



A passion for the plough

Still in demand as a top ploughing judge after a lifetime in farming, past British High-Cut Ploughing Champion and four times winner of the All-Wales Championship Douglas Read is happy in retirement with hobbies as diverse and interesting as vintage cars, chess, sketching and medieval military architecture. Tractor caught up with him at his Oxfordshire home.

Above: Shirt-sleeve fashion at Bampton, Oxon, in 1979, with Douglas Read at the wheel of a Fordson Diesel Major with one of the trailing ploughs he has always used – and just look at its glittering condition!

WORDS: Pete Kelly

Back in 1948, £10 was quite a lot of money – so when Douglas Read was promised that amount by his father if he won the ploughing match he was about to enter, coming second simply wasn't an option!

Using a Standard Fordson tractor and a two-furrow Cockshutt plough, he duly took first prize to start his tally of no fewer than 124 gained in a long and distinguished ploughing career. It began with Young Farmers' Club

events at the age of 14 or 15, was curtailed between the mid-50s and early 70s by the sheer pressure of work as a farmer, and then entered a final golden phase during which Douglas, a Senior Director of the Society of Ploughmen and a much-respected ploughing judge to this day, won the vast majority of his awards.

"I just missed the horses," he said. "My father had a Standard Fordson in the early days, and I first drove it when I was 12 or 13 years old. I remember

that I had to be careful not to stall the engine because I wasn't strong enough to restart it on the crank."

Still smart and dapper in his late 70s, Douglas, who lives with his wife Sally in the village of Black Bourton, Oxfordshire, is the perfect gentleman who loves nothing more than to share his love of ploughing with others. Another of his passions is vintage cars, as his immaculate 1933 Riley Monaco sports saloon testifies, and yet another is the game of chess, for



Above: Douglas Read pours just as much perfection into the job no matter what the hobby. Currently the love of his life (after his good wife Sally, of course) is this majestic 1933 Riley Monaco roadster.

Right: "Just a trophy or two that I've brought home over the years..."



which he became a founder member of the Witney Chess Club.

Most of his ploughing success has been in the oat seed furrow, or 'high-cut' style, and in his final competitive years he used a 1959 International 275 and Ransomes RSLD plough. His philosophy for success was always to pay unhurried attention to detail and to have a fundamental sympathy for the object of perfection.

Although Douglas was born and initially bred on the outskirts of Bristol, his father, WS Read, moved to Oxfordshire in 1941 when he bought Knapps Farm, Bampton, a holding of 220 acres of heavy land with a nice farmhouse, six cottages and all tithes redeemed, for an auction price of £4500! How times have changed - in fact Douglas remembers turning down land at £10 an acre in the 1950s!

The family concentrated on arable farming with some beef production, but in 1982 Douglas and his wife, who have two children, decided to sell the Oxfordshire farm and buy a run-down one in Surrey to 'lick into shape'. This they duly did, selling up four years later to finance a self-catering holiday business in the Cotswolds.

His ploughman's poem, reproduced on these pages, was inspired after he took over some old pasture land at White Owl Farm, Bampton, in 1969, and put it under the plough. "Jack Tanner, the oldest man in the village at that time, leaned on the gate and watched

me work," said Douglas. "He told me that he'd been in the area all his life except during the Great War, and had never seen that land ploughed.

"Ploughing turf for the first time in the memory of a man caused me to think of those who had ploughed there in the dim and distant past.

"Good ploughmen are often poetic - they might not put pen to paper, but they have a deep-thinking frame of mind that puts them apart from lesser mortals."

After I had admired the glittering array of cups and other trophies displayed in the Reads' welcoming home, Douglas was almost

dismissive of their importance when I asked him to pose by them, and the modesty was genuine.

When you're a farmer, ploughing is just one of the many chores that have to be carried out every year. It has to be done as quickly and efficiently as possible - so what is it that draws so many old hands and newcomers alike into the world of

Below: In his latter years of competition, Douglas campaigned this fine 1959 International B275 with a Ransomes RSLD plough, and is seen at a local match. Note the horseshoe on the bonnet side and the signwritten name at the front.



Are we there

Douglas Read looks at 1000 years of plough development.



The quality of Douglas Read's 'high-cut' or 'oat seed furrow' work is legendary.

