The 2005 malting barley crop

The winter barley harvest in England began around the 12th July, at least a week ahead of normal. This was no surprise to anyone, as crops had looked ready for some time, even taking into account the old adage to impatient farmers – "when you think the crop is ripe go on holiday for two weeks!"

By **Alan Rideal**gh, Muntons

Of course this was not true of the country as a whole, but large parts of Southern and Eastern England had enjoyed – endured – a hot dry June. On light soils this resulted in premature ripening and there were fears over both high nitrogen levels and excessively thin corn.

Although some crops had undeniably died on their feet almost certainly based on soil type, most turned out well. This was particularly so of the traditional malting barley regions such as Norfolk and Suffolk where all varieties performed superbly.

In other areas – Lincolnshire, for example, nitrogens were high – often over 1.80% but East Anglia and to some extent Yorkshire, saw a very favourable range of nitrogens between 1.55 and 1.75% (see Table 1).

Pearl has dominated the winter malting barley area for some time now. Its tendency to produce variable nitrogen levels in the grain coupled with a drift downwards in yield has given opportunity to other varieties. I almost said "new" varieties but in fact the variety with the second largest area is Maris Otter which first hit the market in the mid-1960's!

New variety

The next is Fanfare, only a decade or so old largely restricted to Norfolk and parts of Suffolk but watch out for the new variety Flagon. The quantities seen so far are insufficient to be totally sure, but all of the indications are that this variety is a good malting barley. Very importantly it also gives good yields to the farmers. The 2006 crop will include a much higher proportion of Flagon (see Table 2).

The overall area sown to winter barley declined in 2004 and this trend has continued this autumn. Farmers have shown their dissatisfaction with winter malting barley prices by switching to alternatives, including doing nothing. Price is the headline reason, but in truth, cost is also a major factor. Winter malting barley is expensive to grow. Hopefully new high yielding varieties will stem this flow but it is likely that the vast majority of winter malting barley will only be grown on contract, in the same way as Maris Otter is already.

Winter malting barley was for many years a much less significant crop than its spring cousin. The rise and rise of winter barley was almost certainly driven by strong new

Leeds Corn Exchange as it appeared in the 1980s.

Table 1

Nitrogen content % Pearl UK		
2003	2004	2005
1.86	1.85	1.85

Grain size (retained 2.5M) Pearl UK		
2003	2004	2005
89.4	90.5	90

Source: HGCA

Table 2: Market shares (%) of winter barley malting varieties certified in England and Wales

Winter Malting Barley	Final 2004	Provisional 17.10.05
Full – Pearl	49	39
Full – Fanfare	2	2
Provision – Flagon	1	5
Maris Otter	3	4
Regina	1	0
TOTAL	55	49

Source: NIAB

Table 3: 2005 Crop supply & demand estimate – UK

	Area (ha)	Yield t/ha	Total Production	Malting Varieties	Total Malting	Suitability	Available Supply	Demand	Surplus/(Deficit)
England & Wales									
Winter	318,000	6.4	2,035,200	65%	1,322,880	45%	595,296	-540,000	55,296
Spring	275,000	5.7	1,567,500	80%	1,254,000	75%	940,500	-465,000	475,500
Scotland									
Winter	60,000	6.2	372,000	75%	279,000	15%	41,850	-40,000	1,850
Spring	250,000	5.3	1,325,000	75%	993,750	85%	844,688	-660,000	184,688
Total Supply	903,000	5.9	5,299,700	73%	3,849,630	63%	2,422,334	-1,705,000	717,334
Total Winter	378,000	6.4	2,407,200	67%	1,601,880	40%	637,146	-580,000	57,146
Total Spring	525,000	5.5	2,892,500	78%	2,247,750	79%	1,785,188	-1,125,000	660,188

Source: MAGB

Table 4

Nitrogen content % Optic (UK)

2003	2004	2005
1.64	1.66	1.73

Grain size (retained 2.5m) Optic (UK)

2003	2004	2005
89.2	93.5	89.68

Source: HGCA

varieties appearing, chasing the ability to meet Intervention Standards as much as those for malting. The pace of yield increases has slowed now; Intervention for barley still exists but has not been too strong a factor in the climate of smaller acreage. And it remains an expensive crop to grow.

