



## **6<sup>th</sup> Annual Study Tour August 6 – 8 2014**

The 6<sup>th</sup> annual Perennial Pasture Systems study tour headed for Kyneton in the late afternoon of Wednesday August 6<sup>th</sup> after an inspection of the PPS “Greenfields” project site at Glenlofty. No other activity was planned for the night so the group headed for dinner and were joined by members of the O’Sullivan family whose farm was to be the first visit the next day as well as Jane Court from DEPI who has assisted on the reporting of PPS projects.

Thursday commenced with an early breakfast before heading east through the granite country to Pastoria and the O’Sullivan’s “Theaden” property where Michael O’Sullivan outlined the properties history and the business structure. The O’Sullivan family originally moved to the region when their original property at Puckapunyal was taken over as part of the army base. The “Theaden” property was added to the family business in the 1950’s.

The PPS tour group was joined for the day by Lisa Warn and Caitlin Pfeiffer from Melbourne University along with two visiting veterinary students from France and South Korea respectively; Reece Hardwidge from Heritage Seeds, Gerard Ryan from the local Grasslands Society branch and Jane Court from DEPI were also at the “Theaden” tour.

Michael moved on to talk about the O’Sullivan’s 7000 ewe and 400 cow breeding operation and the issues of growing productive pastures on granite soils with their subsoil acidity and high aluminium levels. Michael has moved into phalaris based pastures after issues with ryegrass based pasture persistence. Lisa Warn then talked about trial work on “Theaden” before the group headed out to look at a paired Landmaster and Advanced AT phalaris pasture which has been a spectacular success in a paddock formerly dominated by bent grass. An inspection of a Heritage Seeds grass trial was undertaken before a tour to the top of the hill overlooking the “Theaden” woolshed which opened onto a large plateau which showcased the O’Sullivan farm and the attention to detail in its layout. The tour finished with a hearty morning tea provided by Michael’s family in the woolshed where he explained his key enterprise goals.

- 1 Utilise spring growth*
- 2 Maximise lambing and calving percentages*
- 3 Manipulate feeding by knowing stock requirements*
- 4 Use performance recorded genetics*
- 5 Soil test and continue pasture improvement program*
- 6 Know your strengths and weaknesses by monitoring your business.*

It was then onto Glenaroua near Seymour to Sarah and Ross Thompson’s Chapman Hill Olive Oil where Sarah took everyone through the history of the olives which were initially planted in 1999 and the development of the plantation and associated olive oil processing. Sarah’s background in food services gave her the skills to get Chapman Hill olive oil into some on Melbourne’s top restaurants and expand the business.

The group then drove up the “hut”, which allowed the group to have a look at the extensive landcare work that the Thomson’s have carried out over the years. After an olive oil tasting and lunch at the “hut” situated on a timbered hill on the farm and styled on high country huts, Ross outlined the rest of the family business and their reasons for diversification which was to provide a healthy income for themselves and family members who have joined the enterprise. The Thomson’s have identified a market being this close to Melbourne and as well as the olives have commenced a range of activities on the farm including weddings in the large woolshed, functions at the “hut” and partridge shoots in some of their hill country. Ross also mentioned their 18,000 merino operation focused on fine wool production and turning lambs off the older ewes. Ross is reconsidering the direction of their sheep flock losing confidence in the outlook for wool; as he said “*the wool is only keeping the mutton warm*”.

The Thomson's operation was a great example of a well run sheep operation diversifying into other areas utilising the individual skills of family members and exploiting the opportunities provided by city people wanting a farm experience.

PPS members were settling in well at the "hut" listening to Ross and Sarah's tales of their new ideas but were finally rounded up and headed for the day's final stop at the Fox's property "Cambrain" near Merton.

At "Cambrain", we were met by Alan and Glen Fox who invited us into Alan and his wife Ailsa's house situated high on a ridge giving a stunning view over the front part of the Fox property with its highly productive pastures and well filled strategically placed dams in the valley.

Alan took us through the farm's operation and the family business which has had continued expansion throughout Alan's career and is now managed by his son Stuart and his wife Maree. Another son Glen has expanded his own operation into an 1800 cow dairy operation as well as a fertiliser and contract sowing business.

Alan said that the business plans to be in control of its operations at all times and this has led to the establishment of a 5000 head feedlot to finish lambs or contain stock in dry periods.