In this highly technological and computerised age, ploughing is still the prime job in cultivating the earth. The basic design of the plough remains largely unchanged since medieval times, the principal components being the beam, mouldboard, share and coulter.

In very early days, oxen were used as draught animals, with up to eight yoked to a single-furrow plough. The beam was usually made of ash, which was found to be more flexible than oak. The mouldboard was made from orchard wood, which polished easily and scoured better than elm. The share and coulter were the only iron components, and in times of war ploughshares really were beaten into weapons.

At that time ploughs were

without wheels and were known as swing ploughs, the depth of work being determined by the height of the hitch point. It was after the Norman Conquest that wheels were fitted, thereby giving a more uniform depth of ploughing.

Mouldboards, which were literally straight boards attached at an angle, were later sheathed in iron to reduce wear, but the quality of the metal at that time meant it did not scour as well as fruit wood.

Village craftsmen made ploughs to suit conditions in the immediate area, but these hand-made implements were crude and quite unable to penetrate deeper than three to four inches.

Over the years, as iron became more readily available and design improved, ploughs became lighter in draught so that horses, being

quicker and less stubborn than the ponderous oxen, gradually replaced them as draught animals.

Over time ploughmen and plough makers strove to modify their ploughs in an attempt to decrease the physical effort for both man and beast. It was found that by twisting the mouldboard, which at the same time caused it to become concave, the soil was inverted rather than just pushed to one side, considerably decreasing the draught and enhancing weed control.

As metal smelting improved, enabling steel to be produced in bulk, small foundries and factories replaced the village blacksmith and wheelwright. In 1834, Ransomes of Ipswich patented a process of chilling the undersides of ploughshares to make them extremely hard and self-sharpening. Before this, if a ploughman left his plough in the field overnight, he would probably remove the share for fear of it being stolen, because it took a long time to get a new one bright and sharp.

Heavy land was often ploughed 'ridge-furrow', an expression used when the plot or rig was started and finished in the same place



Lumbering oxen were the first draught animals used for ploughing.

competition ploughing?

To answer that one, Douglas pulled out a *Farmers Weekly* from 14 years ago, when he was at the top of his form, having been placed first or second in his class at the previous three British National Ploughing Championships.

His view was that many competitors took part in the vintage and 'high-cut' classes to rediscover their feel for the soil.

"Older tractors have no cabs and are low to the ground," he said. "That keeps the ploughman near to his work and allows him to make fine adjustments from the tractor seat. He drives the tractor with one hand and controls the plough with the other."

The way he 'paints' the next part of his explanation could have come only from someone with a lifetime's intimacy with the soil: "Being so close to the implement means he can hear and feel the soil as it flows across the mouldboard."

Modern tractor cabs, he says, isolate the driver from his work – and that's why so many of today's tractor drivers leave their big reversibles at home and are so keen to take part in these traditional classes at the weekend.

Although Douglas Read no longer competes at ploughing matches, the skills honed to perfection over so many years mean that he remains in big demand as a judge, and the invitations had already started to arrive when I visited him just a few weeks ago. One of these was for the Llanwarne Agricultural Society's match at Llanwarne Court, Llanwarne, Hereford, on 8 September.

When the time came to say goodbye and start my journey home to Lincolnshire, I felt that I had barely touched the surface with Douglas, who can look back over such a long lifetime of farming memories, including ploughing, harvesting and threshing. He even remembers driving sheep with 'two wonderful collies' from Filton station along the A38 to his home – and then starting school for the day.

Will he be sharing these with *Tractor* readers in the near future? You bet he will!

yet?

year after year, causing the land to become corrugated, aiding surface drainage. At dry times there would be good growth in the 'furrows', which would remain moist, while in a wet season the 'ridges' were dry.

Ridges and furrows were sometimes ploughed in 'S' shaped plots. This required a narrower headland than normal, as the plough could enter and exit the furrow at an angle to the boundary, and of course an 'S' shaped furrow will drain a greater area than a straight one.

As ploughs became more scientifically designed, ploughmen were able to produce more skilful work, which in turn made for increased yields. Wages were negotiable, and a good ploughman would earn better pay than a lesser man. In fact, with the possible exception of the shepherd, he was the most important workman on the farm, whose opinion was often sought by the farmer. The possibility of better remuneration achieved through one's ability made for a competitive attitude, and that was how the first ploughing matches came about. It followed that at these very local events, ploughmen strove hard to beat their fellows, and this encouraged the incorporation of finer adjustments on their ploughs. It was found that to being able to alter the pitch in certain conditions was an advantage.

