

Giant Norfolk Onion store is finally opened by MP after two year planning delay



After running into a brick wall with local planners which led to a two year delay in gaining planning approval owing to the nesting of stone curlews, a small ground nesting bird, at the Thetford farm of R.G. Abrey Farms, the day has finally arrived for the opening of one of the largest state-of-the-art onion stores in the UK.

“We have and have had stone curlews successfully nesting in our onion fields. It appears they favour the late forming canopy of an onion crop such the bare soil creates their perfect breeding habitat. We were therefore disappointed that legislation on the stone curlew could stop us building an onion store.” said Tom Abrey

Today Friday 3rd August Elizabeth Truss MP for West Norfolk will declare the new 7000 T onion storage facility at Larkshall, East Wretham, officially open at an event to be attended by some 200 customers and suppliers.

“I am delighted to be opening the new onion store. Over the years RG Abrey have worked hard to build their business and is now one of the leading onion producers in the country. Last year I worked with the Abreys to ensure their future ambitions were not stifled by unnecessary red tape and bureaucracy created by the Natural Habitats Directive. The company met with DEFRA Minister Richard Benyon to secure support for their state of the art store. The Minister called on the authorities to adopt a ‘more common sense approach’. I am pleased to say the result is now a highly efficient onion store which maintains a quality product in demand across the whole of the UK,” said Elizabeth Truss MP.

R G Abrey Farms was started in 1939 by the late Russel Gordon Abrey. Now as a 3rd generation family farming business it grows combinable crops, sugar beet and specialises in early new season root vegetable production with storage for year round supply to the major multiples. The business has put up many buildings over the last 20 years at the Larkshall site near Thetford but on this occasion it took over two years to get the planning application approved.

“I could write a book about it, however after assistance from our MP Elizabeth Truss and after various meetings including one with the DEFRA minister, we finally gained planning approval,” said Robert Abrey.

“The benefits due to the economy of scale, technological advances in design and equipment and by having three stores under one roof will create energy savings in excess of 20 per cent,” said Robert Abrey.

The 7000 T storage facility is separated into three cells: - 2 x 2500 T bulk stores, 1 x 2000 T box store. The combination of bulk and refrigerated box storage will compliment current storage on site such that UK onions can be supplied into multiples for 11 months of the year.

The main design criteria of the new store was that it had to be energy efficient, sustainable, constructed with the very best quality materials, have the latest in fan and control technology, and have the provisions to fit solar panels and to harvest the rainwater at a later date. Finally as the site was within the curtilage of a species protected area, it had to comply with strict planning requirements.

“Once the design was approved, the planning application was submitted and after a prolonged planning consultation, with the help of Natural England, RSPB, local MP plus a lot of behind the scene activity at the office of R G Abrey Farms, planning permission was approved by committee in December 2011. Orders were then placed with the proviso that the site was bunded and that the main building was erected before the stone curlew breeding season in May,” said David Feakes of Marrison Agriculture Limited, who project managed the development.

Building work started in earnest during January 2012 with Colin Hull of Temple Construction carrying out all of the ground works.

Hingham based A C Bacon Engineering were appointed to erect a 75 metres wide and 42metres long steel building with concrete retaining walls 4 metres high. The whole building is insulated to a very high standard by metal clad insulated panels. Roof panels 2metres wide and 20metres long were chosen to lessen the number of joints, improving building efficiency and to speed up the build programme.

It has been collaborative development involving several specialists. Tim Dudfield of Farm Electronics manufactured the ventilation equipment also being involved with the initial design concept together with Robert Abrey, his agronomist Tom Will (VCS), and David Feakes (Marrisons) - who also helped with the design and then provided project management. Richard Flack (Flach & Le-Roy Limited) designed and manufactured the high performance wooden drive-on-floor, and Harnwell Electrical carried out all electrical work.

“The efficient drying curing and storage system uses both proven design concepts together with new and energy efficient controls. The design of the store with its concrete thrust walls, prop-portal building forming the main air duct and drive over wooden floor allows both rapid loading and unloading of the store, together with long term service ability, which is essential to any large scale farming operation such as R. G. Abrey Farms,” said Tim Dudfield of Farm Electronics,.

Farm Electronics, who have in the past designed and supplied R. G. Abrey Farms with the equipment for other stores, have manufactured and supplied the fans with energy efficient IE2 motors, motorised louvres, and control panels with inverter drive, all designed to work in conjunction with the Vegtec V2 onion store controller.

“The Vegtec Controller provides a new level of sophisticated onion storage control allowing the operator to perfect curing whilst optimising energy efficiency. This patented technology measures crop air flow and duct pressure, alongside standard temperature and humidity measurements, and with fan motor inverters fitted, automatically adjusts the fans speed to the desired air volume for a given tonnage or curing/storage stage- avoiding excessive back pressure and unnecessary energy use,” said Tom Will, of Vegetable Consultancy Services.

The Vegtec Controller significantly improves crop quality (given the options for continuous low volume ventilation) whilst providing energy savings of 20 -30%, according to Tom Will. Other unique features include a data log and auto trending, disease library and advice notes, energy meter, USB port for data down load and modem for remote access.

“It is important to us to supply a quality onion to a discerning market, so when we choose our suppliers we look for companies who share our commitment to customer service and exemplary store design. In my experience, Marrisons, Flach & Le-Roy, Farm Electronics, Bacons and Harnwell Electrical are examples of such companies who deliver quality products and second-to-none service on time and on budget,” said Robert Abrey.

