

PROFILE: TOM TIERNEY

# When this Kildare farmer's car broke down on the other side of the world, his life changed forever

Tom Tierney was a conventional tillage farmer until he met a drill manufacturer while he was waiting for his hire car to be fixed in New Zealand. Now he is a passionate advocate of min-till conservation agriculture, with a sideline in selling machinery

NIALL HURSON



Having spent decades running a conventional plough, till, sow tillage farm in Co Kildare, a trip to New Zealand in 2014 flipped Tom Tierney's world upside down in more ways than one. A chance encounter with a leading manufacturer of no-till drills set Tom on a path of conservation agriculture, and he has since become a leading voice in the area.

This trip of a lifetime completely changed the way Tom farms at home in Prosperous, and has provided him with a new machinery sales revenue stream.

Today, Tom owns a 200ac tillage farm, leasing another 250ac, growing a selection of crops including barley, oats, wheat, beans and oilseed rape,

alongside 40ac of forestry. He is a 2024 Farming for Nature ambassador, a member of BASE Ireland, a Teagasc Signpost farmer and a participant in the Protecting Farmland Pollinators EIP project.

He has used a direct-drilling system since 2015, and he enthuses about the many benefits of the lower soil disturbance method for life both above and below the soil surface.

But he certainly took a roundabout route to get to where he is now.

"Up to 2015 I was all plough, till, sow — conventional. In January 2014 I was in New Zealand on holidays. I had a hire car and it broke down and I rang the crowd and they told me to bring it to Timaru to a garage," Tom says.

"In Timaru they told me it would be a two-hour wait, so I just went for a walk. I came across a factory that manufactures no-till drills and they had one sitting out front on the forecourt.

"I was looking at it and someone came out to sell me one so I told them I'm only a tourist and I told

them my dilemma.

"He then offered me a tour of the factory and it turned out he was the company's managing director and we ended up having a chat and a coffee in the conference room.

"He told me he wouldn't mind exploring the possibilities of trying the drill in the northern hemisphere, with Ireland and New Zealand having a lot of similarities.

"He asked would I be interested in a drill and I said 'sure leave it with me for the minute and I'll think about it.'

"We got talking on email when I got back home and he ended up sending a drill across and I tried it and I ran it for 12 months and I bought it after that.

"I sowed winter and spring crops and there was very little difference so it proved to me that it worked.

"He rang me the following year asking would I bring my drill down to a show in Gurteen, so I gave him a hand to set up the stand and that, and at the end of that he asked me would I sell drills for him in Ireland and the UK.



Tom Tierney on his farm outside Prosperous in Co Kildare. Tom's farm is host to an Eddy Covariance Flux Tower, generating data that provides accurate, long-term information on the carbon dynamics of Irish agricultural systems



This Finland-built Syketec JOBO 55 harvester allows Tom to thin his forest without relying on a contractor

N in total instead of 160-180 and still maintain yield," he says.

"I apply that as a foliar feed. I only apply seven units of N/ac and it's probably as good as 14 units using other methods. Here's the problem, though: it needs to be straight urea and not protected. I'm trying to use less synthetics, so why would I want urea with another enzyme, polymer, or inhibitor in it?"

Animal manure is brought in from neighbouring farms and composted on site before being spread on the land.

There is about 30ac of mixed forestry on the farm — 60pc hardwood and 40pc softwood — and Tom operates a continuous cover forestry system since 2000.

There are also about 12ac of conservation areas on the farm. There is an acre of wetland with naturally regenerating woodland, plus 7ac of wildflowers and 4ac of permanent clover.

"Back then in 2000, it was simple because we had set-aside and my forestry area now is my set-aside area. It just sickened me to see that land left fallow every year and not doing anything," he says.

"At that time you could plant it in forestry and still qualify as set aside under the rules back then. Now 24 years later I'm taking my first thinnings from the forestry. On my farm I'm a one-man-band and that's another reason for the no till.

"When it came to forestry and the thinning, it seemed like the only way

was to get a contractor in because that's the way it's done in Ireland. That was another cheque going out the gate if I got the forester in.

"I was getting mixed advice about which trees to take and leave. My forester gave me the best advice to try and do my own harvesting.

"I got more involved with that idea because it's another project I could be doing myself instead of farming it out.

"I saw a harvester head from Finland and I got it. It does exactly what the contractor's machine does — it's just slower.

"I log the trees into three metre lengths and bring them into the farmyard. In Ireland you can sell forestry three ways; standing, out of your yard, or delivered to the user. In all cases people typically use a contractor... then they'll get paid and you'll get what's left. Straight away there's a chunk of money gone.

"As a small farmer, I'm going to harvest it, bring it into the yard, and then in autumn I'm going to ask buyers to come look at it or I might firewood it."

Tom's daughter Erin is an intellectual disability nurse, and is becoming more involved in farming.

"Erin is doing her Green Cert," says Tom.

"The aim is for her to take over the farm and she is talking about social farming. With her intellectual disability nurse and ag skills she could be in a really good position to pursue something like that."

"I've sold between 50 and 60 drills in Ireland and the UK since 2016."

Tom sells a range of Duncan Ag no-till seed drills for all conditions and soil types, through his business, Ballinacagh Farm.

"Since I've gone no-till, I've been very reluctant to go back to the plough. I don't want to think about it," he says.

"When you talk about carbon, if you're ploughing every year, every bit of carbon you've taken in with the plant is released again the following year when you plough it, so what's

the point? "The best outcome with the plough system is that you could be standing still.

"It's the one problem I have with the organics side of the house: they have to plough in Ireland, it's the only way they have to control weeds.

"People will say organics is the way of the future, but it's not the answer.

"The answer is conservation or regenerative agriculture. Any of those two farming methods would be way better for the country as a whole than organics."

Tom follows the main principles of

conservation agriculture, which include cover cropping, increasing soil organic matter, crop rotations and direct drilling.

"With conservation and regenerative agriculture, we both want to maintain the soil and plant health and use less synthetics. But the singular difference is that regenerative will use livestock in their farming operation.

"Conservation ag is about good crop rotations and minimum soil disturbance. It's about green living plants in the soil all year round

*"Organics is not the answer. Conservation or regenerative agriculture methods would be way better for the country as a whole than organics"*

and getting out organic manures as much as possible on the field and replacing synthetics with organic manure as much as possible."

Tom has reduced the amount of synthetic inputs required on the farm and there has been no insecticide used on the land in six years.

He has two wormeries on the farm and he makes his own bio-stimulants from vermi-juice, seaweed, molasses and silica, which further build the soil biology.

"I melt urea down into liquid form and overall I can put on 128 units of



Tom in a field of winter barley Photo: Damien Eagers



Tom in a field of winter oilseed rape



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Tom's Duncan Enviro DD30/35, a double disc air seeder