If coulter could be angled to undercut on firm ground, a higher crest was produced and more soil was made available for the harrow.

Skim coulter and various attachments were experimented with in an attempt to more thoroughly bury trash and to improve the shape of the furrow. Farmers contributed to this train of thought because it was to their benefit to do so.

As a generalisation, there are three types of plough body.

General purpose, as the name suggests, are multi-use bodies designed to plough at about 6in deep and 10in wide.

Semi-digger ploughs will work to a depth of about 7in and a width of

11in on good friable soil.

High-cut ploughs produce that very artistic and highly specialised style of work that, in ideal conditions, is true perfection. They cut a slice 5½ x 7in, and with a special share set up high-crested furrows that are ideal for immediate sowing or, if left over winter, will weather well.

It is interesting to recall some of the words and measurements that came into use through the symmetry of ploughing in those early days.

A furlong (¼ mile) was the length that a team of horses could pull a plough in reasonable conditions without pausing.

The area of an acre originated as the capacity of one plough in a day and, by the same token, the amount of

land that an ox team was thought able to plough in a year was 120 acres, and this was termed a hide in medieval times.

A rod, or pole, was 5½ yards, the distance a double-handed sower could broadcast seed, and from this came the width of the standard ploughing plot, or 'rig', of 11 yards – once up and back for the sower.

One wonders whether, after 1000 years of plough development, we have got it right at last – or is there yet to come a machine that is truly able to replace the plough? I hope not!

Many attempts have been made, but none so far can match, long-term, the fundamental ability of the share, coulter and mouldboard to prepare the soil for sowing.



Above: International B250 or B275 tractors are ideal for 'high-cut' work, for the driver can just sit back over the diff and control the tractor with one hand, and the trailed plough with the other. This is another fine view of Douglas at work.

P.T.O

What is 'high-cut' ploughing?

The objective of 'high-cut', or 'oat seed furrow' ploughing, as devised many years ago, was to enable grain to be broadcast, or spread, by hand on tightly packed and high-crested ploughing so that, with a single stroke of horse harrows across the furrows, the seed was buried at a uniform depth. It would then grow in drills seven or eight inches apart.

This style of ploughing is so precise that, under ideal conditions, and remembering that the corn was broadcast, the emerging crop could be hoed.

The plough for this type of work has a very long convex mouldboard with a gentle twist, and uses special shares to set up the narrow, high-crested furrow slices. In competition, this plough is set within tolerances of a quarter of an inch. High-cut ploughing is painstakingly slower than other styles as the furrow slices should be kept as intact as possible. However, if performed properly, it dispenses with subsequent cultivation.

The Thoughts of a Ploughman

Sincere are the thoughts of they,
Who plough for the first time since
Their grandfathers' day,
With furrows that are perfect judge who may,
Land that has never borne corn but always ley.

The headland's marked and a split is made
And slice after slice to the crown is laid,
With steel as bright as the armourer's blade,
For these are men of a worthy trade.

Furrows angled always to the same degree,
Straight and matched in superb uniformity,
Feed rooks on insects that only they see,
And from the disturbance mice and voles flee.

Happy these men with time to stare,
As they eat their lunch of homely fare,
In the shelter of a hedge not yet bare,
And talk of plough settings made with care.

Thoughts turn to those who ploughed there before,
Did they also above them see a hawk soar,
Or a fox at dawn the hedgerow tour,
And were they as contented tho' equally poor?

Surely the greatest and most satisfying toil,
The careful inversion of good dark soil,
No heed of travel of many a mile,
Practised by they who to the earth are loyal.

The finished furrows are a joy to be seen,
As from the last to the ridge they lean,
The hue now changed that for years was green,
For all is naked where grass had been.

Now the sun toward distant hills quite low,
Weary but contented ploughmen homeward go,
With pride of skill and justifiably so,
Their work left to be covered by winter snow.

Douglas S Read



JD 'Tin-front'

Our technical editor visits Nick Young Tractor Parts to find out what to look for when considering buying a John Deere 920, 1020 or 1120.



WORDS & PHOTOS: Jerry Thurston