



LEFT UK farmer and entrepreneur Olly 'Blogs' Harrison drove his brand new Claas Lexion combine harvester the length of the UK for charity.

Diversification Pays the Bills

A UK YouTuber farmer with 14 different income streams shared his entrepreneurial recipe as a recent keynote speaker at the Foundation for Arable Research conference.

WORDS **HEATHER CHALMERS**

FILMING FARMING VIDEOS FOR YouTube started off as a bit of fun and a way to communicate with a wider audience during the Covid lockdown, but has now become a useful revenue stream for Olly 'Blogs' Harrison.

The United Kingdom arable farmer and agricultural contractor shared with arable farmers at this year's Foundation for Arable Research (FAR) conference via video link that diversification has been key to him expanding his business.

Olly explained his turnover is split 50-50 between on- and off-farm activities, and 100% of the profit comes from diversification.

"UK agriculture is in a difficult space, particularly the cereal sector. With the cost of land, fertiliser and chemicals, the economics of cereals don't add up. So, we've got to sell it better, or do something else."

Olly farms 324ha of wheat, 120ha of barley, 60ha of spring beans, 24ha of oilseed rape and 50ha of grass.

At 400ha, his biggest crop is grown for bird food, for which the government pays £642 a hectare, under its Sustainable Farm Initiative (SFI). "This has been propping up the farm for three years. Some farmers have stopped growing commercial crops, are using contractors and just relying on the SFI for income. They have basically retired."

He explained how the UK government and the wider population need to be more aware of the importance of being self-sufficient in food production. "Growing flowers and planting trees isn't going to feed the nation."

Leaving school at 16 having struggled with dyslexia, Olly's farm has grown from 70ha to 600ha.

His diversification is taking advantage of farming on the outskirts of Liverpool, being on the urban fringe. Olly's farming business has 14 different income streams including chipping wood for biomass, sunflower mazes, turning farm buildings into office space and holiday rentals and a small animal hotel, and even £10 an hour for people to walk their dog in a field.



ABOVE Olly used his online presence to protest the Labour government's proposed inheritance tax, shutting down central London. **RIGHT** Olly's turnover is split 50-50 between on- and off-farm activities, and 100% of the profit comes from diversification.

All south-facing sheds have solar panels, meaning he is self-sufficient in power with some electricity being sold back to the grid. Tree waste provided by arborists and gardeners is used in a biomass boiler used to dry grain.

A small animal hotel was a cheap conversion of an existing building on the farm. "While there are a lot of accommodation facilities for cats and dogs, no one was specialising in small animals like rabbits, hamsters and guinea pigs." One person paid £2,000 for their pigeon to be housed while they travelled for six months.

After several months' growing an audience over Covid, Olly set his YouTube channel as a monetised channel. The first morning he woke up to find he had earned £1.52 in advertising revenue and this continued to increase each day.

"It was like, wow, free money, as I was making the videos anyway!"

Having an online presence has also helped to gather support for farming issues, notably the UK Labour government's proposal to impose an inheritance tax of 20% for agricultural property assets over £1 million. This led to 45,000 farmers protesting, shutting down central London.

"YouTube has allowed me to expand my farm and to have a bigger voice when it comes to getting people together and lobbying the government," Olly says.

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OLLY 'BLOGS' HARRISON
UK ARABLE FARMER



The popularity of his YouTube channel also led to a spin-off business following requests for clothing merchandise. A neighbour now makes and sells branded hoodie sweatshirts on his behalf, generating a turnover of £100,000 a year. His online presence now helps to fund his agricultural machinery obsession, with the money used to pay the monthly hire purchase payments on a self-propelled sprayer. He also bought some classic tractors to make the videos more interesting.

He grows a sunflower maze, with half the proceeds going to charity. He also started an annual Christmas convoy of decorated tractors into Liverpool. He promised himself that by the age of 40 he'd own a brand-new combine harvester, and having achieved that, he drove his Claas Lexion combine the length of the UK for charity. He says this has definitely helped to reduce the urban-rural divide, with people more engaged and less negative about agriculture. ∞