

# INVESTMENT WAS ESSENTIAL

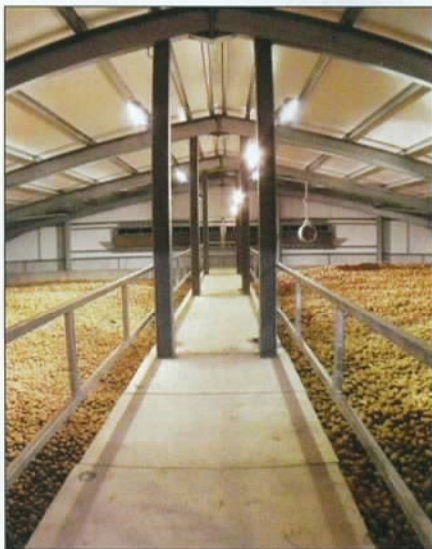
EVERY farming business comes to a crossroads roughly once in 10 years and Michael Bubb's Newport-based holding reached that point not so long ago. Existing potato stores were deemed not fit for purpose and family discussions concluded that by undertaking packing, bagging and producing crops for chipping, the farm was trying to do too much.

Regular readers of POTATO REVIEW may recall Heather Briggs' article in September 2012 which described a major refit. In May this year Mr Bubb outlined the thinking behind the project at a storage forum organised by AHDB Potatoes.

'We needed to choose a path and go down it,' said Mr Bubb. 'If we are not in the top quartile of our customer's suppliers, we are never going to do any good.' As a result, he and his sons, John and Jim, started to approach things differently, and began looking at the possibility of updating their storage facilities.

Mr Bubb took the view that with his sons working for the business, and low interest rates, the investment was a sound business opportunity. 'It can be difficult to make storage totally stack-up, but it is also important to take your customers into account; processors have to keep their factories going 12 months of the year.'

Some of his farming colleagues will have sold all their potato stocks by the end of August but the land on the Bubbs farm is not suitable for such an operation. 'We have a wide range of soil types, we have chosen the varieties we grow to be in with a chance, and our overhead structure is now at the appropriate level for the



job in hand. We have some serious competition from Northern Europe and we ignore it at our peril.'

Having decided to build new stores, he visited a number of different farms, consulted experts at Sutton Bridge and then turned to professionals, top provide a turn-key operation. Although this was expensive, he took the view that ventilation was crucial to keeping quality and minimisation of CIPC and he could see no benefits from compromising and trying to organise design, planning, builder, concrete suppliers and electrical contractors separately.

'There are so many facets to storage you would never think of, such as using a colour to reflect the sunlight which saves us money each year on electricity.' Two brand new units were built, a 250-tonne box store alongside a 2,200-tonne bulk facility. 'I like a few boxes, it gives a lot of flexibility.'

The quality of the potatoes coming out has since been high, with very few isolated incidents of rot which were probably caused by damp trailer loads going into store.

The decision to build a second 2600-tonne store was taken because a grant was made available to the farm and they had the potatoes to fill it as well as customers who were interested.

He says efficient air circulation has helped to reduce the amount of CIPC used and the potatoes can be stored until June. Thick concrete walls help the insulation and temperature control while the second store also has active cooling equipment, computer controlled louvres and coils, and the capacity to change the air every three minutes if required.

Weight loss in the crop at 5% is acceptable, relative humidity is maintained at about 97% and carbon dioxide is also controlled.

## Multiple benefits

'The stores have spread the workload,' he adds. 'When it comes to the autumn, you are your own customer. You don't have to wait for lorries or anyone else, you set up your elevators and load up to 500 tonnes a day.'

'This way of working gives real pleasure; you maximise your growing period and you know you can control when you lift. Getting the potatoes into store in good conditions is a major factor.'

Mr Bubb accepts that only time will tell whether the investment was correct but adds: 'Try doing nothing and see what happens.'

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