Spring barley, so long the poor relation, has staged a fighting come back with some excellent varieties.

During the rise of winter barley, varieties such as Tipper, Magie, Puffin and later Regina, Gleam and Fanfare appeared. These varieties were widely grown across many land types. As a result the crop was very variable and much selection by hand had to take place.

The old order

Grain markets had begun to decline by the early 1980's but the rise of winter barleys – usually grown for quick harvest movement – extended their existence perhaps for another decade.

Mark Lane in London was perhaps the most high profile. This was later to transfer to the Baltic Exchange but still fizzled out during the 1990's. Leeds too was an important market for the North, serving both the sales maltsters and brewer maltsters of the area, as far north as Newcastle and south to Burton upon Trent. Together with Bury St Edmunds and Lincoln these prestigious institutions formed the market, carefully assessing availability, quality and demand.

Within a few days of harvest grain would begin trading at prices formed from the ideas of the many merchants and maltsters who attended these markets. Maltsters would return to their laboratories with hundreds of samples for test these having first satisfied the eye of the buyer. Everyone soon knew what was happening and the market would move – up or down – on each reassessment of yield, quality and demand.

This simply does not happen today. Whether or not market trading was the most efficient method of establishing price I am not sure, but it certainly was exciting! Today most grain is committed before harvest. There is very little on the "open market". Prices tend to move only when the global market assesses the results, or forecast results across the world. I now feel I hear move about the Australian and Canadian crops than I do of those in Suffolk, Yorkshire or Scotland! However Table 3 shows the situation in England and Wales.

The surplus of spring barley in England looks high and it certainly does not exist in East Anglia,

Leeds Corn Exchange – Designed by Cuthbert Broderick and opened in 1863. Built with an elliptical glass roof in order to provide a clear overall light with no shadows. This magnificent building was converted into a shopping centre while still an active market in the late 1980s.

Let the market commence!

Table 5: European Barley Production

	Acreage in 1,000 ha		Yield in tonnes/ha		Production in 1,000 tonnes	
COUNTRY	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Austria	191	192	5.3	4.8	1,007	921
Belgium	39	40	7.8	7.1	305	285
Denmark	697	702	5.2	5.2	3,590	3,631
Germany	1,979	1,964	6.6	6.0	12,993	11,789
Finland	532	594	3.2	3.4	1,725	2,027
France	1,629	1,607	6.8	6.5	11,041	10,379
Greece	90	90	2.6	2.3	238	207
Ireland	183	160	7.1	6.4	1,299	1,027
Italy	307	319	3.8	3.5	1,169	1,116
Luxemburg	9	9	5.8	5.8	52	52
Netherlands	47	46	6.1	6.5	287	301
Portugal	13	20	1.2	0.5	16	10
Spain	3,171	3,195	3.3	1.5	10,609	4,647
Sweden	391	381	4.3	4.2	1,692	1,611
UK	1,006	967	5.8	5.6	5,860	5,447
EU – 15	10,284	10,286	5.0	4.2	51,883	43,450

Table 6: Other European Barley Production

	Acreage in 1,000 ha		Yield in tonnes/ha		Production in 1,000 tonnes	
COUNTRY	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Czech Rep	469	522	5	4.6	2,331	2,389
Hungary	331	324	4.3	3.9	1,414	1,271
Poland	1,014	1,098	3.5	3.1	3,571	3,448
Bulgaria	334	225	3.5	2.5	1,180	570
Romania	424	471	3.3	2.1	1,406	1,000
Belarus	-	-	-	-	2,000	2,500
Kazakhstan	-	-	-	-	1,600	1,900
Russia	-	-	-	-	17,200	16,500
Ukraine	4,656	4,151	2.3	2.1	10,615	8,838

