

The agricultural industry has changed dramatically in recent years, creating a need for farmers to do the same. One Somerset farming family's ability to move with the times was instrumental in their winning the inaugural Farming Family of the Year Award, sponsored by Mole Valley Farmers.

WHEN the Bult family from West Newton, near Bridgwater, Somerset, submitted their entry form for the national Farming Family of the Year Awards earlier this year, they never thought for a moment they might actually win.

But they did - the judges having been impressed by the family's togetherness, as well as the farm's effective combination of traditional practices and innovative new ventures.

The Bult family business started just after World War II when Harry Bult,

# Family combining tradition with new innovative ventures

who ran the Masons Arms in the Somerset village of North Petherton, purchased 50 acres of land on which to grow the peas and beans.

Over the years, more and more land was bought up until, in 1952, the family moved to Rydon Farm in West Newton, which Harry's grandson Harold, now runs with his wife Pam and their three sons, Michael, Richard and Andrew.

Like many other farms in the area, H.Bult & Sons produce a variety of conventional arable crops.

With 220 acres at West Newton and a further 150 acres of rented land in the area, they produce 60 acres of oilseed rape, together with 35 acres of barley and 160 acres of wheat, which is delivered to Mole Valley Farmers' animal feed mill in nearby Huntworth.

The business also produces 1,500 lambs that are fattened over winter before being sold through Highbridge market in the spring.

However, it is the way in which the family has responded to changing times within the agricultural industry by developing new en-



The Bults being presented with their Farming Family of the Year Award by Baroness Byford.



A fishery has been developed by Richard Bult on the family's Somerset farm.



The Bult family pictured on a 1941 Farmall A tractor restored by Richard Bult.



Harold and Pam Bult with a sample of freshly-lifted new potatoes for Sainsbury's.

terprises that sets them apart.

"Five or six years ago farming was in the doldrums -nothing was making any money and the future looked very gloomy," said Michael Bult, who took over the day-to-day running of the business in 1999.

"However, as a family we took the view that we wanted to remain actively involved in farming and decided that the only way to secure our futures was by developing new initiatives."

Although success in any business involves an element of luck and good fortune, Michael believes that success comes to those who create their own luck.

"We've done our best to make it happen and are now beginning to reap the benefits," he added.

Indeed, the potato enterprise provides an example of their forward-thinking approach.

In the past, 60 acres of the crop had been sold through a local wholesaler. However, Michael was keen to secure business up front, and so three years ago they formed 'B & B Potatoes' in partnership with neighbour Matthew Bere, for whom they had graded potatoes for seven years.

As a result, the acreage put down to potatoes has increased to 200 acres, with 70 per cent of the 3,000 tonnes produced being sold under forward contracts almost 18 months ahead of delivery.

Such scale of operation and forward planning has enabled them to secure improved contracts with major outlets, to invest in the latest equipment and, by reducing production costs, remain at the forefront of the industry.

And all the family is involved in the production line. Early potatoes, for example, are lifted by Andrew, graded and packed at West Newton by Harold and Pam, before being delivered directly to Sainsbury's supermarkets within 30 miles of the farm by Michael.

The contract, which originally involved supplying three Sainsbury's outlets, now covers seven of the company's stores, two in Taunton, plus others at Bridgwater, Street, Weston-super-Mare, Frome and Sherborne.

Although very labour intensive, Michael said potatoes offer the potential for far greater rewards than many other arable crops such as cereals, where the yield and income potential is limited.

"Potato prices have been good in recent years, grain prices are rising and demand for bio-fuels to meet European Union targets for renewable energy targets is increasing the market for crops such as oilseed rape," he explained.

"So we firmly believe there are good opportunities for those farmers who have remained in the industry, have the ability to innovate and can operate cost-effectively"

The family has also found the time and energy to diversify away from farming and into the fishing sector.

Recognising that the farm could not support the entire family, Richard followed a career in mechanical engineering, both in the motor trade and as a lecturer at Somerset College of Art and Technology.

Until, that is, he saw the potential of the farm's one-third-acre pond, which had originally been created to provide irrigation water for the potatoes. A fanatical carp angler, Richard put forward plans to create a 2.5-acre fishing lake on previously non-productive marshland.

Purpose-designed to provide an underwater maze, the lake was initially stocked with 48 carp, which bred so

successfully that the lake soon became over-populated. Undeterred, Richard established another business, which today sells 5,000 UK-bred carp weighing up to 4lb to private fishing clubs and landowners throughout the country, largely over the internet.

Having successfully developed new business interests and currently renovating another farm building to let, the Bults are now optimistic about the future.

"During the last few years this family business has worked particularly well involved but have allowed us the freedom to make our own way and pursue different avenues," said Michael.

"I believe that is why we have been successful at a time when many other family farms have disbanded."



Michael and Andrew Bult bring in this year's harvest