

ESTABLISHED 1809

THOMAS FAWCETT & SONS, LTD.

MALTSTERS AND MALT ROASTERS

EASTFIELD LANE
CASTLEFORD

TELEPHONES
552460 & 552490
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"FAWCETT'S", MALTSTERS, CASTLEFORD

WEST YORKSHIRE
WF10 4LE

REGISTERED IN
ENGLAND
No. 153755

Crop Report 2023

This has been another challenging and highly unpredictable harvest due to the extremes in weather. The winter crops went into the ground on time and were initially not looking too bad. The early spring was reasonably mild with sufficient rain, but later on the weather changed to being cool and dry. We had crop walks planned for early July but then we had a very hot period in June that ripened the winter crops extremely quickly causing an early start to harvest. Initially the first winter barley samples were worrying; thin, small grains that hadn't filled out with high levels of screenings. But then samples started to improve with bigger grain sizes and lower nitrogen levels. Screening levels were still higher than usual, but samples were acceptable after dressing. Unfortunately, just as the combines started to roll the weather changed and it started raining. We had one of the wettest Julys in recent history and crops that were ripe and ready had to just sit in the fields awaiting for a dry window to be combined. The appearance of the later samples clearly show the impact of the wet weather; they are darkened in colour, almost grey-looking. Quite a contrast to the 2022 crop which was sun-bleached!

Thankfully, because the ambient temperatures were lower than expected, there wasn't the level of splitting that would otherwise be prevalent. However, due to the extended wet conditions, there were some visible signs of pre-germination, moulds and pink grains in later cut samples. This is of particular concern due to possible higher levels of fungal mycotoxins. As the "summer" continued, farmers were obviously becoming concerned that the winter crop was still in the fields and the spring crops were ripening so the window for combining was getting smaller and shed space would be limiting! Many farmers decided to combine their winter crops at the first opportunity, with the resulting grain moistures being higher than desired. Drying charges have therefore been much higher this year than in previous years, but all our winter malting barley requirements have been safely dried and moved promptly into store in order to preserve the malting quality.

Meanwhile, outside of the UK in mainland Europe they were having excessive heat / drought conditions and wildfires – one of the hottest Julys on record. This followed dry conditions earlier in the year and was not good for the malting barley crop. This has had the effect of keeping UK malting barley premiums over feed barley and feed wheat at higher levels as there was a great deal of interest from overseas to export the UK crop. The early sown spring barleys were expected to be better from our field walks and this largely turned out to be the case – good grain size but variable levels of nitrogen, some low (under 1.60 %) and some higher. The later sown spring barley suffered more from the weather; not becoming established enough before the very dry conditions. As a result, these tended to produce higher nitrogen samples (some over 2.00 %).

As I write this article (early September) the majority of the English barley harvest has been completed. We have managed to buy enough quality malting barley, carefully selecting the best samples that had not suffered as a result of the extreme weather conditions. Being a smaller, specialist maltster, is a great advantage when the crop is as varied as it is this year; we only need to buy a limited quantity and can select the best; everything is hand-evaluated and visually inspected before being approved. As a result, we are confident that the quality of our raw materials purchased from the 2023 crop will enable us to continue making premium malts for sale in 2024, and all our customers can be re-assured of our commitment to supplying them with the very best malts available.
Brian Hickman, Production Director