Source: ABARE

Table 7: European Union Spring Malting Barley 2005 Harvest

	Area 000 Hectares	Production Tonnes	Malting Barley	Malting Quality Tonnes	Demand Tonnes	Balance 2005 Tonnes	*Balance 2004 Tonnes*
UK	540,000	2,916,000	44%	1,283,040	1,100,000	183,040	*173,548*
France	565,000	3,277,000	52%	1,704,040	1,150,000	554,040	*1,353,772*
Germany	570,000	2,736,000	55%	1,504,800	2,100,000	(595,200)	*(170,500)*
Belgium	5,000	26,500	25%	6,625	575,000	(568,375)	*(533,250)*
Denmark	585,000	3,217,500	42%	1,351,350	310,000	1,041,350	*475,000*
Holland	42,000	256,200	68%	174,216	275,000	(100,784)	*(49,040)*
Ireland	145,000	884,500	24%	212,280	190,000	22,280	*135,060*
Spain	2,300,000	5,750,000	5%	287,500	520,000	(232,500)	*196,750*
Portugal	0	0	0	0	85,000	(75,000)	*(65,000)*
Finland	597,000	2,059,650	12%	247,158	220,000	27,158	*(36,096)*
Greece	0	0	0	0	50,000	(45,000)	*(40,000)*
Italy	0	0	0	0	95,000	(15,000)	*(58,750)*
Sweden	380,000	1,596,000	23%	367,080	280,000	87,080	*111,520*
Austria	105,000	493,500	32%	157,920	180,000	22,080)	*48,135*
TOTAL	**5,834,000**	**3,212,850**	-	**7,296,009**	**7,130,000**	**261,009**	***1,541,149***

Source : Abildsrøm

Lincolnshire or Yorkshire. Over 100,000 tonnes has been sold for export from south coast ports, which tends to point to this region being the area of surplus. Any apparent surplus from Scotland will by now have largely disappeared as feed barley as most farmers in this area are not able to dry and store their grain for any period of time.

Spring barley growing has been a quiet success in the last couple of years, although the wet harvest of 2004 was a disappointment. This year the rain threatened again but did no damage and the crop was cut and gathered in safely. Quality was good except for one or two areas that had suffered from the June drought. Again Suffolk and Norfolk were excellent as was Yorkshire and Scotland.

Optic (see Table 4) has been the mainstay of the spring crop for quite some years and is likely to continue to be so in Scotland. In England, Cocktail has had a very good year and will be well supported in the next two seasons by Westminster and Tipple.

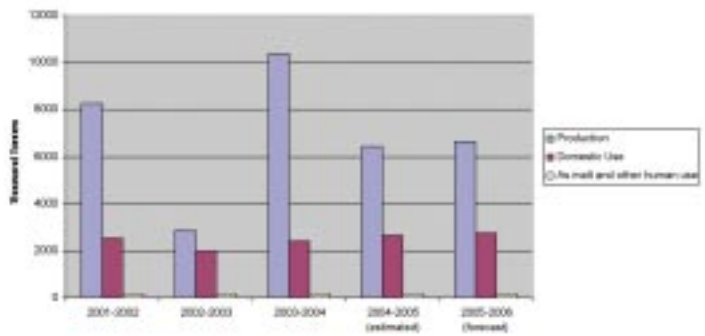
Availability restricted

Across Europe, total barley availability was restricted due to severe drought in Spain and Portugal (see Table 5 and 6). The crop in Spain alone fell by 6 million tonnes, much of which would need replacing from elsewhere. As far as spring malting barley (see Table 7) was concerned, both Germany and France have reduced availability whereas the UK is slightly improved on 2004 but Denmark has a significant surplus.

But overall, and factoring in the poor Spanish position, there is a much smaller balance from the EU(15) countries in 2005. The "new" countries also failed to increase their position. This means of course a knock-on effect on the 2006 crop. This may materialise into higher prices if malting barley availability comes under any pressure from Canada or Australia.

As I write, Australia seems fine with a reasonable crop and acceptable quality (see Table 8). Canada however has not enjoyed a favourable spell of weather and as can be seen from Table 9 availability of total barley is down but the position is far worse for malting barley. ■

Table 8: Australian Barley Supply



Source: ABARE

Table 9: Canadian Barley Production (Tonnes)

	2004	2005
Alberta	5,835,000	5,290,700
Manitoba	1,367,300	701,100
Saskatchewan	5,007,700	5,268,900
3 Provinces	12,210,000	11,260,700
Other Provinces	976,400	871,800
All Canada	13,186,400	12,132,500

Source Gleadell

Memories of summer.