see a business succeed when it's taken brave steps to change direction. Damon and Deborah Randall moved down from London to run their ladies' fashion shop in Lewes High Street. After a few years they decided that they would be better off running their business online.

They closed the shop, rented one of our barns and Damon drew on his previous experience in the film industry to photograph their stock and display it online. It worked, but in an unexpected way. His photographs were seen by a big online fashion retailer who asked if they would shoot their range. They did, the client was delighted and now their business is purely fashion photography for a growing number of retailers. With the unusual combination



of Deborah's fashion flair (she's held some serious positions in the industry) and Damon's photographic skills, they have developed their own technique using custom-made mannequins and mainboard models from top London agencies. It makes the clothes look stunning, needs little client input and is highly competitive – and *that* is attracting a lot of attention.

When the call came for Imago to expand their operation, we were able to come up with just the right solution in the form of a newly-extended barn.

Forest School comes to the Spinney

For the past year Pumpkin Patch Nursery School from Brighton has been enjoying the use of the Spinney on Iford Hill for its Forest School Days.



Pumpkin Patch has established its Forest School on the far edge of the Spinney near the Lodge on the hillside. However now that all the trees have been checked as safe and we have cleared out a fair amount of scrap metalwork we are ready to find a primary school which can also take advantage of the woodland site.

You may be aware that we now have planning

permission for change of use for the Lodge to include community use. Marina Robb has found it provides a perfect space for her Forest School staff training days, helped also by its close proximity to the Spinney. Her present project is the establishment of woodland days for children and young people with learning disabilities. Marina has used the lodge for debriefing sessions to support her teams in this challenging project.

A February training day for police at Iford



They were here for a day's training on a range of farming topics and types of rural crime. It was organised by the National Union of Farmers (NFU) and run by Sussex NFU Adviser James Osman who said: "We are pleased that Sussex Police views tackling rural crime as a priority and days like this help officers to understand the issues that farmers face. There are many different types of crime that farmers experience and it was good to explain some of the worst issues we face in Sussex, such as livestock worrying and hare coursing."

This training session – one of several planned – included a quiz and aimed to give the officers an overview of the farming calendar, a rundown on the various types of rural crime and some of the relevant legislation. In turn, the NFU heard how technological advances are helping in the fight against crime. The topics covered included:

- Farming overview, farm incomes, diversification
- Agricultural machinery – function and value; security marking and tracking devices
- Fuel, crop protection and fertilisers
- Livestock and cropping
- Access

- Dog attacks on livestock (livestock worrying)
- Hare coursing (trespassing, chasing and killing brown hares with dogs illegally) and deer poaching
- Farmed environment and green farming schemes

Sussex Police officer for wildlife crime Sergeant Tom Carter said: "It is important for our officers to understand the impact of crime on rural communities and how vulnerable rural businesses are to criminal acts. Crime in rural locations presents very different challenges to what many officers are more used to dealing with, so this was a valuable opportunity to demonstrate to them what to expect. We were able to show them what to look out for on the ground without the constraints of computer presentations in classrooms. We were also able to inform them about new techniques for preventing and investigating rural and wildlife crime, enhancing their skills and knowledge."

Cows graze with their calves in mid April on the high ground above Swanborough. An Iford Estate tractor harrows the ground in readiness for sowing.

In normal circumstances the sight of twenty officers from Sussex Police turning up at Iford Estate would have sent pulses racing. We were ready for them though!

Top: Sgt. Tom Carter and Sussex NFU Adviser James Osman talk to Sussex Police officers on the Downs overlooking Iford.

Left: Ben Taylor flanked by Sgt. Tom Carter and James Osman.



A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY



OPEN FARM SUNDAY 2016
Sunday 5 June

It was a pleasure to welcome so many of you last year. We will be back bigger and better this year so we look forward to seeing you in June!