Although the Fox's have had continued expansion of their farm size, Alan emphasised that this was not done until the existing land had been brought up to full capacity. Alan also made a strong point on the efficient use of fertilisers and said *"if you can't afford to fertilise pastures then you can't afford to farm"*.

After the discussion in the house an inspection of the feedlot, large and efficient woolshed and new undercover sheep handling area was undertaken. The sheep handling area has only recently been completed and all were impressed with its design which included sheep scales with an automated three way drafting machine.

The farm visit ended with a drive into the farm's foothills along the central laneway where the productive pastures, land class fencing and landcare work were a tribute to the Fox's farming philosophy.

The day finished with dinner for the tour group in Mansfield where we were joined by Alan and Ailsa Fox, one of the next day's hosts Mark Ritchie and farm entrepreneur Chris Stoney. After dinner Chris took us through his farming career which included high country cattle grazing before the government ban, hosting horse trail rides, joint ownership of an outback pub and his focus on leasing farms in the Riverina, Gippsland as well as country around Mansfield. It is a highly geared business running 44,000 ewes with lamb finishing on the Gippsland power station land lease; Chris's entertaining talk convinced everyone that this type of operation is not for the faint hearted and requires a very high degree of organisational skill but hopefully will end up being very rewarding.

On the final day PPS were joined by Mark Palmer from Stephen Pasture Seeds Cobram and headed to Dr Rod Manning's "Daviak Pastoral Co" near Mansfield. Rod has officially retired from both the farm management and his Mansfield vet practice but after a forty minute introduction to the farm business, most of us were left in doubt regarding his description of retired. "Daviak" is an amalgamation of freehold and leased country and runs a 1600 Angus breeding operation as well as trading cattle throughout the year. Rod aims to double the size of the operation every ten years and has done so ever since he added farming to his veterinary career. Rod emphasised that using sensible debt levels were a key driver to this expansion.

The pasture base is phalaris and sub clover with an intensive 5-7 day rotation and a focus on trying to minimise supplementary feed costs. While some of the phalaris pastures on "Daviak" are forty years old, some have declined but are replaced by Victorian perennial ryegrass which has colonised most of the Mansfield area. While recognising the merits of the ryegrass; Rod is adamant that phalaris is needed to provide adequate winter feed for his operation.

Rod is very conscious of mineral deficiencies and their possible sub clinical effects on the herd and has salt constantly available for the cattle. We had a drive through some of the pastures before a stop at the cattle yards where many questions were asked on Rod's theories on mineral requirements before returning to the house for smoko.

Rod spent a year of his "retirement" building the magnificent house from materials on the farm using a red gum timber and sandstone design with feature windows looking out on the Mansfield Valley and the snow topped Mt Buller. Rod told us of his next "retirement" plan which consists of a thirty day walking and climbing expedition in South America. He also expanded into his risk management program and the critical points which the business uses in that process. PPS has already asked him to speak to the group again at some stage in the future to expand on some of his farm business innovations.

PPS then headed south over the Delatite River for the final stop at “Delatite Station” where Mark Ritchie took us through a business analysis of the 2600 ha sheep and cattle breeding operation. “Delatite Station” has an 8300 ewe flock with a sheep total of 20,000 and 1280 cows in the 2600 cattle herd. Mark and Fenella Ritchie have a breeding program accessing high range genetics through ASBV’s. Mark expressed some frustration in the direction of the wool industry but is determined to continue the focus on wool in his operation whilst adding meat traits to the flock. Most of the pastures are ryegrass based with a higher emphasis planned on Banquet 2 ryegrass and phalaris based pastures. Mark also discussed some new ideas in potential labour savings in the sheep flock but has yet to trial their efficacy.

The tour through “Delatite Station” showed the balance between high stocking rates and winter pasture production with stock in good condition and pastures well grazed ready for the spring. Further discussion was held focusing on the high labour efficiency on “Delatite Station” and the use of gibberillic acid to improve winter feed growth. Mark made the point that they attempt to be an efficient low cost operation with good benchmarking to make sure that they achieve this aim.

The tour ended with lunch in gardens of the Delatite homestead which overlook the Delatite River. The homestead is currently undergoing an extensive renovation before Mark and Fenella and their family move in around Xmas. It will be great to see the homestead, which is over one hundred years old rejuvenated and taking its place overlooking the station land.

The PPS group then headed off on the long journey home after visiting five inspirational properties and hearing from six innovative farm businesses. The tour again opened up possibilities for future PPS speakers and projects and was regarded by all as a very successful venture both educationally and socially.

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