

The early days of silage.

We are all used to seeing rows of tractors in various states of repair standing cheek by jowl in long lines at shows and rallies and as much as they may be admired for what they represent it is always refreshing to see them attached to implements and ready for work rather than just exhibition. A tractor is generally without purpose when standing alone and unhitched to any tool so collectors who match machine to power source are to be applauded and one such is Josh Bailey of Tipperary town.

Josh, when he is not running the family sawmill, is an avid enthusiast of vintage and classic machinery and his restoration of an FE35 (Copper Belly) from 1956 is a tribute to his desire to see old tractors brought back to useful life rather than just as museum pieces. Having rebuilt the tractor from the ground up he decided to give the old girl something to do so his next step was to retrieve from its nettle strewn graveyard an MF-71 single chop forage harvester. This has also been fully restored to working order and side mounted with the necessary frame as seen in the picture. The exact date of manufacture for the implement has not yet been ascertained but it is believed to be from the mid sixties, the era when this type of harvester dominated silage making in Ireland and the UK. The middle of that decade was also the time when the more advanced double chop harvester was introduced to the equipment market which ultimately led to the demise of these simpler machines.

There were two major problems with the single chop harvester, the first was the high power requirement and the general inefficiency if required to work at low ground speeds whilst the second was the imprecision with which it cut the crop for ensiling.

Josh's FE35 would be working hard when pulling this 42 inch wide machine through a standing crop as at least 20hp would be demanded from the PTO leaving just 15hp to move the tractor and accumulating load in the trailer. Quite a task for a little grey Fergie and slopes would doubtless have provided a challenge. By the mid sixties though, both Ford and MF were offering tractors of above 50hp which were much more able to cope with the loads imposed in the cutting of heavy crops of grass.

One advantage of the single chop, or direct cut as it was also called, was that it could cut and load in one pass of the field which is ideal for zero grazing systems but otherwise allows no time for the crop to wilt, leading to wet silage and nutrient loss back at the clamp unless the field had already been mown a day or two beforehand. The double chop machines which came after could more finely slice the leaves and stems into shorter lengths ensuring that exclusion of oxygen through greater compaction would lead to an anaerobic fermentation and preservation of the energy and protein within the grass. As this became more widely understood and better grass management allowed silaging dates to creep forward, earlier in to the year, the shortcomings of these machines ensured that they gradually faded from use other than in the aforementioned zero grazing or feed lot systems, but even here they have been squeezed out by self loading forage wagons and so they are no longer available new.

Josh has preserved for us all an excellent window into the history of forage production which is a story every bit as important as the evolution of the tractor although maybe not always as glamorous. This combination of harvester and tractor is pictured cutting the grass at Tipperary race course in preparation for the annual vintage rally held each Easter.